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The Many Lives of Photography

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

by Sabeena Gadihoke
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This report seeks to examine 38 grants made by India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) between 1995-96 and 2021-22 and to look at how these may have made a mark on the field of photography. When IFA gave its first grant for photography, the discipline in India had yet to evolve in terms of academic or scholarly work. Public institutional support to the field was almost absent. Photography was taught as a technical skill and with the exception of well-known professional auteurs and some artists who were experimenting with the camera, there was little engagement with the form. Most scholarly work had focused thus far on colonial collections and Christopher Pinney's well known book *Camera Indica* had just been published in 1997. There has been a huge shift in the landscape of what one could term 'photography studies' in the following two decades. It is commendable that IFA has given grants to 38 projects that when looked at collectively, contribute to a rich archive of the field today and mirror the vibrant turn that the study of the still image has taken in our contemporary moment. The projects highlight an interdisciplinary engagement with photography and draw attention to a very significant category of researcher/practitioner who engages with both pedagogical inquiry as well as praxis.

IFA has funded and implemented a very wide range of grants that are located in different parts of the country and focus on multiple themes.

*Image: Sharbendu De/*Imagined Homeland*

Their objectives are diverse but at least in initial years, one could categorise them as those that were driven by the impulse to document or archive and others that sought to create bodies of work or were more experimental in nature. These projects have produced a variety of outcomes that include manuscripts and books, portfolios and exhibitions, installations, websites, performance, films, lectures, talks, and art work and have fed into conferences and courses. This report will suggest some long-term reverberations of these outcomes that were not necessarily apparent at the time but contribute significantly to the study and knowledge about photography today.

In trying to make meaning of these very diverse projects, it might be useful to use the analogy of the 'rhizome' as conceived of by French theorists Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who use it to describe an approach to research that has multiple and non-hierarchical entry and exit points. Comparing a conventional tree and a rhizomatic plant, the latter could be seen as a non-linear, decentred, proliferating and interconnected web of relations as opposed to the linear structure of the former that has roots and grows upwards to have branches. Each of the grants have their own unique identity and build upon the works that came before but they also speak *across* to each other in lateral ways.

THEMES AND SUBJECTS

One of the ways of looking at the grants might be through the lens of theme or subject matter. For instance, there are many projects that engage with sites of conflict and/or contested identities. One of the notable projects in this category includes Sanjay Kak's *Witness 1986-2016/Nine Photographers* (2017) that collated the works of press photographers from Kashmir in a beautifully produced book. *Witness* is of great value as it gives visibility to an analogue archive threatened both by the ongoing discord as well as the unexpected floods in Kashmir. Eight of the nine photographers included in the book have used their camera to document conflict in one of the most militarised regions in the subcontinent in the past three decades. The only exception is the inclusion of the work of Sumit Dayal, that, like other work on Kashmir (for instance, ongoing work by Anita Khemka and Imran Kokiloo titled *Kashmir: A Lost Childhood* and Iffat Fatima's documentary *Khoon Diy Baarav/Blood Leaves its Trail*, 2015) suggests a different way of viewing conflict through the de-centered lens of the personal, the family or the experiences of women. In this sense, Kak's book, while collating a valuable archival record of the ongoing conflict also points to the possibilities of work in the future that might look at the troubled history of the valley in other ways.

Sanjay Kak/*Witness*

Another set of grants challenge existing representations of those living on the periphery of the nation state. The borderlands of the North-East and what are known as its 'tribal' communities have been the subject of the lens of many European anthropologists and photographers in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Projects by Zubeni Lotha, Sharbendu De, Tarun Bhartiya, Mridu Rai and Dipti Tamang interrogate colonial representations of 'exotic others' defined primarily through discourses of conflict or tourism. As academics and curators, Rai and Tamang attempt to challenge existing representations of the Gorkhas in Darjeeling by encouraging alternate work with young practitioners from the region. Their project (which is yet to be completed) will be disseminated through a photo book and exhibitions. Zubeni Lotha and Sharbendu De seek to counter romanticised and static representations of 'primitive' indigenous people such as the Konyak Nagas and the Lisus on the Arunachal borders by engaging with their subjects to create new work.
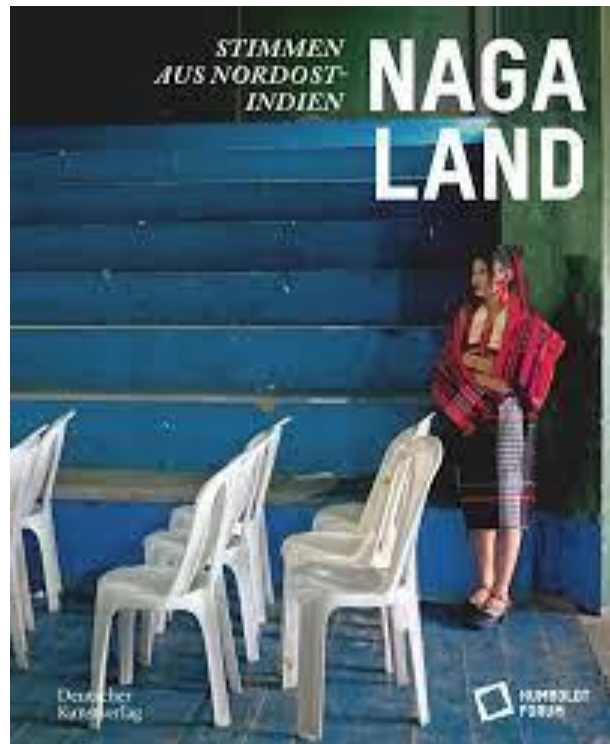

