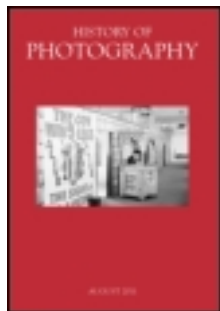


This article was downloaded by: [University of California, Berkeley]

On: 15 November 2011, At: 14:24

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



History of Photography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/thph20>

Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah

Laura Weinstein

Available online: 12 Feb 2010

To cite this article: Laura Weinstein (2010): Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah , History of Photography, 34:1, 2-16

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03087290903283627>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Exposing the *Zenana*: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in *Purdah*

Laura Weinstein

This project was made possible by the generous assistance of Princess Diya Kumari of Jaipur and Pankaj Sharma, Curator of the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, The City Palace, Jaipur.

This paper explores a group of photographic portraits taken by the Jaipur maharaja Ram Singh II of female inhabitants of his *zenana*. These largely unexplored portraits of upper-class Rajput women who lived in *purdah* inhabit a peculiar intermediate zone between orientalist 'harem' photography and Victorian studio portraiture, upsetting our expectations of both. In order to elucidate the unique character of these portraits, this paper sets them within the context of colonial and Rajput ideas about female roles in domestic space and norms of female representation. It argues that the portraits present the *zenana* as a sanitized and modernized domestic space and thereby defend this long-standing domestic institution from the critiques of late nineteenth-century social reform movements. Ultimately, Ram Singh's portraits of women in *purdah* are found to represent a staging of modernity in the service of tradition.

Keywords: *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II (r. 1835–1880), Abbas Ali and Mushkoor-ud-dowlah of Lucknow, Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896), photography – India, photography – Jaipur (India), representations of women, purdah, social reform – India*

Sometime during the 1860s and 1870s Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II – ruler of the princely state of Jaipur from 1835 to 1880 – took photographic portraits of women who lived in his palace's *zenana* (figure 1). The *zenana* section of a Rajput palace was a set of rooms, courtyards, terraces and other areas reserved exclusively for women.¹ Its female inhabitants lived there in *purdah*, unseen by all men except their husbands, close relatives and some servants. *Purdah* (Persian, meaning literally 'curtain') refers to the seclusion of women in the physical space of the *zenana*. To photograph such women was completely without precedent. In the long history of the visual arts in Rajasthan up to about 1860, portraits of Rajput women in *purdah* in any medium were virtually nonexistent. Ram Singh's photographic survey was therefore a boldly modern act, breaking decisively with long-standing norms of domesticity and representation.

The glass negatives that produced these remarkable portraits are now in the collection of the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum in Jaipur.² Although they have no labels, numbers or other markers to indicate who the photographer was, scholarly consensus holds that they were produced by the maharaja himself, who is known to have been an accomplished amateur photographer.³ Ram Singh was, it is reasoned, the only male who had both full access to the women of the *zenana* and the ability to produce photographs of them. The women of the photographs are not identified by name in any known source, but it is believed that they were inhabitants

1 – Rajput refers to a group of related Indian clans whose members share the same caste. Rajput dynasties dominated northern India from about 800 C.E. until they were defeated by the Mughal emperors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

2 – The over two thousand glass negatives in this collection have not been thoroughly catalogued, and so the exact number of images of women is not known. The photographic collection as a whole is discussed in Yaduendra Sahai and Ram Singh, *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur, the Photographer Prince*, Jaipur: Dr Durga Sahai Foundation 1996.

3 – Sahai asserts that Ram Singh was the first person to take photographs of unveiled women in India. Other references to Ram Singh II as the photographer of these images can be found in J. Bautze, *Interaction of Cultures: Indian and Western Painting, 1780–1910: The Ehrenfeld Collection*, Alexandria, Va.: Art Services International 1998, no. 49; Vidya Dehejia and Charles Allen, *India through the Lens: Photography 1840–1911*, Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Smithsonian Institution in association with Mapin Publishing Ahmedabad 2000, 228; B. N. Goswamy, 'Of Devotees and Elephant Fights: Some Notes on Subject Matter in Rajput and Mughal Painting', in *Life at Court: Art for India's Rulers, 16th–19th Centuries*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai, et al., Boston, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts 1985, xix.

Figure 1. Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'pāswan'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860–80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1436. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur.



of the *zenana*: elite women who, despite living in *purdah*, could not refuse to be photographed by their maharaja.

The timing of these portraits, this article will argue, is no coincidence. Ram Singh produced them during a period of great interest in and concern about the condition of Indian women in *purdah* among educated Indians, colonial administrators, British feminists and other communities of the Raj. By forging a new mode of representation of courtly women as decent, dignified individuals, these photographs constitute a pictorial engagement with this widespread discourse and a refutation of a common sentiment of the period: the notion that women in *purdah* were idle, sexually deviant and oppressed. Paradoxically, in this defence of Rajput domestic tradition and the institution of the *zenana*, Ram Singh violated its most basic principle: the invisibility of its inhabitants.

Purdah, norms of visibility and representations of women in Rajput society

In nineteenth-century households of Rajput rulers like Ram Singh, the rules of *purdah* were strictly observed.⁴ It is difficult to say when *purdah* began in India, as its origins are obscure and complex. It is clear, however, that it was firmly in place within Rajput society by the fifteenth century, and that it was most frequently practised among the wealthy and upper class segments of society, although many middle class families observed *purdah* as well. It was, therefore, associated with high status. For this reason and others, as Meredith Borthwick has written, 'even marginal alterations to strict *purdah* touched off reverberations of panic throughout Hindu society'.⁵

In Rajput society, the institution of *purdah* regulated women's interactions with their husbands and with members of their husbands' households, as well as with outsiders. One goal was to minimise the chance that the bond between husband and

4 – Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications 1995. For information on *purdah* in South Asia more generally, see Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault, *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, 1st ed., Delhi: Chanakya Publications 1982.

