

PHOTOGRAPHIC CONSUMPTION IN KATHMANDU, C. 1863-1960

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, a few hundred photographs taken in Nepal prior to 1960 have been published. These have been included in several books and collections. One can, for instance, think of *Nepal Rediscovered: The Rana Court 1846-1951* edited by Padma Prakash Shrestha (1986) containing 90 photos from the Rana era selected from the archives of the UK-based Nepal Kingdom Foundation. Similarly, in the 2-volumes narrative *Shree Teen Haruko Tatthya Britanta* Purushottam SJB Rana (1990) has published about 300 photos of the Ranas. In *Nepal Under the Ranas* written by Adrian Sever (1993), we can find more than 270 photos selected from the private collection of Jharendra SJB Rana. In *Portraits and Photographs from Nepal* Prakash A. Raj (1994) has published over 50 photos taken before 1960. We can also think of more recent publications such as *Images of a Century: The Changing Townscapes of the Kathmandu Valley* edited by Andreas Proksch (1995) and *Changing Faces of Nepal*, containing the photos taken by the father and son duo of Dirga Man Chitrakar and Ganesh Man Chitrakar (Heide 1997). Similarly travelogues and other books written by non-Nepalis who visited Nepal during the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries usually contain a few photographs. In addition, many of the more recent monographs on modern Nepali history contain some photographs from the pre-1960 period. Unknown number of unpublished photographs from this period are also to be found in many personal collections.

Substantive analytical histories of pre-1960 photography in Nepal have not yet been written. The first four books mentioned above treat the photographs they print as evidence that is simply 'there', sometimes to augment their respective narratives, but say very little in the form of a social history of the first century of photography in Nepal. *Images of a Century* was described by one reviewer as "a visual feast" to everybody interested in Kathmandu, "an extremely useful record of the historical layers of the city" (Shah 1996) but it is also not a work that examines the photos it exhibits. In contrast *Changing Faces of Nepal* comes with a substantial essay on the work of the early Nepali photographers and their patrons, written by Susanne von der Heide. This latter work, J. P. Losty's article (1992) on the work of Clarence C. Taylor, the first person to take photographs in Nepal, and this writer's earlier essay (Onta 1994) contribute toward a social history of the first century of photography in Nepal. Yet many questions go unanswered or are still waiting for more detailed answers. These include: who had social access to photography as a consumption item and how did that access change over the century long period under

consideration here? Toward what ends was photography put to use in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries in Nepal? What kinds of cultural capital did photographs embody during those two half-century periods? And of what use are these photographs to social historians today?

At this preliminary stage of research, it might not be possible to answer all the above questions adequately for all of Nepal. Nor will it be possible to provide an analytically descriptive account of the entire corpus, published and unpublished, of photographs from the pre-1960 period. For such a project to be realized, not only will we have to look at all the available photographs, but also at the related voluminous non-photographic sources that will throw light on the contexts surrounding their creation. For obvious reasons, this kind of project is well beyond the intellectual and financial means of an individual researcher. Therefore, the objective of this essay, which is a shortened and revised version of a six-part article I wrote for *The Kathmandu Post* four years ago (Onta 1994) - one that does not seem very accessible to readers in Europe as it is not mentioned by Susanne von der Heide (1997) - is to highlight and analyse some of the more interesting aspects of the history of photography in Kathmandu until about 1960. My aim will not be to provide an exhaustive history but rather a suggestive one. In particular, this is a history of photographic consumption in Kathmandu. What I offer is a very incomplete reading of a small portion of the photo archive of this period and I expect my interpretations to be superseded by more nuanced readings that others will hopefully provide fol-



1. Kaviraj Dirgananda Raj Vaidya and Chandra Badan Vaidya with their daughter and first son. Also seen is family attendant. c. 1916. Photographer unknown. From the collection of T. N. Vaidya.

lowing a more systematic research on this topic.

I begin with a short section that discusses the first photographers in Kathmandu. The following sections highlight both the varieties of and meanings in photographic consumption up to the end of the 1950s. The main thread of the argument that I make can be stated as thus: photographic consumption until about 1910 was an exclusive prerogative of the ruling Ranas. After the setting up of local studios in Kathmandu around that time, the exclusivity of this consumption practice was broken and Kathmandu's proto-middle class began to seek photographic portraits of itself. Once cameras became portable and affordable to members of this class in the 1920s, photography gradually became a normalizing practice of self-representation of this middle class.

