Photography was first introduced to India in 1840, only a year after the announcements of the daguerreotype and calotype processes in France and England. The fragility of this early material, the uniqueness of the daguerreotype and the harshness of the Indian climate mean that photographs from this time are scarce, leaving us with a fragmented picture of the development of the medium.

Initially, commercial studios were established in cities such as Calcutta, where an ever-increasing clientele could be relied upon to keep up a demand for portraits. Some amateurs also brought cameras to India; some of the earliest surviving photographs from India are in a family album, now in the Getty Museum, containing views taken in Nainital, Bareilly and Kanpur during the mid-1840s (Fig.1). Around the same time, the French daguerreotypist Jules Itier (1802-77) passed through India, whilst engaged in a treaty negotiation with China. A handful of his views of South India still survive today in a number of collections. The extremely small amount of material that has survived from the 1840s must represent only a fraction of the photographic activity that took place.

The Colonial Contribution

This lack of material from the 1840s makes the story relatively straightforward to tell in its early years. After 1850, with the use of the camera spreading across the subcontinent, things get a little more complicated. The number and type of photographers at work increases dramatically within the space of a few years. Their output ranges from studio portraits to ethnographic documentation, from picturesque landscapes to documentary records of architecture, works of art and the natural history of India. The history of photography in India has, over the last quarter of a century, been told largely from the perspective of a handful of colonial collections, in particular the India Office Collection, now housed at the British Library in London. Publications by British Library curators, including Ray Desmond’s *Victorian India in Focus* (London, 1982) and John Falconer’s *A Shifting View: Photography in India 1850-1900* (London, 1995), have been influential in establishing significant photographers and events, while emphasising the importance of British documentary work. This colonial dominance is inevitable, for although the photographs in the India Office Collection combine to create an extraordinary collection of around 350,000 items containing the work of hundreds of photographers, it represents what subsequent colonial administrators believed to be worth collecting and preserving, rather than being truly representative of photography in India. In particular the collection contains the photographs amassed by the Archaeological Survey of India, the official body set up by the British administration in 1870 to identify and preserve India’s architectural and archaeological heritage. This collection alone consists of 57,284 prints, according to the online catalogue (Fig.2).

The development of ‘photography in India’ as a field of research has taken place within the wider context of the growth of the history of photography as a subject of serious investigation. This is evident through the creation of separate photography departments in museums, libraries and archives (the Museum of Modern Art in New York established a photography department relatively early in 1940, but many departments in European institutions were not created until the late 1960s and early 1970s) and, hand-in-hand with this, the development of a commercial market for buying and selling photographs. With museums focusing on the aesthetic qualities of photography at the expense of its social history and meaning, the work of a handful of photographers was identified and promoted at the expense of a greater understanding of the medium. From India, both Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902) and Dr John Murray (1809-1858) are frequently cited as the most accomplished masters of the art, and to a lesser extent, Samuel Bourne (1834-1912). The work of these British photographers fits the European paradigm for successful, aesthetically pleasing compositions and the landscapes of Bozeman in particular are composed according to the demands of the Pictorialist ideal (Figs.3 & 4).

There is some tension within the field between scholars from South Asian departments who concentrate exclusively on Indian photography within an Indian context but who know little about the broader history of photography, and those who work regularly with a wider range of photographic images, such as curators and photography dealers, but who generally know little about India. This debate can be boiled down to ‘context versus aesthetics’ and at present it shows no signs of abating. Some, however, have successfully engaged with different approaches and aspects of the work. Maria Antonella Pelizzari’s publication *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture and the Politics of Representation*, 1850-1900 (Montreal, 2004) contains contributions from a variety of scholars of different backgrounds, discussing a range of meanings and interpretations for architectural photography.

The Private Collector

The growth of the market and the role of the private collector have done much to stimulate the field into broadening and embracing new avenues for research. Each individual collector inevitably brings a unique set of criteria for making acquisitions. Indian collectors in particular come with ideas that differ greatly, in the most positive way, from those of Western museums. This usually ranges between a desire to preserve India’s photographs because of the richness and beauty of the medium, to ensuring that the information contained within the images such as records of events and fast-disappearing buildings is not only saved but made available and used in the many conservation projects now establishing themselves in India. The Alkazi Collection, for example, has embraced many of these approaches. The collection acquires the acknowl-
edged masters of photography as well as attempting to expand this category through promoting the work of other accomplished artists such as John Edward Saché (1834–1884). It is also creating an archive of work that represents local traditions and practices, for example, painted photographs, collage and montage work, and material from studios working for the independent princely states as well as for middle-class Indian families. Scholars such as Christopher Pinney and Malavika Karlekar have recently worked on this type of material, presenting new lines of thought and opening up new and unexplored collectors’ fields that has, since the 1900s, been in danger of stagnating under Fauvism accounts to (colonial) discourse and power (Fig.3).

Karlekar’s work has also broken the artificial chronological boundaries that have arisen in the field, wherein early photography up to c. 1901 is considered the domain of the historian, early 20th century photography that of the anthropologist, and photography after 1947 belongs to the modern art world. These categories, coming from equally artificial timeframes imposed in Western art history and other humanities disciplines, do not take into account local practices. This has resulted in large quantities of material, particularly from the early to mid-20th century, being ignored. For example, although photographic journals from the 19th century have been fully examined, the journals of the Photographic Society of India that were published in the 1920s are rarely referenced. Work that is typically reproduced and discussed in the journals was stylistically heavily influenced by Pictorialism — consciously drawing on the conventions of Western academic painting and emphasising the position of the photographer as Artist — at a time when Western art was rejecting the art photograph in favour of work that challenged existing conventions and traditional definitions. This ‘soft pictorialism’ that was practised in India was enormously popular for many years, yet it remains an unexplored avenue within the field.

These divisions and omissions have also lead to modern and contemporary photographic practice in India being divorced from its own history, as Indian artists look almost exclusively to Euro-American photographers for precedence. This has some parallels with past and current debates within the contemporary art field in India, leading in particular to questions over identity that have been raised by artists as well as by critics.

Photographic Connections

The last few years have been remarkably fruitful with more publications and exhibitions tackling diverse aspects of this extraordinarily rich and varied body of material. The efforts of Sabeena Gadihoke to explore the work of Homai Vyarawalla (b.1913), whose efforts of Sabeena Gadihoke to explore the work of Homai Vyarawalla (b.1913), and the photographic work of the Amrita Sher-Gil, one of India’s foremost twentieth century painters. Sundaram is Amrita’s nephew. (main image)

What is remarkable about Sundaram’s series of photographs titled Re-take of Amrita (2001–4) is that, while sometimes beautiful and at other times deeply unsettling, it engages with photographers and artists, as well as with critics and the public, over issues concerning truth, identity and the nature of the medium. These concerns were central to debates over photography in the 1850s and remain so today. (Fig.4)

Suggested further reading

- Gordon, Sophie. 2004 Uncovering India: Studies of Nineteenth-Century Indian Photography. History of Photography 28:2, 180-190

Notes

2 Exhibition held at Sepia International Inc., New York, 10 May - 12 July 2005.
3 Sophie Gordon Curator, Royal Photographic Collection, sophie.gordon@royalcollection.org.uk