

CHAPTER 2

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON IN INDIA: EURO-CENTRIC PHOTOJOURNALISM

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Abstract

As the world transitioned from the era of colonialism to the era of independent nations in the mid-twentieth century, issues surrounding their representation by the dispossessed ‘empires’ assumed a notable significance in the post-colonial discourse. The formation of Magnum Photos in 1947 in this context was a landmark event. It aimed to bring newsworthy events of different parts of the world to a global audience. This paper discusses the work of Cartier-Bresson in South Asia during one of the most important occurrences in the region in modern times: the independence of India and the accompanying partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947. His photography in the region raises questions about iconic photojournalistic narratives that have the power to emerge (and by extension, exclude other moments that fall under the same ambit) as a meta-narrative. Looking at Cartier-Bresson’s photographs of the India- Pakistan partition, Kashmir and several other events/people in the subcontinent, the paper carries out a postcolonial reading highlighting the implications his photojournalistic, privileged and racial-political status carried for the selection and interpretation of the decisive moments he captured and archived through his various projects all over the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: *Henri Cartier-Bresson, India, postcolonial, partition, photojournalism*

Introduction

As the world transitioned from the era of colonialism to the era of independent nations in the mid-twentieth century, issues surrounding their representation by the dispossessed ‘empires’ assumed a notable significance in the post-colonial discourse. The formation of Magnum Photos in 1947 in this context was a landmark event. It aimed to bring newsworthy events of different parts of the world to a global audience. Seventy years later, Magnum Photos represents not only the pioneering photojournalistic initiative, but also as an archive of major world events since World War II. Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of the five founding members of Magnum Photos and his contributions to the world of photojournalism have been indispensable. His book *The decisive moment* (1952) has over the years become the Bible to study photography and photo reportage. This paper, however, studies his work from the post-colonial perspective for it can be seen to carry a view of the third world which is fraught with tensions like other-ness, elitism and orientalism. This paper discusses the work of Cartier-Bresson in South Asia during one of the most important occurrences in the region in modern times: the independence of India and the accompanying partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947. His photography in the region raises questions about an ethical narrative and the problem with creating an iconic moment in history that has the power to emerge (and by extension, exclude other moments that fall under the same ambit) as a meta-narrative. Some of the photographs in his series become especially remarkable, as they tend to misconstrue the meaning and divert the attention from several issues of immense consequence.

BRESSON-CARTIER AS PHOTOJOURNALIST

In multiple interviews, Henri Cartier-Bresson has made it lucid that his career was not driven by documentation. Neither did he wish to be labeled a surrealist photographer. Unlike Robert Capa, the co-founder of Magnum Photos with Cartier-Bresson, the latter did not wish to be fastidious about the way photography coincided with journalism and documentation of lived history. The difference of ideology that existed between him and Capa came to an agreement in the way they wanted to be titled, that is, as a photojournalist. Cartier-Bresson aimed to achieve visual sophistication in his works, exemplified by the use of strong contrasts, geometrical symmetry, and building a story around the situation. Cartier-Bresson believed that a good picture, in contrast to a mediocre one, must

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contain two broad constituents- first, significant content worthy of being photographed, which is then, secondly, arranged in rigorous composition. Claude Cookman (1998) in his article ‘Compelled to witness: The social realism of Henri Cartier-Bresson’ brings out the debate surrounding Henri Cartier-Bresson as to whether he should be labeled an artist or a photojournalist. Aiming to resurrect Cartier-Bresson’s reputation as a photo-journalist, the article navigates the range of arguments put forth by art and photography critics that seem to conclude that his work was more aesthetics driven than reportage driven.

PHOTOGRAPHING PARTITION: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

The independence of British ruled India came at the heavy price of partition of the country into three regions- the Hindu majority India and the two regions of East and West Pakistan where Muslims were demographically strong. The question of minorities in the three areas was debated with heated enthusiasm, but the abruptness of the transition and badly implemented decisions led to the largest and the most traumatic forced migration that the world had ever seen. Over 6 million people left their homes to move to a new land, which the political brass had decided they belonged to, uprooting them from the land they belonged to since generations. The transition turned into a massacre, just as religious zealots and electoral politics turned the communities against each other- a polarity that had been building up since the 1920s. The partition became embroiled in arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence¹. More than 75,000 women were raped and converted as a symbol of victory. Many committed honour suicides to protect themselves from violation at the hands of the ‘enemy’. The trains that left India for Pakistan and vice-versa reached their destinations with only corpses. The few who managed to reach alive had no place to live, no jobs and no family or friends to go to in the new place. Most families were clueless about the whereabouts of their family members, unsure whether they had made it alive or not. In such a dismal situation, the refugee camps that were set up did little to ease their suffering. Hygiene at these camps was abysmal, inmates were stuffed into every possible place as in bird coops, food ration was not enough, and rehabilitation efforts were inadequate.

