#18

PhotoDemos Pamphlet Series
University College London
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Dalit Camera: Imagining Caste

Christopher Pinney

Sacred and Democratic Phones

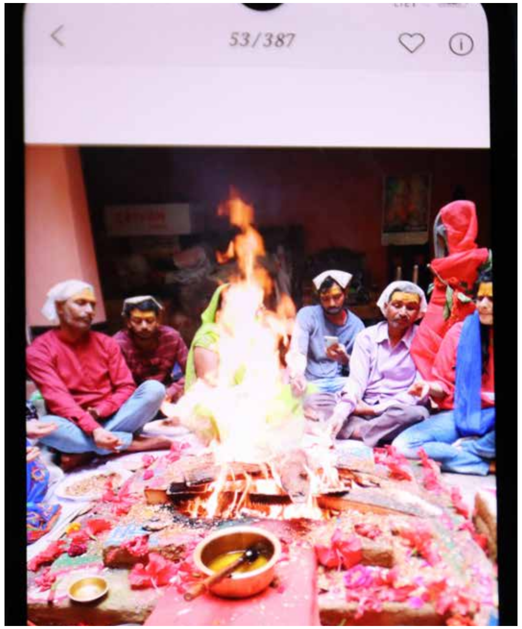
The afternoon of *sharad purnima* (29th October 2012): a young Jain villager receives a message from his Jain guru urging him to recite 324 *navkars* (complex Jain mantras) at 1:30am that coming night. The bulk SMS immediately connected a large community of believers in aspirational and devotional behavior. A few weeks later, this guru would visit his home and diagnose the *vastu* of his father’s *puja* room with a smartphone application.

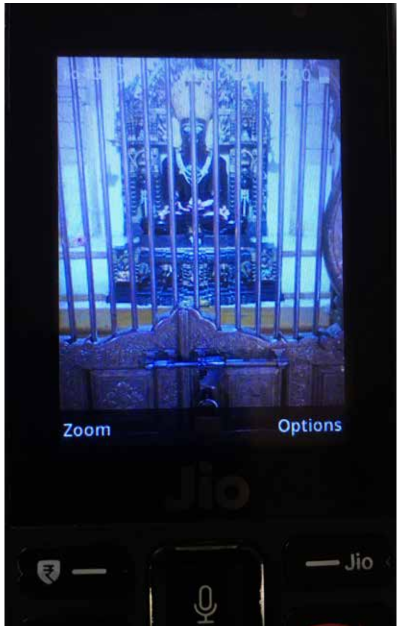
6th September 2013: a new experience – youngsters with phones jostling elders with prayer trays. The established mode of interaction (*darshan*, and/or *arati*) involving human eyes engaging the gaze of the deity is being displaced – literally edged to the margin – by the lens of the camera phone.

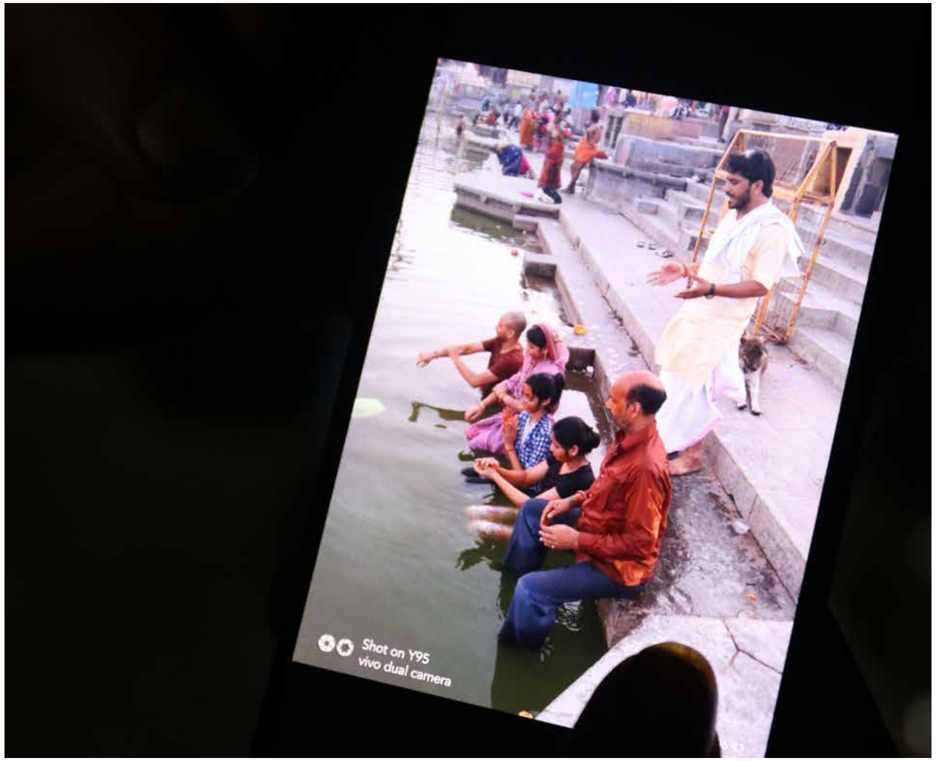
9th October 2018: Was passing the house of Jagdish Sharma (the pujari of the village Krishna temple) and was called inside by his younger son. Met his eldest son, Suresh Chandra, who was visiting from Ujjain, where he is an astrologer and *havan* expert at the Mahakaleshvar Temple and also on Ramghat by the River Kshipra. He showed me numerous images of *havans* on his phone, also a vast *Lakshmi puja* he had staged and ones of *puja* on the ghat that conveyed a strong sense of the drama and intimacy of these occasions. What impressed me most was the possibility of the phone as a vast, compressed archive of the sacred. There was nothing de-auraticizing about his device.