5 – Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984, 229.

wife would grow so strong that it would become a threat to the interests of other members of the family. Another was to ensure that new wives respected the authority of more senior members of the *zenana*. Writ large, *purdah* customs among the Rajputs constituted a complex set of rules used to demarcate authority and status and regulate interaction between wives and others (both outsiders and insiders).

Although *purdah* conventions varied in different communities, common to all is that many of the practices have to do with the visibility of women. Women in *purdah* were, for example, expected to cover their faces when in the presence of any men other than their husbands, immediate relatives and servants. In some homes a woman might also cover her face in the presence of her husband and mother-in-law. The end of the *sari* could be pulled down over a woman's face, or a floor length curtain could be drawn between male and female participants in a conversation. When travelling, a woman in *purdah* might ride in a covered palanquin in order to avoid being seen. Women's presence might be felt, and in fact women in upper class *zenanas* often had considerable political power, but they would rarely be seen.⁶

Not surprisingly, representations of women in Rajput art before the colonial period reflect the limited visibility of female subjects.⁷ Although portraiture had constituted a large portion of paintings produced in Rajput courts since the mid seventeenth century, the subjects of these portraits were always male. Portraits of specific women are nearly unknown.⁸ Instead, artists created innumerable idealized representations of women based on a single model: pale skin and dark hair, large eyes, a narrow waist and high round breasts (figure 2). This model, with slight variations, was used for centuries to depict dancers, musicians, attendants or queens.⁹ This mode of representation mirrored and perhaps even reinforced the prevailing social system in which upper class women were ubiquitous but remote.¹⁰

Such representations of women were still the norm in Jaipur during the 1860s, when Ram Singh was active in his photography studio. A painting once in the Ehrenfeld Collection is said to depict one of Ram Singh's courtesans, and thus constitutes a painted analogue to the photographs he took of them (figure 3).¹¹ Made by a Jaipur artist between 1860 and 1870, the painting shows a courtesan dressed for *Vasant*, a Hindu festival celebrating spring. While the artist has suggested volume by shading portions of her face and neck and attempting to depict the translucency of her *sari*, her features are exaggerated and generic in the style of earlier miniature paintings. As Joachim Bautze has pointed out, this image marks a transitional moment between painting and photography, when generic representations of women were just beginning to incorporate characteristics of photographic representation.¹²

Purdah in the nineteenth century

The seclusion of upper- and middle-class Rajput women continued during the colonial period, but certainly did not cause them to be overlooked or forgotten by the British. On the contrary, British administrators, travellers, missionaries, journalists and *mem-sahibs* wrote extensively about their impressions of Indian women and the conditions in which they lived, often commenting specifically on the institution of *purdah* or the *zenana*. In many of these texts it is clear that authors' conceptions of *purdah* have been profoundly shaped by British colonial ideologies which viewed the colony as a dark and dangerous place from which women were in need of rescue.¹³

British views of the *zenana* varied. While some imagined it as a site of women's oppression, others viewed it as a place where women exercised tremendous power. Despite this variation in interpretation, certain tropes appear again and again. The *zenana* was widely conceived of as a dark, damp area of the palace, closed in and lacking fresh air. Little of the penetrating light of education was believed to find entrance, leaving the *zenana* a breeding ground of superstition. Hygiene and medicine were seen as all but absent, while sexual impulses were understood to be

6 – This is a central argument in Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*.

7 – Molly Emma Aitken, 'Purdah and Portrayal: Rajput Women as Subjects, Patrons, and Collectors', *Artibus Asiae* 62: 2 (2002).

8 – A very small number of paintings can be identified that depict a lone woman with generic features and bear an inscription identifying the subject of the painting by name. Although such images do not mimetically represent the subject, they should nevertheless be considered portraits. One such example can be found in Joachim Bautze, 'The "Inevitable Nautch Girl" . . . on the Iconography of a Very Particular Kind of Woman in 19th Century British India', *Journal of Bengal Art* 9 & 10 (2004–2005), pl. 16.2.

9 – An eighteenth-century example of such a painting from Jaipur can be found in Daljeet et al., *Indian Miniature Painting: Manifestation of a Creative Mind*, New Delhi: Brijbasi Art Press 2006, 95.

10 – Architecture also reflects the institution of *purdah*. Rajput palaces tend to have a *zenana* section bounded by walls that limit access to it. Upper stories frequently have *jalis* or perforated screens through which women could view activity outside without being seen. One of the most famous monuments of Rajput architecture is the Hawa Mahal of Jaipur. This building, constructed in 1799 for Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh, was built to allow women of the Jaipur *zenana* to view processions or other activities on the street below. See G. H. R. Tillotson, *The Rajput Palaces: The Development of an Architectural Style, 1450–1750*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1987, 182–4.

11 – Bautze and International, *Interaction of Cultures*, fig. 49.

12 – *Ibid.*, 194.

13 – Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858–1900, New Perspectives in South Asian History*; 3 Hyderabad: Orient Longman 2002. Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina 1994.

Figure 2. Unknown Jaipur artist, *Courtesan*, opaque watercolour with gold, silver and crimson foil on paper, ca 1850. Courtesy Francesca Galloway.

