

Review Essay

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY: NEW HISTORIC IMAGES OF NEPAL

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Lisa Choegyol, ed. 2021. *Nepal Remembered: Historical Images from Dirgha Man and Ganesh Man Chitrakar*. Kathmandu: Kiran Man Chitrakar.

Mary Margaret Gaye and Doug Halverson. 2023. *The Photography of Joseph Gaye: Nepal, India and Burma 1888–1899*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: The authors.

Over the past few decades Kathmandu book shops have seen quite a few large-format historical photo collection books come and go.¹ These focus mainly on the Rana era and, with some exceptions, reproduce images from Rana family (or other elites’) collections. These earlier volumes include historical photographs intended mainly to commemorate people and events of Rana Nepal, with the photographers themselves often uncredited.

The two volumes reviewed here help to turn the focus at least partially back onto the people who actually took the photos. The more wide-ranging of the two outlines the crucial role that generations of Chitrakar family members played in the history of photography in Nepal. The second volume offers a collection of late-19th century images taken by Joseph Gaye, an until-now unknown photographic chronicler of Rana era Nepal. Although some of the Chitrakar images have been reproduced elsewhere, those by Gaye appear for the first time. Both books offer digitally documented selections from larger collections that are now publicly archived and accessible to researchers.

¹ These include Shrestha (1986); Proksch (1995); Thingo and von der Heide (1997); Rana, Rana, and Rana (2003); and probably many others.

For anyone aware of the trove of historic photos in the Chitrakar family's possession, Lisa Choegyal's edited book (or something like it) has been eagerly anticipated for decades.² Presented in a coffee-table format, with large high-quality black and white photo reproductions, *Nepal Remembered* offers a representative sampling of the more than 5,000 images in the family archive, all taken by Dirgha Man Chitrakar (1877–1951) and his son Ganesh Man Chitrakar (1916–1985) over an almost one-hundred year period (roughly 1880s to 1970s). Although aimed at a generalist readership, the book also has scholarly value. The images are fascinating individually, but also in how they collectively chart the shift from Rana-era photographic usage and patronage to more popular commercial and state-sponsored “development” photography after the mid-20th century.

Nepal Remembered is divided into four chapters, each with an introductory text followed by representative photos from the collection: Chapter One, “My family, the Chitrakars” (Cristeena Chitrakar); Chapter Two “Perspectives on culture and heritage” (Mark Watson); Chapter Three, “Politics of image: The Ranas and photography” (Cristeena Chitrakar); and Chapter Four, “Reflections on ordinary life: Stories and memories” (David Gellner).

Texts accompanying images in *Nepal Remembered* assume a reader who knows relatively little about Nepal. With no citations or even bibliography, the book doesn't really invite or facilitate further exploration but it does make an important contribution to the historiography of photography in Nepal. The heart of the book are lead-author Cristeena Chitrakar's historical observations about the Chitrakar clan's artistic services to Nepali elites broadly, and those of her own family line in particular. (Art historian Cristeena Chitrakar is great granddaughter and granddaughter of the book's two primary subjects.) Chitrakar offers compact but useful biographical and contextual information

² At least one earlier publication highlights photos specifically from the Chitrakar family collection. Thingo and von der Heide's 1997 edited volume features mainly townscapes, group photos, and news documentary photos—at least some of which also appear in the present volume. Although the quality of the photographic reproductions in this earlier publication is poor, von der Heide does provide a rather extensive and detailed introductory essay (pp. 12–31) on the history of photography in Nepal as well as a useful bibliography. Her essay places the Chitrakar photographers in the context of a surprisingly extensive constellation of photographers and photographic services that existed in Kathmandu by the turn of the 20th century.

on her forebearers' careers while suggesting that more detailed documentary material remains in the family's possession. Chitrakar also passes on the good news that a grant from the British Library's Endangered Archives Program made it possible to digitize and archive "the entire collection."³ The essays by Watson and Gellner provide appropriate background and contextual information.

In addition to many wonderful Chitrakar family photos, Chapter One features pictures of historic cameras and other photographic equipment, receipts from foreign providers for developing chemicals and other supplies, and other relevant memorabilia that illustrate generations of Chitrakar family involvement in professional photography. Chapter Two features photos of urban landmarks and streetscapes from around the Kathmandu Valley, many of which record official ceremonies and festivals or document the 1934 earthquake aftermath and reconstruction. Because they were allowed to travel outside the Valley, the Chitrakars also took the rare early photographs of places like Gorkha, Tansen, Ridi, Lumbini, and Muktinath reproduced here.

