

## Archeology of Nostalgia: Recent Social History of Pakistani People through Photographs

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A photograph, the moment it is taken, becomes archival. It becomes a proof of something which once existed in time. It gives permanence to remembrance of people and things. Photographers are visual anthropologists, biographers and historians of an era. With image bricks they construct an archeology of nostalgia which also keeps a chronological record of happenings of that period. Andre Bazin, a French film theorist, said that photography saves time from its proper corruption. To my understanding, nothing can be more spiteful than to allow an epoch to pass without credible visual references. Any deliberate apathy towards visual recording of a period makes existing chronological and referential data gravely treacherous and untrustworthy.

Question of reliability of modern day research, since the beginning of 20th century, took several exciting twists with novel insights and intriguing exploration of diverse cultures through the lens of a camera. This discovery of photographic evidence also unleashed a new perspective on modern history. As photographs became a substitute for seeing the real thing; availability of images (as secondary verification to primary documents) related to themes of anthropology, history and scientific fields strengthened the specificity of research. The 20th century academics extensively extended their reliance on photographic proof and consequently what we now call 'a culture of visual memory' flourished in full bloom.

History is not just about time, it is about people living in time. Photography encompasses both. Photographs are myriad reflections of everyday realities which continuously emerge and expire like bubbles between a million momentary splits on the time scale. Using a camera for documenting fleeting events and the people associated with them is a subtle task. Inclusion of images merely for archival necessity brings collective past into the present and maps temporal gaps with convincing visual detail. Photography seizes the present and glorifies it as the past. This tricky nature of a photograph contributes to liberate present time

from its captivity and transcends its relevance to events of the past and the future. Camera documents crucifixion of the present and its resurrection in a photograph, thus, establishes its eternalness as a reference image.

Visual history of a nation is not just a happy coincidence of assorted photographs but a solid reflection of its social behavior recorded in the form of images. The evolutionary history tells us about human motivations and collective communal conduct. Witnessing the recent past of Pakistani nation through the viewfinder of a camera reveals scores of cloaked details which hugely contribute in forming Pakistan's larger image as a country. The first images which we have of this country since are a record of blood-spattered chaos recorded by Margaret Bourke-White (Life Magazine photographer, who was commissioned to photograph the Independence of India and Pakistan from British rule in 1947). The graphic detail of violence in those images is shocking. However, a great deal of past seven decades (noticeably marred by the nation's eternal dilemmas ranging from conflicts between religion and culture to meek attempts for toppling English language's grasp as an official language and establishing Urdu as *lingua franca*) is also equally distressing on a different level. Looking at a rapidly swelling population with its diverse cultural motifs and roots flowing back to over five thousand years, it is an astonishing observation that how swiftly somewhere in the flow of history the descendants of Indus Valley Civilization took up weapons (as an excuse to extinguish the 'Other') whereas their ancestors left no proof of making armaments throughout several hundred years even during the prime of world's oldest civilization. A series of images labeled "Guns N Roses" shows Pakistani youth's infatuation with toy guns (Figure 1). Even today, more shocking is the fact that custodians of an extraordinary richness of folk wisdom in literature (both in Urdu and regional languages) have become confined to assorted groups with an appalling degree of intellectual drought. Recent communal behavior reflects patterns set by seven decades of conditioned social growth and arrested development. Years of denial, grave mistakes and unforgivable alibis rendered nothing but a motley crew with a dazed vision of independence, some glimpses of which can be seen in the accompanying images (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8).



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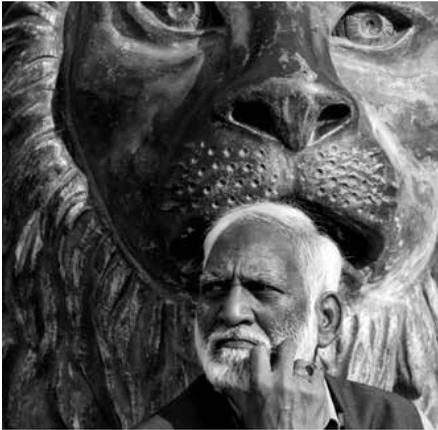
Figure 1 (L)

“Guns N Roses – Armed violence on the rise”. Photograph by Umair Ghani

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Figure 2 (R)

“Living a broken dream”. Photograph by Umair Ghani



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Figure 3 (L)

“Untitled”. Photograph by Umair Ghani

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Figure 4 (R)

“Celebrating foreign rule”. Photograph by Umair Ghani



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Figure 5 (L)

“Between saints and sinners”. Photograph by Umair Ghani

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Figure 6 (R)

“A male dominant society”. Photograph by Umair Ghani

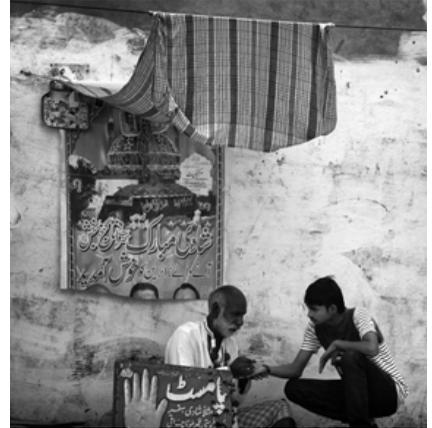
Figure 7 (L)

“Voice of the masses”.  
Photograph by  
Umair Ghani



Figure 8 (R)

