

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Typecasting: Photography, Ethnographic Classification, and the Politics of Looking in Colonial India, 1855–1920

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the exhibition *Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India, 1855–1920*, curated by historian and archaeologist Sudeshna Guha at DAG (Delhi Art Gallery), Bikaner House, New Delhi. Using a collection of photographs from one of India's largest private holdings of early ethnographic photography, the exhibition questions the process of visually classifying India's diverse communities based on their racial, tribal, caste-based, and occupational characteristics. Highlighting *The People of India* (1868–1875)—an eight-volume photographic compilation commissioned in the wake of the 1857 revolt—the exhibition maps the development of a scientific approach to anthropological study through photography to classify Indians for colonial administrative purposes. This paper explores the exhibition's curatorial approach, which uses the themes of frontier and martial races, trade and occupation, and the genre of "beauties and dancing girls," and deconstructs the colonially fixed classifications. Contextualising the exhibition through postcolonial studies of colonial visualities by Christopher Pinney and Elizabeth Edwards, the paper discusses how *Typecasting* destabilises the meaning of the ethnographic photograph.

Keywords: Ethnographic classification, Postcolonial curation, The People of India, Visual archive

FULL RESEARCH PAPER**Introduction**

The photographic exhibition, *Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India-1855–1920*, was held at Bikaner House in New Delhi in February 2026, featuring about 166 to 197 photographic objects including prints, cabinet cards, postcards, folios, and albums taken from the collections of DAG, an Indian-based art gallery that in the last ten years compiled one of the largest photographic collections in India (*"Typecasting,"* wall text; Tewari and Guha, qtd. in Tewari). The exhibition is curated by the historian and archaeologist Sudeshna Guha. It explores a collection of photographs made between the 1850s and the 1920s, the period when, according to the curators' description on the exhibition's wall text, "the camera was used primarily as the instrument of ethnographic study" that captured "the peoples of India" (*"Typecasting,"* wall text).

There are two levels of irony implicit in the title of the show, "typecasting." In the first place, "typecasting" refers to the nineteenth-century process whereby Indians were classified according to their race and social standing based on portrait photography, and it *also* implies the show's critique of this practice. According to the wall text near the gallery entrance, the purpose of this exhibition is to disclose "the uncertainties and limitations" of ethnic classifications and to encourage spectators to reflect on the ambiguities the photos present rather than to try to uncover the truth behind them (*"Typecasting,"* wall text). This is the premise for the paper. The paper posits that the show is, on the one hand, an archive of colonial visual epistemology and, on the other, its critique, made possible by the nature of the medium itself rather than by the classification system.

The essay is organised into five sections. First, it traces the emergence of ethnographic photography in India, focusing on the imperial survey *The People of India* (1868–1875). Next, the essay discusses the exhibition's curatorship and the use made of the DAG archive. The third section presents a thematic reading of the exhibition's three main sections on tribe and field photography, trade and occupation, and the category of the "nautch girl" or dancing woman, through the photographs, captions, and labels presented in the exhibition. In the fourth section, the findings from the analysis are put into context through a discussion of the relevant scholarship on photography and colonial anthropology, including especially that of Christopher Pinney and Elizabeth Edwards.

Camera and the Ethnographic Turn: The People of India, 1868-1875

The advent of photography in the 1850s coincided with the emergence of anthropology. In the context of colonial India, both practices emerged simultaneously ("The People of India," wall text). The photograph functioned as the instrument that supposedly offered an objective view of the people of India since it could document objectively the physique, dress, and cultural objects of the Indian people, bypassing the interpretation and distortions associated with more traditional methods of documentation, like Company School paintings, which were known in Britain since the end of the eighteenth century ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text). However, the idea of mechanical objectivity proved illusory, as the exhibit's curatorial wall text noted: "Photography had its own aesthetic conventions and was not the objective instrument that some people claimed it to be" ("Typecasting," wall text).