The First Photographers in Kathmandu

The three scholarly writings that focus on the early history of photography referred to earlier allow us to reach a few conclusions:

1. While we have evidence that portraits of Jung Bahadur were made while he visited Europe in mid-1850 (c.g., P. SJB Rana 1998), there are good reasons to believe that he was not photographed there. Given the way in which his activities in Europe were covered by the press, it is highly inconceivable that a photo session, had it taken place, would not have been reported (Onta 1994). Had Jung Bahadur encountered this technology, we can guess that he would have brought back cameras with him to Nepal, thus precipitating an earlier encounter with the medium inside Nepal.

2. While photo collectors in Nepal have occasionally claimed that they have photos taken inside Nepal in the 1850s, no has been able to prove this beyond doubt. On the other hand, historical research done thus far allows us to conclude that, in all probability, Kathmandu did not see any photographic activity in the 1850s. In response to a request from Calcutta for photographs of the 'principal hill tribes' of Nepal, George Ramsay, the then British Resident in Nepal, wrote on 3 July 1861: "There are no amateurs in the art of Photography here, and the inducements to professionals to visit Khatmandoo (sic) are so very small, that none have ever come up here" (Losty 1992 : 318). Except for an occasional absence, Ramsay had been in Kathmandu since 1852 (he held this post until 1867). Given that the few foreigners who came into Kathmandu during the 1850s would have been either the guests of the Rana premier or the resident, Ramsay was in a good position to know and remember if any of them had been photo-

graphy-enthusiasts. No other archival or secondary source has succeeded in raising a credible doubt about Ramsay's statement regarding the absence of photographic activity in Nepal in the 1850s.

3. Based on indubitable photographic and textual evidence thus far examined, Losty has identified Clarence Comyn Taylor (1830-79) as the first person to take photographs in Nepal in 1863. Taylor arrived in Kathmandu on 19 March 1863 as an assistant to Resident Ramsay. On 10 September 1863, Ramsay wrote to Calcutta stating Taylor was ready to take the photographs requested in 1861. A year later, on 24 Septem-



2. Two Newar women. Late 1930s. Photographer unknown.
From the collection of P. Onta.

ber 1864, Ramsay reported that four identical sets each consisting of twenty photographs of the tribes of Nepal prepared by Captain Taylor had been mailed to Calcutta (Losty 1992). These 20 photographs by Taylor were not the first ones taken by Taylor inside Nepal and are not included in the Taylor album recently acquired by the

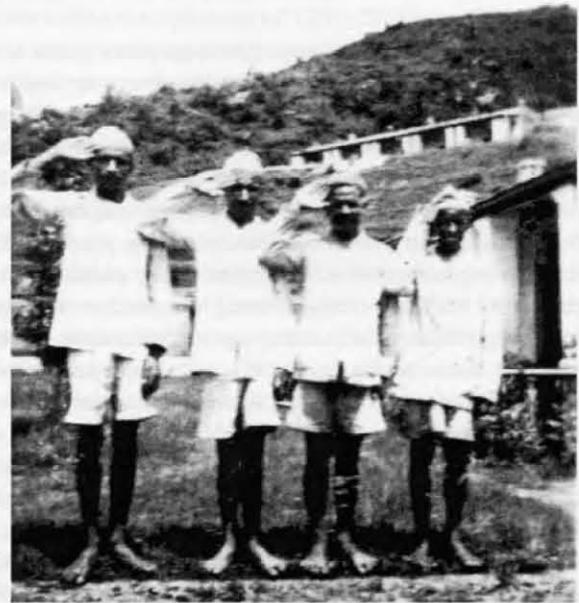
British Library. This album consists of 18 photographs, 14 of which show different views of the Kathmandu Valley. The remaining four are single or group portraits of ruling elites. The four portrait photographs include a single portrait of Jung Bahadur wearing a full formal dress, he with his sons Jagat Jung and Jit Jung sitting on a chaise longue, Jung Bahadur with his wife Hiranyagarbha Kumari, daughters and attendant 'slave girls' (so the caption reads), and King Surendra with Resident Ramsay and other Nepali high ranking officials. At least a few of these 18 photographs had already been taken by September 1863. The evidence for this comes from Ramsay's 10 September 1863 letter mentioned above where he states that several of the Ranas including Jung Bahadur had asked for copies of Taylor's photographs. Thus we can be sure that within six months of his arrival in Kathmandu, Taylor had already taken some photographs of the Kathmandu scenery and done some portraits of Jung Bahadur and his court, and had made Jung Bahadur and others interested in the medium.

4. After the photographs taken in 1863-65 by C. C. Taylor, the next dated photographs come from Jung Bahadur's visit in November-December 1871 to the great fair at Hajipur (on the Ganges opposite Patna) where he met Lord Mayo, the viceroy of India. One photograph from this occasion, showing some members of the entourage of both Jung and Lord Mayo, has been published in *Life of Jung Bahadur* written by his son Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana (1909). The 1871 photos, according to Losty (1992), were taken by Messers Bourne and Shepherd, who were also the official photographers when the Prince of Wales came to the Nepal Tarai in early 1876 for a sixteen-day hunting trip. These photographers, it seems, also made it to Kathmandu in 1875.

