



**Bourne & Shepherd**  
 11, Esplanade Road, Bombay, c. 1880–1890  
 Verso of Cabinet Card, 165 x 110 mm,  
 ACP: 94.75.0004

## MASTERING THE LENS

### BEFORE AND AFTER CARTIER-BRESSON IN PONDICHERRY

*Shilpi Goswami and Deepak Bharathan*

“The power—and authority—of the visual in modern Indian public sphere emerges from the fact that it inhabits such an ‘interocular’ or ‘intervisual’ field, overlapping, intersecting, and interlocking with other images and in conjuncture with different media, triggering associations, catalyzing memories, rendering the unfamiliar recognizable, and frequently reconfiguring the recognizable, so that, as earlier images... [they] are forever waiting to erupt in the present as they continually migrate, moving in and out of new times and changing political contexts.”

*Sumathi Ramaswamy*<sup>1</sup>

The intellectual charge of the statement above lies in its recognition of the complexities involved in the development of media strategies, especially at a nascent stage of intercultural relations occurring in the colonial period. Photography as a form of reportage, as well as individual perception undergoes a ‘worlding’ in India, based on its progressions, influences and manifestations across all spheres of socio-political activity.

Photography emerged in India shortly after the public announcement of the Calotype in London and Daguerreotype’s invention in 1839 in Paris. From 1840 onwards, the governments of imperial nations realised its potential for recording the antiquities of the ‘Orient’. Other European photographers in India at the time such as Samuel Bourne (1834–1912) or the French aristocrat-photographer Baron Alexis Aimé de La Grange (1825–1917) captured the essence of

photography’s nascent use: a form of reportage, documentation and inventory keeping. The story of early photography in India is hence deeply aligned to the influence of European culture eastwards, primarily as a technology that was introduced in Calcutta, one of the principal states of the British Presidency, as early as 1840.<sup>2</sup> The rise of photography in India, practiced both inside and outside the studio, offers not only a fascinating social history of its patronage, usage and circulation, but also its transition to an art form and practice, underscoring the need for a deeper investigation of the challenges it faced and developments it wrought on visual culture, then as well as now.<sup>3</sup>

Photography was taken up with alacrity by amateurs, aspirant professionals, commercial practitioners as well as by the apparatus of the colonial state.<sup>4</sup> The 1860s witnessed many pioneers arriving in the subcontinent

and establishing long-standing firms during this time, and soon Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai) developed their own unique photographic societies. However, the lineage provided by the medium does not only present evidence of mainstream studios in larger metropolitan cities, but also of vernacular traditions and experiments that help to deconstruct its effect on the subcontinent as a whole. A reference to ateliers of artists, who later interacted with photography in Rajasthan, substantiates this notion, elucidated in another publication on *Painted Photographs*<sup>5</sup> from the Alkazi Collection.

The function of a popular or emancipated tradition in India therefore arises out of the conversation between tradition and modernity, the past and the continuing present. Hence the notion of a ‘cannon’ in photography history here is fraught with ambivalences, bearing in mind the growing



Fig. 2  
**Nicolas De Fer**  
 Plan de Pondichery a la côte de Coromandel Occupé par la Compagnie Royale de Indes Orientales (Map of Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast occupied by the Royal East India Company), 1705  
 Ink on Paper, 239 x 353 mm  
 ACP: 2012.01.M2



Fig. 3  
**Unknown Photographer**  
 Principal Street, Karikal (currently Karaikal), c. 1860  
 Albumen Print, Photographer's Ref. 8, 193 x 243 mm  
 ACP: 97.16.0079(0003)

Karaikal is a small coastal enclave within the Union Territory, about 130 km south of the city. It was formerly part of French India.



Fig. 4  
**Unknown Photographer**  
 Areuncoupom Bridge-Pondichery (Ariyankuppam Bridge), c. 1880  
 Albumen Print, 141 x 218 mm  
 ACP: 97.48.0001(0049)



such as the Customs House, Tribunal Court and other impressive structures surrounded the Square itself.<sup>34</sup> The Government House [Fig. 5] was reconstructed, designed by Monsieur Dumont in the Tuscan-Doric style with Rococo style interiors.<sup>35</sup> Bourçet, the engineer responsible for the reconstruction, designed the house in a much less grand scale, transforming the Baroque-Classicism into a neo-Classicism style.<sup>36</sup>

In the centre of the European quarter was the parade ground of the old citadel [Fig. 6]. It was planted with trees, with

boulevards and canals, and on its four sides were new government buildings - the Governor's Palace and the Administrative office on the north, warehouses on the south, and military barracks on the east and west. The streets were all straight, stretching from east to west and from north to south cutting each other at right angles.<sup>37</sup> The entire town was hence laid out in planned grids. Buildings like Hôtel du Gouvernement, the Palais de Justice, Messageries Maritimes were built in 1862 [Fig. 7], and the Aayi Mandapam was constructed in 1863 [Fig. 8]. A lighthouse

was installed on the seashore and a pier was built between 1835 and 1866 [Fig. 9]. The statue of Dupleix was installed in 1870 [Fig. 10] and a railway line was laid from Pondicherry to Villupuram in 1879.<sup>38</sup>

Though the early development of photography in the region is unclear, some surviving images cited in the text provide a sense of the agendas and intentionality at work for the travelling photographer. For instance, Bourne and Shepherd<sup>39</sup>, a photographic firm started by partners Samuel Bourne and Charles Shepherd "in search of



*Facing page*  
Fig. 5  
**Unknown Photographer**  
Government House Pondichery, c. 1880, Albumen Print, 150 x 217 mm  
ACP: 97.48.0001(0041)

The Governor's House, located in the Government Square, was originally designed by Dumont, a French engineer, and was the residence of the French Governor Joseph-François Dupleix (1697-1763). Following the capture of Pondicherry by the British in 1761, the Governor's House was reconstructed on a more modest scale by Bouçet, another French engineer. At present, it is the residence of the Indian Lieutenant Governor, and is called "Raj Nivas".



*Above*  
Fig. 6  
**Unknown Photographer**  
Pondicherry: Living Quarters of the Textile Firm "Savanah," c. 1870  
Albumen Print, 164 x 219 mm  
ACP: 96.20.0154

*Below*  
Fig. 7  
**Unknown Photographer**  
Messageries Maritimes (Post Office)-Pondichery, c. 1880  
Albumen Print, 158 x 220 mm  
ACP: 97.48.0001(0042)

The Messageries Maritimes was founded in 1851. Initially known as Messageries Nationales, then Messageries Impériales, it became Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes in 1871. The company was responsible for transporting passengers and goods between France and its colonies, as well as mail and messages.