The most comprehensive expression of the photographic-anthropological enterprise was realised in the publication *The People of India*. It was a book in eight volumes, published between 1868 and 1875, which included nearly 480 photographs of the so-called tribes, races, professions, and occupations of the continent ("The People of India," wall text). The project was initiated as a personal souvenir ordered by Lord Canning, the first Viceroy of India; however, it quickly grew in terms of the geographic scope and volume until it became, according to the exhibition wall text, "possibly the most ambitious photo-documentation project of the nineteenth century" and, therefore, laid the foundation of anthropological photography as a genre in South Asia ("The People of India," wall text). The series of photos started geographically from the Bengal Presidency—a geographic region that encompassed the Himalayan states of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal—and moved westward along the United Provinces to Punjab and Sind, southwards through Rajputana and Central Provinces to Mysore, Travancore and Madras, and, finally, crossed the Bay of Bengal towards Burma and Singapore ("The People of India," wall text).

Of central importance is that the survey was never an impartial scientific endeavour. The administrators who conducted it were fully aware that it was a scientific study towards the acquisition of facts about India, but what drove their curiosity was the fear felt by the colonial government regarding its lack of knowledge about the people it ruled, particularly following the events of the Revolt of 1857, which demonstrated how little the British knew about Indian society ("The People of India," wall text). Photography was thus a means not only of documentation but of control: knowing the tribal, caste, and occupational structure of a population was an important element of governance. Therefore, *The People of India* serves as an example of how

an allegedly scientific enterprise was always tainted by administrative and security concerns, while also being a source of valuable information ("The People of India," wall text).

It is precisely this duality, being both an instrument of colonial governance and an accidental repository of personal histories, that constitutes the crux of scholarship on the history of photography in India. In *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Christopher Pinney has claimed that photography during the period of British rule in India functioned primarily as "a quantifiable instrument of measurement" serving the interests of administration and race-science, while at the same time leaving room for Indian self-fashioning through the very same photographic practice (Pinney 8). Elizabeth Edwards, editor of the seminal essay collection *Anthropology and Photography 1860–1920*, has described the manner in which the emergence of anthropology and photography led to the production of photographic imagery whose truth status was continually emphasized by colonial scientists, yet never entirely guaranteed, since the camera captured not only what its ethnographic labels said, but also much more than that (Edwards 3–17).

Curatorial Context: DAG's Collection and Sudeshna Guha's Methodology

This exhibition is based on an archive collected by DAG over the past decade and regarded as the most extensive private collection of early ethnographic photography from India ("Typecasting," wall text). As Tilak notes in her article, Ashish Anand, the CEO of DAG, says the archive used in the exhibition provides an unprecedented level of documentation of the history of ethnography and its consequences for both the British administration and the Indian people portrayed. This archive includes a wide variety of images taken in the nineteenth century, including silver albumen photographs mounted on card or paper, carte de visites, cabinet cards, folios, albums, and printed postcards with letterpress captions ("Typecasting"; object labels).

In her curator's statement, Guha directly characterises this exhibition as an effort at repatriation and reexamination. As this photograph archive was originally produced mainly for a European audience, and "as proof ... of having 'seen India,'" and as these photographs depict "very much a colonial perspective on Indian society," Guha describes the curatorial endeavor as "buying these images from other places and bringing them back to India and opening them up to interrogation by Indians in the present day" (qtd. in Tewari). According to Guha's statements in interviews about this exhibition, the material was never neutral (qtd. in Tewari). The goal of this

exhibition is to investigate when an ethnographic image becomes a portrait, meaning "when the presence of the individual overwhelms the categorical definition implied in the caption of 'Races and Tribes of India'" (Tewari).

This curatorial goal informs the layout of the exhibition, which does not follow a straight chronology but is organised into a series of thematic sections, each preceded by a large wall-text panel placed atop a blown-up historical photograph. Viewers are met with such headings as "Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography," "Trade. Caste. Occupation," and "Beauties and Dancing Girls," with individual images labeled within their period frames, accompanied by object labels that give all the relevant information (photographer, title, medium, year, size of image and mount) as well as a large composite wall made up of close-ups of faces to demonstrate the extent of the colonial classification endeavor.

Theme Analysis of the Exhibition: Tribe, Community and the Frontier

In the "Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography" section of the exhibition, it is shown how the classificatory urge developed following the 1870s, where the "tribal" was identified according to the exhibition as possessing a structure that was "suspiciously democratic" and had "an exotic appearance and customs" that fascinated and alarmed British spectators ("Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography," wall text). The so-called "Frontier Tribes" were often described as aggressive and, accordingly, their tribal potentates or leaders were regularly photographed with weapons as part of the practice of classifying them as members of the "martial races," thus explaining both the need to conquer their defiance and the utility of recruiting them into the colonial army ("Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography," wall text). One of the photographs displayed shows a group of Nagas, or "Frontier Militia," seated and standing by a mud wall with jezails and shields in hand, a classic depiction that can be seen in the arrangement of armed individuals against an undecorated wall, like a police mug shot.