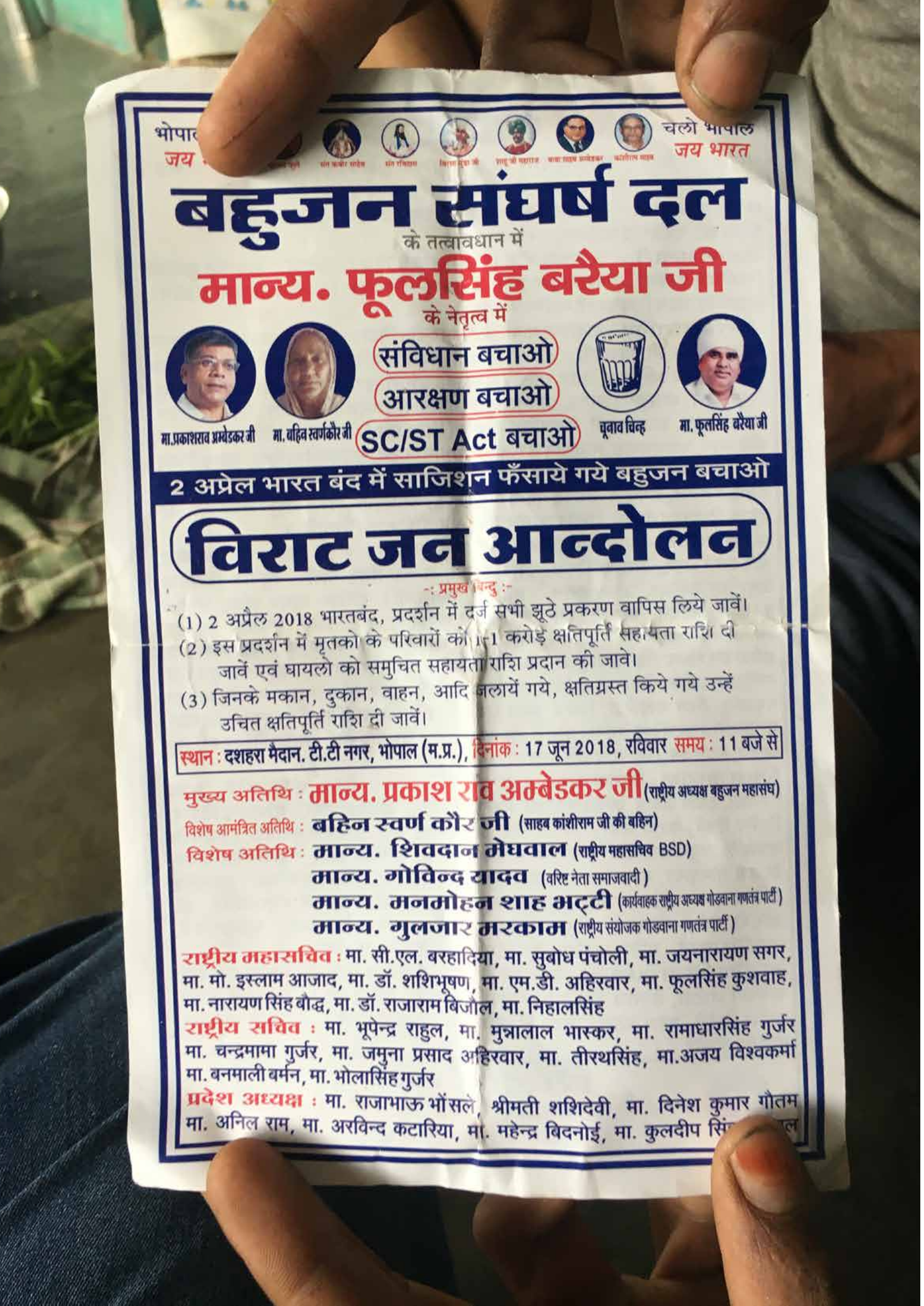
9th October 2018: a young Jain tells me he was at the pilgrimage site of Mohankheda with a mixed party of (largely non-Jain) villagers. The *chowkidar* of the temple told them not to take any photos but they did so anyway. They got a lot of good shots, which they viewed on preview. They then did their prayers and were about to post their images on WhatsApp when they realized that all the photos had gone: some supernatural force had removed them, leaving black voids admonishing inappropriate acts of theft by photography.

Then I'm turning a corner beyond Jagdish's house opposite the Krishna temple, heading towards the Ravidasi Dalit neighborhood when I hear a voice in the distance, Bollywoodized with reverb, speaking about the lessons of Dalit icons such as Jyotirao Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. Then, taking a left slightly uphill and then swinging right, I see the origin of this unexpected and novel soundtrack. Gajji is sitting on the spacious *mandap* that connects her house with the shrine to the Goddess Sitala (Goddess of smallpox) whose *pujari* is her father, Dhanna. Gajji is preparing *choli*, green beans, and simultaneously entertaining one of the extended family's children. I'm struck by the physical placement of the phone, not held close to Gajji but purposively positioned at some distance as though it were public property, broadcasting its message to any public that might chose to appear.









भोपा

जय

चलो भोपाल

जय भारत

बहुजन संघर्ष दल

के तत्वावधान में

मान्य. फूलसिंह बरैया जी

के नेतृत्व में

संविधान बचाओ

आरक्षण बचाओ

SC/ST Act बचाओ

मा.प्रकाशराव अम्बेडकर जी

मा. बहिन स्वर्णकौर जी

चूनाव चिन्ह

मा. फूलसिंह बरैया जी

2 अप्रेल भारत बंद में साजिशन फँसाये गये बहुजन बचाओ

विराट जन आन्दोलन

-: प्रमुख बिन्दु :-

(1) 2 अप्रैल 2018 भारतबंद, प्रदर्शन में दर्ज सभी झूठे प्रकरण वापिस लिये जावें।

(2) इस प्रदर्शन में मृतको के परिवारों को 1 करोड़ क्षतिपूर्ति सहायता राशि दी जावें एवं घायलो को समुचित सहायता राशि प्रदान की जावे।

(3) जिनके मकान, दुकान, वाहन, आदि जलायें गये, क्षतिग्रस्त किये गये उन्हें उचित क्षतिपूर्ति राशि दी जावें।

स्थान : दशहरा मैदान. टी.टी नगर, भोपाल (म.प्र.), दिनांक : 17 जून 2018, रविवार समय : 11 बजे से

मुख्य अतिथि : **मान्य. प्रकाश राव अम्बेडकर जी** (राष्ट्रीय अध्यक्ष बहुजन महासंघ)

विशेष आमंत्रित अतिथि : **बहिन स्वर्ण कौर जी** (साहब कांशीराम जी की बहिन)

विशेष अतिथि : **मान्य. शिवदान मेघवाल** (राष्ट्रीय महासचिव BSD)
मान्य. गोविन्द यादव (वरिष्ट नेता समाजवादी)
मान्य. मनमोहन शाह भट्टी (कार्यवाहक राष्ट्रीय अध्यक्ष गोंडवाना गणतंत्र पार्टी)
मान्य. गुलजार मरकाम (राष्ट्रीय संयोजक गोंडवाना गणतंत्र पार्टी)

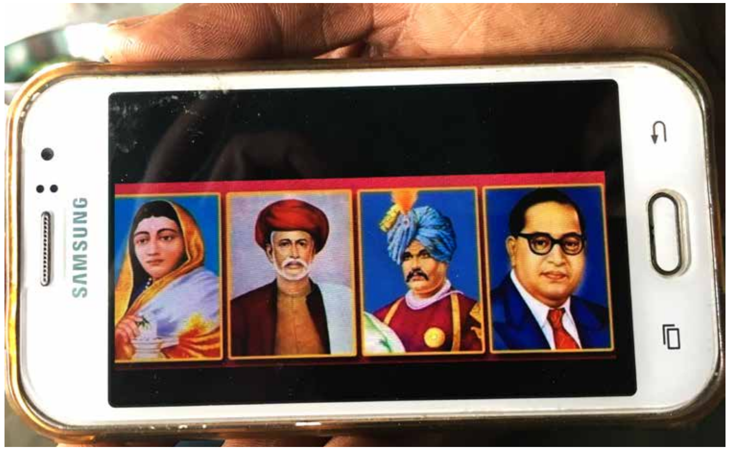
राष्ट्रीय महासचिव : मा. सी.एल. बरहादिया, मा. सुबोध पंचोली, मा. जयनारायण सगर, मा. मो. इस्लाम आजाद, मा. डॉ. शशिभूषण, मा. एम.डी. अहिरवार, मा. फूलसिंह कुशवाह, मा. नारायण सिंह बौद्ध, मा. डॉ. राजाराम बिजौल, मा. निहालसिंह

