Report on the Session for Semester 7 students based on the DAG Exhibition titled *Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India, 1855–1920*

Event: DAG SESSION

DATE: 16.9.2026

Facilitator: Dr Sukanya Mitra

Total no of participants: 16 Semester 7 Major students

Expected Outcome: The students will be able to understand the importance of photography as a method of archiving. They will also be able to identify the colonial gaze and how the use of photography resisted it by creating ambiguities that the colonizer's failed to anticipate.

An academic session based on the DAG exhibition *Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India, 1855–1920* at the Alipore Jail Museum was conducted on 16.9.2026 from 11.30 to 1.30 p.m. by Dr Sukanya Mitra, Assistant Professor of History, Loreto College, Kolkata (Autonomous). Sixteen students of Semester 7 Major of the Department of History attended it. They were first given a walkthrough on behalf of DAG so that they could familiarize themselves with the theme of the exhibition. This was followed by Dr Mitra's session.

The exhibition, curated by Dr Sudeshna Guha, examined how colonial photography and visual representation were used to document, classify and construct identities of the peoples of India, particularly through representations of tribes, women and occupations. It was situated within the colonial context following the Revolt of 1857, when an "information panic" encouraged greater collection and classification of information about Indian society. Photography increasingly came to be regarded as a scientific and documentary tool as photographs were considered difficult to alter and therefore apparently objective. **William Johnson** opened the first photographic studio in the Bombay Presidency and was associated with the *Indian Amateur Photography Album (IAPA)*. The *People of India* series was connected with **Lord Canning**, the Governor-General and first Viceroy, through the selection and classification of tribes and communities. This contributed to categories such as "martial" and "non-martial races", particularly after 1857. From the 1890s, photography became increasingly connected with anthropology. **W. H. R. Rivers** photographed the Todas between 1904 and 1909, while **Charles Shepherd** highlighted their staged representation before the camera. **Samuel Bourne**, associated with Bourne and Shepherd, was connected with one of South Asia's longest-running photographic studios. The photograph of the **Bareilly Committee** represented an early

municipal committee photograph, while the representation of the **Rasa Rajputs as "*Russia Rajputs*"** in painting reflected contemporary British anxiety regarding Russian influence in the Dhanzai region of China.

The exhibition examined the typecasting of tribes through categories such as the **Dunias, Gurkhas and Punjabis**. The **Criminal Tribes Act** institutionalised the classification of several mobile communities as criminal. The **Bhils** and **Banjaras** were negatively represented because their mobility and movement through forests were considered difficult for colonial control. The ***Kukis (Manipur)*** painting is associated with descriptions of robbery and theft. Paintings of the Aghoris represented them negatively as supposedly primitive inhabitants of Varanasi. Such representations were often anonymous, unlike representations of British landlords. The problem of inaccurate documentation was illustrated by ***Vedda Tribes***, which was identified as representing rural people who had been instructed or encouraged to pose.

A separate section focused on the representation of **women**, particularly tribal women and nautch girls. In a photograph associated with **Asscer Manuel**, Naga women were asked to remove clothing to create a particular contrast, demonstrating the intrusive colonial gaze. **Edward Taurines' *Gypsy Dancing Girl*** and representations of **Bheel women** similarly presented women as exotic or ethnographic subjects, often requiring them to pose uncomfortably**. *Witch of Ghoons*** depicted a woman as a "witch" because of her dishevelled appearance; she was identified as 103 years old; a detail associated with **Sukumar Ray**; father of Satyajit Ray. The exhibition also referred to the trade of nautch girls associated with the Kachwaha dynasty of Jaipur to Delhi. Paintings such as ***Miss Gomti, Mussoorie, Dancing Girl & Musician, and Dancing Girl & Dancing Attitude*** illustrated the practice of double printing, while ***Chauth Girls*** represented women simultaneously as financial agents which were self-commissioned and served as primary ethnographic specimens.

The exhibition also examined the representation of **occupations in the Bengal Presidency**, particularly through the **Krishnanagar models**, also represented in collections associated with Cambridge University and London. These representations transformed everyday occupations into fixed social and ethnographic categories. **G. W. Strong's *The Wonderful Art of Taking Things Easy*** depicted *phankakulis* resting while fanning the British and a *bawarchi* smoking while cooking. Such representations presented labour, service and colonial dependence as ordinary aspects of everyday life, thereby making unequal colonial relations and the abuses and punishment appear natural and contributing to the normalisation of colonial hierarchies.

The session conducted by Dr Mitra after the exhibition walkthrough raised questions about how the exhibits could be used by historians as an archive. She highlighted **H. H. Risley's** attempts

at categorizing and classifying the Indian population based on race, caste, gender etc.

Dr Mitra also discussed the use of photography as a medium of documentation and whether photographs were genuinely objective or were shaped by the photographer, administrator and intended audience's perspectives. The students were asked to think of research topics based on the exhibits. One of the students, Sinjini Roy spoke about the representation of **nautch girls** and how this could be revisited through the contrast between Victorian ideals of female independence and the colonial representation of Indian women. The categories of **"martial" and "non-martial races"** were also discussed in relation to colonial anxieties following 1857. The exhibition was compared with the earlier **1857 Revolution photography exhibition organised by DAG**, particularly in relation to Varanasi by Arushi Ghosh. She pointed out that the **Daniel brothers** presented Varanasi through an exoticized vision associated with the utilitarian mission of **"White Man's Burden"**, whereas **Alexander Carpenter** represented it as a more industrialised and developing city. The comparison demonstrated that colonial photographs and paintings were not merely records but could construct contrasting understandings of India and its people.

All in all, the session was a new experience for both the facilitator and the students. It helped to develop a critical understanding of the historian's archive and the colonial gaze.



DAG Session conducted by Dr Sukanya Mitra



DAG Exhibition on Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India 1855-1920



DAG Exhibition at Alipore Jail Museum, Kolkata