



# THE ARTFUL POSE

EARLY STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY IN MUMBAI

— c. 1855–1940 —

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The Alkazi Collection of Photography  
NEW DELHI • LONDON • NEW YORK



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MUMBAI CITY MUSEUM

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AHMEDABAD



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FIG. 3 | SHAPOOR N. BHEDWAR  
*The Feast of Roses—The Flower Girl*  
carbon print, 349 x 261 mm, c. 1890s,  
from the *Art Studies* album [ACP: 97.47.0001 (06)]

FIG. 4(A–B) | DAROGHA ABBAS ALI  
*Seated Lady of the Court* (a) & (b)  
albumen carte-de-visite, 104 x 62 mm, c. 1870s  
[ACP: (a) 98.64.0011; (b) 98.64.0012]



FIG. 5 | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER;  
UNKNOWN ARTIST  
*Grandsons of Begum Sultan Jahan of Bhopal:*  
*Habibullah Khan (1903–1930) & Wahid uz-Zafar*  
*(1905–1922)*  
gelatin silver print and watercolour, 297 x 250 mm,  
c. 1910s [ACP: D2004.119.0001]

Ali may have found a lucrative subject in these nautch girls, a subject that also captured the imagination of several European artists in India in subsequent years.

The development of the studio portrait gave the middle classes access to a genre that had hitherto been confined to oil portraits of the nobility. Among these early group photos, I have chosen two striking portraits: one of them from none other than the princely family of Bhopal, the grandsons of Begum Sultan Shah Jahan dressed up for a wedding (Fig. 5), and the other an earlier image of the Begum herself (Fig. 6). The portrait of the two veiled princes seem to subvert the prime function of portraiture, that is, to capture the facial likeness of the sitter. On the other hand, the dramatic image of the Begum herself informs us about how the custom of *purdah* was not strictly followed even when the ruler was a female. As a ruler, considered divine by her subjects, she was exempt from the usual constraints faced by women. In this she was no different from princely men who, as we know from innumerable Mughal miniatures, were represented as divine.

#### The Mughal Legacy in Indian Photography

To return to the Mughal legacy in photography, I try and offer here a bare outline of its myriad implications for the colonial era. In the process, I hope to throw some light on the and contradictory pulls between the “modern” British Empire, and the pre-modern Mughal civilisation, which the colonial rulers overturned. An interesting aspect of this is the political manipulation of the Mughal legacy. Renouncing the idea that Western reforms could improve Indian society, after 1857, British rule was predicated on the image of a timeless India that was inimical to Western progress.<sup>9</sup>

Modern nations often take recourse to the old tradition in order to assert a mythical continuity with the historic past. The late Barnard Cohn showed us how the Raj “re-invented” Mughal rituals in order to legitimate British authority over Indians. In the post-1857 era, the official tour was incorporated into the Mughal concept of the Durbar.<sup>10</sup> Originally, the Durbar was the meeting of the Mughal emperor with the nobles of the realm. Emperor Shah Jahan had choreographed a formal hierarchy of the nobles of the reign, with himself at the apex.<sup>11</sup> The English did not employ the Mughal pyramid—they created a different kind of hierarchy with the viceroy as the figurehead. The two most sumptuous durbars were the great Durbar of Delhi held by Lord Curzon in 1903, followed in 1911 by the Durbar of King George V, the only reigning monarch to visit India. These durbars were meant to demonstrate that the Indian princes under their British colonial overlord were more representative of the Indian sentiment than the minority of Western-educated nationalists (Fig. 7).

The man who captured the pomp and circumstance of the British Raj was Lala Deen Dayal, the leading Indian photographer of the Victorian Age, who was appointed photographer to Queen Empress herself. Many of these grand assemblages and other forms of imperial “theatre”