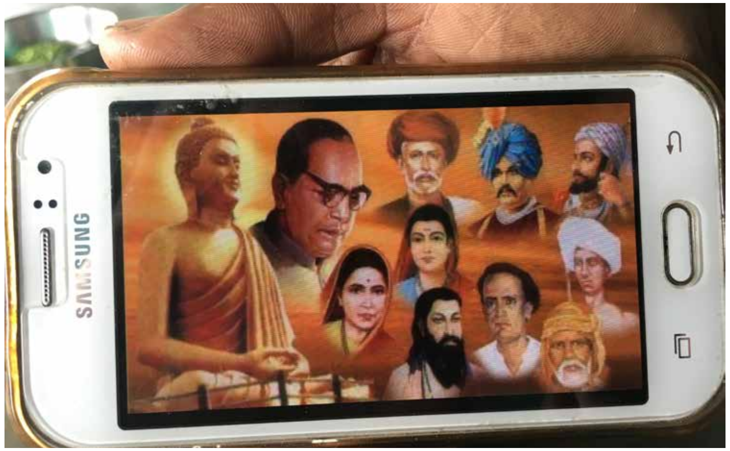
राष्ट्रीय सचिव : मा. भूपेन्द्र राहुल, मा. मुन्नालाल भास्कर, मा. रामाधारसिंह गुर्जर मा. चन्द्रमामा गुर्जर, मा. जमुना प्रसाद अहिरवार, मा. तीरथसिंह, मा.अजय विश्वकर्मा मा. बनमाली बर्मन, मा. भोलासिंह गुर्जर

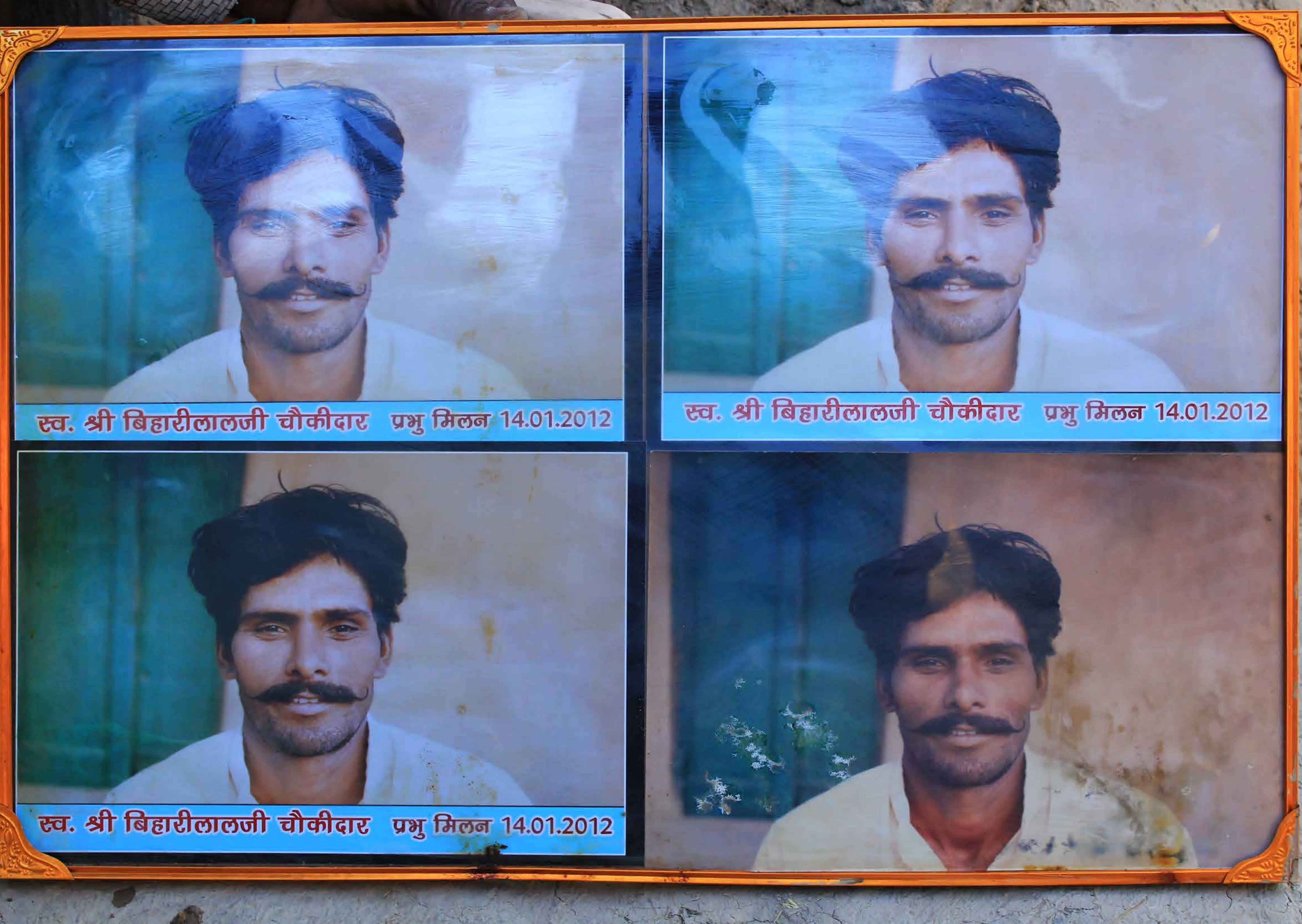
प्रदेश अध्यक्ष : मा. राजाभाऊ भोंसले, श्रीमती शशिदेवी, मा. दिनेश कुमार गौतम मा. अनिल राम, मा. अरविन्द कटारिया, मा. महेन्द्र बिदनोई, मा. कुलदीप सिं[illegible]ल

It transpires that the lecture is one of many on Dalit history that are shared between members of a village Ravidasi WhatsApp group. The lectures present a Dalit perspective on world history. Accompanying visuals illustrate key figures such as Savitribai Phule, Jyotirao Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and of course Ambedkar himself.

The two ends of the *mandap* – with the heavily controlled Sitala shrine at one end – cloaked and usually gated, and the open proclamations from the phone at the other – seemed to exemplify the Benjaminian spectrum between the cultic and the exhibitional. The mobile phone and WhatsApp lecture map a new space in the rolling frontier of the *sarvajanik*, although the potential 'political public' announced by Gajji's phone is quite different from the hegemonic Hinduizing *sarvajanik* strategy described by Kajri Jain (2021:85-87, 89-99) for these phone lectures address a specifically Dalit public.