This is shown in the 1891 Census, in which colonial classifications were extended into the princely states, leading to ethnographic research in either a "racist" or "materialist" manner of analysis, including new methods of anthropometric measurement ("Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography," wall text). These census-based types contributed directly to Edgar Thurston's many volumes, "Castes and Tribes of South India," published in 1909 and produced with the help of Indian assistants; it is called the most extensive contribution to the Ethnographic Survey of India by the exhibition ("Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field

Photography," wall text). An important change in methodology, also mentioned at the exhibition, is the 1901-02 study of the Toda people from the Nilgiri Hills by the psychologist from Cambridge, W.H.R. Rivers, which marked the first case of fieldwork in India, as well as a similar mission in 1907-08 to the Vedda people of Sri Lanka ("Tribe, Community and Anthropological Field Photography," wall text). One such photograph from the Sri Lankan collection, depicting a series of male Veddas arranged with long bows and arrows in front of a thatch-roofed house, illustrates exactly this kind of "scientific" ethnographic practice, whereby commercial photographers acted on behalf of the anthropologist to construct hunting and body-type tableaux.

Some of the individually labelled prints in this section reveal the archival details of the exhibition. One of the silver albumen prints in this section is titled "Korkoos. Aboriginal Tribe. Berar." It is identified as the work of an unknown photographer in 1874 in *The People of India*, Volume Seven. This print is placed next to the portrait entitled "Rajah of Sillana. Rajpoot. Sillana" taken by the photographer James Waterhouse in 1874 (object labels). The placement of the unnamed photograph of the ethnic "type," together with the portrait of the ruling prince commissioned by the name, shows how *The People of India* levelled out the radically diverse social statuses, from princely elites to aboriginals, by placing them on a single photographic-taxonomic scale. Another example of the pairing includes Lala Deen Dayal's circa-1879 "Bhil Aboriginals, Central India" and "Group of Naga Women" attributed to Oscar Mallitte, and Willoughby Wallace Hooper's "Native Woman from Chhotanagpur" (object labels). The photograph of the Naga women, which shows them in front of thick vegetation holding baskets, and some of the captioned individuals are bare-chested due to regional attire, serves as a perfect example of the ethnographic record combined with obvious visual pleasure.

Possibly, the most telling juxtaposition of all is that in an oval-format print entitled "Andamanese Group at Calcutta, with their Keeper, Mr Homfray," which seems to have been produced by the studio of John Edward Saché and Westfield around 1865 (object labels). The photograph features a bearded European man standing among a group of Andamanese boys and men, with his hand hovering proprietarily above the group; the use of the term "keeper" in the original title—words typically reserved for describing the guardianship of animals and prisoners—brings to light the idea of possession that characterized much of colonial ethnographic photography of the Andaman Islanders, who were displaced and displayed through such images

within a larger framework of colonial governance of the islands since the inception of the penal colony there.

Trade, Caste and Occupation

The second thematic grouping is called "Trade. Caste. Occupation" and concerns itself with the intertwined categorisation of labour and caste during the colonial period. As mentioned in the exhibition wall text, many professions in India were traditionally tied to caste. However, a great many photographs still demonstrate the photographer's obvious interest in depicting tradespeople actively performing their occupation rather than merely as carriers of their caste label ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text). The photographs show portraits of shopkeepers, boatmen, tea pickers, water carriers, barbers, potters, cobblers, coolies, guards, domestics, and cooks at work, which, according to colonial imagination, defined them as individuals ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text).

The exhibition makes sure to mention how the conventions of aesthetics associated with such occupational photography have largely been inspired by the previously established Company School painting tradition, wherein there was a strong tendency towards treating caste as a fixed and essential category instead of an ever-changing social identity ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text). This reifying tendency is exemplified through the exhibition wall text, through which a 1906 publication is quoted, which claims the hierarchy of labour reliability among Sinhalese and Tamil workers in colonial tea gardens—again, not as ethnographic fact, but as one of the many instances of facile racial stereotyping that often accompanied occupational photography ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text). Some individual object labels within this segment mention several photographers who engaged in commercial photography of occupations such as an unnamed photographer's "A Potter Making Tiles," Skeen & Co. studio's "Native Fruit Shop" from the 1880s, Fred Bremner's "Fruit Seller, Quetta Market" from around 1900, and John Edward Saché's 1865 "Rope Seller" or "A Native Shop (Mussalman)" (object labels).