Zubeni Lotha/*The Konyak Nagas*

Lotha creates collaborative portraits with her Naga subjects (some of which were later published as a book titled *Naga Land*) while Sharbendu De makes phantasmatic and surreal tableaus of families of the Lisus. In De's uncanny dreamscapes, his protagonists both inhabit nature and are simultaneously displaced from their 'natural' surroundings as they gaze at strange light sources or engage with modern technologies such as the television in the forest. In this body of work De seems to challenge the realist tropes of the documentary that are almost always used to define those who are disadvantaged. His preferred mode of representation moves away from the 'real' and rational towards realms of dreams, fantasy and the unconscious. It is interesting that Zubeni Lotha too makes reference to this simultaneous co-existence of the worlds of science/rationality and intuition (what is often termed 'superstition') in a discussion of her Naga subjects.

Sharbendu De/*Imagined Homeland*

Looking at the state of Meghalaya, Tarun Bhartiya explores the delicate nuances of faith and identity among the Niam Khasi people as he interrogates the complicated nature of their encounter with Christianity during colonialism and now with majoritarian Hindu nationalism. Bhartiya weaves together found and self-taken monochrome images juxtaposing them with text to make suggestions about this encounter through the form of the postcard. As souvenirs of a South Asian colonial experience, postcards had always circulated photographic vistas of exotic landscape and people all over the world. In Bhartiya's interactive project, the use of the postcard to interrogate these received images among the Khasi people is an interesting formalist and provocative intervention.
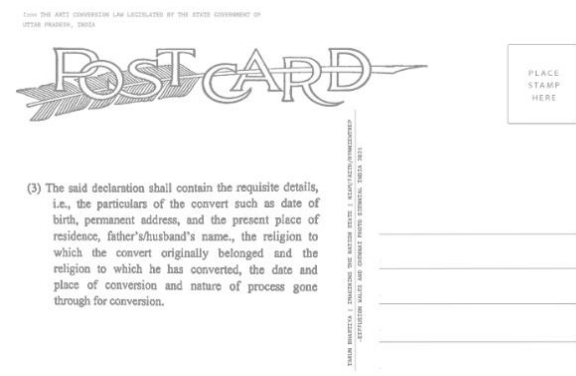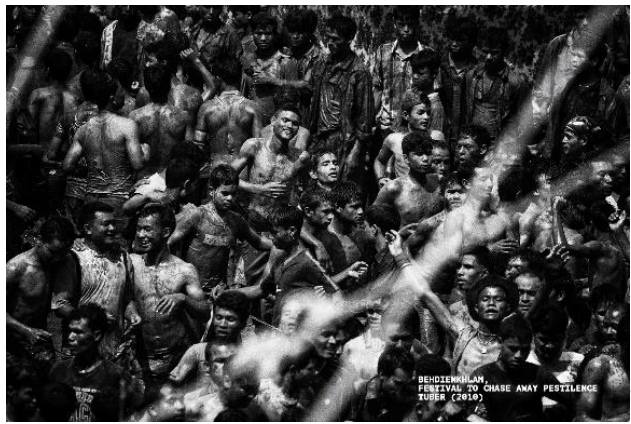
Tarun Bhartiya/*Niam/Faith/Hynniewtrep*