5. The compiler of *Changing Faces of Nepal* which was prepared as a catalogue for an exhibition at UNESCO in Paris (December 1997) of selective photos taken by the father and son duo of Dirga Man Chitrakar (1877-1951) and Ganesh Man Chitrakar (1906-1985) of Kathmandu, Susanne von der Heide (1997), provides substantial information on pioneering Nepali photographers and wealthy Rana individuals who patronized them. In an essay (spiced with relevant photos) entitled "Pioneers of Early Photography in Nepal: Photographers, Artists and Patrons," she identifies Dambar Shamsheer (1858-1922), younger brother of Rana PM Bir Shamsheer (r. 1885-1901), as the first Nepali photographer. He had set up a photo studio in his durbar with money provided by his father Dhir Shamsheer. It seems that he had learnt the art in the mid-1870s from Bourne and Shepherd. Later Dambar Shamsheer's son Samar Shamsheer (1883-1958) became a first-rate photographer.

Heide names Purna Man Chitrakar (c. 1863-1939) as an important early photographer who was patronized by Dambar Shamsheer and Gehendra Shamsheer, son of Bir Shamsheer (cf. Adhikari 2048 B.S.). Purna Man is said

to have learnt photography from the former around 1880 and was sent to Calcutta in the early 1880s for further training. Even as he continued to paint, Purna Man also received instructions from a Bengali photographer Neel Madhaba Deen who was invited to Kathmandu in 1888. Dirga Man Chitrakar came under the tutelage of Purna Man in the early 1890s when he was in his early teens. Later he was patronized by Chandra Shamsheer (r. 1901-1929) who gave him a job in the art department in Singha Durbar and took him in his entourage to Europe in 1908. Whether Dirga Man took any pictures while he was there has not been ascertained but it is known for sure that many cameras were brought back to Nepal at the end of that trip. It is with them that Dirga Man began to photograph. He set up an enlarge-



3. A group of menial workers at the Tokha sanatorium, 2004 B.S. (c. 1947). Photographer: Chandra Nanda Raj Vaidya. From the C.N.R. Vaidya album.

ment studio in his house in Bhimsensthan around then as well and later taught photography to his son Ganesh Man.

According to Heide (1997), Purna Man taught photography to many Chitrakars: his brother Badra Man, Badra Man's brothers-in-law Ratna Bahadur and Hira Bahadur; Krishna Bahadur, Tej Bahadur and possibly Harka Lal Chitrakar and his son Prithvi Lal. Other pioneering Chitrakar photographers mentioned by Heide include Chaite Chitrakar and his son Purna; Prithvi Man Chitrakar, the brothers Laxmi Bahadur and Tulsi Bahadur (grandsons of the famous artist Bhaju Man who Jung Bahadur had taken to Europe in 1850) and the latter's sons Buddhi Bahadur and Krishna Bahadur. Other early photographers included Chakra Bahadur Kayestha and his three sons: Tej, Darsan and Sahilu; Madan and Sri Man Kayestha; Ghyana Bahadur Karma-charya and his brother Shanta Bahadur, latter's son Samar; Narayan Prasad Joshi, Pashupati Lal Shrestha,

Bharat Shrestha and Tirath Raj Manandhar, Govind Vaidya, Bishnu Dhoj Joshi and his son Hiranya Dhoj.

According to Heide (1997) Chitrakars who had access to Rana courts had to redefine their traditional role as painters and artists. When photography entered the scene in late 19th century, some took it up even as they continued to paint. The new technology also gave birth to the hybrid product of 'retouched' photos (photos that had been reworked with the painter's brush) which were quite popular with the Rana elites. Photography began to coexist with water color painting and the art of engraving and powerful Ranas competed with each other to patronize the more skillful painters and/or photographers.