According to the exhibit, pictures of the tradespeople, much like the pictures of the dancing girls mentioned later in the paper, were widely distributed throughout India in the form of postcards, acting as a sort of catalog of visual knowledge: "a person sending a postcard with the picture of snake charmers [has] in effect announced that they have seen these people on the streets of India and have direct 'knowledge' of this aspect of India" ("Trade. Caste. Occupation," wall text). The

postcard culture turned ethnography from a tool of scientific categorisation for the privileged into a mass popular genre of visual culture.

Beauties and Dancing Girls

Third comes the section entitled "Beauties and Dancing Girls," which addresses Indian female photography. In this genre of ethnographic photography, the curators find voyeurism in the clearest sense possible, which is how the exhibition wall text defines this *section* as the place where it is most apparent ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). Unlike some captions, which were designed to introduce tribes or communities, others would simply record generic terms such as "Hindu Woman," "Group of Kashmiri Females," or "Tamil Lady" ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). The most recurrent images in this genre were photographs of the dancing girls, who pose so skillfully that the exhibition says their faces have "a barely concealed erotic charge" ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). Some examples of photography in this genre include several photographs by Charles Shepherd from Simla, among them a wet collodion glass-negative print, "Nautch Girl," dated 1862, as well as "Nautch Girls" and "Delhi Dancing Girls with Musicians" (object labels).

It is also noted in the wall text that pictures of beautiful women and dancers were widely circulated among the population, bearing the women's names such as "Miss Jomti of Mussourie" and "Miss Goharjan." Even though the motives of people buying and sending such postcards could be diverse, the overall result of this practice was the emergence of a common idea of "performed Indian femininity" circulating in British India ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). In such circumstances, the museum pays attention to the unique case of the photograph book *Hasinān-e Lakhna'ū*, or *The Beauties of Lucknow* (1874) made by Daroga Abbas Ali, which is described in the wall text as "a unique example of attempting something quite different" ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). The photographs depicting the dancing girls called *paris*, or "fairies," participating in the Indur Sabha performance are presented as professional performing art rather than ethnographic examples, reminding the viewer of the long-gone "magical court" of the banished Nawab Wajid Ali Shah ("Beauties and Dancing Girls," wall text). The inclusion of Ali's photographs enables the exhibition to show how Indian photographers adopted the same conventions in photographic genres as their European peers, but for completely different purposes, thus challenging the notion that the agency of photography was held *only* by the coloniser.

The Elite and the Problematics of the Colonial Frame

While the exhibition contains sections dedicated to tribal, occupational, and gendered “types,” it also contains a variety of images that are not part of the colonial classification system at all. One such image is a studio portrait taken around the start of the twentieth century, depicting an extended family of Indian Muslims (likely a wealthy Bohra merchant family). This studio portrait depicts the family in a carefully posed, multi-generational grouping against a painted backdrop with classic columns and drapery, the men dressed in Western-style suits with traditional turbans, while the women and children are in elaborate patterned clothing. Some members of the family have been seated on elevated furniture to create the pyramid-shaped composition commonly used in high-status portraits of this era. Unlike many of the faceless “types” found elsewhere in the exhibition, this photo was almost certainly taken at the family’s request. The inclusion of the work in the exhibit highlights an observation made by Guha explicitly in an interview: while the same photo archive created images that racially defined the “types,” they also created in the same period and through the same commercial photographer’s portraits of the well-off that they had control over much more than the faceless tribe members or labourers (qtd. in Tewari).

Theoretical Context: Photography, Anthropology, and Colonial Power

The Typecasting show should be considered in relation to academic work on the interconnections between the history of photography and anthropology in the British Empire. Christopher Pinney’s *Camera Indica* is the key work on the Indian photographic tradition throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras; according to Pinney, photography under British colonisation was primarily “a quantifiable instrument of measurement” used to fixate and stabilise Indian identity (Pinney 8). Yet, what is more important, Pinney states that Indian photography, even though it was practised in the colonial context, allowed people to idealise themselves and disguise their social reality—an act of “creative destabilisation” of established identity categories that has been discussed by subsequent scholarship, including the DAG show itself (qtd. in “The Coming of Photography in India”).