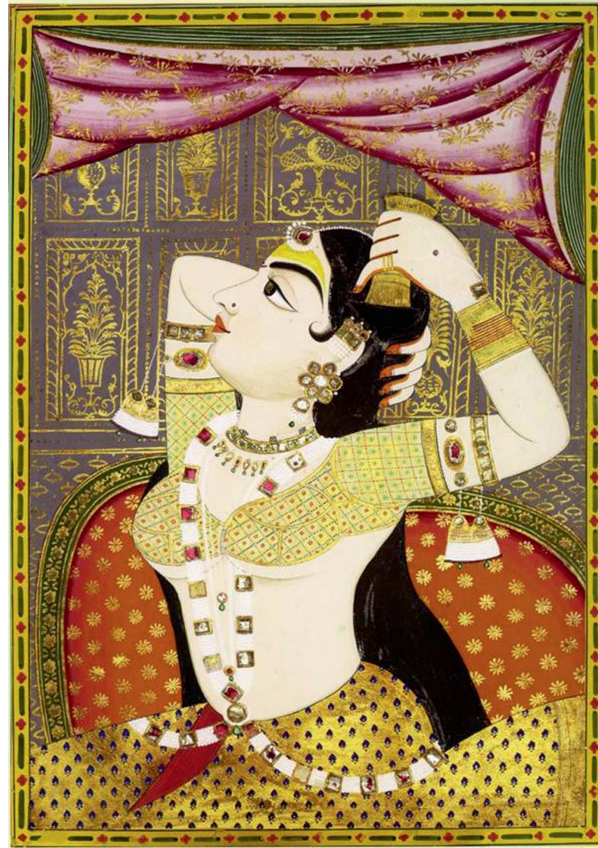


Figure 3. Unknown Jaipur artist, *A Courtesan of Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur dressed for the Spring Festival*, gouache on paper, 1860–1870. Formerly in the collection of William Keve Ehrenfeld, current whereabouts unknown.



completely unbridled. The inhabitants of the *zenana* were seen as ignorant and oppressed, idle and passive, or devious and obstinate, to name just a few characterizations.¹⁴

In these colonial perspectives it was, in many ways, *pardah* itself that made the upper- and middle-class Indian home so problematic. *Purdah* literally drew a curtain over the innermost part of the home, rendering it not just dark but opaque. This opacity in particular made *pardah* dangerous, according to Inderpal Grewal, who argues that the prevailing social and political discourses of nineteenth-century England, in which transparency was the highest social ideal, led to colonial impressions of India as a dark space. In her estimation, Asia was depicted as an 'area of darkness, not only because it was unknown and perceived as mysterious, but also because it was believed that these lands were ruled by a despotism equivalent to that which had been removed in Europe'.¹⁵ No space was less transparent to British colonialists than the harem.

Not surprisingly, British and Indian movements aiming to reform the home cropped up all over the subcontinent in the nineteenth century. Their agendas varied as much as did their conceptions of the *zenana*. Legislative reform movements dominated early-nineteenth-century agendas, such as the effort to ban *sati*, the practice of widow immolation.¹⁶ Later on the focus shifted to bringing education to women, for example among certain Bengali communities.¹⁷

British-led movements, though they did nothing so extreme as to seek the abolition of *pardah*, can be seen as motivated by a desire to make the *zenana* less opaque: to bring women into visibility and under the control of males. This was part of the larger mission of British colonialism. Such efforts became all the more important after the war of 1857, when the British found themselves in control of a large, varied and not well-understood population and urgently needed to find a way to transform it into a 'pacified, unthreatening, transparent populace'.¹⁸ Legislative reforms, '*zenana* missions' (missionary projects focused on women in *pardah*) and British women's writing about their experiences in the *zenana* all helped to bring Indian women into range of the colonial gaze.

Indian social reformers also focused on the home and the lives of women and no more sought to do away with *pardah* than did the British. Instead, Indian reformists too pursued changes relating to hygiene, dress and education. Despite originating among Indians, many of these movements nevertheless worked within colonial binaries, attempting to reform the 'harem' into a 'home' modelled after the homes of Victorian England's middle-class.¹⁹ The reformed Indian female needed to become, according to this view, healthy and modestly dressed, sufficiently educated, and skilled in motherhood and maintenance of the home.

Despite these various movements to reform or modernize Indian domestic life and the lives of women, middle- and upper-class Indian women remained largely invisible to white males during the nineteenth century. There were a few exceptions. The famous Begums of Bhopal, female rulers of the princely state of Bhopal, came out of *pardah* in the early nineteenth century. They interacted with men, and frequently allowed themselves to be photographed.²⁰ Jaipur, however, was no such exception. In fact, upper- and middle-class Rajput women in Jaipur did not come out of *pardah* until the 1940s, when Maharani Gayatri Devi began a major campaign to change the prevailing custom.²¹

Ram Singh and *pardah*

Ram Singh's opinions about Indian women and the *zenana* can only be discerned through his actions, as they were never explicitly recorded. He is generally thought to have been an enlightened, westernized ruler who championed reform and progress, and thus one might expect him to have supported reform movements affecting women. His actions suggest, however, that although he was indeed involved in certain social reform efforts, his participation was limited and, in some cases, was compromised by other priorities.

14 – Janaki Nair, 'Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian Womanhood in Englishwomen's Writings', *Journal of Women's History* 2: 1 (1990). Sen, *Woman and Empire*.

15 – Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1996, 26. In much the same way, Africa came to be conceived as a 'dark continent' during the latter half of the nineteenth century by many British citizens. This idea is explored in Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', *Critical Inquiry* 12: 1 (1985).

16 – Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1990.

17 – Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*; Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, *Women's Studies*, Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press 1991.

18 – Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 49.

19 – *Ibid.*, 25, 54.

20 – An example is reproduced in Dehejia and Allen, *India through the Lens*, no. 85.

21 – Lucy Moore, *Maharanis: The Lives and Times of Three Generations of Indian Princesses*, London: Viking 2004.