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Bresson (2009) wrote, “That’s why it develops a great anxiety, this profession. Because you are always waiting, what’s going to happen, what, what, what, what! It’s what?”¹ It can be argued that this is also a characteristic of history, where no moment ever repeats itself and there is a constant unfolding of events in the flow of lived experience, even more so in the case of turbulent historical events involving intense violence. There is no possibility of returning to the past and alter the course of events or wish that things had somehow taken place differently. As a photojournalist, Cartier-Bresson was well aware of his role in history, as an eye through which the future would view the moment that was taking place right then. According to him, photography was not to prove any point, but only to capture, and the analysis could be left to posterity. For him, photojournalism was a gaze which mobilized personalisation and subjectivisation as a natural corollary. As against that, facts are not really ‘interesting’ to him.



Image 1

His wish to wait for the ‘decisive moment’, which can act as a standalone picture for an entire episode in history, automatically and intentionally, obscures many other aspects of any given event. Through his images in 1947-48 South Asia, it can be argued that between his quest of the perfectly

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composed picture and the tryst to capture a moment of quintessential historical significance, he glossed over the countless narratives of pain and injustice with the typical ease and indifference of the colonizer. One strikingly problematic image is that of refugees playing in a camp at Delhi, where one may be easily misled to think that the camps provided a haven of plenty and security for refugees and became temporary 'homes' for them. While it might be argued that counter-narratives to a situation are equally valid, but they cannot be isolated and rarified to swim against the general tide of the moment to mask as objective truth.

Susan Sontag (1977) points out the fetish to photograph the beautiful, transforming even the ugly into a thing of beauty. The psyche of a photographer pushes her to only capture an ugly thing till she considers its ugliness beautiful. In *The pain of others*, she makes a compelling argument against the aestheticization of pain and suffering (Sontag, 1977). Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. Even if one argues that Cartier-Bresson's photographs did not originally have the documentary motive, the subjects that are depicted in them demand a certain level of sensitivity, without romanticising these experiences. In the images given below, clicking the baggage of a refugee and a wide-angled and symmetric shot of a camp though make for an aesthetic image but render the key issues invisible. Photography, by definition, has a limitation that it excludes in the process of inclusion. In his *The decisive moment*, Cartier-Bresson illustrates how throughout his career, he aspires to tell stories through images and create a photo reportage. But in the process of discovering the one image that has the power to become the whole story in itself, one finds a plethora of other stories being discarded. Thus, it is important that the photographer acknowledges his or her limitations in order to make the viewers aware of what they might be missing while looking at the photographs.

PHOTOGRAPHING KASHMIR: AESTHETICS AND POLEMICS

The issue of Kashmir has been beleaguered since the time of independence. Soon after independence, India and Pakistan fought two wars over control of Kashmir, causing the land to be riven with conflicts till today. The images of Kashmir by Cartier-Bresson show the aspects of Kashmir that one is likely to see in traveller magazines, with boat markets, mountain caravans and landscapes. Thus, as

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works of photojournalism, they fall short of the professional expectation to participate, illustrate and corroborate.



Image 2

Rather, they can be seen as counter evidence to project the idea that things were *not* violent. As someone sharing close proximity to the erstwhile British administration and the new to-be Indian administration, Cartier-Bresson's work seems to feed to a "situation-well-under-control" propaganda. Being an insider to the Indian elite circle, and being European, Cartier-Bresson's narrative ideology shows a continuation of apologist colonial behaviour, shock-proofing any backlash to the imperial regime or Indian governance. His photographs are still taken as references for studying the visual representation of partition of India but it is extremely important to interrogate what is systematically erased in public memory through such iconic instances of photojournalism. What Bresson calls "The decisive moment" is actually a subjective decision on part of the photographer, arising from his or her own individual background, which though integrated in public history, is still 'his story'. As Susan Sontag says, "In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a

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presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (Sontag, 1977, p.5).

PHOTOGRAPHING THE SUBCONTINENT- COLONIAL AND ORIENTAL

This paper takes in its ambit three of Cartier-Bresson's projects: *India.1947-1948*, *Pakistan.1948* and *Asia.1948*. These images were taken over a period of 2 years, throughout which Cartier- Bresson stayed in India and travelled to different parts, taking photographs of the upheavals that were taking place throughout the subcontinent. Journalistic photographs are meant to serve as archival evidence and insightful archaeology of the present times. When one looks at Cartier-Bresson's works in South Asia as historiography, oriental and colonial attitudes seem ingrained in these photographs. Cartier-Bresson's work around the time of Indian independence raises issues of opportunistic and condescending voyeurism and how the global East is viewed by the global West. Despite Cartier-Bresson's self-professed photographic creed that analysis comes after the photograph, the photographer is not free from judgments and biases that reveal themselves to post-colonial analysis.

His wife, Mohini, was a close friend of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, giving him the vantage entry point into elite circles of the newly born nation. This position of privilege nurtures and nourishes the White Man's voyeuristic delight which tends to focus more on the grandiose and the sensational, and less on the mundane and quotidian. Cartier-Bresson could access the large matrix of India's former royalty and emerging bureaucracy. His photographs train their lens into the world of the Indian elite at this turning point and depict their lavish lifestyle, their personalities and their relationships with each other. Similarly, the individual portraits of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Sheikh Abdullah Saraf, Lord and Lady Mountbatten document the age gone by and its cultural remnants.