Varieties and Politics of Photographic Consumption, 1880-1910

In the 1880s several foreign photographers made it to Kathmandu : A certain Henry Ballantine was visiting Kathmandu when the Rana premier Ranaudip Singh was killed by the Shamsher brothers on November 22, 1885. In his *On India's Frontier or Nepal, the Gurkhas' Mysterious Land* (1896), Ballantine describes how he filled up his leisure hours taking photographs after having borrowed a few negative dry plates from a certain Mr Hoffman of the firm of Messrs. Johnson and Hoffman of Calcutta. According to Ballantine, Hoffman had come to Kathmandu with a European artist assistant "to photograph the carvings and other curiosities that were being collected under the supervision of the Residency surgeon for the Indian and Colonial Exhibition to be held in London as well as to take what pictures he could of the Nepalese officers and their court"(1896 : 109). Hoffman reportedly was "well patronized" by the Ranas. On Ballantine's own admission, we know that the photographs of the Ranas included in his book were taken by Hoffman. Of the 34 photographs given in Ballantine's book, eleven are portraits of the ruling elites, sixteen show various scenery from the Valley, and the rest seven are shots of 'common' folks. Photography during this decade was also used for scientific research. The evidence for this first comes from Cecil Bendall's *A Journey of Literary and Archaeological Research in Nepal and Northern India during the winter of 1884-5* (1886). Bendall mentions photographing several inscriptions and reproduces photographs of them and of several temples from the valley. Other visitors included Neel Madhaba Deen in 1888 and Bert Harris (a worker for Johnson and Hoffman) in 1896-97.

Photography was also used to record big-game hunting. In April 1901, during the short tenure of Dev Shumsher as Rana premier, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, visited the Nepal Tarai on a hunting trip. Although Jung Bahadur and his successors seem to have gone for shikar in the Tarai on an annual basis, it was only when British guests were invited for big-game hunting that their official photographers could document this activity by the Ranas. This state of affairs

seems to have continued until the mid-1910s when Nepali photographers became capable of recording shikar activities. But until then, big hunting expeditions such as those made by the Prince of Wales in 1876 and Lord Curzon in 1901 provided their Rana hosts an opportunity to engage in their own type of "action" photography. The 1876 hunt was officially photographed by Messrs. Bourne and Shepherd and more photographs than the few that have been published of that occasion probably exist in some British archive. With respect to Lord Curzon's 1901 hunt, an entire album of photographs taken by the Calcutta firm of Herzog & Higgins, entitled *H. E. the Viceroy's Shooting Tour Nepal, Terai April 1901*, can be found in the Kaiser Library in Kathmandu. The remarkable photographs from this album include those showing elephants lined-up in preparation for the hunt, tiger skins testifying to its success and big birds scavenging through the carrion (Onta 1994).

While there seems to have been plenty of photographic activity in Dambar Shamsher's durbar before 1910, access to the medium as an item of consumption was not very easily available to other Ranas. For them, photographic activity, especially before the turn of the century, mainly took place only when photographers from India came to Nepal either on their own (with permission from the Ranas of course) or were officially invited for that purpose. Based on the published corpus of photographs from this period, we can say that only the elite Ranas, their immediate families, high ranking officials and their attendants became subjects of photographic portraits during the times when guest photographers were in Kathmandu. The photographs included in Sever (1993) and Shrestha (1986) are ample testimony to this fact.

Except for those photographs taken during hunting expeditions in the Tarai, most photographs of the Ranas are portraits done indoors. The Rana men appear almost exclusively in military-like uniforms and the women are seen in the long saris that were then prevalent or hoop-skirtish clothes. Most have a serious look to their face and seem to stare directly at the camera or slightly away from it. The 'ch-e-e-se' sensibility that marks today's portraiture is completely missing from almost all of the photographs of the Ranas from this period. When royal attendants are included in group portraits they too look serious. The most exceptional photograph on this count is a portrait of eight royal servants published as plate 10 in Shrestha (1986). Dated as belonging to about 1890, we can see a smile in almost all of the faces, as if being photographed was a pleasurable break from their routine burden. In her well-known book, *On Photography*, critic Susan Sontag notes that photography became a rite of family life just when the larger family aggregates started undergoing radical surgery towards the nuclear family in the industrializing countries of Europe and America. As this was happening, "photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing

extendedness of family life" (1977 : 9). In contrast, it would seem that for the Ranas, the family portraits were testimony to the continuance of their large family aggregates as well as forceful statements of the vitality of the extendedness of their family life. Moreover, the large numbers of children and wives seen in Rana family portraits seem to suggest that photography provided an unprecedented representational medium to assert the virility of Rana male family-heads. Sontag further writes that memorializing the achievements of individual family members is the earliest popular use of photography (1977 : 8). The photographs published by Shrestha (1986) and Sever (1993) of Bir Shamsher's inauguration of premiership in 1885 seems to suggest that a genre of inauguration-photography recording the prime minister's success was begun, one that all the subsequent Rana premiers adhered to. Hunting and marriages were to provide further occasions to document individual achievements. Photographing one's huge durbars (for instance the Seto Durbar of Bir Shamsher) must also be seen as a way to record and represent one's accomplishment on a monumental scale.