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Dalit Camera

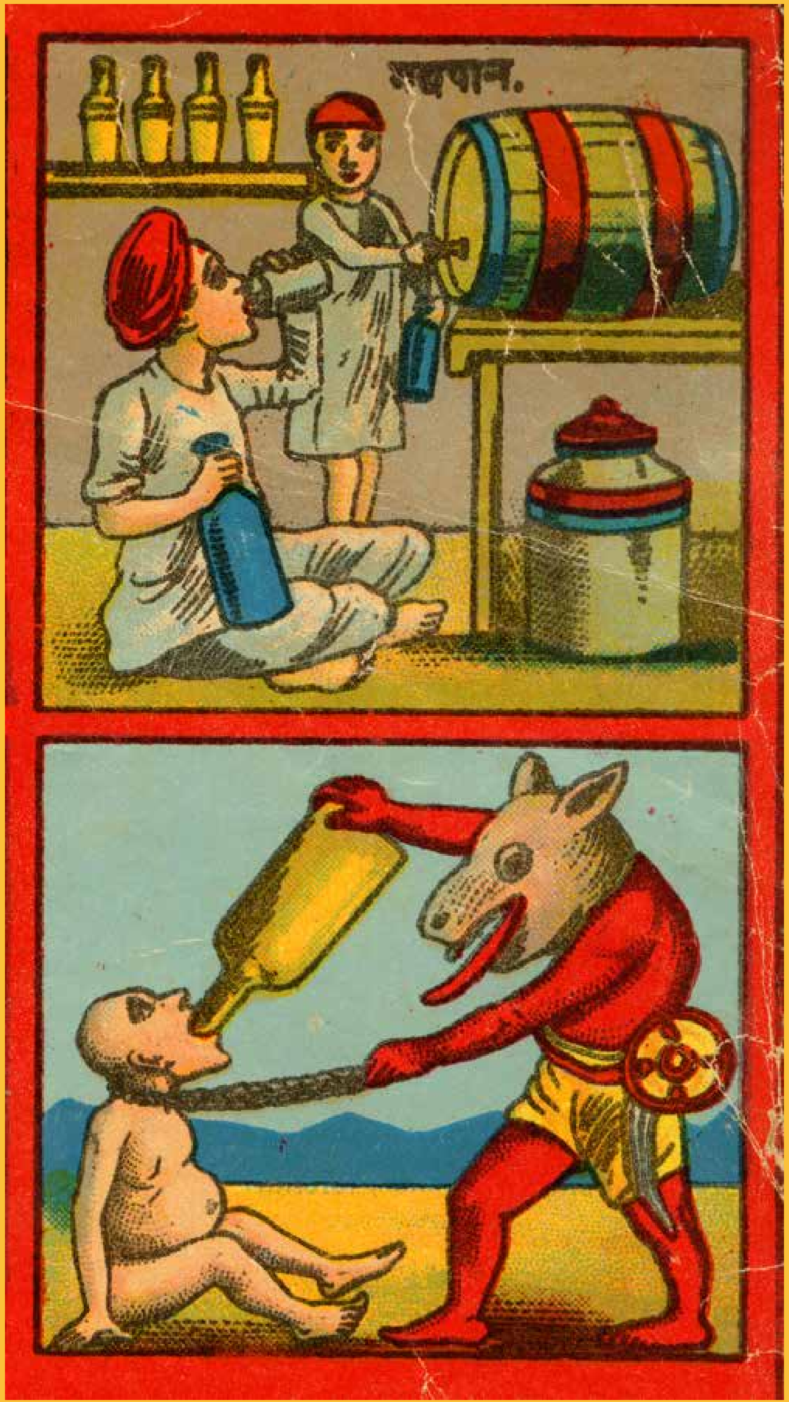
Benjamin's passing allusion in the *Work of Art* essay concerning the parallel emergence of both photography and socialism is developed more fully in his arguments concerning the sense of sameness that photography engenders. His provocations set the stage for Ariella Azoulay's even bolder claim that photography offers a form of citizenship in advance of ordinary politics (Azoulay 2008: 37 & 117).

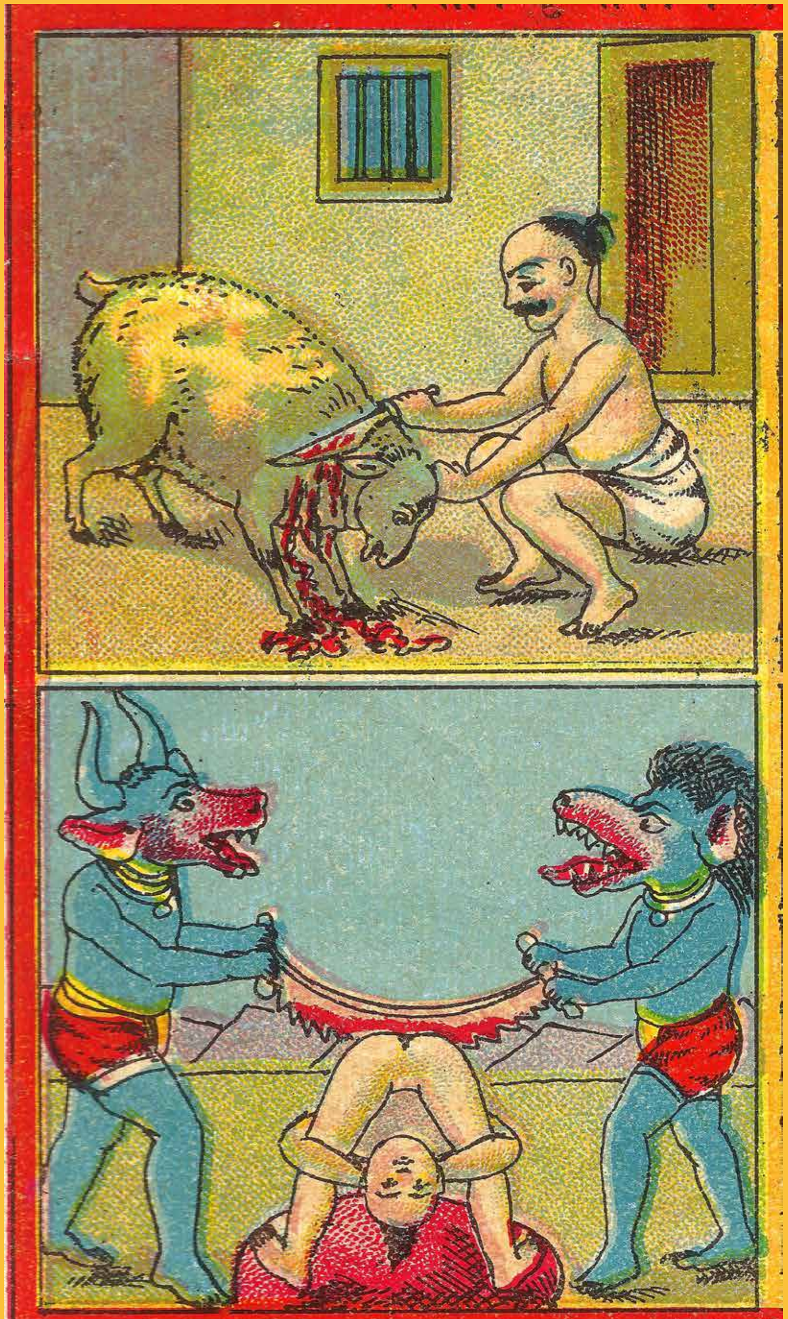
The modalities of Dalit photographic practice are several. It involves straightforward claims to visibility as in the self-photography with mobiles in the halls of Ambedkar Park in Lucknow. This monumental declaration of the indestructability of Dalit presence offers several huge bronze sculptures of Ambedkar, his wife, and the later Dalit politicians Kanshiram, and Mayawati situated inside vast Buddhistic *stupas*. Based on photographs of these individuals, they are in turn photographed as objects of pilgrims' devotion and serve as declarations of presence and persistence.

But the ontology of the visual that commits it to record everything 'positively in a certain shape', and photography's affirmation of this offers further, heightened, possibilities for advancing political claims through documentation by the camera. We should be in no doubt that Dalits are stigmatized by aspects of demotic visual culture when through the 'two-step of language' (Krauss 1986:105-07) it is able to negate. Note that this overturning of the positivity of the visual involves the conjunction of two or more images in syntagmatic concatenation. One of the genres of popular imagery through which Dalit life worlds are vilified is Karni Bharni, which depict the 'sinful' deeds and their punishment in hell. The Ravi Udaya Press image titled Yampuri no. 2 c. 1915 (see Pinney 2018:20) contains a whole series of paired images of deeds and their 'fruits' (*phal*). On the left, in the center of the ensemble is a pairing of images titled *Mendha bagh ka phal* (the fruit of killing a ram). The top vignette shows a squatting male severing the neck of a large ram and the image below shows the consequences of this action in hell: the perpetrator is shown upside down and being sawn in half by two *rakshas*, the devilish assistants of Yam, the lord of the dead. Trapped within the syntagmatic duality of deed and punishment, there is little room for doubt that the viewer is expected to negatively respond to the initial action. The clear message of the pairing is that killing animals is wrong. In this sense the negation offered here mirrors that of 'non-vegetarian' in which the positive valency of 'vegetarian' is affirmed by its negation.