Some of these collaborative and constructed works draw from as well as contribute to an older lineage of photographic practices by artists and photographers like Sheba Chhachhi and Dayanita Singh. Chhachhi was one of the earliest to respond to the clichés of realist forms of documentary portraiture by creating posed collaborative portraits with women friends in *Seven Lives and a Dream* (1980-91). This sensibility can also be seen in the work on families by Dayanita Singh (late 1990s), both of whom were described in my own (hereafter Gadihoke) study on women photographers. It is interesting that another artist described in the same study, Pushpamala N was also awarded an IFA grant to create (along with her photographer-collaborator Claire Arni) a series of tableaux, questioning what she called stereotypical representations of the 'South Indian woman' in an imaginary studio. Like the American photographer Cindy Sherman, Pushpamala has used feminist notions of the masquerade to perform different roles from popular culture and to use these as a critique of ways in which women are slotted as 'types.' Her work has evolved further since this early project into publications (below) and is discussed extensively in scholarly work on photography. She is considered to be one of the most significant performance artists in South Asia today.
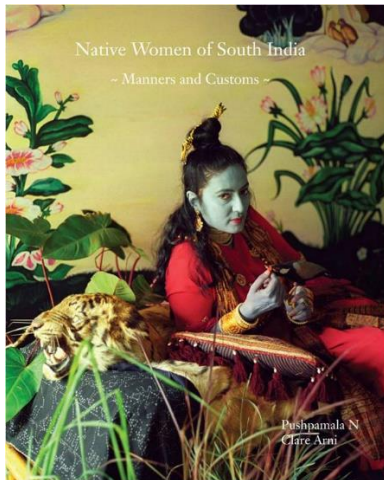
Pushpamala N/*Somberikatte Photo Studio*

One of the interesting aspects of the IFA grants is that there is no one profile of grantee. Endowments have been made to photographers, filmmakers, researchers, academics and artists. Documentary filmmaker Nishtha Jain was the recipient of two grants for her well-known films *City of Photos* (2002) and *Family Album* (2012). Both have been an important resource for the teaching of photography in institutions. *City of Photos* also refers to early digital practices of photo shop that hark back to traditions of photo montage and cut and paste techniques within the trajectory of studio photography in South Asia. It draws attention to photographs as both images as well as objects. This mirrors the 'material turn' in the study of visual practice and photography.
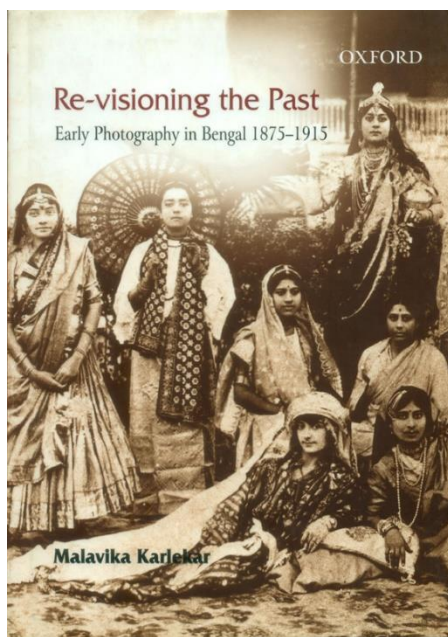

Nishtha Jain/Film Projects

The emphasis on Bengal in Jain's films finds echo in another set of early IFA grants to historian Malavika Karlekar who traces social histories of the arrival of colonial photography and the porosity of this encounter. One of the significant outcomes of this grant was her book- *Revisioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875-1915* that was published by OUP in 2005. In hindsight, one could give the example of the rich production of material by Karlekar post the grant (she produced another book and an archive of images that led to the creation of several photographic calendars on women through her parent institution, the Centre for Women's

Development Studies) as another example of how the outcomes of grants often have a longer history.

The book grant given to Malavika Karlekar, Jain's films, as well projects such as that of Pushpamala or Gadihoke also draw attention to another theme–that of the lived experiences of women with photography. In Jain's *City of Photos* (2005) a family of Muslim women in Ahmedabad, Gujarat express how they felt a sense of empowerment every time they appeared before the camera. Forbidden by orthodox Islam to put up images on their walls, the women speak of their obsession and desire to be photographed in different clothes and scenarios. This deep attraction to photographic fantasy and 'dressing up' for the camera is also referred to in Nishtha Jain's next film *Family Album* (2012) and is evident in the cover image of Karlekar's book. All these grants focus on the dialogic possibilities of performance and 'picture making' among women as subjects.