From what has been said above, it should be clear that only a small group of Ranas and their allied high ranking officials had control over access to photography as a technology up to the end of the first decade of this century. Even as they might have been photographed by official photographers or travellers like Ballantine, photography remained beyond the reach of the common non-Rana folk in Kathmandu and elsewhere. They would simply allow themselves to be photographed or crowd around curiously, as reported by Ballantine (1896 : 129), as he took a photograph of Kal Bhairab in Kathmandu. And herein lies my main argument regarding its use in Nepal during this period. For the Ranas photographs embodied a special form of cultural capital that only they had intermittent access to in Nepal and therefore their consumption of this media was part of a distinct ruling class sub-culture that they were busily producing. Other consumption items of this sub-culture included foreign objects, dress, insignia and European styled durbars. The modality of this Rana practice necessarily involved, what the American anthropologist Mark Liechty (1997) has called a strategy of "selective exclusion". While consuming foreignness, the Ranas wanted to control the power that was associated with it and avoid its dangers. As Liechty has put it in his paper devoted to Nepal's contact with foreigners and foreign goods prior to 1951, the power of Ranas' trafficking of the image of foreignness depended on their ability to strictly control how it was defined, and who had access to it. The Ranas had to monopolize both the representation of foreignness inside Nepal, and the social access to it. Photography fit rather nicely in this scheme. While the control over photographic technology in the form of photographers imported from India or limited access to Rana photo studios was an obvious case of the monopolization of access, the

medium could also be effectively used to represent their consumption of other items of foreignness. Apart from the photographs that were sent to their British friends, these photographs of the Ranas adorned their homes where they were mainly seen by other members of their fraternity. While reasserting internal Rana differentiation, these photographs acted to reinforce a collectively shared Rana sub-culture.

The exclusive use of photography in the recreation of this sub-culture seems to have been so complete that the Ranas did not show any interest in producing a volume similar to *The People of India* (eight volumes published between 1868-75) wherein Indian tribes and castes were ethnographically described along with their photos. One reason this volume was commissioned for India was undoubtedly the insecurity felt by its British rulers after the uprisings of 1857-58. Hence they executed a deeper study of Indian society using all means that were then available to them. But there were no similar exigencies pressing the Rana rulers of Nepal. Having increasingly consolidated the agrarian bureaucracy - the state apparatus that ensured that the revenue extracted from the peasants in different parts of the country reached them in Kathmandu - during these years, the Ranas did not feel internally challenged to expend any of their energy on gathering this kind of knowledge about their subject population. Photographing common folks was then left to the whims of itinerant photographers who happened to be in Nepal for other reasons.

Loss of Rana Monopoly and the Rise of the Middle-Class : 1910-1940

For the period after 1910, many portraits of Chandra Shumsher and his family have already been published. As mentioned earlier Dirga Man Chitrakar began to take photographs with cameras brought back to Nepal at the end of Chandra Shumsher's 1908 trip to England. Once photography by local photographers became more easily available, the logic of internal differentiation within the Rana sub-culture propelled its more influential members to consume photography at a greatly increased volume-level. It was now not enough to be photographed once in a while by a photographer who came from India. I would suppose that life-cycle rituals and other ceremonials of these families were photographed extensively, although very few of them have been published thus far. These Ranas also included their family photographs in Vijaya Dasami, Christmas, and New Year's Greeting cards they sent to their relatives and foreign friends.

How about non-Rana consumption? Some of the very first photographs taken in Nepal in 1863-64 by C.C. Taylor were of individually unidentified members of different tribes and castes. A remarkable photograph from about 1890 of a group of royal servants has been discussed above. Among the published corpus of photographs, we can find several photographs depicting crowds of people on various Kathmandu streets. On other occasions, photographs of labourers carrying elite

officials during the latter's trips to various parts of the country or cars into the Valley have also been published. These photographs are important documents of our history. But it can be nobody's argument that the common (namely non-Ranas) people seen in these photographs were sovereign consumers of the medium. That they have been inscribed in photographic record not by their own demand but because of the command of their masters or because they caught the fancy of travelling photographers is quite obvious. In this essay, I am unable to analyze these photographs. What I would like to do here instead is to look at some of the non-Rana photographs – taken undoubtedly at the demand of the subjects of these photographs – from the first half of this century.

Local photo studios had come into existence in Kathmandu by 1910. Several photos that can be dated to the decade that ended in 1920 suggest that within a few years of the establishment of the local studios, middle-class Kathmandu folks had acquired knowledge of the medium and used it upon their demand. These photographs were all taken in studios which is not surprising given the difficulty of moving the rather cumbersome camera equipment of that era. In the personal collection of an acquaintance, I have seen a photograph taken about 1915 of a common couple in their mid-twenties that undoubtedly exhibits, at least in its dress, Rana influence. The man, sitting on his wife's right, looks at the camera, exuding confidence and a prior familiarity with the technology. The woman, on the other hand, looks away from the camera and seems distinctly uncomfortable being positioned in that manner. This photograph and the three that I discuss below could constitute part of the evidence for an analysis of gender relationships of middle-class families in Kathmandu in the early part of this century.

