

**An Archaeology of Pictorial Desire:
The Archives of the Jadavpur University Photographic Club**
By Sourav Sil

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Image 1. Deepan Das, *Untitled*, Chandrashila, 2013. Digital.
Courtesy: Deepan Das.

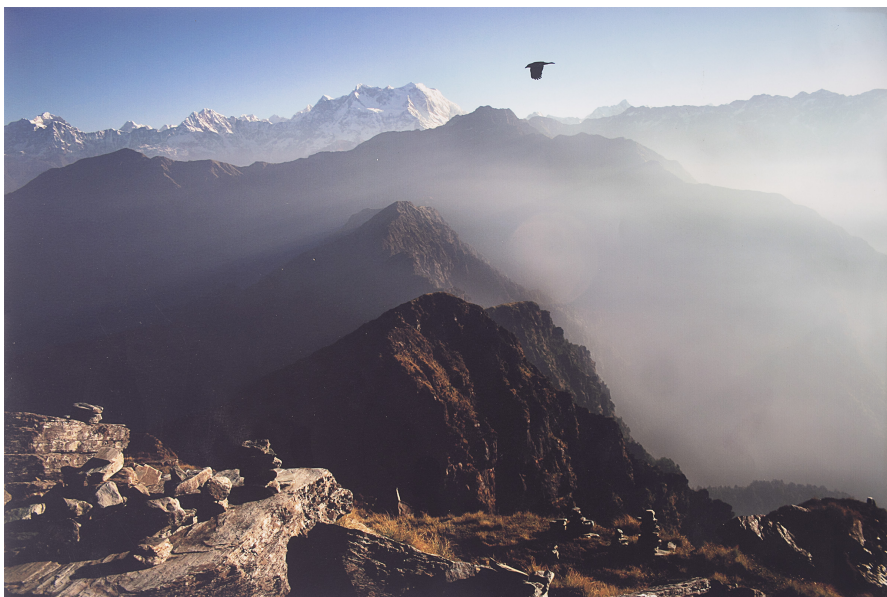


Image 2. Surya Basu, *Untitled*, Chandrashila, c. 2008. Chromogenic print,
45.4 x 30.2 cm. The photograph was taken at the same place as in Image 1.
Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

The word “archive” traces its roots, across a millennia-old etymological journey, to the Greek word “*arkheion*”, which refers to the quarters of the city magistrates of ancient Greece. In an imaginary metonymy, if archive indeed stands for a dwelling or a room, where do we search

for the histories once we start living inside it? Three years ago, on a summer afternoon in Kolkata, I was at the familiar Jadavpur University Photographic Club (JUPC), hoping to produce a dissertation on the institution that had initiated me into photography. Looking through rusty cabinets, a decrepit refrigerator, a broken film dryer and a couple of wooden drawers, I unearthed scores of photographic prints, along with some old journals and a few boxes of decaying transparencies. Rummaging for artefacts for my research, I felt keenly the haunting opacities of the collected photographs. The distance between their subjects and myself seemed unbreachable. Yet I knew that the origin of my own thinking about photography was ensconced in that very separation.

I joined the JUPC in 2012 as a university freshman, when I enrolled for their month-long introductory programme. Every year, this photography course, called “Basic Training Session”, is conducted as a four-part series. It begins with “Focusing”, followed by “Exposure” and “Depth of Field”, and concludes with “Composition”. Every topic is divided between a mid-week theoretical class and an outdoor practical class on Sundays. Although the first three practical classes are held at various spots, usually landmarks within Kolkata, the final class on composition is customarily reserved for the bucolic landscape of the outskirts. Here, one is taught to frame the subject while abiding by a stringent set of visual codes. When I started participating in this Sunday morning exercise as a member of JUPC, I was hardly conscious of the possibility that these morning rituals could have a past of their own.



Image 3. Pradip Sen, *The Glow of Wonder*, c. 1973. Halftone print. Scanned from the souvenir of the 1973 Jadavpur University International Students’ Salon of Photography. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.



Image 4. Subhadeep Datta, *Secret in her eyes*, Gourdah, c. 2012. Digital. Courtesy: Subhadeep Datta.