Malavika Karlekar/*Re-visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal*

Nishtha Jain/*City of Photos*

OUTCOMES

Karlekar's project also allows one to move to another way of looking at the grants, which is through their outcomes and what it might mean for the dissemination and circulation of photography. Many projects such as that of KP Jayakumar (a project that interrogated colonial images of landscape and communities in the high ranges of Kerala and their continuing presence in discourses of contemporary tourism) resulted in photo essays and exhibitions. Others such as Gadihoke produced a manuscript. A large number of books have emerged from IFA grants and examining these more carefully allows us to witness the shifts in their production values ranging from older glossy coffee table books or those that use photographs as illustrations for text to the photo book as a distinct entity in its own right. This is not by way of critique of books that came
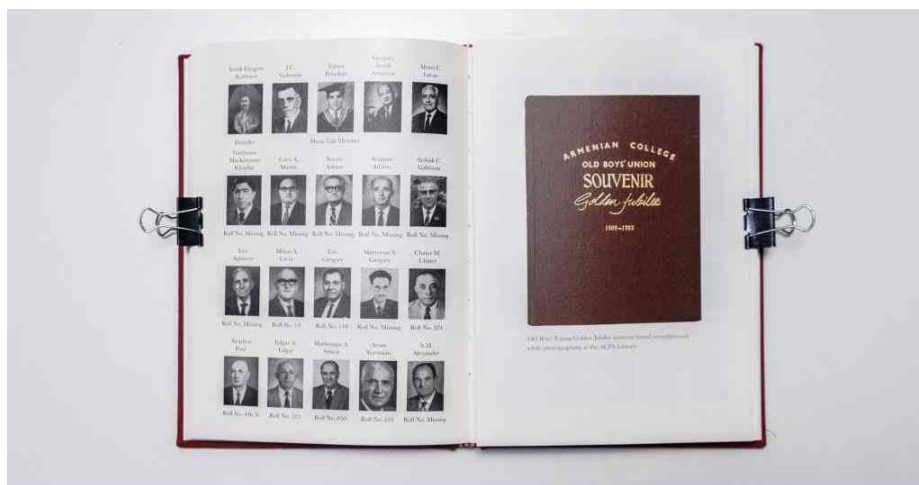
out earlier but merely to point out how the grants in themselves can be seem to reflect shifts in the field. One example of this is the more recent interest in the photo book that pays as much attention to the nuances of book making, its design and material form-the quality of paper for instance or the layout and its relationship to text – as it does to the reproduction of images. This is evident in the design of *Witness* (by Sukanya Baskar) as well as that of *Where the Birds Never Sing* by Soumya Sankar Bose or a book on the Armenians of Calcutta by Alakananda Nag. At times, it is heart-warming that small budgeted books take on a life of their own as happened in the case of Sandesh Bhandare, who received a grant in 2002 to document troupes performing *Tamasha* in Maharashtra. In this case (as with other grants) IFA was prescient about follow-up grants that enabled grantees to take their work further. Bhandare received two subsequent grants to produce a limited run of books. *Tamasha: Ek Rangadi Gamat* had 250 images using his own text in Marathi. This modestly produced and low-priced book had a very large circulation among a regional readership and received praise from major figures in the field of theatre. The success of this project seems to point towards the need for more such grants that reach out to a vernacular readership.
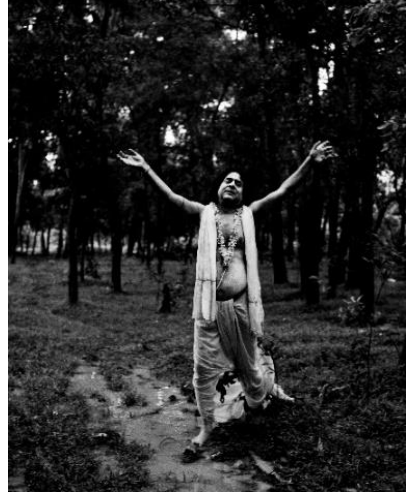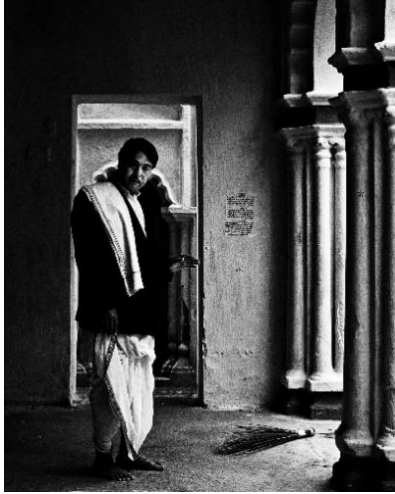

Sanjay Kak/*Witness*

Soumya Sankar Bose/*Where the Birds Never Sing*

Alakananda Nag/*The Armenians of Calcutta*

DOCUMENTATION/REGION/PLACE

Like Bhandare, many photo projects have been driven by the impulse to document threatened folk arts and crafts or to trace their future trajectories. It is noteworthy that some focus on small towns or local sub-cultures. Bhandare's project was based in districts of Maharashtra while Dev Nayak's project to document the potter's community in Kumartuli and Pradeep Kumar Kar's grant to trace the invisible history of artisans (often from lower caste backgrounds) are located in Bengal. Most of them offer new insights about the future directions that these threatened forms might take. If the reasons to document *Tamasha* was the apprehension that it might be a dying art, Bhandare brings new insights such as how popular cinema might actually give the form a new lease of life or the curious reflection that the Kargil war was one of the new emerging themes in some performances. In Tamil Nadu (Poompuhar) Abul Kalam Azad works with cultural and social memory about ancient epics to work on a photo project with a focus on masculinity.