Born in 1833 and invested with full ruling powers by the British Governor-General on his eighteenth birthday, Ram Singh came of age at a time when the British were becoming more and more deeply involved in Jaipur's state affairs. As a result, the young maharaja was exposed to western culture at an early age, and was prepared for rule by British tutors. He spoke and wrote English fluently, introduced electric street lights to Jaipur and established institutions of social welfare on a modern European model.²²

There are some indications that he took a progressive stance towards the women of Jaipur as well. The groundwork for this was laid during his minority, when Jaipur's Council of Regency, led by Major John Ludlow, abolished *sati*, making Jaipur the first princely state to do so.²³ Once Ram Singh succeeded to the throne, he took actions such as helping to promote women's education by founding the Maharaja School for Girls in 1867.²⁴ This initiative, though it suggests the influence of social reform movements on his attitudes and priorities, should not be seen as an indication that Ram Singh was at the forefront of reforms relating to the lives of women. As Robert Stern has argued, Ram Singh's actions also reflect a pragmatic tendency to acquiescence to British colonial preferences in exchange for titles and other kinds of honours which were crucial for the maintenance of his power.

In one interesting exception to this rule, Ram Singh tried to alter a tradition relating to women and the home and was censured by the colonial government. This event took place in 1853, when the maharaja was ready to marry and had selected the daughter of the maharaja of Rewa to be his first wife. This match conflicted with Rajput custom, however, which required that the Jaipur maharaja make the daughter of the maharaja of Jodhpur his first wife. In defiance of tradition, Ram Singh set off for Rewa to fetch his chosen mate, but was informed along the way that if he persisted with this plan, the British agency would deny him the 'usual honours' as he passed through their territory.²⁵

Ram Singh opted to comply with the British ultimatum. He changed route and proceeded, 'honours' intact, first to Jodhpur where he married the daughter of Maharaja Takht Singh, and then soon after to Rewa, for his second marriage. The fact that British officials, more than the maharaja himself, were determined to uphold tradition in this incident reminds us that conflicts about women and domestic life, as Lata Mani has powerfully demonstrated in regard to *sati* reform, were 'not merely about women' but in fact were cases in which women 'became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated'.²⁶

Indeed, debates about tradition arose frequently between Ram Singh and the British officers in Jaipur. As in the previous anecdote, it was often the British who fought for the preservation of Rajput tradition, rather than the Rajputs themselves. A small but telling inconsistency in Louis Rousselet's 1878 publication *L'Inde des Rajahs: Voyage dans l'Inde Centrale* illustrates this tendency.²⁷ Rousselet's narrative describes his travels around India between 1864 and 1870, during which he visited many princely states. One passage describing his visit to Jaipur is often quoted, as it is one of the few English sources to mention Ram Singh's interest in photography, but it also contains a series of intriguing observations on his dress:

The conversation then turned on photography (he is not only an admirer of this art, but is himself a skilled photographer) [. . .]. His dress was handsome, but showed an indifference to ornament, which, perhaps, was studied; he wore scarcely any jewels, and no sword or dagger, but an immense revolver was thrust into his belt, from which hung a bunch of keys.²⁸

Rousselet's comments convey, with a hint of surprise and suspicion, that Ram Singh did not dress the way Rousselet expected he would. In the accompanying illustration of the scene, by A. Gusmand, the artist has replaced the revolver and keys with a large sword (figure 4). This disjuncture between the text and the illustration, even more than the hint of discomfort in Rousselet's description, reflects difficulties the British

22 – H. C. Batra, *The Relations of Jaipur State with East India Company, 1803–1858*, Delhi: S. Chand & Co. 1955, 196; Robert W. Stern, *The Cat and the Lion: Jaipur State in the British Raj, Monographs and Theoretical Studies in Sociology and Anthropology in Honour of Nels Anderson, Publication 21* Leiden, New York: E. J. Brill 1988.

23 – Ram Singh himself is often credited with banning the practice, but in fact he was only thirteen at the time. In that period his regents conducted most state business on his behalf. Batra, *Relations of Jaipur State with East India Company*, 164; Andrea Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press 2007, 195–6.

24 – Stern, *The Cat and the Lion*, 124.

25 – Batra, *Relations of Jaipur State with East India Company*, 174.

26 – Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', 118.

27. Louis Rousselet and Charles Randolph Buckle, *India and Its Native Princes; Travels in Central India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal*, London: Bickers and son 1878, 224.

28 – *Ibid.*, 229.

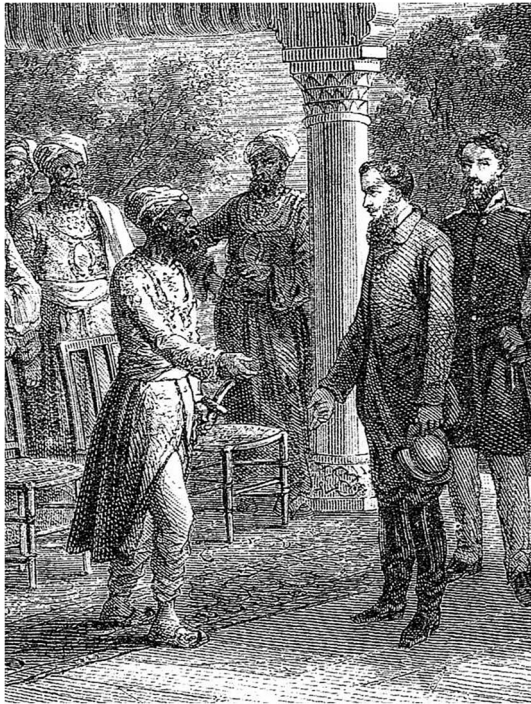


Figure 4. A. Gusmand, *First Interview with the Maharaja of Jaipur*, engraving, ca 1878. *L'Inde des Rajahs: Voyage dans l'Inde Centrale*.

sometimes had accommodating certain kinds of modernization among their colonial subjects.²⁹ Apparently a maharaja with a large revolver simply would not do.

