





#4

PhotoDemos Pamphlet Series
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TIME & TRACE

Birgunj and Janakpur, Nepal

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Leaving the relative crispness of the Kathmandu Valley and descending through verdant mountains the traveller is soon confronted by the sweltering heat of the Terai. Its effects can be seen vividly in the photographs one encounters. Despite efforts to preserve them in plastic bags in the dark interiors of wardrobes, many – indeed sometimes the majority – appear to have succumbed to a vigorous rhizome-like fungus which seems to be particular to the Terai, rippling through the laminated surfaces of the images upon which they feed. The fetid climate appears to be reclaiming the past, stretching its tendrils across transient human attempts to preserve the specificity of the moment, slowly obliterating one time with another.





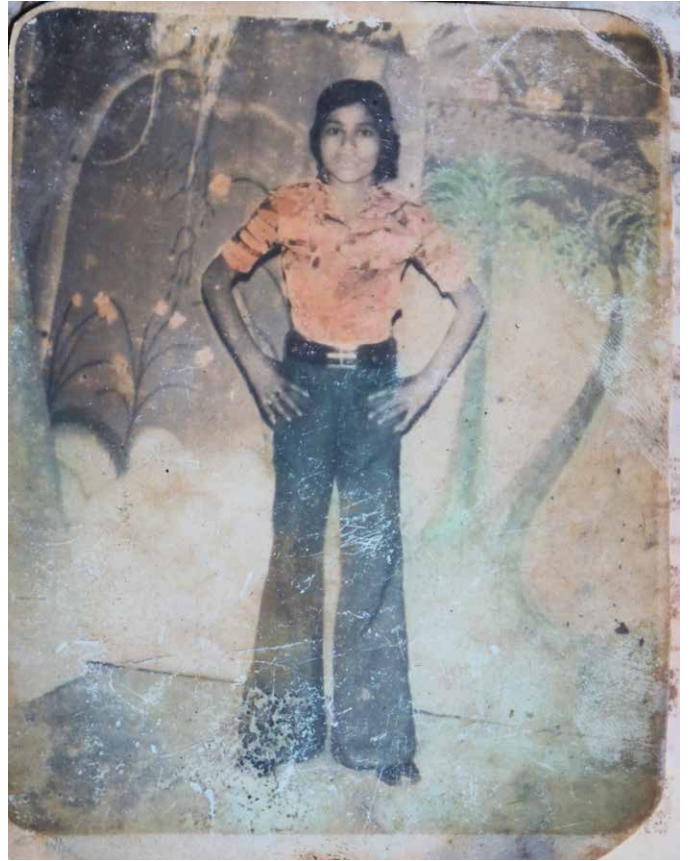


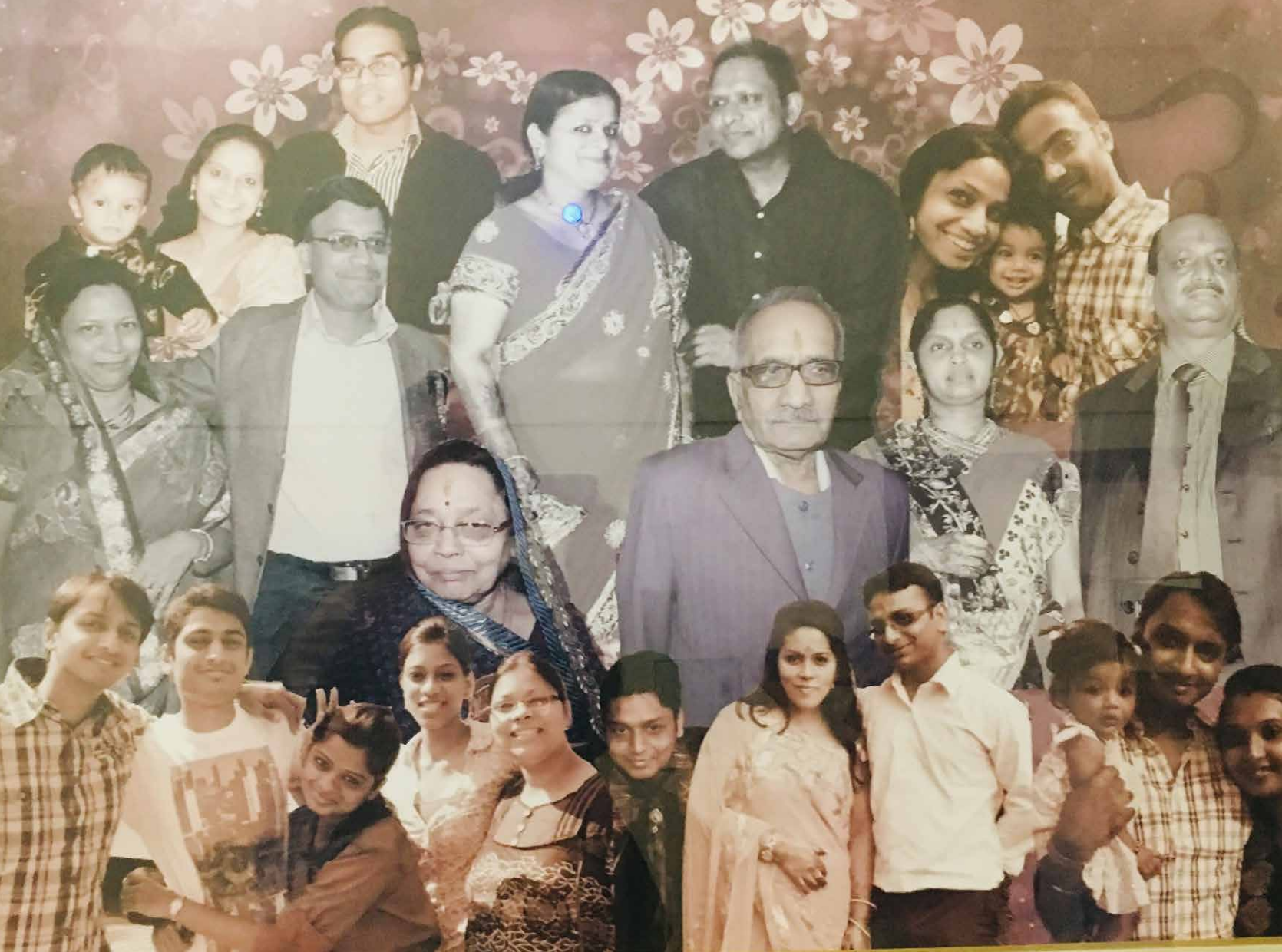
In Birgunj, time makes itself felt through the centrifugal and centripetal dynamics, through dispersal and coagulation. Talking with the eminent businessman and photographic enthusiast Ganesh Lath I had the opportunity to