“Seeking good  
fortunes on  
footpaths”.  
Photograph by  
Umair Ghani



Photographs shown with this commentary are not a direct representation of injustices or hopelessness experienced by present day Pakistani society but these are a credible evidence of 21st century slavery sheathed in grave bankruptcy of thought and ideology. Massive perplexing conducts point to the fact that somehow those at the helm of affairs need to maintain the status quo. Such apathetic trends shown in these photographs are allowed to thrive on purpose. Social interaction within various ethnic groups remained suspended sometimes as an excuse for “principle of necessity” and sometimes merely as a prerequisite to run domestic affairs without being answerable to public. These images disclose that multitudes of people have become enslaved to various agendas. Dazed by many opium-coated ideologies (borrowed and improvised for urgent need) and by subsequent bogus pledges and fake promises of prosperity, the people of Pakistan eventually get convinced that whatever they possess is not for themselves but for the rightful loot and plunder of the ruling mafias. They only add up as digits in a dubious electoral count, a bargain in politics of poverty or a slogan for a glorious destiny which will never be their own. The images supporting this article are indicators of widespread social confusion which is spurred by intentionally unchecked factors highlighting the current social conduct of Pakistani people.

The camera becomes political when photographers begin to operate as witnesses. Photographic image has the power to stir the social conscience and mobilize masses. It stares back with intent. It ignites action, demands attention and raises questions. Most of the photographers who start taking pictures casually in the beginning, in due course begin to investigate the actual nature of those photographs. People who shoot landscape and culture eventually shift focus to serious self initiated probes like ‘what is happening to these cultures and societies now and how people inhabiting those places are being treated?’ In this context, every photographer at some point becomes an activist. The camera assists this function in an extraordinary fashion and captures, arrests,

seizes, freezes and reveals the reality of its time. It unsettles monarchy and generates discontent in the echelons of power. It is humanity's greatest challenge to unjust supremacy and totalitarian control.

Using a camera for documenting sensitive social aspects demands immense experience, perception, compassionate eye and above all the unflinching ability to render selective focus on elements which prosper beneath the enriching magnetism of a society or culture. To ensure a promising degree of truthfulness of documentation, a photographer has to be an insider from that culture at best or needs to find a native as an escort. Failure to establish intimate acquaintance with the "subject" and not to be able to see "objective truth" from a close range may result in unpardonable distortion of reality. A common trap for a photographer's intrusive eye is that all cultures often appear vibrant, dazzling and enormously spell binding on the surface and their art and architecture may seem enchanting, captivating and enthralling. Exposure to this exotic experience of reaching out to unfamiliar strata in a society through the viewfinder of a camera often shadows appropriate knowledge and understanding which can end up in an utterly disappointing body of work. Despite all the fascinating shimmer on the surface; cultures tend to guard their secrets under a thin veneer of glitzy cultural facade. An American photographer Diane Arbus said, "A photograph is a secret about a secret". The covert nature of a photograph explains the dilemma of documenting diversity of countless different communities existing within the greater span of multicultural landscape in a country like Pakistan.

A further enormous obstacle in documenting social history in form of images in Pakistan is the strict privacy of minorities and marginalized communities. Social norms also pose a challenge as in many areas of the country the use of camera and photography is still considered strictly anti-Islamic. In that case, even for an insider with a camera may get to see only partial reality. Most of the time, despite their best efforts, photographers just manage to see the half truth or fuzzy facts. Like any underrated culture, a photograph of it may also hide as much as it reveals. Ethnic groups, minorities and marginalized people mask their uniqueness for the sake of survival. They tend to believe that they can thrive safely only when exist away from mainstream urban clusters to avoid cultural erosion which stems from unwanted interaction with the 'Other' culture. For example, pointing a camera to a group of people in Indus Kohistan was as unwelcoming as it was in several areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab under the pretext of photography being credited as *Haraam* (forbidden in Islam) and sometimes merely because they do not want to be seen by anyone who is culturally or racially different from them. On the contrary, snapping a picture without paying a monetary compensation in Kalash valleys is considered an act of disapproval but allowed with much relish when paid in advance. These varying extremes of visual documentation somehow affect the nature of photographs and claim of reality shown in them.

Quite often, out of inevitability of survival or unchecked interaction with dominant cultural groups, isolated ethnic populace discreetly merge into conventional thread of larger neighboring communities. This unanticipated erosion distorts the factual understanding of ethnic diversity and ironically, shaded by this blurring visor of muddy reality, the photographers also get deceived.

A photograph makes complex visual abstractions of a society comprehensible to us in the form of two dimensional documents. The eyes only see what the mind registers. In the absence of reliable photographic images, the journey into the heart of people and their reality fails to capture countless noteworthy details. "A picture speaks a thousand words", they say but due to its persuasive character, any picture is hardly a perfect premier on historical verification without a credible supplementary written or verbal account from its author. I believe that every journalistic or documentary photograph remains an inadequate proof of a situation without a carefully crafted accompanying statement which elaborates the camouflaged visual narrative in that picture. Most of the time, it is not the picture that makes the story but in fact it is the story that makes a picture. To accomplish authentic relevance of any pictorial chronicle to the people connected to it, a photographer must delve deeper into the study of a subject he/she intends to document. The images presented here solve a few riddles but give rise to more enigmas, the biggest of which is the eternal question, "when will the Pakistani nation begin its true journey out of the heart of its darkness?"

The nature of a photographic image can be argued. Photographs can be biased. They may be elusive as a mirage like life itself. However, with all the illusions, imperfections, chaos and amusement, they make us feel comfortable with ourselves as this is the only eye witness account we have. They arrest the flux of time and redeem the photographer. Every picture is a virtue for it performs some sort of redemptive function.

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