In 1963, Prof. Robin Wood, a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) faculty from Cambridge University, teaching at JU, gathered a small group of enthusiastic students and professors to turn one of the washrooms at the department of Geological Sciences into a photographic darkroom. Over the years, this event has come to mark the mythic beginnings of JUPC. In my attempt to weave a history of the club by bridging the gap between its genesis and the club's present, I amassed a prodigious set of images that turned out to be exceptionally diverse, and acutely fragmented. I understood that the construction of an accurate, coherent history of the club with the aid of the garnered material was untenable. What I could only hope to do was to foreground the hidden connections between the myriad fragments of the archive.

While trying to parse the photographs, it appeared that almost the entire collection stood in direct opposition to the common belief that photographs are axiomatically archival objects. A village boy running after a domestic fowl, a pensive expression on an unsuspecting face in the street, a shepherd guiding his herd back home at sunset, an orchard of poplars swaying or a river tern majestically taking off, etc. become the appropriate subjects of these timeless images. The photographers' eye seems to warily abandon the material reality of the captured subjects, leaving them in a zone of irretrievable 'otherness'. My efforts at piecing together JUPC's archival puzzle suggest that this photographic idiom emerged out of a deep-rooted knowledge system that sought to de-emphasize exactitude and documentary realism in favour of the heightened ideals of pictorial art. In these images, the photographers cloak themselves and their apparatus to project their inner subjectivities onto the external world in boundless pursuit of a 'good photograph'.

An article titled "Composition: Basis of Photography" retrieved from a mimeographed copy of *JUPC Monthly Bulletin*, published in 1969, unpacks for the reader what is meant by a 'good photograph'. The author Robindra Singh cites good composition, human interest, naturalness, emotional appeal and technical brilliance as the essential ingredients. He further elucidates what constitutes a good composition, "Say for example we have decided to photograph a house... We must never place the house in the centre. It is bad composition. Place it to the left or the right and above or below the centre lines... Incidentally, a simple front-view of a house

seldom looks good. It is much wiser to have an angular view of it.” In his articulation of these principles, the photograph becomes an object of design whose meaning is its function, where a set of symbolic codes determines this meaning. “A straight line suggests strength, vitality, security, masculinity etc. A horizontal line suggests peace, stability, and quietness. A vertical line—height, dignity and courage. A diagonal line suggests instability, movement and restlessness,” Singh adds.



Image 5. Kushal Gangopadhyay, *Untitled*, Manali, c. 1982. Digital scan. Courtesy: Kushal Gangopadhyay.



Image 6. Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, *Sisters*, c. 1971. Halftone print. Scanned from the souvenir of the Fifth Annual Exhibition 1971. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

Another essay titled “Photographic Impact” by Nilava Sen, published in a JUPC journal called *Phototone* in 1975, segues from the symbolic to the affective register. Sen writes, “The main quality of a photograph is that it must arrest the attention and stop the eyes from slipping by... [but] A truly good picture has an added quality: Impact. This is its emotional aspect and produces a stirring effect in the mind.” In his piece, Sen refers to a host of American

documentary photographers including Alfred Eisenstaedt and W. Eugene Smith, who are widely credited for pioneering the photo-essay tradition within the mid-century magazine cultures of *Time* and *Life*. Interestingly, Sen picks out only single images. He cites Smith's iconic 1948 photo-essay *The Country Doctor* as only a "famous picture" symbolizing the doctor's feelings regarding his patients' tragedies. These illustrations of 'impact' emphasize a subliminal, mystified index of poetic expression. While documentary photography's claim ordinarily lies in actuality, Sen's claim here is towards a kind of transfigured realism where individuals are emblematic of eternal humanistic values and universal truths. This becomes abundantly clear in the archetypal portraits of women in the archives, where the subject is always modelled as a spiritual source of beauty, and appears as a still life. The abstract captions for these portraits, for example, *The Mood*, *The Stranger*, *The Question*, *Smiling Lady*, etc. are testament to this photographic intent.