review his large collection of images, many arranged in albums. Ganesh's family, who originated in Shekawati in northern Rajasthan, had a long and deep interest in photography. His Grandfather loved getting his portrait taken and this was easy since he lived next to a studio in Birgunj. His mother was equally keen but since she had to practice *gunghat* (a Hindu practice of deferential veiling) she had to wait until she was in Kathmandu to obtain unveiled portraits. Birgunj studios were happy to make unveiled portraits but she didn't feel comfortable commissioning such images in a small town where everyone knew everyone else's business. Ganesh had traded in 'foreign goods' for many years and at one stage imported Leicas into Nepal.



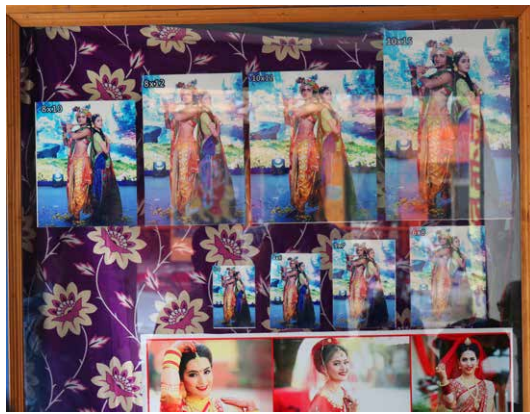


This Marwari family was alert to business opportunities and prepared to travel to pursue them and Ganesh's kin were consequently spread far and wide. As they had dispersed, they had taken images from the collective family album with them so that what remained in Ganesh's possession was a kind of ruin, a former repository of photographs now depleted, each absence testimony to the importance of photographs to the now-dispersed family.





