Once they were all neatly ordered, medium format 120 mm negatives each housed in a small envelope, with details of name and date, and 35 mm stored in plastic files. Then a fierce storm blew open the shutter at the front of the godown where they were stored. Water poured in and several decades of studio work lay moldering on the floor. The godown stored the entire analog output of Studio Suhag, which had been founded by Suresh Punjabi together with his brother Mahesh in the late 1970s. The location is Nagda Jn, an industrial town in central India, exactly halfway between Mumbai and Delhi. The studio is a standard 10 by 20 feet lock up on the town’s main street, Jawahar Marg. Like many Jawahar Marg in other Indian towns it is bisected by Mahatma Gandhi Marg and Jhansi Ki Rani Marg. This is the basic patriotic grid of urban life in numerous small towns in which similar, doubtless less-accomplished, photographic studios are also to be found.

One image, shot on the front step of Studio Suhag in the late 1970s, shows a friend astride a Yezdi motorbike, clutching a small child. This anomalous image shot on the threshold of the shop, revealing a thinly populated Jawahar Marg, draws our attention to the fact that overwhelmingly the images record the space in the opposite direction, the one that lies inside the studio. Looking at the 1,500 or so images salvaged from what was originally an archive of tens of thousands of images produced within this space between 1978 and 1984 one is struck by their claustrophobia and near-immunity to the astonishing events of that broader political history. There are dreams, aspirations, identities, and rhythms that intrude upon these photographs but for the most part one is left with the sense of an endlessly repeated space within which Suresh, with his expressive fingers, sculpts his customers.

The city in effigy retrieved via these images is one comprised of villagers and townspeople, poor and rich, devout and cosmopolitan, but these are all made visible in a very particular space in which a relatively fixed repertoire of backdrops, props, lighting and framing techniques gradually become recognizable.

“What has been?” is perhaps also evident in photographs in which sitters seek a record of their occupation or status, as coolies, a policeman, or (as in the case of Nasir Khan) a bandmaster. Maybe it is there in a young Muslim woman proudly attired in her NCC uniform saluting to the camera, testimony to a national identity that now seems far more complex. Similarly, the image of a daru-wala, the drunken poet so beloved of Bollywood of the period (the afterburn of Pyaasa and the contemporaneity of Kabhi Kabhie), speaks to a poetic sensibility that has been driven out by later fundamentalist orthodoxy (the whisky was colored water).

Of course all these photographs, which appear, as Bourdieu once put it, to solemnize what has already been achieved, are in a profound sense future-oriented. Those instances of “instrumental...
realism”, mug-shots made at the insistence of the state, are also voyages into an anticipated future and death itself, which as an intellectual metaphor has done so much to hamper the theoretical understanding of photography as always oriented to a future. The most common complaint I used to hear whenever I returned to my ongoing fieldsite, a nearby village, without a photograph for which someone had been waiting was “so what will they do when I’m dead?” Their portrait is placed in a future trajectory into a time where one day it will do the work of embodying them for the purpose of shraddha puja during pitra paksh.

Such images invite a backward glance at a past that seems irretrievably lost. But in fact most of the images speak in prophetic mode to a future that is yet to be. There are young men with phones, because phones could only be easily found in photographic studios in the early 1980s. Suhag’s customers pose wistfully, listening carefully to an interlocutor who is not yet there. They are almost literally speaking to the future. The distant utopia of consumer durables and technologies of connectivity makes its appearance through other means such as the radio, physically fusing two male friends but, like the phones in the earlier images, pointing to a distant horizon. Then there are those lost in distant film-worlds: the coolly-reposed consumer of Mayapuri whose resplendent fantasies are sufficiently luminous to pierce his dark shades. Or the bohemian photographer, perhaps reading a feature about Hema Malini or Reena Roy while his Yashica hangs ready for action from his shoulder.

It was this quality of photography, its ability to transform the world, that often made customers, especially villagers, beseech the camera as though it were some capricious god. Customers would often seek the blessing of the camera before submitting to it—or indeed might insist on their submission to the camera becoming the subject of the photograph itself. This gesture might be positioned in a widespread set of assumptions about the divinatory nature of mimesis. Usually when I arrive in Nagda or Bhatisuda several people will tell me that they dreamt of my face the previous night so that they knew I would be coming. Sometimes they have a vision like this just minutes before I appear. Perhaps the most elaborate example of this premonitory mimesis was triggered by my question at a wedding reception in Nagda in November 2012 concerning how it was possible to serve (amazingly delicious) fresh mango juice out of season as part of the nastar. This prompted a former Nagderite, now resident in Ratlam, to relate various narratives about a powerful sant called Anandalalji. The first two incidents were personally witnessed by his father: he saw these with his own eyes. In the first, a very familiar narrative, someone arrived to see the sant who told him that he had dreamt of his arrival the previous day. The visitor was surprised. Then the sant asked him what he would like to eat and the visitor said mango—mangos being out of season and assuming that this was an impossible request. The sant gestured to his chela to retrieve something from a bag in a neighboring room and he returned with a huge mango, fructiferous confirmation of the sant’s perspicacity.