In some cases, Ram Singh's modern-sounding statements and behaviours were intended only to conceal his intention to preserve the status quo. This is particularly clear in an incident related by Stern when, in 1864, Ram Singh voluntarily created a Royal Council to the delight of British officials in Jaipur. This step, they thought, indicated that Ram Singh was moving towards representative government, slowly coming around to colonial opinion about the evils of monarchical rule. They later realized with disappointment, however, that Ram Singh's personal authority was in fact strengthened by the establishment of the Council. For one thing, its members had strictly limited power and dared not directly oppose the maharaja, who served as its head. Moreover, by placating the British, Ram Singh reduced the likelihood of any future loss of power, since this small gesture decreased the chances that the British would seek to impose feudalism, an outcome highly objectionable to the maharaja. The reality of this Council so diverged from what the British had envisioned that it was eventually 'dismissed as a sham'.³⁰

The skill with which Ram Singh negotiated between modernity and tradition extended to his use of photography. This is particularly true of his self-portraits, which playfully manipulate poses, props and costumes, sometimes showing the maharaja in a traditional light (as a Hindu holy man or a Rajput warrior) and, at others, as a model modern gentlemen.³¹ Vikramaditya Prakash aptly describes Ram Singh's self-portraits as 'self-consciously hybridized representations [which] straddle and contest the separating boundary – between colonizer and colonized, English and native – the preservation and reaffirmation of which was crucial for colonial discourse'.³²

The Photographs

Much of Prakash's argument holds true for the *zenana* portraits, which deploy photographic technologies in order to challenge ideas central to colonialism. In this case, the relevant colonial idea is that Indian women were living in degradation in the *zenana* and were in need of rescue and reform. Although this notion found frequent inscription in British writing about Indian family life in the nineteenth century, it is not corroborated by the *zenana* portraits, which depict their subjects as decorous and healthful specimens of femininity.

29 – Vikramaditya Prakash presents a similar incident relating to Ram Singh's architectural sponsorship in Vikramaditya Prakash, 'Between Objectivity and Illusion: Architectural Photography in the Colonial Frame', *Journal of Architectural Education* 5: 1 (2001).

30 – Stern, *The Cat and the Lion*, 125.

31 – Sahai and Ram Singh, *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur*, 5, 6.

32 – Prakash, 'Between Objectivity and Illusion', 19.

33 – Sahai and Ram Singh, *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur*, 21.

A typical example shows two women posed in front of a painted backdrop (figure 5). Yaduendra Sahai, in the only volume dedicated to Ram Singh's photographs, identifies the women not by name (as their identities are not known), but by title: 'Paaswan of Maharaja with sakhi'.³³ The *pāswan* or concubine perches tensely on a chair in the centre of the composition. She is amply and modestly covered by her *sari*. Although she faces forward and bares her face, her eyes do not meet the camera's gaze. Her *sakhi* or companion stands nearby, echoing her superior's pose but clearly subservient. The two women are distinguishable by their spatial arrangement as well as by their clothing: the *pāswan* wears an elegant sari with subtle patterning, while the *sakhi*'s costume is boldly spotted.

Pāswans, like the central figure in this photograph, were royal concubines. Royal Rajput households tended to include large numbers of concubines, all of whom lived in *purdah*. In the hierarchy of the *zenana*, the *maharanis* or queens were highest in status. It appears that Ram Singh photographed a large number of concubines, but not his *maharanis*; in all likelihood the *maharanis*' adherence to the rules of *purdah* was so complete that even Ram Singh could not or would not challenge it.³⁴ Below the *maharanis* were the concubines, who were divided into several ranks: a *pāswan*, for example, was slightly lower in status than a *pardayat*.³⁵

As in portraiture in general, the clothing worn by the subjects suggests certain aspects of their identity. We can deduce the natal place of many of the women based on their clothing, since among Ram Singh's photographs of women are subjects wearing the characteristic clothing of Kerala, Maharashtra and Rajasthan itself, as in an image of a *pardayat* wearing Rajasthani 'tie-dye' textiles and bunches of thick anklets (figure 6). Similarly, some of them wear one or two *bindis*, suggesting that they are Hindu, while others wear none, perhaps indicating that they are Muslim. Although their clothing and poses are varied – while some of them look sidelong or directly at the camera, others look away – none of these women are veiled.

Surrounding most of the subjects are elegant backdrops, Victorian furniture and Persian carpets: a studio setting. The most common backdrop depicts a European-style interior with a mantel piece on the left and a window-lined corridor on the right. The scene is serene, domestic, and quite western. In most of the portraits a three-legged table sits in front of the backdrop, covered by a cloth with long tassels. It is a small, fussy table, with barely enough surface area to hold up the flower vase or ornate clock often placed upon it. Whether the women were brought to Ram Singh's photography studio or were photographed within the *zenana* itself, it is clear that the setting is artificial and does not reflect the actual space in which they lived.

We can as yet only guess at how and where Ram Singh's photographs of women circulated. He may have had them printed or may even printed them himself for inclusion in an album for his sole perusal or perhaps for his concubines. It is highly unlikely that the images were available to anyone outside the royal household. The surely limited range within which these images could have circulated does not mean that they should be seen as purely 'private' and thus unrelated to the societal world in which they were made. Even private portraits are in a certain sense public. As Richard Brilliant has written, all portraits 'have a public aspect, perhaps because their images are indeterminate extensions of themselves that may one day escape from the boundaries of privacy'.³⁶ This is especially true of photographic portraits, which in the nineteenth century were sufficiently complicated to produce that photographers often had assistants working alongside them. Whether Ram Singh worked alone or with assistants is not currently known, but it is difficult to imagine that he was the only person who glimpsed these images.

