



Woman and Photography: Gender Representation in the 19th Century Photography of Parsis in India

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ABSTRACT

The present paper's primary focus is to study the gender identity represented through the photographs of the Parsi community in the colonial India of the 19th century. The paper aims to attempt to explore the visual and contextual elements in the construction of this identity. Indeed, as a micro-minority, the Parsi community achieved a remarkable significance and social status in the period of colonial India. Due to their great wealth, power and close ties with the colonizers, Parsis could easily afford to possess a camera. The possession of the camera enabled them to represent their own identity through their self-realization and, thus, escape the colonial perspective. As an influential community in India, the Parsi women had relatively more access to education and enjoyed a fair level of gender equality as compared to women from other communities. The paper seeks to analyse selected photographs in the light of gender power equations and the impact of social and cultural values on the representation.

Key Words: Persia, Parsi, identity, gender representation, India, photography, colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th Century, the new-born medium of photography was brought to India by colonizers and came to the service of the colonial gaze. As it rose in prominence in a comparatively short duration of time, photography became more reachable to most elite families in India, including the Parsi community. Parsis are the descendants of the people who had originally migrated from Iran in 10th A.D due to the dominance of Islam and resulting persecution, which the story of this immigration is mentioned in "the Qissa-e Sanjan a late sixteenth-century Zoroastrian text in Persian." (Hinnells 15)

The Greeks used the name Persia (Persis) for Iran due to the mighty Persian Empire that raised from Persia in southwest Iran, in 550 B.C. Therefore, the Persian Empire's reign was called Persia and its residents as Persians. (Mirza 01) In a literal sense, "Parsi" is just "a resident of Pars," a province in southwestern Iran. Therefore, it's an ethnic term. (01)

Achaemenid Persians had used the term *Pārsa* (in Old Persian) for their language. The Greeks also adopted this and called it *Persis*, (shapur suren pahlav). The Persian in English is like Arabic for Arabi or

Italian for Italiano. Parsi is a native description of the Persian language, while Farsi is an Arabic pronunciation due to the nonexistence of the 'P' sound in the Arabic language.

It wasn't until the Nowrooz of 1935 when Reza Shah Pahlavi, the King of Iran, ordered the nation's international name rechristening from Persia to Iran - literally the '*Land of the Nobles*,' or the '*land of Aryans*'.(Filtz 05)Avesta, Iran's oldest available literature, calls the country's name as *Airyānām*, which subsequently turned *Aryān* in the Eastern Pahlavi language (the Eastern Middle Persian), *Ērānšahr* (01) in Sassanid Pahlavi (Western Middle Persian) and *Iran* in the New Persian language.

After coming to India and assimilating with the local culture and earning favours from the colonial rulers, they began to trade with the British government and, with time, adopted their language, dresses, intellectual, and gentleman/lady-like manners. Within no time, they rose to prominent and influential positions in the country, becoming a robust community less in population but with significant achievements and influence in the Indian subcontinent.

'By 1881, 74 percent of the community was literate. By 1901 more than a quarter of the community spoke English, as compared to less than one percent of the Jains and half a percent of the Hindus; 63 percent of Parsi women were literate and nearly all the men.' (Luhmann 113)

This paper studies the photographs of the time mentioned above to understand the gender construction, the relation of gender and power, and the socio-cultural shifts faced by the Parsi community of India of that era. With a focus on the analysis of gender, the study explains the social construction of Parsi women. Supported by their religion, Parsi women had been treated relatively equally with their men. After the close relations with colonizers and adoption of their manners and culture, they could move more forward in different social activities fields than other women of Indian society of the 19th century.

The study explores the questions such as: how did the photographs construct gender identity or narrate a cultural change? How did these photographs represent the prevalent power relations of those times? This study is essential as it attempts to throw some light on the subject that has been rarely addressed in academics.

SELECT PHOTOGRAPHS OF PARSIS WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA

In this paper, several portraits have been selected for discussion. In the picture of a Parsi woman (Fig. 01), the modestly covered Parsi woman was captured with ornaments and a feminine floral shawl. In this photo, which was shot as a vertical frame, the photographer used the third rule to place the woman's eye on the spot. Moreover, her face seemed lit up by a classic light, most likely from a nearby side window. She seems to be gazing off the frame softly. The lady's photograph had a spiritual appearance, achieved by the clever use of light and partly due to expressions on her face. The woman looked upward towards the light source, which contributed to crafting a spiritual atmosphere in the picture. It seems that she has no objection to being looked at, while her passive expression gives visual pleasure to the audience. The woman was put at the same eye level as the onlookers. However, her upward-looking face gave her a submissive and dominated position.