The most explicit critique of those everyday codes which are also championed by *karni bharni* images is advanced by the contemporary Dalit activist and academic Kancha Ilaiah. In his provocatively titled book *Post-Hindu India* Ilaiah argues on behalf of what he calls 'meatarianism' against the vegetarianism of high caste Hinduism. Dalit-Bahujan (the oppressed and marginalized) are the 'mothers' of human food culture, Ilaiah argues, and developed a complex nutritional science involving the consumption of all kinds of animal flesh. 'Brahmanism', however, 'negated all such food values and has spread hegemonic propaganda that only vegetarianism is good for society. Vegetarianism has killed the rational element in their beings, since it is not the food of individual choice, but that of cultural conditioning' (2009:9). These moral codes which *karni bharni* images proclaim are, for Ilaiah, reflections of recent politically driven campaigns associated with Brahmanism and Gandhism which negated Dalit-Bahujan lifeworlds and their celebration of meat and alcohol. These political projects conscripted religion and sought to impose a single moral code. Whereas Dalit-Bahujan did 'not interfere with the eating and drinking habits of the people, Hinduism considers the consumption of liquor as being against divine dispensation. Hindu nationalism has judged intoxicating drinks as demonic. Brahmanical habits, particularly those of Gandhi, were projected as being representative of the Hindu gods and goddesses' (2009:11).

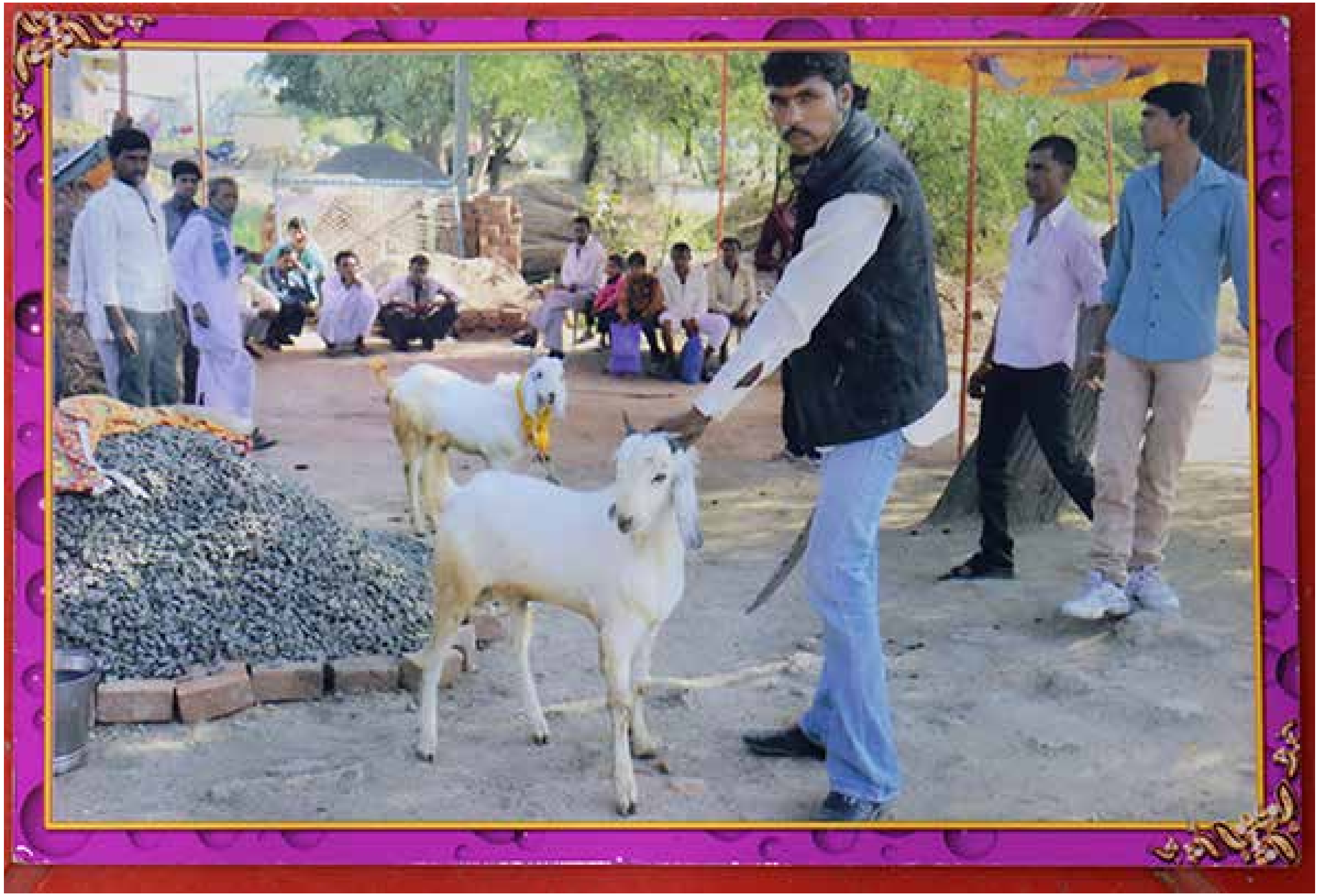
Ilaiah's celebration of meatarianism (*mamsaharam*) resonates with much ethnographic reportage that underlines the extent to which Dalit cosmologies oppose those of higher castes. If the world for higher castes is frequently conceptualized as vulnerable to destabilizing heat, an excess of *tamsik guna* (whose chief agents are flesh and liquor), for Dalits this same heat is viewed as a source of revitalizing energy, a necessary source of sustenance for exploited laboring bodies (see Pinney 1999).





मेंढा वधका फल.

Meatarianism, as a concept, frees itself from the burden of being the other of something that is more positively evaluated ('vegetarianism' which is affirmed, and the 'non-' which 'others' it). Meatarianism claims its own self-presence. In this respect we might see it as echoing the presence of the photograph, which is ontologically destined to affirm the veracity of whatever appears in its frame. Consider in this context a photograph of a man in a village setting preparing to sacrifice two goats. Taken by fellow caste members, this image was brought to a Nagda studio for Photoshopping and records an about to occur *balidan* (sacrifice), very likely held on the occasion of one of the twice yearly Nine Nights of the Goddess festival. Although the idiom is sacrificial and the goat is offered as a gift to the Goddess, its meat is shared out among caste members afterwards and is eaten. The confident and unapologetic stance of the man wielding the sword and, his evident pause in what is also clearly a performance for the camera, are indicative of the liberatory potential of photography. Unlike the syntagmatic chains of other popular media, it can only present what is, 'positively in a certain shape'. The camera is fated to present Dalit practices as 'meatarian' rather than 'non-vegetarian'.