Sandesh Bhandare/*Tamasha: Ek Rangadi Gamat*

Regional specificity is highlighted in most of the above-described projects. The focus on Bengal is extended in a very interesting set of grants awarded to Soumya Sankar Bose for two projects. One of these sought to explore the theatrical and transforming world of *Jatra* through constructed portraits of veteran performers while the other revisits an unspoken traumatic historical event in the Sundarbans in 1979. The massacre of Marichjhapi is an example of the calculated erasure from public memory of state sponsored violence against vulnerable inhabitants. As evaluators have correctly pointed out, this project acquires great significance in the light of a present-day political discourse on the legality of citizenship. In both projects, Bose has concrete outcomes: a book and exhibition of photographs but his use of performance and fictive elements to interrogate the ephemeral nature of traumatic post memory in the second project is significant. In the *Jatra* project, Bose created a sensorial experience of this changing world by mounting an exhibition in an old library in Calcutta that used staged portraits made by him as well as found memorabilia, audio and performance.

Soumya Sankar Bose/*Gems of Jatra*

Soumya Sankar Bose/*Where the Birds Never Sing*

Bose's projects also offer an example of the rhizomatic connections *between* projects. It can be seen in a continuum with other regional projects located in Bengal or as a documentation of changing theatrical forms (along with others like *Tamasha* in Maharashtra). In its hybrid performative form, experimentation and photo collaboration with subjects it also speaks to other projects by Sharbendu De, Tarun Bhartiya and Zubeni Lotha.

INTERMEDIAL COLLABORATION

Many IFA grants have encouraged collaborative (and often intermedial) work between photographers and other disciplines. The arts-based installation by Visthar comprising a photographer, visual artist and dancer/choreographer (TM Aziz, Tripura Kashyap and C.F. John) sought to locate their work in an outdoor site. The group eventually produced both an exhibition and an installation titled *Wall of Memories*. Another grant that emphasised collectivity under the Extending Arts Program (EAP) at IFA was given to the Sunlight Trust. One among these projects invited four photographers for a residency at the Goa Centre for Alternative photography (ALTlab). This stay enabled them to reflect and develop 'slow' forms of their own practice by using their bodies and other senses (through walks in Goa for instance). In both cases, evaluators have noted how the emphasis has been on process and not the pressure of an outcome.

Visthar/*Wall of Memories*

OLD AND NEW MEDIA

What form does the analogue take in an age of digital reconstruction? One interesting trajectory that emerges in a lot of grants is experimentation with the medium and the relationship between old and new media. The Sunlight Trust residencies enabled photographers to return to analogue laboratory practices such as the creation of calotypes, Alakananda Nag used materials like Shellac and Indigo to print her images of the Armenians while Tushar Joshi and K Balamurugan choose to experiment with vintage forms of printing such as the dry and wet collodion process in their project located in Almora. All these projects return to 'slower' photo chemical processes in the instantaneous moment of the digital. Others have engaged with the relationship between the analogue and digital.

Sunlight Trust, Goa

**Tushar Joshi & K Balamurugan, Almora**

Sunlight Trust, Goa

At a moment that is often amnesiac about an analog history, media archaeologists point out the need to be attentive to the sedimented and recurring nature of media cultures as a fading analog past marks its indelible trace on the present. Even lens-based digital art draws from a physical footprint and often, it carries the haunting of this analog past. A project that illustrates this is by Joe Paul Cyriac who draws an analogy between the surveillance of uploaded google street views and 19th century surveys of landscape. One of the only projects to engage with the pandemic is that of Bombay based Patel who creates a small but significant set of images that are about the virtual travel of her mother on a trip to Japan – a physical journey that never happened.