Fig. 2. Madame Bhikaiji Cama (1861-1936),
Photograph courtesy: Private



Fig. 1. unidentified lady, by Raja Deen Dayal c.1890s courtesy:
Ms. Helmata Jain, Mumbai

By the middle of the nineteenth century, mainly due to their interaction with the British government, women who belonged to the traders' families and the elite members of the Parsi community in India had reached a comparatively better standard in social education practices. Many women from the community were engaged in trade and social affairs - some of them even taking part in something as significant as the Independence Movement of India.

One prominent among them, Madam Bhikaiji Cama (Fig. 02), was a famous revolutionary and nationalist from the Parsi community. Madam Cama believed that the only way to remove the British from India was radical actions. She got the country's attention when she spoke at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany, against what she called the British tyranny against Indians. At this event, she unfurled the Indian tricolour for the first time. This was the flag on which later the flag of independent India was based. For more than 35 years, she lived in exile in Europe due to her actions and speeches against the British Empire in India.

This image of Madam Bhikaiji Cama aims to document a nationalist political figure fighting for independence from the colonial rulers. In her pose, she is shown modestly yet powerfully for the camera. Here, she is looking towards the camera, at the same time showing nationalistic pride. She is holding the flag as the extension of her shawl in her hand. It stood as a symbol for womanhood, as the nation is most often visualized in a female form. In its message, the photograph conveys that the need to protect one's country is as important as the need to protect the women of that land. Therefore, this can risk imaging women as passive objects that need to be protected by men rather than as independent and self-sufficient individuals.

This image is significant as it portrays women in their new roles in political, social, and militancy contexts, roles which had long been the domain of men. The photograph of Madam Cama presents a symbolic role for women, instead of trying to naturalize female leadership roles in leadership that had long been perceived to be the default for men. It seems the construction of the photograph and what it symbolizes is indirectly in the context of the male-dominated photography of that time.

A considerable portion of the images shot during the 19th century, including the Parsi community and others in India, comprised mainly family photographs. In this family portrait (Fig 03), one can see a Parsi family being photographed sitting in a modern setting inside the studio.

The photograph is different from the other formal portraits, which are now replaced by a casual, essentially European style. In most such portraits, the seated subjects are the most respectful, and in this photo, a woman is among the seated. In the photo, two male family members are standing behind her in a protective stance, another symbol of a highly patriarchal structure of India of that era. The men standing behind act as the group's bridge when they touch the lady's shoulders and the children, signifying their family bonding with these gestures. Three members are directly looking inside the camera. The two men in the photo are dressed up fashionably according to their time. The representation of the family focuses on their wealth and sophistication. However, there are also visible symbols of patriarchalism because the masculinity of that time was symbolized through the professional achievements and wealth of a man.

The image seems to represent more than a father's love and bond representation. It symbolizes the patriarchy since the image represents the man's lineage and sexual ability. Still, another interpretation might also describe a gentlemen's familial responsibilities. This photograph shows intimate relationships and the household's social and economic structure and gives this message within and outside the community.



Fig. 3. Unidentified Parsi Family, Gelatin silver print on studio mount Photographer: J. S. Taraporwala, Bombay, c. 1900

One of the most famous photographs of the Parsi community is the family photo of the business tycoons TATA family, where they pose for a photograph in Victorian manners. The family members look outside the frame and in different directions to distinguish them from each other (Fig 05). Though the image was clicked in the cultural background of India, it looks to be inspired by the norms of the west.

The family's outfit, which is business style but also reflective of the influence of European fashion upon the dressing of elite Parsi families, is a recurring theme because of the community's close ties with the British. The TATA family stands very professionally before the camera. The male head of the group and his wife take the seated positions while others stand behind them. It represents the power and authority of the man and his wife. This image documents the levels of power in the family (like an official state photograph) and not the emotional intimacy of the family.

This photograph is significant as it shows the Parsi community in a country colonized by the British. For much of the nineteenth century, India was depicted in an oriental manner as a savage country, satisfying the hegemonic goals of the colonial powers. The photograph was not only used for the family archive but it could be used internationally too, to show off the wealth of the family. It aims to show an Indian Parsi business group as successful and influential.