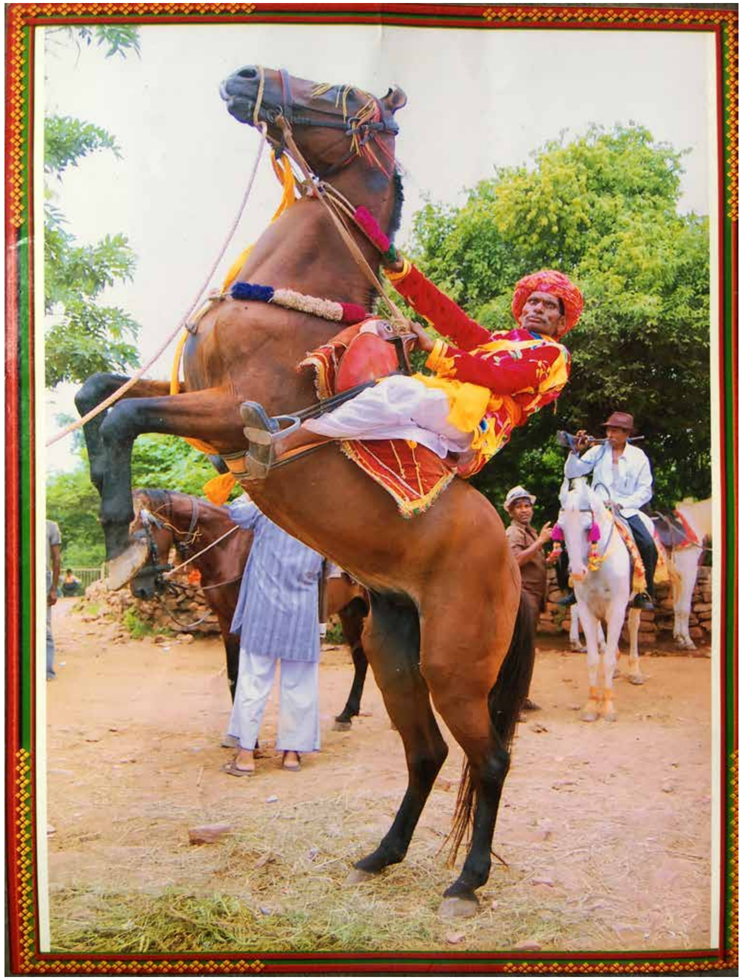
Political Punctum

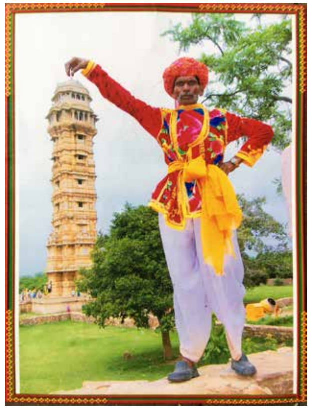
Barthes famously advanced the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*. The former he defined as an 'average effect', a general commitment 'without special acuity' (1981:26). The latter punctures or pierces this general regime. The *punctum* is a 'wound', a 'sting', 'which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (1981:27).

The *studium* in photographs of Ambaram, a rural Dalit, in front of Chittor's Tower of Victory and astride a horse is clear. Barthes wrote that 'to recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions' and in this case they involve dramatizing the visit of largely rural customers to the fort at Chittorgarh, in Rajasthan. The fifteenth-century Tower of Victory (*Vijay Stambh*) visible in the background of one is the central attraction in the fort and celebrates the victory of Rana Kumbha over the Malwa and Gujarat sultanates. The gesture, through which Ambaram appears to be suspending the edifice aloft, encouraged by many photographers at tourist sites, plays with photography's illusionistic potential to displace scale. The horse also alludes to a legendary Rajput martial prowess, this further resonating with the significance of the site.

The *punctum* was described by Barthes as a 'detail' whose 'mere presence changes my reading' so that 'I feel […] I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value' (1981:42). The *punctum* is 'what I add to the photograph and *what is nevertheless already there*' (1981:55 italics in original). What is already there in the photograph of Ambaram on a horse but what I add to the image is his grimace, his startled and accusatory look. Perhaps it is simply the result of the horse suddenly rearing but I recognize the look from my many interactions with him. I recognize it as the grimace of a glimpsed freedom after years of repression, a mix of horror and excitement, not a simple grasping of the future but a kind of astonished fear of its possibilities.

It is also a detail that pierces me because the photograph brings memories of a conversation with Sidhu, an articulate young Dalit. He once catalogued the oppression that village Dalits experienced at the hands of Rajputs, that is by members of the very caste whose past