Chapter Three focuses on images that highlight Rana privilege and exclusivity. Presumably a large part of the Chitrakars' work and purpose was to document the high "civilization" of their Rana patrons. Here are images of massive Rana palaces, opulent Victorian interiors jam-packed with imported luxury items, and—especially—formal portraiture that not only documented the people portrayed, but also emphasized their outrageous wealth and haute fashion sensibilities. Chapter Four features some of the most interesting—and least likely to have been seen before—photos. Under the heading of "ordinary life," these images are of non-elite Nepalis in family groups, weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies, and—starting especially after 1950—engaged in occupational labor (women planting rice, threshing, etc.). From this later period are also images documenting ethnic diversity.

The photos selected often have an artistic/aesthetic quality that goes beyond their role of historical documentation. I am no art critic but many of the images seem wonderfully composed and skillfully executed, with remarkably crisp focus on faces. The clarity of the images is testament to

³ See <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP838> for access to 5,207 digital images that allow viewers to zoom in and out on details. The British Library's Endangered Archives Program also hosts a spectacular collection of digitized photos from the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya which are now available at <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP166>.

the professional talents of the photographers, the precision of the digital reproductions, the book's high production value (with glossy, heavy stock paper), and—not least—to the quality of light in an era before air pollution. There is more than just nostalgia in Mark Watson's observation that "the images depict a time of clear skies and unobstructed views, of free-flowing crystal clean rivers meandering over broad river beds, and wide expanses of farmland stretching to the sides of the Valley. Views that are lost forever" (p. 45).

One of the book's unfortunate qualities is the lack of clear dates or even basic identification for many of the images of people other than Rana elites. If Dirgha Man and Ganesh Man kept notes recording the dates and subjects of their photos, those have apparently not survived. The editor and authors have added informational and interpretive captions to the extent possible but many of the people depicted are unnamed and dates given are often broad: for example, "early 1900s" or even just "1900s." Hopefully, as more people see the photos, more precise identification and dating may result.⁴

As a British subject employed by the Rana regime (as opposed to being a member of the official British legation), Joseph Gaye has largely evaded historical attention.⁵ Hired to train and lead Royal Nepal Army musical ensembles, Gaye was also an amateur photographer. Thanks to the work of his great granddaughter, Mary Margaret Gaye, more than 150 of Gaye's photos of Nepal (taken between 1888 and 1892) are published for the first time.⁶

Joseph Gaye (1852–1926) joined the British Army in 1870 at age 18. Having entered the army with some musical training, during his 12 year enlistment period Gaye rose in the ranks to become a regimental band leader in the British Indian Army. In 1888 Joseph and his new wife Mary moved

⁴ Even I could identify some people, such as the image of the Shivapuri Baba surrounded by devotees on p. 175.

⁵ For some reason appendix XXIV of Perceval Landon's *Nepal* (1928) does not list Gaye among the Europeans known to have visited Nepal between 1881 and 1925.

⁶ Note that this volume was produced in a very limited edition of only 30 copies, one of which is in the Martin Chautari library in Kathmandu. Although the original plates were donated to the British Library in 2023, digitized images are available at the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, Kathmandu and at the British Library (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2023/10/joseph-gaye-1852-1926-photographic-views-of-the-kathmandu-valley-and-india-donated-to-the-british-li.html>).

to Kathmandu where Gaye served as bandmaster to the Royal Nepal Army under Rana Prime Minister Bir Shamsheer until 1892. Returning to colonial India Gaye served as bandmaster to three successive British viceroys. Gaye returned to England in 1899 before finally emigrating with his family to western Canada in 1905. With him went hundreds of his own glass plate negatives, lantern slides, and albumen prints documenting Gaye's South Asian sojourn in India, Nepal, and Burma. In Canada Gaye worked as a small-town administrator while also conducting several local music ensembles until his death in 1926. It is not clear how much of Gaye's photographic work was lost in generations of family disbursements, but when Mary Margaret Gaye found hundreds of glass negatives and other images packed into cases in a family attic, she decided that her ancestor's work was worth conserving for posterity.