The second story concerned the same sant and the attempt of a photographer to photograph him. The photographer took 40–50 pictures (the narrator obviously knew nothing about analog photography) and these (as it later transpired) were all blank—nothing showed up in the negative when they were processed—these were the days of roll film. After the photographer had taken these pictures the sant asked him whether he had sought his permission. The photographer was embarrassed and belatedly requested it, and found he only had one shot left on his roll. He snapped and when he processed them found that there was this one sole clear image. It is this image you see everywhere in pan shops in Ratlam.

The acknowledgment of the divinatory potential of mimesis together with the necessity of a consensual contractualism seems to inform those images in which customers offer the camera their abhinandan pranam. But it also perhaps explains why Suresh carefully filed all his technical mishaps—accidental double exposures—that one might have otherwise expected to have been discarded

The present images, all printed from medium format square 120 mm negatives, bear testimony to primary material facts. The ones reproduced here were retrieved between 2011 and 2012 from decaying piles that spilled onto the floor of the storage area. Nearly all the negatives bear evidence of water damage, providing a skein, a double coating of history, an environmental pentimento, which brings these images right into our present.

The other material trace is that of the space of the studio. In the late 1980s Suresh switched to 35 mm format. Not only was this much cheaper but its format was also closer to the format of the prints which most clients desired. Many customers demand “full-body” images. Using a medium format camera (Suresh’s was a Yashica 635) to capture a full-length pose always meant that all the “noise” of the studio was also recorded in the negative. Suresh would step back, framing his full body subject centrally in the image, and at the sides would intrude studio lights, curtains, props, and so on. This was the inevitable result of placing a human body within a square frame. The resulting noise was all cropped out in the printed image since it was mere infrastructure designed to deliver an illuminated and adequately posed central body and was of no interest to the customer or to Suresh. But it was all there in the negative, fragments of small town India in a silent Brechtian margin, awaiting recovery.

Often as not that margin simply shows the clutter of the studio, elements of the apparatus necessary to bring the photograph into being: studio lights, alternative backdrops, chairs, props, crumpled newspapers, the sheer cramped physicality of this space. Sometimes the contingency of the event is apparent in other ways: a tambourine is jangled to distract an unsettled baby. At other times one glimpses the complex network of sociality spreading off-screen and which the negative is unable to exclude.

My own moment of epiphany about the nature of the god that lies in the detail (to recall Warburg) or the nation which is to be found in its fragments (to recall Partha Chatterjee) was an encounter with an image in which a man stands in the right hand corner of Studio Suhag, his hands placed assertively on his waist in a posture than seems to declare, look! This is what I have got and it is all chaka-chak. Perhaps he was a Rajasthani migrant working in the GRASIM factory who wanted something to send back to his natal village. It was easy to imagine the cropped prints being sent with a note to his mother telling her not to worry: he was eating, he had got some great clothes, and all was well. Rather atypically Suresh has aligned him vertically against the painted pillar on the backdrop so that it appears to be sprouting from the top of his head. One starts to ponder whether the customer wanted only the pillar or whether he wanted the painted rural backdrop on his right, perhaps to remind him of what he had left behind when he came to this industrial hell-hole. One’s attention wanders in this space and then something pricks it and catches our attention. Suspended in the indeterminate space between the two backdrops there is some anomalous object, a strip of translucent squares off which light shines unevenly. It appears to mirror the dark strip that separates the rusticity of the village backdrop from the palatial elegance of the colonnaded central space. And then suddenly you comprehend: it is a strip of medium format film, newly plucked from the Yashica, processed by Suresh and pinned up to dry. While it would be far-fetched to claim this as Nagda’s Las Meninas, it remains nevertheless an astonishing image, one which incorporates into its margin of excess and noise, accidental and inescapable evidence for the very process and format which generates that self-same noise.

Note

1. Some of this text and some of these images appeared in Suresh Punjabi and Christopher Pinney, Artisan Camera: Studio Photography from Central India, Tara Books, Chennai, 2013.
Studio Suhag: 1978–84

Portraits by Suresh Punjabi