The first photograph (from 1915) shows Kedarmani Acharya Dixit (whose contributions to the genre of Nepali travel-writing is significant) and his wife Bidyadevi Dixit (who was one of the early women writers) about two weeks after they had married. It is published in Kedarmani's autobiography, *Aphnai Kura* (2034 V.S.). Since Kedarmani's grandfather, Kashinath Acharya Dixit, and father, Rammani Acharya Dixit, were in service of the Shamsheer Ranas, it is likely that his family had access to photography earlier than most other middle-class families of Kathmandu. In fact a photograph from about 1911 when Kedarmani was only seven is included in his book. However his book and the separate memoirs written by Kashinath (2031 V.S.) and Rammani (2029 V.S.) do not say anything explicit regarding the family's consumption of photography. What is of interest here is that at the time of their marriage, Kedar was eleven and Bidyadevi ten. Their age at marriage was not at all unusual even for urban middle-class educated Brahman families. Quite the contrary, available evidence would suggest that it was the norm. For women, it was customary to get married before the onset of puberty. In 1915 child marriage had not been

recognized as morally repugnant by the powerful guardians of culture and was widely prevalent, irrespective of caste or class. In that cultural world, marriage did not necessarily mean the end of childhood and the onset of adult life, although I would imagine that it entailed a growth of responsibilities, especially for child-brides.

One consequence of child marriage used to be the possibility of the wife becoming taller than her husband as they both grew up. Such a possibility is evidenced in a photograph dated about 1916 (see photo no. 1), now in the collection of T. N. Vaidya. This shows a Newar couple in their twenties from Kathmandu's inner city with their two children and an attendant (about 1916). The man shown therein, Kaviraj Dirgananda Raj Vaidya, and his wife, Chandra Badan Vaidya (my mother's paternal grandparents) had married in their early adolescence. In the photograph, he is seen to be a slightly shorter than his wife. We can only guess what social commentaries this disparity in their heights might have invited from members of Kathmandu's society where the man in any couple was expected to be taller than his spouse. This photograph is also noteworthy for other reasons. The man is located to the right of the woman, as in the two photographs discussed above. This tradition, still largely in vogue today, seems to have already set in by the time these photographs were taken and could have possibly been imported as a sensibility of 'couple portraiture' from India and beyond. In this photograph the attendant is located in the same row (but seated) as the family members whereas similar people in Rana group portraits are usually seen standing at the back of the group. Also interesting is the sari clad by Chandra Badan. Its length obviously exceeds that of those worn by Rana and Brahman/Chhetri women as seen in other contemporary photographs.

The length of the saris worn by Newar women is even more evident in another photograph taken in late 1930s (see photo no. 2). The saris of these two middle-age Newar women easily exceeded 50 feet each. Its weight was not insignificant either. According to old Newar women, it was apparently routine to cut these long saris into two pieces for purposes of washing and stitch them together once they had dried in the sun. Given the gendered distribution of labour, it is difficult to imagine how Newar women of this era, clad in these heavy and long saris, carried out household chores. It might not be outrageous to speculate that because of the difficulty entailed in walking while wearing such heavy saris, notions of distance within Kathmandu were also differentially understood by men and women (this is not to deny the other reasons at work).

Dress and habits of the body are historically inscribed makers of class and photographs provide excellent evidence of this inscription. A juxtaposition of these photographs showing members of Kathmandu's middle-class with those of the elite Ranas brings out this point clearly. However, these photographs are also evidence of how photography was no longer in the exclusive consumption domain of the Ranas, thus signalling the

beginning of the failure of what has been described as their policy of selective exclusion with respect to foreign goods and technology. Through the consumption of photography upon its own demand, Kathmandu's incipient middle-class began to assert its own social position during the high days of Rana rule. Photographic evidence of this assertion exists in a scattered manner at the moment and very few of these photographs have been published thus far. In addition, the first reference to photography (that I am aware of) in a work of Nepali language literature comes from around this time. In a short play entitled *Bishnumaya* set in Kathmandu which was written some time between 1917 and 1923, writer Pahalmansing Swar (2033 V.S. : 56) deploys a photograph in a plot wherein a husband discovers a (fake) letter written by his wife to her putative lover with the latter's photograph. It is significant that the first deployment of photography in Nepali literature does not happen within a plot involving the Ranas.