He is able to connect with the Indian elite better because their lives were more European than that of the ordinary population. Many of the photographs also revolve around Gandhi's final moments before he was assassinated and many after his death. They display the devotion Gandhi commanded and attempt to underscore Gandhi's relationship with the people. Owing to *Life Magazine's* commission to Cartier-Bresson to report Gandhi's death, many of his photos are much celebrated and have gone down in history. But in these images also we see that the ordinary people

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are usually foils to the rich and powerful of India. Ordinary people count only as crowd comprising testimony to the God-like following that Gandhi had come to attract.



Image 3

Similarly, while capturing the festivities of Maharaja of Baroda's birthday, we see incidental glimpses of people and their lives. Any pre-occupation with the actual lives of millions of people who were the real victims of the power struggle between the British and the different sections of Indian elite was by and large missing. The ordinary people, thus, appear in relation to the elite, instead of having identities and agencies of their own. There are some photos like those of three women reunited with their families in *Pakistan*. 1948 which show the severity of the

calamity for the common people, but these are sparse and under-represented.



Image 4

He said about his stay in India,

I was in India just at the death of Gandhi, at the partition between India and Pakistan and it's to be present when there is a change of situation, when there is most tension. And I had been living in India for about a year even more and problem of demography, immensity of space, of people preoccupied me very much. I like to live in a place, I don't like to go for short. What is made with time, time will respect it or something like this (Cartier-Bresson, 1973, para 14).



Image 5

The quote here reflects the urge towards direct storytelling based on assumption of an objective and absolute truth that can be captured through the camera. Discounting the vast gulf between the lived experience of the native and the

white man, of the poor and the affluent, this theory emanates from his early influence with the imperialist historiography of the “Cambridge School”, where the white man appropriates sole right to storytelling, with no intention of acknowledging pluralities and diversities. He was born in a family of powerful and wealthy French industrialists, and his time in Cambridge further shaped his thinking and outlook to contemporary history. Through engagement with people like the great anthropologist, Sir James Frazer, and living in Africa during the age of French colonialism, he developed an eye for the colonised people and began photographing Africa. When he returned to France later, he was full of horrors of colonialism and insisted on capturing life realistically in the colonies. This might have been the beginning of his socialist ideals. But for all his “champagne socialism”, his work often, knowingly or unknowingly, treaded the path to the aestheticisation of poverty and the exoticisation of the Orient.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, thus, when one evaluates Henri Cartier-Bresson’s works on India as a means to study its history, one finds that the extreme violence and the social, cultural and psychological trauma of the period around 1947 is overshadowed by ostentatious celebrations of independence and elaborate gestation of a nation. The finesse of images and erudition of moments make Cartier-Bresson’s images of refugee camps and the trains between India and Pakistan reflect oneiric quiet and aesthetic charm. His photographs carry the stamp of a privileged insider and a story teller who can pin his audience with the musealisation of watershed events and popular celebrities. He has the imperial élan and arrogance and professional privilege and repute to reframe and reorder issues. The post-colonial

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viewer of his photographs today is ill-at-ease with all of this. A postcolonial reading such as the one as carried out in this paper de-canonizes their status by re-instating the limitations and imbalances that are inherent in them.

Notes

¹ For further reading on the legacy of the Partition of India and a critical analysis of partition literature, see Dalrymple, William. 2017. "The Great Divide- The Violent Legacy of Indian Partition". *The New Yorker*. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

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Image Credits

Image 1: Cartier-Bresson, H. (1947a). Muslim Refugee Train from Delhi to Lahore, Pakistan, passing through Kuinkshaha station [Silver Gelatine Print]. The Heritage Lab.
<https://www.theheritagelab.in/india-henri-cartier-bresson/>

Image 2: Cartier-Bresson, H. (1948). Srinagar, Kashmir, 1948 [Gelatin silver print, 9 9/16 x 14 3/8 in. (24.3 x 36.5 cm)]. New Orleans Museum of Art. <https://noma.org/object-lesson-srinagar-kashmir-by-henri-cartier-bresson/>

Image 3: Cartier-Bresson, H. (1947). Nehru et Lord Mountbatten , 1947 [Gelatin silver print]. Artnet.
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/henri-cartier-bresson/nehru-et-lord-mountbatten-bA9aZPYNK8dq1LBf7y51wQ2>

Image 4: Cartier Bresson, H. (1948). Crowds wait to pay last respects as Gandhi's funeral cortege approaches the cremation ground. Delhi, India, 1948. [Photograph]. Magnum Photos.
<https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/religion/henri-cartier-bresson-india-death-gandhi/>

Image 5: Cartier-Bresson, H. (1948a). Gandhi's body at Birla House, the day after his assassination. Delhi, India. 1948. [Photograph]. Magnum Photos.
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