It also seems to serve the colonial aims as Parsis show themselves as the partners of the British in India, thus gaining progress and modernity. Something which plays into the narrative of the presence of British colonials to enhance the life of undeveloped Indian communities, and at the same time, lead them to the modern world and Western civilization. In two photographs of the Parsi community in the book *"The oriental races and tribes, residents and visitors of Mumbai, a series of photographs with letter press descriptions"* by Johnson William, the Parsi community is represented in the same way as other undeveloped communities of India, with an emphasis on their clothing. Many Indian academics have criticized the book for depicting India as a savage country (William 87/89).

An important thing to be addressed here is how India was represented in the nineteenth century. British colonialism had portrayed India in an exotic and highly saturated manner, apart from showing it as a visually splendid place - a product of western imagination. In the context of western norms, exotism arises for the western eye from the people who don't look like them. Hence, in this photo, the gap between the traditional clothes of the Saree (tradition/modernity dichotomy) and the western female dresses is filled by the active participation of women in the

photo. The men are already dressed up according to western norms. This acceptance of western norms affects producing power structures of gender. Among the elite Parsis at the time of India's independence struggle, the heightened nationalistic sense also led them to identify themselves with traditional Indian elements such as food and clothes while at the same time seeming to reject the colonial legacy in even their external appearance.



Fig. 4. family of TATA, the Tata museum, Navsari, Gujarat, India



Fig. 5. Parsi Women, by Johnson William, courtesy: The oriental races and tribes, residents and visitors of Bombay



Fig. 6. Parsis by Johnson William, courtesy: The oriental races and tribes, residents and visitors of Bombay



Fig. 7. Sir Ratan J. Tata and wife Navajbai Tata, collection: Tata Central Archives, TF-RJT-E19-001/.

In some of the photographs of the Parsi community, we notice unconventional approach of the photographer to break through the rigid Victorian poses. An example of this is the photo of Ratan J. Tata and his wife Navajbai Tata (Fig. 08). In this photo, the formal poses of early Parsi photography have given way to the couple's casual, informal pose. The male sits on the table slightly above level over the woman, gazing at a cage. The image appears to move away from the classic binary, but even then, the power of creativity still lies with the man. The centre of the frame is where the main action is happening, the man looking at the bird inside the cage while the lady is sitting away. In this photo, the main subject of the gaze is the bird. The woman is flanked on the chair, not involved and inactive in what is happening around her.

CONCLUSION

As a micro-minority in the subcontinent, with their roots originally in Iran, Parsis of India adopted the Indian language of Gujarati, their clothes, and some social customs after immigration to India. After centuries by the arrival of the colonizers in Mumbai who brought freedom of religious practice to the city and made it a safe place for minorities, a group of Parsis moved to Mumbai and started a business. They chose the British government as their business partners. They shortly adopted their language, manners, and culture, which led them to a rapid Anglicization and a bridge between India's colonizers and undeveloped communities. As Parsis provided their women with freedom and education, Parsi women became more powerful and got involved in business, sport, and cultural activities, even in nationalism and independence movements.

As close British partners, Parsis accessed the camera as a tool brought by colonizers. They were interested in recording their families and establishments and started using the camera for the same purpose. As Parsi women had an almost equal position as their men in the community, they are frequently depicted in pictures. Portraits documented Parsi women in the 19th century as individuals or in groups, with their husbands or children.

The photographs of the Parsi women depict, first and foremost, their freedom of rights and participation in social activities. The identity of the Parsi woman is demonstrated with lady-like manners inspired by the British ladies. However, they have mostly kept Saree as their clothes. By the end of the 19th century, many of the elite women of the community adopted western clothes.

However, at the moment wearing the traditional outfit and performing Indian customs became a policy against the colonizers, adopted by the nationalist Parsis. The construction of gender in the photographs is built by the soft and feminine aspects of the Parsi women. The female gender is not transforming from exotic to modern existence; instead, it keeps an established identity and repeats itself. She has the support and protection of the male figures, whether through a business group photo or as an individual portraying itself for a visually soft representation and accessible gaze of the viewer or as a nationalist symbolizing the country in need of support and protection. This representation of the Parsi woman gives her an independent identity. Still, it retains the patriarchal norms of the society of the 19th century in which the gentleman protects and provides the lady. Even though the Parsi community was living in colonized India, it was not being treated as one of the colonized communities. Therefore, the type of objectification and exotic representation of genders, both male and female, common in colonial India cannot be observed in Parsi subjects. As the owner of the camera and the gaze, the community made a self-representation distinctive from the colonial gaze.

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SOURCE OF IMAGES:

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