Photographic contexts

There was no tradition of mimetic representation of Indian women when Ram Singh began taking his *zenana* portraits. Although this changed when photographers began turning to female subjects in the 1860s, photographs of women in *purdah* did not

34 – Ibid., 23, Sahai is not clear on this point. He writes that 'even the Maharaja was unsuccessful in getting his wives, the *Maharanis*, to pose in front of the camera', but only one sentence later contradicts this, asserting that 'each of his *Maharanis* (he had twelve) and a dozen of *Rani Dholnis* (singers and *Dholak* players), *Bais* (virgin attendants) cooks and other servants were photographed'.

35 – Along with the differences in status, there were differences in the way that *purdah* was practised. In some Rajput courts, the lower ranks of concubines were on rare occasions allowed to make appearances outside the *zenana*. Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*, 121.

36 – Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1991, 10.



Figure 5. Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'pāswan' and her 'sakhi'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860–80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1458. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur.



Figure 6. Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'pardayat'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860–80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1471. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur.

37 – There is a handful of exceptional cases, two of which are documented in Bautze, “The ‘Inevitable Nautch Girl’”, pl. 16.3, 16.29.

38 – Joachim Bautze, ‘Umrao Jan Ada: Her Carte-De-Visite’, in *Prajnadhara: Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya*, ed. Gerd Mevissen and Arundhati Banerji, New Delhi: Kaveri Books 2009, 140.

39 – Bautze, ‘The “Inevitable Nautch Girl”’; Bautze, ‘Umrao Jan Ada’.

40 – Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950*, New York: Columbia University Press 1988, 60–82. Ken Jacobson, *Odalisques & Arabesques: Orientalist Photography 1839–1925*, London: Quaritch 2007.

41 – Bautze, ‘Umrao Jan Ada’; Bautze, ‘The “Inevitable Nautch Girl”’, figs. 16.4 – 16.25.

become common until two decades later, when middle class families began patronizing commercial studios. It would take much longer for elite women in *purdah* to follow suit.³⁷ Even in 1880, an album produced in Lucknow – *An Illustrated Historical Album of the Rajas and Taaluqdaras of Oudh* – filled the empty spaces reserved for photographs of the *ranis* and *thakuranis* with the label ‘*pardanashin*’, referring to a woman who was in *purdah* and therefore could not be photographed.³⁸

Experiments in representing individual Indian women of middle or high status through photography began, therefore, with women who were not in *purdah*, such as courtesans and dancing girls.³⁹ This challenge was quickly taken on by commercial photographers, with the effect that in the later decades of the nineteenth century, such women’s faces and bodies suddenly became visible in a way they never had before. A similar process was occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, where women began to be photographed in large numbers by Europeans and local photographers.⁴⁰

As early as the mid 1860s Lucknow photographers Abbas Ali and Mushkooor-ud-dowlah, for example, began producing a series of portraits of female courtesans who did not observe *purdah*. These photographs appear on a large number of *cartes-de-visite* in addition to filling an 1874 album entitled *The Beauties of Lucknow*. Joachim Bautze has recently published a number of these images, whose subjects are frequently shown reclining within easy reach of props such as hookahs, spittoons and boxes containing intoxicating betel nuts (figure 7).⁴¹ In other images the subjects are shown playing games, fixing their hair, enjoying each other’s company or lounging alone.

As there is no record of their subjects’ names, it is tempting to see Abbas Ali and Mushkooor-ud-dowlah’s photographs not as portraits of individuals but as representations of a type: the high-class courtesan who leads a life of luxury, sensuality and idleness. When we compare such photographs with Ram Singh’s, we see that although the *zenana* portraits also include the basic elements of the commercial studio portrait and also depict women whom Europeans would expect to chew betel nuts and lie about upon bolsters, they do not include any references to the courtesan type. There is no suggestion of idleness or even repose, nor are there any allusions to intoxicants like opium and betel nut. Despite the fact that Ram Singh’s subjects actually lived in a *zenana*, it is Abbas Ali and Mushkooor-ud-dowlah’s subjects who appear as though they do.

Figure 7. Mushkooor-ud-dowlah or Abbas Ali of Lucknow, A Lucknow courtesan with studio backdrop, *carte-de-visite*, albumen print, ca. 1865–70. P. & G. Bautze Germany.



Another new kind of representation of Indian women that appeared in the 1860s was the ethnographic portrait. Several examples can be found in *The People of India*, a massive compilation of ethnographic information illustrated by photographs.⁴² This colonial photographic documentation project (from 1856 to 1868) has been characterized as a ‘Herculean attempt to encapsulate and categorize a society’.⁴³ It is generally understood as a post-1857 attempt to become more knowledgeable about the population of Britain’s newest colony. Most of the images were taken by military officials who carried a camera on their tours of duty, and thus the styles, poses, props and captions of the images vary widely. The predominant mode, however, is what Christopher Pinney terms the ‘detective paradigm’, which seeks to capture and objectively represent a person by means of a clearly laid out and precisely focused photographic image.⁴⁴

The People of India contains numerous images of women. In one, an ornately dressed woman identified as a courtesan from Allahabad is shown sitting before a blank backdrop (figure 8). The floor is bare, and no props distract our eye. She faces the camera in an almost perfectly frontal view, her full face and flowing robes the sole foci of the image. Although many photographs in *The People of India* include props and backgrounds to represent facets of that ‘type’ of person, in this case it is merely the slouching posture, open-legged pose, and rich adornment of the subject that authorizes the caption: ‘Zahore Begum is a Cashmere Mussulmani, and follows the profession of a courtezian [sic]. As may be supposed, her character is not very respectable’.⁴⁵ Unlike the Lucknow images of courtesans, here there is no attempt to set Zahore Begum within a studio context that suggests the harem of western

42 – J. Forbes Watson et al., *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan, Originally Prepared under the Authority of the Government of India, and Reproduced by Order of the Secretary of State for India in Council*, London: India Museum 1868.