After discussing these albums in his office, Ganesh took me into his home next door to reveal a vast Photoshopped panorama in which that dispersed family were photographically reunited, the centripetal potential of montage counterpointing the centrifugal destruction of the album we had just seen.





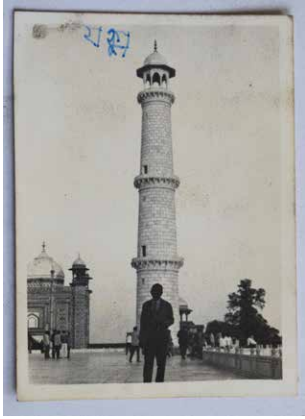
In the holy city of Janakpur, the Zonal Educational Commissioner, Ramnarayan Prasad Mandal, shared his huge collection of images. The prevalence of transistor radios in group portraits was striking and many of the images in his collection displayed his concern with mortality and temporality. His concern was visibly marked through the idiosyncratic presence of an ink cross applied to figures in photographs who had subsequently died. In many images most, and sometimes all, the figures were marked by crosses.







Among his numerous old photographs was a landscape format image of six pilgrims carrying *gangajal* (water from the Ganges). Ramnarayan was one of the participants, carrying two clay pots filled with water to Baba Baidyanathdham in what is now Jharkhand in India. Water is collected from an auspicious northward-flowing stretch of the Ganges and taken to the temple to give *abhishek* to the shivaling there. Four of the group had since died and these are all marked with red crosses on the photograph. Images which provide the opportunity to document and mark the border between life and death map only one possible photographic direction: analogue montage and Photoshop also facilitate a reverse flow in which the living and dead, the near and the distant, can be made co-present.



Photography is entangled in the future in complex and mysterious ways. This was demonstrated memorably one evening in 2019 in Janakpur, the pilgrimage town near the Nepal-India border. A late evening rendezvous in the hope of seeing exciting photographs started poorly with a stack of new albums decorated with designs intended to appeal to children. One small album was placed on top of the pile, its first few pages containing the usual deteriorating colour prints whose rounded edges marked them as products of the 1980s. I flipped desultorily through it, trying to look appreciative of the gracious hospitality that was about to culminate in the presentation of an elaborate meal. Then, suddenly, a page fell open revealing three older, gorgeous images. These were splendid examples of the studio photographer's craft, and they would turn out to be the work of Indian photographers from Bhagalpur, and two further images, made visible when I turned the next page, made in studios in Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga.



However, I would soon discover that their visual remarkableness was as nothing when compared to the astonishing story that lay behind them. As I would rapidly learn, the five images depicted five sisters, four of them being the older siblings of my host. She recalled that she was twelve years old when her mother insisted that her picture be taken. The photograph showed an adolescent girl pictured from the waist up standing by a table on which stood a decorated flower vase. The girl's pose was dictated by the photographer (her right hand is draped over the edge of the table so as to display her watch) and she looks steadily at the camera betraying no sense of nervousness or uncertainty. This was rather surprising given the circumstances which my host went on to relate.



The photograph was made and distributed in order to advertise this young girl's availability for marriage. An astrologer had told her pregnant mother (who had five daughters and was desperately hoping for a baby boy) that the only sure way to get a son was to marry her daughter before she was older than twelve.

She would only meet the man whom she would wed as a result of this on their wedding day. He was a relaxed and amiable presence who had appeared briefly earlier in the evening of my visit wearing a vest turned turquoise by years of the application of Reckitt's Blue. I pressed his wife as to whether she any resentment towards her mother. She defended her insistently: after all, 16 days after her own marriage her mother had given birth to a son. The astrologer had been correct in his prediction.



Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:
Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on
<https://citizensofphotography.org>

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