Joe Paul Cyriac/*The Order of Sorcery*
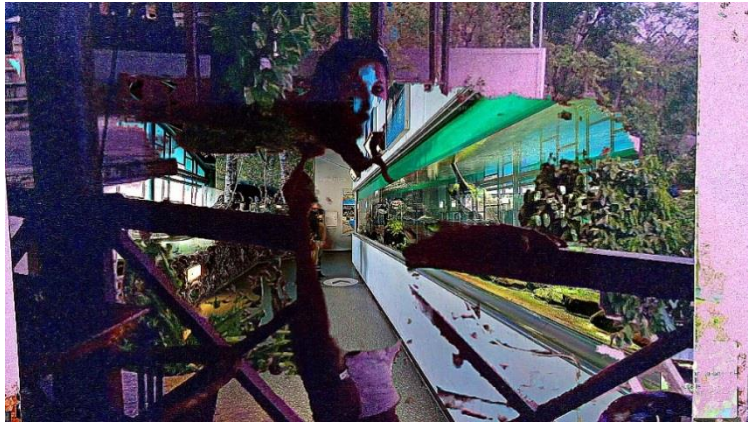
Kaamna Patel/*Take a Picture*

ARCHIVES

The digital age has also facilitated the rediscovery and new lives of analogue collections. In this context it would be useful to discuss two very interesting archival projects. Navin Thomas attempted to look what he termed 'the city's discards'– a very large abandoned 'found' archive of 2,00,000 negatives that represent the decades between the 1960s and 1980s in Bangalore. The few images made available to this evaluator that document obsolete technologies such as the typewriter, calculator and telephone are testimony to the immense possibilities of this project.
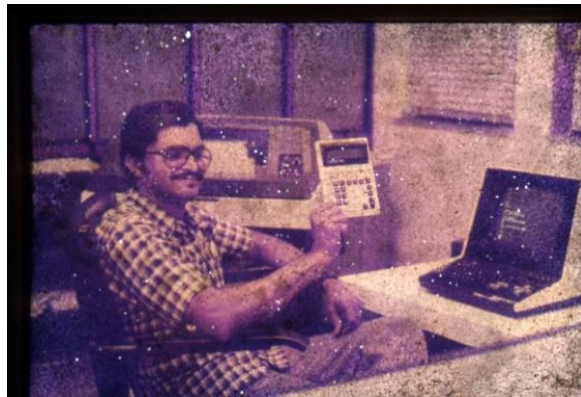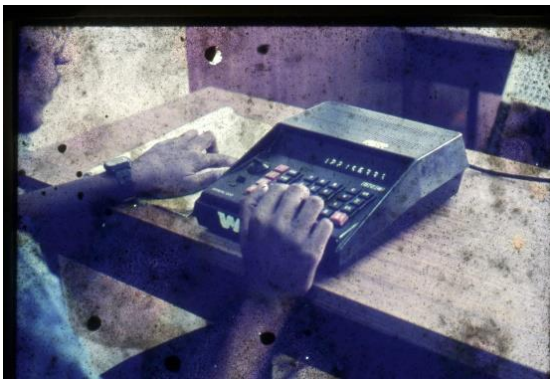
Navin Thomas/*Bangalore Photo City: Lost and Found*

Another project that is also driven by an archival impulse – to trace histories of the everyday – emerges from a more official institutional collection-that of the Delhi Visual archive at Ambedkar University. Bhavin Shukla, Koyna Tomar and Vaibhavi Kowshik come from different fields and each approach the 4500 digitised photos made available to them from a different perspective. For instance, Tomar is able to work out a digital archiving system to catalogue and organise parts of the collection to trace patterns and meanings within the quotidian – what Geoff Dyer has termed 'the ongoing moment' – while Shukla looks at how built environment and exhibition spaces interact with curated images. In this case new meanings and juxtapositions emerge as a result of the open, flexible, and ever-expanding nature of a digitised archive.

Bhavin Shukla/*Delhi Dialogues*

While Navin Thomas' project can be seen within a cluster of projects that return to the analogue or explore archives, it could also be seen as part of yet another sub-set of projects – those documenting urban histories – in this case, Bangalore. If this project seeks to discover a city which was "yet to discover its future as a Silicon Valley," Shruti Chamaria's photo-documentation of abandoned cyber cafes in Bangalore offers a more dystopic vision of closure as a result of change in the cultures of technology. Her project also seeks to connect to similar experiences across transnational borders. There is a third fascinating grant given to Mahesh S to explore histories and narratives about Bangalore's tallest building no 37 that opened in 1973. Driven by narratives of decay, nostalgia, loss and secrecy, this multimedia project using voice, text, sketches as well and the still and moving image had immense potential too as a speculative biography since there were so many gaps in access to factual information. One could also add Poornima Sukumar's project that sought to design multi media events over a year with the trans community in Bangalore within this cluster of urban histories.