43 – John Falconer, “‘A Pure Labor of Love’”: A Publishing History of *the People of India*, in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. High and Gary D. Sampson, London: Routledge 2002, 54.

44 – Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs, Envisioning Asia*, London: Reaktion Books 1997, 45.

45 – Falconer, “‘A Pure Labor of Love’”: A Publishing History of *the People of India*, 60.



Figure 8. Unknown photographer, *Zahore Begum, Mahomedan, Allahabad*, ca 1862, *The People of India*, Vol. 2, Plate 104. Courtesy New York Public Library, New York.

46 – See also Saloni Mathur's discussion of 'native view' postcards with photographs of women of different types and castes produced in late-nineteenth-century India. Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2007, Ch. 4.

imagination. Nevertheless, the caption reminds us to think of her in such a context.⁴⁶

These two cases reflect two influential modes of representation that emerged for the depiction of middle- and upper-class Indian women in photographs in the 1860s and 1870s. Neither the Lucknow nor the ethnographic portraits have much in common with Ram Singh's *zenana* portraits, however, and one is forced to ask whether this might be a function of Ram Singh's having had a different kind of relationship with his subjects than the colonial or commercial photographers did. Although Ram Singh's more intimate relationships with his subjects must have affected the choices that shaped his photographs, this should not be understood as predetermining the nature of the portraits he created. This is best illustrated by the only set of photograph portraits of women in *purdah* from this early period of which the author is aware: another series of portraits taken by a ruler of the women in his own harem. Although these images were produced outside India, they nevertheless offer an illuminating comparison.

Like the Jaipur maharaja, Nasir al-Din Shah, ruler of Iran from 1848 to 1896, was a skilled amateur photographer. Among his photographic works are a number of images he took of women in his harem, probably for his own private viewing. In a photograph he took of one of his wives in about 1880, for example, we see her lying upon an ornate couch in a sort of demi-odalisque position, her legs exposed up to the knees (figure 9). Ali Behdad has described her side-long glance as a 'bored gaze, suggestive of the monotony of harem life, invit[ing] the (male) viewer to fantasize about an erotic encounter with her'.⁴⁷

Some of Nasir al-Din Shah's photographs are set within the harem itself, rather than within a studio setting, and in certain images he appears alongside the women. These photographs provide the viewer with unprecedented access to the spaces within which these women lived and, by extension, to Nasir al-Din Shah's own private life. Behdad convincingly argues that Nasir al-Din Shah's images are 'self-orientalizing', meaning that they depict their subjects with the same kind of gaze and in the same stereotyping manner that we see in images of similar subjects produced by Europeans. In his words, 'women are portrayed as objects of male voyeuristic

47 – Ali Behdad, 'The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran', *Iranian Studies, Special Issue on Representing the Qajars: New Research in the Study of 19th-Century Iran* 34: 1 (2001), 146.

Figure 9. Nasir al-Din Shah, *Anis al-Dawla*, black and white photograph, ca 1880. Private collection.



pleasure and symbols of exotic sexuality, [and] the Shah is represented as a solemn figure of cruelty and despotic power'.⁴⁸

Surely this kind of 'self-orientalizing' representation was as much an option to Ram Singh as it was for the Iranian shah, but it is one that it seems he chose to eschew.⁴⁹ In his portraits of women he neither placed them in sexually suggestive poses, nor photographed them in the *zenana*, nor posed beside them. Compared with these other early photographic attempts to represent individual women, Ram Singh's photographs stand out as the only ones that do not mirror orientalist conceptions of Indian domestic life.

Instead, the *zenana* photographs are chaste and dignified, and in this sense they share much more with studio portraits of middle-class women produced after 1880, which tend to be explicitly formal and proper. Photographic studios catering to the middle class had begun to flourish in India by the 1860s, and after an initial period in which only men were photographed, couples and whole families began to visit studios for portrait sittings. By the 1880s it was not uncommon to find photographic portraits of middle-class women, particularly in Bengal where early reform movements brought women into public view for the first time.⁵⁰ Some of these women worked outside the home as teachers, doctors, or in other professions, and were regularly seen by men. Others remained in *pardah*, and were photographed by female photographers who ran *zenana* studios or brought their equipment to subjects' homes.⁵¹

Photographs of these women, many examples of which can be found in Malavika Karlekar's recent books, probably circulated within highly circumscribed familial contexts. They tend to be relatively stiff and formal, and include props like ornate tables, books and flowers. Many of the subjects wear *saris* modified to be less revealing, reflecting the impact of social reform movements devoted to dress.⁵² In Karlekar's estimation, these images represent the aspirations of progressive, modernizing families.⁵³ They also reflect the conception of Indian family life that was at that time being promoted by social reformers, who, according to Grewal, sought to transform Indian households into something more like the 'home' of Victorian-era European imagination. Women in these portraits are neither erotic objects nor ethnic or professional types, but embodiments of the 'feminine virtues of sacrifice, nurturance, and maternal caring'.⁵⁴

Photographs like these Bengal family portraits were not yet being produced at the time when Ram Singh made his *zenana* portraits, but his photographs make a similar statement about women in the domestic sphere. Anticipating later developments, Ram Singh forged a new mode of visual representation of women in *pardah* – by appropriating a European model of portrait photography – which emphasized their dignity and propriety. Through photographic technology – which was in this period considered uniquely penetrating and authoritative – he formulated an alternative to pervasive and largely negative colonial conceptions of *zenana* life.