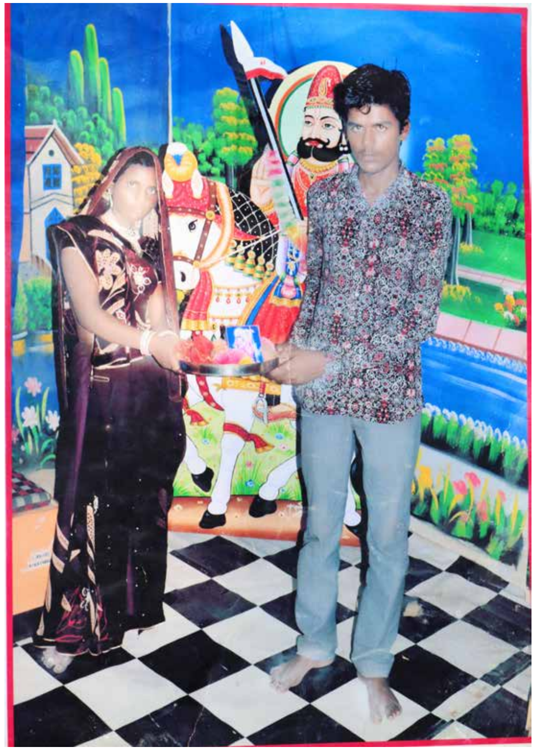


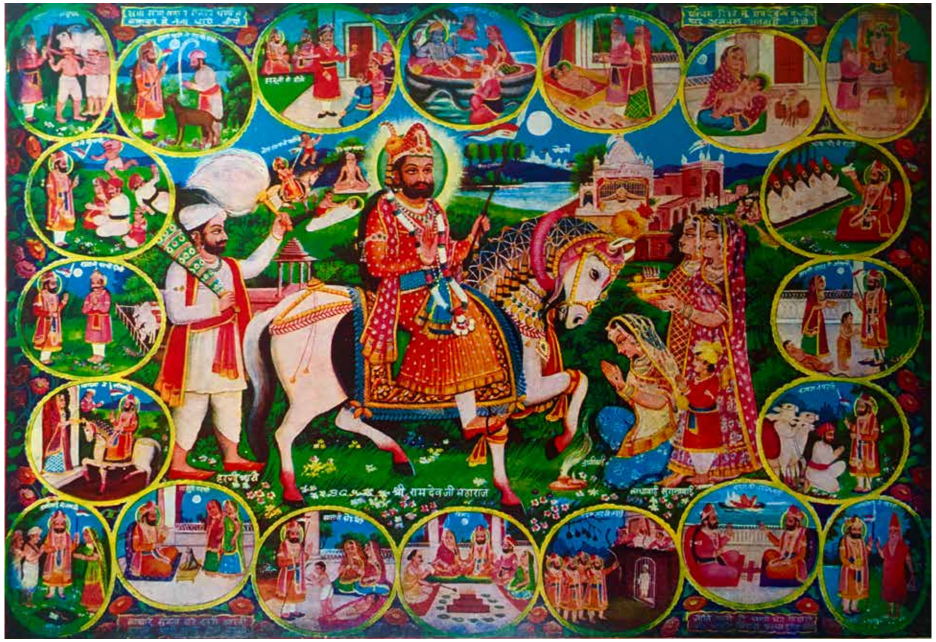


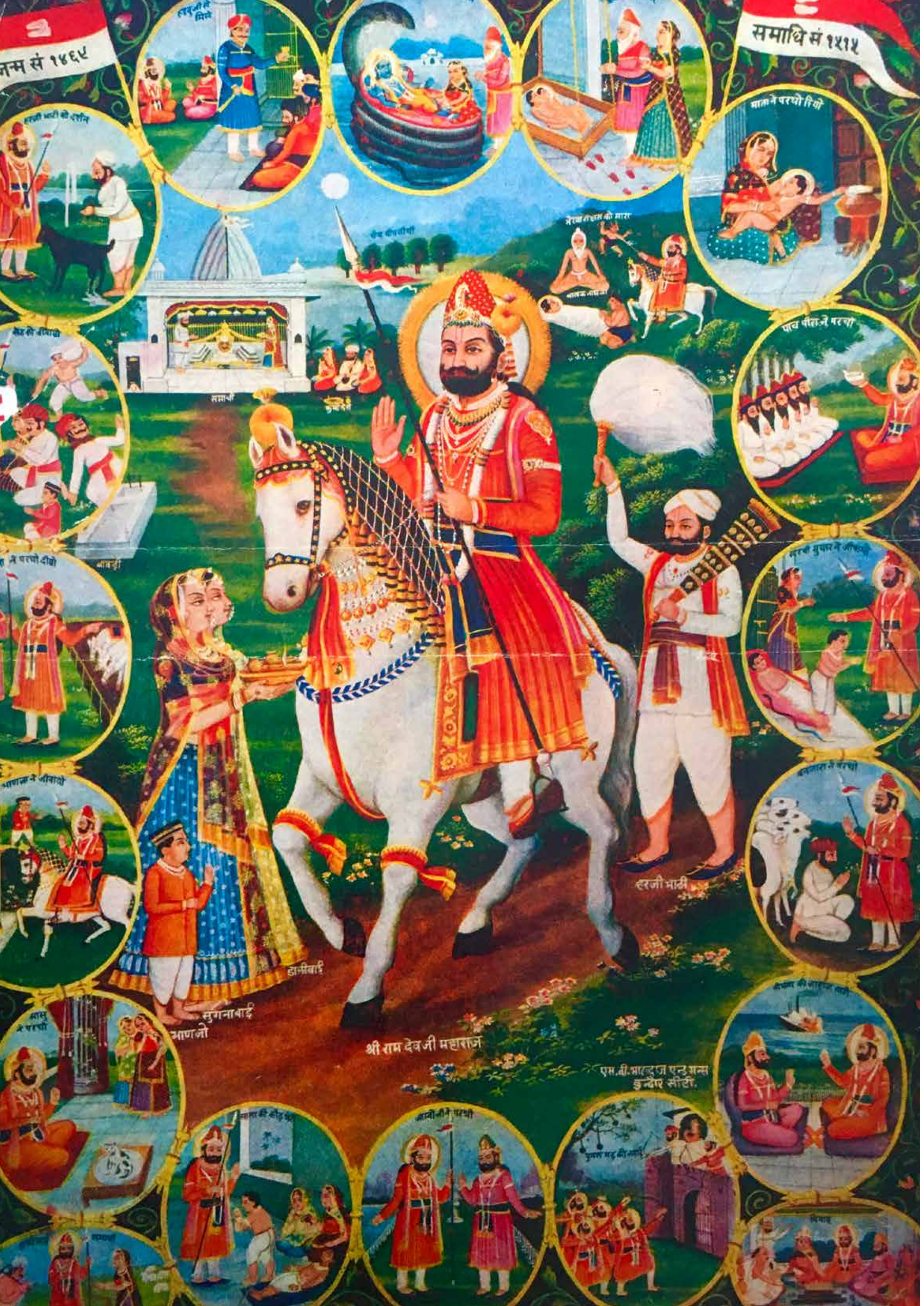
heroics are celebrated at Chittor. They smashed *matkas* (clay water pots) if Dalits had touched them, and imposed restrictions on entering temples. The oppression was deeply felt because of its symbolic power and prohibitions: ‘if we’re going in a *baraat* (groom’s wedding party) they say you can’t go on a horse because you’re *nich jati* (low caste). You can go on foot or on a tractor but not on a horse…They’ll fight us and try and beat us if we go on a horse’

One of the photographs whose *punctum* fascinates Barthes is G.W. Wilson’s image of Queen Victoria on a horse. The *studium*, he argues can be found in the long skirt ‘draping the entire animal’ (1981:57) and the *punctum* in the kilted groom holding the horse’s bridle. The groom clearly is there ‘to supervise the horse’s behavior’ pointing to an unruliness of the beyond: ‘what if the horse suddenly began to rear?’ Barthes asks (1981:57). The image fascinates Barthes because it suggests the possibility of the horse *emerging*, of it suddenly leaving its frame to enter the off-screen space beyond. Ambaram’s rearing horse illustrates the political, power of such sudden movement.

Dalit political aspiration has another equine manifestation that is also entangled with photography. Baba Ramdev Pir, was a medieval Rajasthani renouncer king. Ambaram visited Chittor because it was en route to Ramdevra, in the far west, his pilgrimage to honour Ramdev being the reason for his journey. Other Dalit communities are also eager pilgrims: a young Bagdi couple showed me several images taken inside studios in Ramdevra, the site of Ramdev’s *samadhi*. Ramdev Maharaj appears in the painted backdrop flanked by his faithful devotees Dhulibai and Harji Bhatti. Within the securely framed space of the studio there is little chance of the horse bolting, of it rearing upwards, or escaping into the off-screen ‘blindfield’. Ramdev’s *parcha* prefigure the proofs of photography: in these pilgrimage mementos the gesture comes full circle as photography delivers proofs of having encountered Ramdevji.



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भाणजो
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एम.बी.भारद्वाज एन्ड सन्स
इन्दौर सीटी.