Starting sometime in the early 1920s, a few of Kathmandu's middle class men started capturing a variety of moments, views and people (and that too in different parts of the country) with their newly acquired portable cameras. Photos from the 1920s that are testimony to this fact have been published, for instance, in Heide (1997) and Bajracharya (1998 : 4). During this decade, people who owned photostudios in Kathmandu and certain Rana personalities such as Samar Shamsheer and his son, Balkrishna Sama are also known to have owned and operated such cameras (see Sama 2029 V.S.). However, the use of portable cameras by common middle-class men (yes, they were almost always men) increased considerably in the 1930s and the 1940s. The following section will explore some of the images captured by them and suggest that photography came to increasingly occupy an important place in the manufacturing of middle class's sensibility toward self and others.

Asserting Middle-Class Sensibility : 1940-60

Most of the photographs that I have seen from the two decades between 1940 and 1960 remain unpublished and in the private collection of my relatives. While my comments below are informed by my viewing of these photographs, they are particularly based on a close reading of an immaculate photoalbum that belonged to my maternal grandfather, Kaviraj Chandra Nanda Raj Vaidya (d. 1981 at age 57), a Newar man from Kathmandu's inner-city. Each one of over 770 photographs in the album has a caption and most have a date. Except for a few photographs, all were taken during the decade of the 1940s and the 1950s. Over eighty percent of the photographs were taken by the album-owner himself whose use of a particular camera (later stolen while travelling in India) for that purpose is still remembered fondly by my mother.

So what are the subjects inscribed in these photographs? Many photographs in the album taken during the 1940s show members of the family, especially chil-

dren in various mundane poses. Family gatherings, *puja*, and various *bhoj* have also been recorded. Some photographs show life-cycle events such as *bratabandha* in progress. If one takes lessons from the history of the use of photography in the Euro-American world, this obsession does not come as a surprise. There, as Susan Sontag (1977 : 8) writes "memorializing the achievements of individuals considered as members of families" was one of the earliest popular uses of photography. As soon as photography became comfortably portable and could therefore be taken out of the professional studio, the middle-class Kathmandu family used it to construct an image-chronicle of itself, one that would record its connectedness not only for oneself but also for other members of the society. As Sontag adds, "It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished" (1977 : 8).

Another theme seen in the photographs from this decade is the study of the city. These include photographs of monuments of power such as the Dharahara, the Ghantaghar, statues of Rana premiers, and the facade of New Road after it had been restored following the 1934 earthquake, the ravages of which were recorded by Balkrishna Sama, among others (for Sama's photos that record this devastation, see B. Rana 1992 V.S.). They also include photographs of religious sites such as Pashupatinath and Swayambhu. Also included are photographs of city streets as some *jatra* or the *sawari* of an important Rana personality wound its way through them. The middle-class recording of the public space through photography did not stop at the city-limits. The inner-city Newars' discovery of the rural countryside in or near Kathmandu is equally apparent in these photographs. Many photographs show family members visiting places like Balaju, Dakshinkali, Dhulikhel, Sundarrijal, Dhunbeshi, Kulekhani, and Tokha. Since C.N.R. Vaidya spent a few months in Tokha sanatorium (while undergoing treatment for T. B.) in the mid-1940s, quite a few photographs of the rural landscape around Tokha can be found in the album. A shot captures a cockfight in progress. Two other photographs show different groups of menial workers of the sanatorium in their uniforms, posing for a salute (see photo no. 3). Yet two other photographs capture a young woman each, obviously posed as requested by the photographer.

The rural landscape and the people therein have been photographed in part in the spirit of discovery associated with personal travel in space. However, another aspect of this encounter is probably more worthy of attention. The photographs of the rural women and those of the menial workers testify to this middle-class man's ability to direct these people, members of a lower class to be sure, for a posed session of photography. This encounter whereby a city-man asserts his power to photographically inscribe members of a lower class is important in the manufacturing of the middle-class's sensibility of its "middle-ness." As if to provide more evidence of this, we find photographs of beggars

(with one captioned “an old beggar”) taken inside the city after Vaidya had returned home from Tokha. Caught between the elite Ranas and the majority of the masses, the middle-class discovered the latter as a curious subject of photography.

The photographs from the 1950s show a slightly different orientation. More family and architectural photographs were definitely taken. But the emphasis, both representing and reinforcing the new found freedom in the immediately post-Rana Nepal, shifts toward a search for images of “modernity.” Hence we come across photographs of a family member sitting on a bulldozer during an outing to the country-side in 1953. In another photograph, the jeep the family had rented for its trip is positioned next to the dozer, apparently at work in building a new road. Another photograph of a friend of the album-owner taken in London in the late 1950s showing the former in front of a television set further emphasizes my point: machines were the measure par excellence of this middle-class’s early brush with modernity.