Dispelling the darkness

Ram Singh can hardly have been unaware that among Europeans, photography was at this time widely seen as a method of producing reliable knowledge. The dominance of the concepts of transparency and opacity in the ways Europeans thought about everything from physical attractiveness to the condition of a society meant that the camera – a mechanical purveyor of illumination, reflection and vision – had become particularly valuable as a way to illuminate the unknown. As we have already seen, photographic projects with this aim were carried out by the colonial government in the late nineteenth century. In these, the camera was used to penetrate the mysterious 'darkness' of the colony and depict with clarity whatever lay within.⁵⁵

If colonial photographers had been granted access to the *zenanas* of Rajput royalty, it is hard to imagine that they would not have jumped at the chance to realize the colonial desire to penetrate the troubling opacity of the Indian harem. The pervasive colonial discourse in the late-nineteenth century about the problematic

48 – Ibid., 148. Interestingly, Behdad points out that the most overtly orientalized of Nasir al-Din's photographs are the ones that are for private use.

49 – In 1985 B. N. Goswamy published a reference to a group of erotic photographs apparently also taken by Ram Singh II in Goswamy, 'Of Devotees and Elephant Fights', xix. Goswamy describes the photographs as showing Ram Singh and various women engaging in sexual activities. He explains that he did not see the images himself, but heard of them through Yaduendra Sahai, who was at that time curator of the Sawai Man Singh II Palace Museum. In 1996 Sahai confirmed that erotic photographs exist, but he went to great pains to make clear that these were probably taken by Ram Singh's pupil and the son of his Prime Minister, Fair Ali Khan, not by the maharaja himself. Yaduendra Sahai, *Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur, the Photographer Prince*, 24.

50 – Malavika Karlekar, *Re-Visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875–1915*, New Delhi, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2005; Malavika Karlekar and Centre for Women's Development Studies (New Delhi India), *Visualizing Indian Women, 1875–1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2006.

51 – Dehejia and Allen, *India through the Lens*, 19; Karlekar and Centre for Women's Development Studies (New Delhi India), *Visualizing Indian Women, 1875–1947*. *Zenana* studios seem to have emerged in large cities like Calcutta and Hyderabad by the 1890s. No evidence of a *zenana* studio in Jaipur has yet emerged.

52 – Sen, *Woman and Empire*, 57.

53 – Karlekar and Centre for Women's Development Studies (New Delhi India), *Visualizing Indian Women*, 1.

54 – Ibid., xxvi.

55 – James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997, 28–44.

state of Indian domestic life would have further motivated them to do so. It is not unlikely that they would have produced images that – like the photograph of Zahore Begum, the Lucknow courtesans or even Nasir al-Din Shah's Persian wives – reflected the photographer's preconceptions about the subject as much as they reflected her own nature and appearance.

Although Ram Singh certainly did not grant this access to either colonial or commercial photographers, he took advantage of the access he had to the *zenana* to do something not entirely unlike what they might have done in his place: he created images of the women of the *zenana*, and in doing so he lifted away the *pardah* that had for so long made such women invisible, exposing them to the harsh light of colonial India. What this unveiling revealed, however, was nothing like what social reformers – especially European ones – would have expected to see.

The *zenana* portraits reveal no sickness or dirt, depraved or deviant faces, exposed bodies or sexually suggestive poses (figure 10). Nor do they suggest women devoid of dignified self-control. Furthermore, in comparison to contemporaneous photographs of women in roughly comparable social positions, the portraits constitute a conspicuously civilised social tableau. They enact visually a transformation that Indian social reformers were just then seeking to bring about: the conversion of 'the *harem*, a space of opacity, [into] the *home*, a reconstituted Victorian space that was transparent in its clear manifestation of moral virtues'.⁵⁶

It might appear that Ram Singh's photographs were signalling a reform of his *zenana*, modernizing it the way he modernized Jaipur's streets and schools. But, as we have seen above, often his modernizing efforts were not what they seemed to be. When we consider that the photographs are not labelled with the names of the subjects and that the institution of *pardah* continued relatively unchanged for seventy years after Ram Singh's death, it begins to seem that the photographs do

56 – Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 25.

Figure 10. Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'pāswan'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860–80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1456. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur.



not so much indicate a change to the *zenana* as demonstrate, if only to an audience of one, the propriety of the *zenana* as it already was.

This demonstration would have done nothing less than affirm the decency and vigour of Ram Singh's rule. On one hand, by photographing *zenana* inhabitants the maharaja asserted his control over them, countering western anxiety that within the *zenana* males fall victim to the machinations of devious women. On the other hand, by showing the women as dignified individuals, the images countered colonial concern about 'despotism in domestic space', the notion that the Indian male cruelly oppressed women in *pardah*.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the portraits communicated that there was nothing to fear behind the *pardah*: the *zenana* and its subjects already conformed to the desires of British and Indian social reformers. Although Ram Singh never appears in these photographs, he is represented in them by inference as a capable, just and progressive ruler.

57 – Ibid., 49.

There is a certain ambiguity embedded in the impression these photographs give of the propriety of the *zenana* and of Ram Singh's rule. For, in producing the portraits, Ram Singh simultaneously defended and violated the institution of *pardah*. In other words, the photographs guard the *zenana* against its critics, bolstering its stability and, consequently, its inhabitants' continuing invisibility by rendering them visible for the first time. Like many of his other apparently modernising actions, Ram Singh's photographs do not unequivocally relinquish the old in favour of the new. One might better describe them as taking a strikingly modern approach to the defence of tradition.