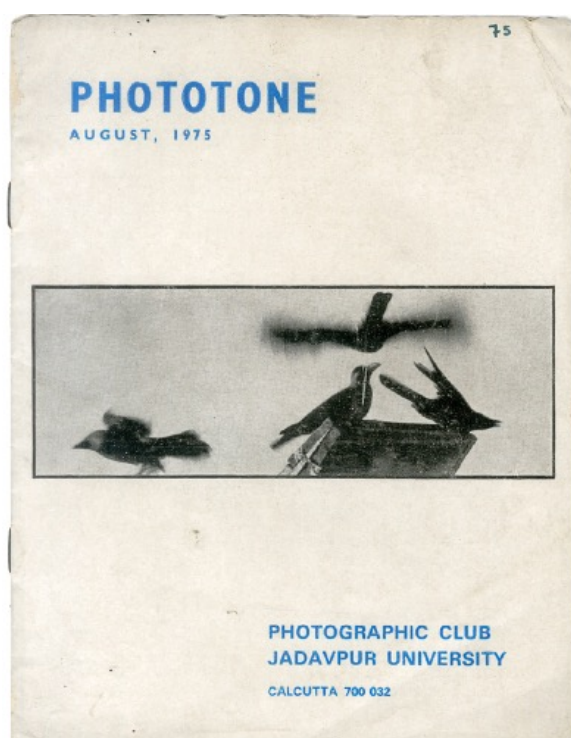


Image 7. Cover of the journal *Phototone* published by Nilava Sen, August 1975. The cover photograph titled *Up and Away* is taken by Shantha Weerasinghe. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

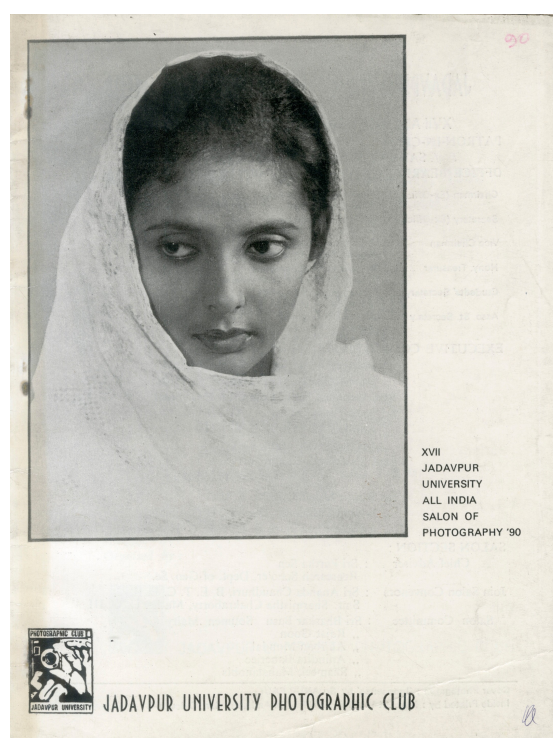


Image 8. Cover of the souvenir of 1990 JUPC salon. The cover photograph titled *Innocence* is taken by Anup Paul. It won the Certificate of Merit in the Pictorial Print section. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

What might appear as an anachronism is symptomatic of a deeply regimented and institutionalized practice, having its roots in the 19th century Pictorialist movement of Europe and North America. It had run its course by the end of the First World War, as the Western canon embraced progressive visions of industrial modernity. The romantic and symbolist motifs of Pictorialism gradually faded into oblivion. However, the attitudes that it nurtured survived in some measure through a well-networked ring of international amateur photography clubs, with their journals and annual exhibitions called "salons". The

Photographic Society of America (PSA) founded in 1934, the Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique (FIAP) founded in 1946, and the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) of London founded in 1853, oversaw the activities of amateur photographers across the globe. In 1952, India joined the bandwagon with the formation of the Federation of Indian Photography (FIP).

When JUPC started organizing its own annual exhibitions from 1967, it came under the influence of this network. By then, the Photographic Association of Bengal (PAB) and the Photographic Association of Dumdum (PAD) had emerged as the pivotal centres of the regional pictorialist circuit. The members of PAB and PAD were often invited to host lectures and short training sessions for the JUPC members. Selections of photographic prints were regularly sent to JUPC from the FIP, which were then critically discussed in special club meetings. In the club library, I also discovered copies of *The Photographic Journal* published by RPS, the *Viewfinder* journal of FIP, and *Indian Photography & Cinematography* journal of the India International Photographic Council. Several veteran photojournalists and commercial photographers, many of whom were closely associated to this network like Benu Sen, Arun Ganguly, Kanti Lal Chaudhuri, Shambhu Saha, Sunil K. Dutt, Jyotish Chakraborty among others, were often invited to judge the JUPC salons.