SUPER MASTER
BLENDERS PRIDE
SUPER MASTER RUM
IMPERIAL BLUE

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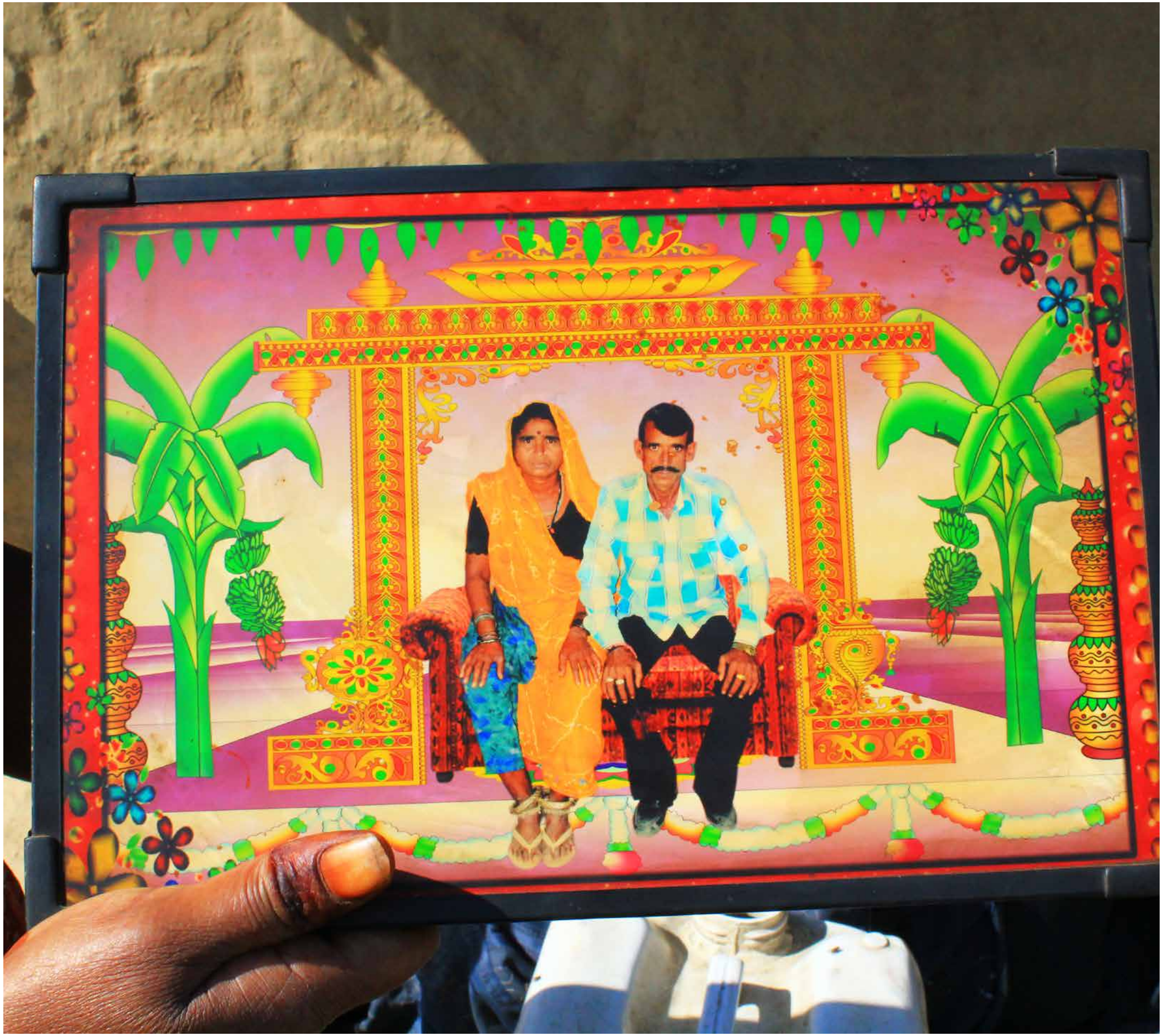

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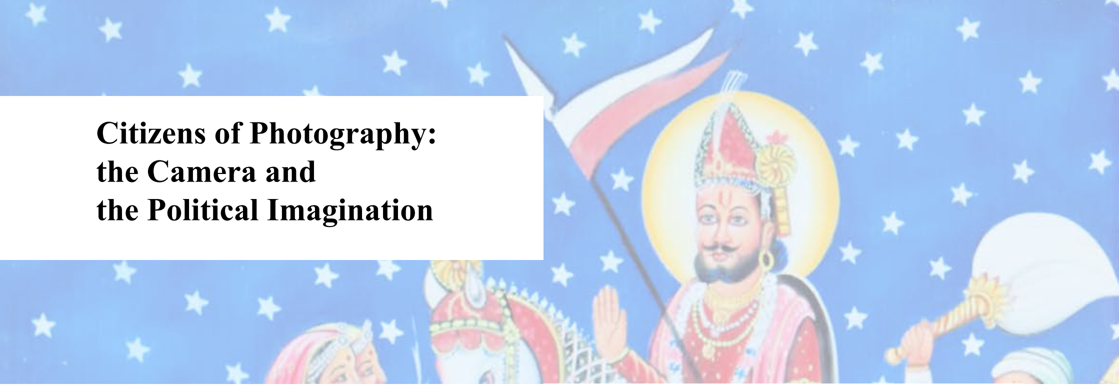


Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

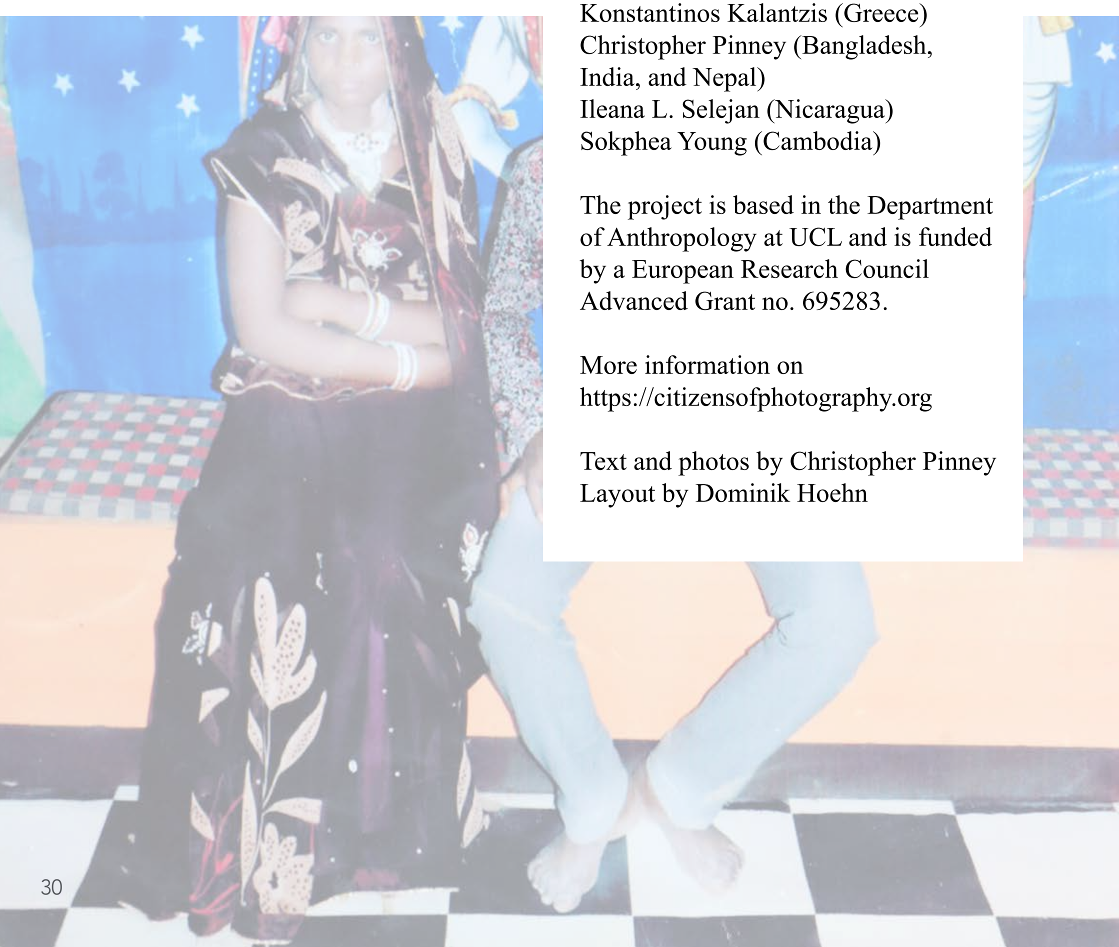
The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

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

Text and photos by Christopher Pinney
Layout by Dominik Hoehn