Mahesh S/*Building No 37*

MARGINALISED HISTORIES

It is interesting that some images in the archive of Ambedkar University have been donated by amateur photographers. These forms of photography that include practices of photographing within the home or the banality of the everyday have not been given enough attention in photo histories that tend to focus on canonical works by auteurs and other professionals. In a lateral manner one could then connect this to a recent IFA grant to Shilpi Goswami to organise (along with Suryanandini Sinha) an online conference of emerging scholarship on the micro histories of family photographs. This grant will also culminate in a book draft that would be a welcome addition to the field. The stated objectives of this grant have been to look beyond the frame of the functional family unit to interrogate narratives of loss, heteronormativity and other kinds of tensions through intersectionality's of gender, class and caste. Goswami and Sinha's project folds back into and takes forward Gadihoke's project that had at the turn of the millennium sought to document the presence of women practitioners in 20th century India. Among other photo practices, this study had also discussed non-professional engagements with the camera that included 'zenana photography' by women at the turn of the early 20th century and mid-century amateur practices by women in the home. This is yet another example of lateral and rhizomatic connections *between* projects.

Sabeena Gadihoke/*Women Photographers Project*

WHAT REMAINS: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE
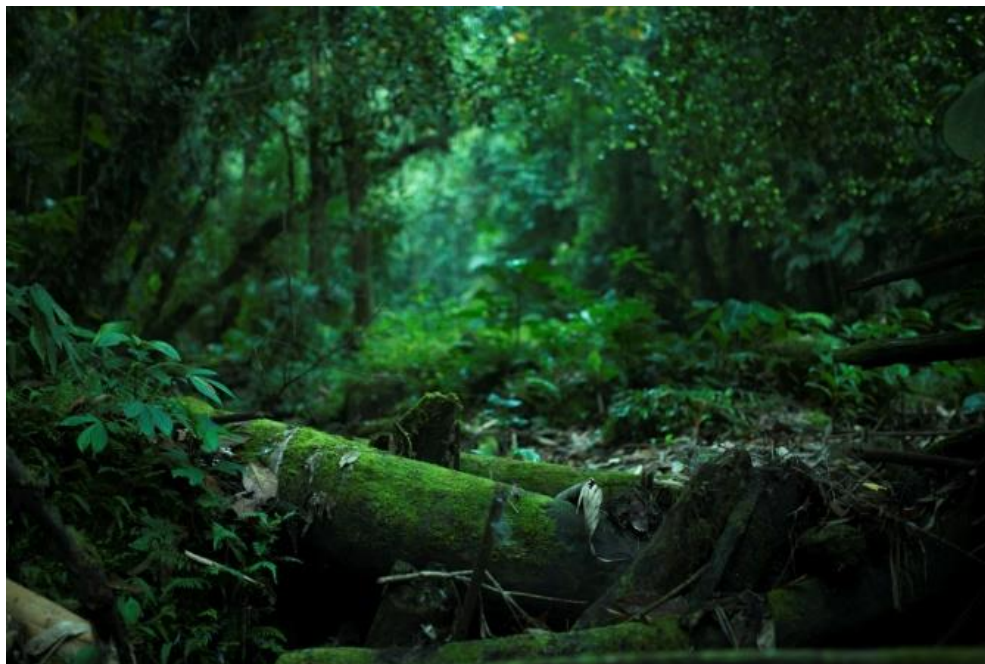
Sharbendu De/*Imagined Homeland*

The IFA projects described so far are striking in their diversity, richness and contribution to the landscape of photo studies today. I have suggested how leaps and connections could be made across themes, geographic location and region, objectives, form, experimentation and archives. The grants have given opportunity to gifted practitioners to experiment with their craft. In many cases the dissemination of work has moved away from the predictable model of the gallery towards other forms of exhibition and dissemination. There have been intermedial experiments with other visual forms such as illustrations and film. Most interestingly, the projects point to a dynamic encounter between the pasts and presents of photograph. While the grants are very comprehensive in terms of scale, there is always scope for filling in gaps.

It is obvious that IFA should continue to encourage projects that experiment with questions of form − not just in terms of making visual images, but in their many lives through circulation and dissemination or display. This report has deliberately not created a separate category devoted to aesthetics and experimentation as so many projects (even those that set out to do something different and did not quite make it) have been able to push the borders.

Perhaps more projects that focus on concerns of caste, religious minorities and vernacular publics could be encouraged. There has been a recent turn to identity-based forms of representation but even as we welcome marginalised groups creating their own images one might want to be careful about taking patronising positions that stem from essentialism. Instead, there should be attempts to seek fresh insights, ways of looking and formalistic interventions.

There are photo-histories yet to be documented. One instance of this is work on photo practices such as amateur photography that are popular and yet ignored as they have been considered too

ubiquitous and common. Covid 19 has redefined media in ways that are unimaginable. How could artist/researchers engage with the enforced isolation of the pandemic and a changed world in its aftermath? It would be interesting to see how new photographic work engages with this moment not just in terms of human subjects but discussions of the Anthropocene and the non-human world- an approach displacing humans from their position of primacy as well as acknowledging the catastrophic consequences of this hierarchy on the animal world, wildlife, environment and climate change. Further, how could IFA grants be collaborative *across* transnational borders especially in a South Asian context? The pandemic has actually demonstrated how these connections might be easier.