Barred from participating openly in public institutions and functions during the Rana days, the middle class photographically recorded its participation in them in the 1950s with a vengeance. School functions, office space and ceremonies, elections, visits by foreign dignitaries and national celebrations (such as King Mahendra’s coronation, and annual “democracy” day celebrations) are photographed quite extensively. High school students are seen picnicking and performing stage dramas during the second half of the 1950s (see photo no. 4). We could argue that the sensibility of photographically recording every private and public ceremonial in which some family member or friend was involved was itself a characteristic of the modernity which was inculcated during these decades.² It is my argument that photography gave the urban middle-class a new way to come to terms with itself and others in Nepali society. Kathmandu’s middle-class learnt a new code of seeing which while ostensibly directed toward the outside – the city streets, the rural landscape, the lower class, school, office and public occasions – was as much directed inward. While making others the subjects of photography, the middle-class was asserting its own image of itself increasingly in the Nepali society at large.

With the passage of time, all historical sources are increasingly divorced from the context in which they were originally created (cf. Newhall 1988). Therefore they become open to multiple readings. In interpreting the photographs in the above manner, I have perhaps taken advantage of this openness. The plausibility of the readings offered here based on the viewing of an admittedly small number of photographs from this period can only be gauged after more detailed studies of photographic and other sources of this era are done. Nevertheless it must be accepted that the photographs that form the basis of this analysis help us to write, however partially, a history of, among other things,

class & consumption, social relationships and the constitution of urban public spaces. I have here suggested some ways of “reading” these common photographs as part of the project of reconstructing a social world that has changed significantly. A more complete analysis would include an account (based also on non-photographic sources) of how technologies like photography were differentially available to and consumed by the members of what was essentially a heterogeneous middle-class (in terms of intra-class wealth variation, caste, gender, educational achievements) in the early part of the century. It hardly needs to be added that social historians will benefit from a more systematic study of this corpus of largely unpublished photographs for obvious reasons.

Conclusion

In this essay then, I have briefly reviewed the state of our knowledge regarding the early history of photography in Kathmandu and indicated the ways in which photography was used there in its early years by the Ranas as part of their strategy of selective exclusion. I have also discussed how photography came to occupy an increasingly important place in the lives of middle-class inhabitants of Kathmandu over this century and hinted at ways in which historians interested in reconstructing the social worlds of this class might benefit from a close reading of the existing photographic archives.

Monograph-length treatment of the history of photography in Nepal is a must. Therein one could include a more indepth study – one that also looks at the technical and economic aspects of the trade – of the now almost century-long history of Nepali photostudios. Photographs could also be extensively studied by historians for a more complete reconstruction of class, caste and gender relationships of an earlier era of our society. Those interested in the use of photography in the post 1960 years might want to look at how the medium was used by politicians of the Panchayat system and their opponents in their respective print media forums. An anthropological study of these years that focuses on the consumption patterns of photography by different classes of Nepalis might illuminate the trends and dynamics of change in Nepali society in ways that have not been discussed before. Through a sustained study of the corpus of published and unpublished photographs, one could also do an analysis of the linked topics of the culture of national politics and the politics of culture in Nepal. For instance, for the period after 1990, it might be interesting to figure out how photography has been implicated in the politics of nationalism and ethnicity as they have been played out in the public media³.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this essay constitutes only the most preliminary look at how photographs have been consumed in Kathmandu. As stated earlier, it is based on a viewing of a relatively small number of photographs taken before 1960. Much of what I have said in this essay – the proposed periodiza-



4. Mainya Baba Vaidya in the role of "Maya" in the play *Apriya Ghatana*. 2015 V.S. (1958).
Photographer: Unknown. From the C.N.R. Vaidya album.

tions, thematic explorations and the general framework – must be criticized, augmented and eventually supplanted by other analyses if we want to see a healthy growth of a broad-based social history of Nepali society. The alternative would be to prolong our intellectual incarceration inside the narrow walls of the political history paradigm which has had until now a near monopolistic reign in the domain of history-writing of and in Nepal.

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Notes :

- 1 A 1927 photo taken by Dirga Man Chitrakar showing a wedding (published in Heide 1997 : 81) is proof that Kathmandu's middle-class had begun to make photography a part of the marriage ritual within years of its gaining access to the medium.
- 2 Today this sensibility has reached a stage where the still record offered by photography is found to be inadequate. Instead a record in motion in the form of video footage is preferred.
- 3 As far as I know, no systematic photoarchive exists in any of the government-owned archives and libraries in Nepal. Private collections of photographs remain very scattered and uncatalogued. Therefore archivists and social historians must also work toward the establishment of a proper photoarchive if they would like to preserve historical photographs for future viewing and analysis.

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