In her edited book *Anthropology and Photography 1860–1920*, Elizabeth Edwards presents another complementary perspective, showing how the simultaneously emerging disciplines of anthropology and photography in the British Empire created an enormous collection of images that were continuously produced to claim their status as scientific evidence (Edwards 3–17). In her introduction to the book, Edwards explains that the pictures taken during anthropological expeditions

offer more than the framework used now the picture is taken. Pictures are still filled with additional information about gesture, personal identity and context, which continuously threaten to spill over the classification caption (Edwards 3-17). The theory formulated by Edwards corresponds directly to the idea suggested by Guha as a core of DAG exhibition: that the picture captioned "Races and Tribes of India" may turn out to be a family photograph once it is taken out of the context of its classification (Tewari).

Taken together, the two authors indicate that colonial ethnographic photography was not a straightforward, clear tool of racial science despite its descriptive captions and administrative framework for its application. The Typecasting exhibition puts the theoretical idea into practice through the physical presentation of captioned type photographs—the one of the Korkoos aboriginal tribe and the Andamanese community with its "keeper"—in contrast to photographs that show self-portraits, like the portrait of the elite family mentioned before, or even to Abbas Ali's Beauties of Lucknow. The row of cropped heads presented on the wall of the Typecasting exhibition not only serves another function: in addition to emphasising how colonial photography sought to flatten people's individuality, this composition brings that individuality into focus through the scale at which the photographs are placed.

Ambiguity, Agency, and the Limitations of a Critical Re-Display

The fact that the exhibition deliberately eschews providing "definitive meanings" of its subject matter ("Typecasting," wall text) not only represents the primary intellectual success but also one of the biggest risks undertaken by the exhibition's organisers. In the first place, such an approach to the presentation of the subject matter is an effective means of avoiding the tendency towards mere reversal of the colonial gaze, which involves substituting one totalizing mode of interpretation (scientific racialism) for another (celebration of the native resistance or agency). In this way, visitors will have to accept multiple, even opposing, interpretations of the same photograph: a portrait of Naga women may be regarded as an ethnographic specimen, a piece of voyeurism, and a picture that captures the individuals' process of self-representation at the same time.

At the same time, the use of ambiguity places a heavy burden of interpretation on viewers as well as on the wall texts that define each theme of the exhibition. In other words, if a visitor will see only the bare object labels (photographer, name of image, medium, print sizes) and not wall texts (dense, history-rich, paying attention to

nuance), he or she will have much less information about the colonial era, besides that provided in the colonial captions of these photographs: "Several of them still bear original, jarring captions like 'Andamanese Group at Calcutta, with their Keeper'" (object labels). It means that the exhibition's critical potential rests on careful reading and viewing of didactic panels, which can be seen as a requirement like that of historians who read colonial archives. However, this can also be regarded as one of the strengths of the exhibition as it makes viewers look more carefully at the pictures, just like Guha wanted them to do: "It is only through this deliberate act of viewing – of looking and seeing and re-seeing – that these images 'open many histories'" (qtd. in Tewari).

Conclusion

Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India, 1855–1920 brings together a massive colonial photographic archive and a present-day Indian curator committed to preventing this archive from speaking for itself. In putting the spotlight on The People of India, along with the ethnographic survey project in which it played such a foundational role, Typecasting meticulously charts the coming together of photography, anthropology, and colonial administration in mid- to late-nineteenth-century India to create a taxonomy of the peoples of India based on concepts of race, tribe, caste, and profession, and aimed at managing the population after the Revolt of 1857. At the same time, by virtue of its thematic presentation, its inclusion of exceptions such as Daroga Abbas Ali's Beauties of Lucknow, and its consistent emphasis on ambiguity as an interpretive approach, the exhibition highlights how the same photographs never fully fulfilled the classification agenda of their makers. In light of the work of Christopher Pinney and Elizabeth Edwards, the exhibition shows that the colonial ethnographic photograph has always been a double image: tool of scientific racism as well as an indeterminate record of life stories that keep accruing meaning and identity after the moment of their capture ("Typecasting," wall text). It is this doubling that Typecasting wants us to think about, not any one of its corrected versions or reversals.

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