The volume begins with a brief biography of Joseph Gaye—about whom very little is known given that no journals, diaries, or letters have survived in family hands. Next is a short but well documented essay surveying literature on photography in colonial-era South Asia. (There is also a useful bibliography at the end of the volume.) By far the largest part of the book is a chapter titled “Sojourn in Nepal (1888–1892)” (pp. 6–138) made up of well-captioned reproductions of Gaye's photos interspersed with basic narrative to help situate the images. The authors identify many, though not all, of the images by location but almost none of the people photographed are named—even those posed for formal portraits. Gaye's original images had only extremely brief captions such as “Nepalese ladies” or “bridge, Nepal.” (Likely he assumed that people who viewed the photos outside of Nepal would not know the individuals portrayed anyway.)

As a foreigner and hobbyist it is not surprising that many of Gaye's subjects are very different from those taken by the Rana-employed Chitrakar professionals. Gaye's photos include none of the ruling class and only one palace interior. The main overlap with the Chitrakar photos is images of religious monuments and the striking architecture of the Valley's Darbar Squares: images that were fast becoming standard tourist shots and remain so today.

Where the photo collections differ most is in Gaye's many images of everyday life. There are street scenes, including during festivals such as the Kumari Jatra. There are urban pedestrians and people resting in *pāṭīs*. There are also photos of farmers working, farm families, agricultural land, farm

houses, and a rural Dashain festival swing. There are images of Newars and Tibetans, craftspeople and workers, Hindus and Muslims, household scenes, low caste members. There are wonderful portraits of musical groups that Gaye worked with as well as of individual musicians, some including their families. Though we have no idea who they are, there are also many remarkable, more or less formal, photo portraits of non-elite families and individuals, many of them women. Finally are photos of the British residency compound, Europeans picnicking, and a sad 1891 image of Joseph and Mary's infant son's grave, the first known photo taken in the Kathmandu British Cemetery.

Among Gaye's photos are some that may be unique in the photographic historical record. These include prisoners in shackles outside the Kathmandu jail, and lepers displaying disfigured hands and feet, photographed from across a river. There are also images of three city gates, only one of which (Patan Dhoka) is identified. The other two may be the only known images of since-vanished Kathmandu city gates, one labeled by Gaye "The ancient south gate of City, Nepal," and the other "Gateway into City, Nepal." Although Gaye's images are not the oldest of Nepal to survive, nor necessarily unique, they are valuable for being able to date with certainty from between 1888-1892. Together they are one of the most extensive datable pre-20th century collections from one photographer. Compared with images from the Chitrakar family collection, the photographic reproduction in Gaye's book are noticeably less crisp, presumably because of little or no effective conservation measures over the century, but also perhaps because of Gaye's more amateur talents.

Comparing the two volumes, it is interesting to ask what constituted a photographable image in late-19th, early 20th century Nepal? What do the photos say about how Nepalis and foreigners "saw" the city? In an era when taking a single photographic image represented a real investment in time and money, what was "worth" photographing and why? If Gaye brought with him a combination of Victorian "picturesque," or exoticizing, or colonial ethnographic sensibilities, to what extent—if at all—had the Chitrakars embraced similar representational aesthetics or agendas? And if they had, by when, how, and why? Gaye's photos include (at least proportionately) more images of "everyday life." Is this because the Chitrakars saw scenes

like these as not worthy of photographing? Or would such images simply have been outside their professional directives as court photographers?

As interesting as the differences between the Chitrakars' and Gaye's photos are, maybe even more interesting is how similar they are. While the Chitrakar work is weighted toward Rana subjects, and Gaye's toward "everyday life," the overlap is in monumental architectural images from around the Valley. In both collections are dozens of photos of what are now the standard touristic images of Nepal. For Gaye, photos of places like Pashupatinath, Bouddhanath, Swayambhu, Kasthamandap, Dharahara, Rani Pohkari, Balaju, the Valley's Darbar Squares, etc., would have constituted personal souvenirs and evidence of the exotic that he had witnessed in the (for most) "forbidden land" of Nepal. But why did the Chitrakars photograph the same places when these temples, public spaces, and landmarks must have been woven into the mundane fabric of daily routine and, therefore, hardly remarkable. Were these Chitrakar images of public spaces taken at Rana request? Were the Ranas then using images like these as part of their own strategy to represent Nepal (and its people) as "timeless," "delicate," and in need of protection from the outside, but at the same time exotic and alluring to the modern (foreign) gaze? Although these volumes don't provide answers to these questions, they do offer striking evidence of an emerging national photographic imaginary that went on to become the foundation of the Nepal state's own tourist promotional representations since the mid-20th century.

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Biographical Note

Mark Liechty is professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author or editor of six books on modern Nepal dealing with middleclass culture, tourism, and development. Liechty is a founding co-editor of the journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society*.