While it was very informative to read the comments of the evaluators and to understand the shape that these projects finally took, I found myself thinking at several junctures of how many of these projects actually respond to a lineage of similar work that has been created in the past. Some examples been provided earlier, but the work of Soumya Sankar Bose could be speaking to the documentary *Performing the Goddess: The Chapal Bhaduri Story* (1999) by Naveen Kishore. The dilemmas about the representation of the 'other' in the otherwise successful project on the Aravanis by Poornima Sukumar have been addressed by photographers Dayanita Singh (*Myself Mona Ahmed*, 2001) and Anita Khemka (work on Laxmi and other trans subjects, 2003). While there is no doubt that many of these projects depart from and take discussions in new directions, I wonder if grantees (if they don't already do) could be asked to write a review of work done in the area when they give in proposals. This would be akin to writing a review of literature which is the requirement of any kind of academic proposal to have a sense of the landscape of the proposed field and where they fit in. In other words, there should be a reflective understanding of how the project contributes new knowledge to the field.

My last suggestion has to do with the gestation period for project outcomes to be fulfilled. While there is always an anxiety to want solid outcomes and results, part of the excitement of research is the 'messy' nature of its trajectory that does not always take the path expected. It is also difficult to predict the unexpected journeys that a grant may take in the future. It might be useful to ask some grantees to return at the end of a substantial gap (a decade/two decades?) to make presentations about how their projects branched out into new possibilities that were not always anticipated. Towards the end of this report, perhaps I could illustrate this with a discussion about the journey of my own IFA project which was to document the practices of women photographers in India. In 1996-97 I had been a participant in a fascinating course titled 'Women in Photography' in an institution abroad. My own project was initially driven by a desire to move away from the Eurocentric focus of this course and to replicate the same in a South Asian context. By coincidence I received a parallel grant to make a film about three women photographers at the same time. The research for both fed into each other as all three protagonists of my film were also in the study. In the meantime, the proposed course did not materialise. Instead, the grant enabled me to continue to meet Homai Vyarawalla, India's first woman press photographer which eventually culminated in a book in 2006 and several retrospective exhibitions on her during 2010-12. Other parts of the research were published but the reverberations of one of the sections on mid-century amateurs continue strongly in my work nearly 25 years later. I have worked more closely on Nony Singh (the mother of Dayanita Singh) in a book titled *Nony Singh/ The Archivist* (2013), published on the twin sisters Manobina Roy and Debalina Mazumdar and recently co-curated (along with Mallika Luezinger and Tapati Guha-Thakurta) two exhibitions of their photographs in 2022. For the latter I returned to audio

recordings with the sisters from my IFA grant in 1999-2000. The research also opened the doors to other work and publications on mid-20th century amateur photography (not limited to women) and has finally taken the shape of courses on Photography Studies and Personal Archives that I now offer at university. However, this is certainly not the trajectory for the grant that was originally envisaged.

Sabeena Gadihoke/Women Photographers Project/Book

Sabeena Gadihoke/Women Photographers Project/Posters of Exhibitions

As one comes to the end of this report, it might be useful to ruminate on what photography might be in the future. In an age of constantly moving screens where it is difficult to rest the eye, perhaps it will be the reflective and pensive quality of the still image that will not lose its place and that we will most return to. There is and will be more work located at the intersection of the still and moving image. There have been far reaching changes ushered in by the smart phone - we might refer to it as the 'Kodak moment' of the Global South. The smart phone makes it possible for everyone to be a 'good' photographer. At the far end of this techno-curve will be the changes that begun with Photoshop and move towards images that do not need human intervention. Today open-source Artificial Intelligence sites like Dall E2 can create realistic, hyper real or phantasmatic pictures on the command of a word. Yet, at a moment of excess when everybody can make images, the critical difference will lie not in technique but in leaps made in the imagination. This is the moment to think of photography as a language where words are created solely by images. Perhaps one could end with an example of the use of the camera by the visually impaired. In an essay in the Calcutta *Telegraph* (October 11, 2012) titled *Darkly I Listen: Photography Freed from the Limitations of Sight* the late Aveek Sen writes evocatively about the imagination of a world by those who were born blind. Freed from the acquired language of photography and the 'tyranny of the visible,' he draws attention to a mode of vision that has shed the burden of 'seeing' - through information, context and illustration and is instead informed by feeling and the sensory. It is hoped that grants given by IFA will continue to push some of these borders and contribute to engagements with photographs not just as images but with their many and constantly mutating afterlives.