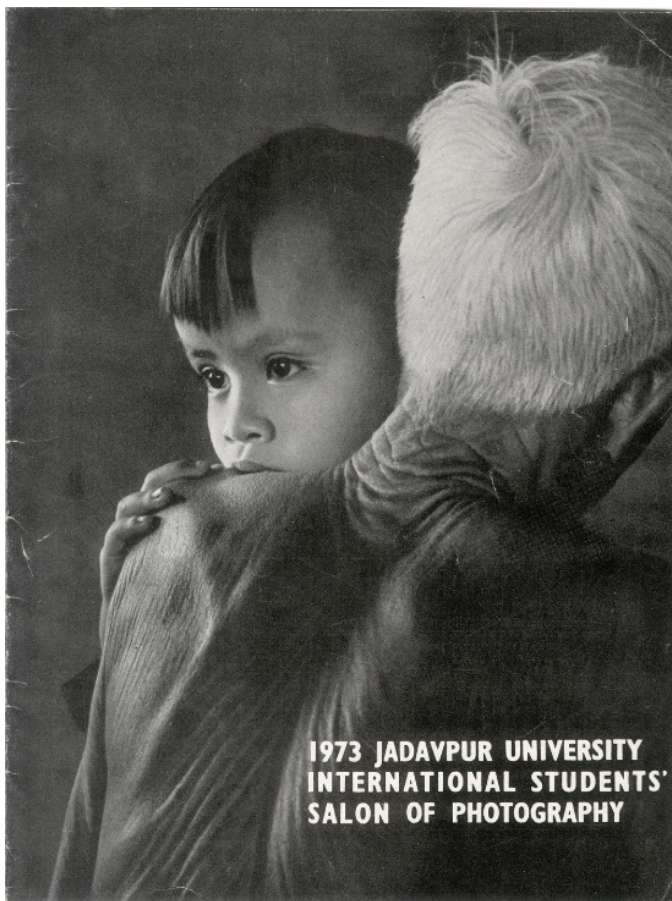


Image 9. Cover of the souvenir of the first international salon organized by JUPC, which saw participation from 21 countries, 1973. The cover photograph, *Grandfather*, is by Nguyen Thanh Hai from Vietnam. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

SEVENTH ALL INDIA STUDENTS' SALON, 1976
STATISTICS

University or Institution	Entrants	Monochrome Prints Submitted	Monochrome Prints Exhibited	Color Transparencies Submitted	Color Transparencies Exhibited
Alagappa Chettiar College of Technology, Madras	1	4	2	4	2
B. E. College, Howrah,	12	21	3	22	5
Bombay University	1	4	3	0	0
Baroda University	1	3	2	0	0
D. A. V. College, Lucknow	1	4	3	0	0
Himachal Pradesh University	5	13	0	0	0
I. I. M, Calcutta	1	0	0	4	2
I. I. T, Kharagpur	2	8	2	8	2
Jadavpur University	20	61	38	8	2
Jodhpur University	2	0	0	4	1
Law College, Calcutta	1	4	1	4	2
Loyola College, Madras	1	4	2	4	2
N. S. E. College, Hyderabad	4	6	1	0	0
S.A. Jaipuria College, Calcutta	1	4	4	0	0
S. S. Medical College, Rewa	2	8	2	4	1
School of Printing Technology, Calcutta	1	4	2	0	0
St. Xavier's College, Calcutta	3	4	2	8	5
The Modern School, Delhi	1	4	1	0	0
Udaipur University	1	2	0	0	0
University College of Science and Technology, Calcutta	1	4	2	4	1
V. S. S. Medical College, Sambalpur	1	4	1	0	0
Total	63	166	70	74	26

Image 10. Participation statistics of the Seventh All India Students' Salon, 1976. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

Photo. Club
10/1/83

ENTRY FORM

NAME: _____
ADDRESS: _____
CLUB (IF ANY): _____

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Received Date		Full Signature of Entrant	
Serial Number			
No. of Prints			
No. of Slides			
No. of entries			
Fees			
Mode of Delivery			
Result			
Catalogue			
Sticker			
Certificate			
Prize			
Return			

Twelfth Jadavpur University All India Salon of Photography 1983
AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

Selection Panel

- Sri Benu Sen -RPS, FNPAS, EFIAP, MFIAP
- Sri Anjya Kumar Nandy -AFIAP
- Sri Asit Ranjan Banerjee -ARPS

Salon Calendar

- Closing Date — 22nd January 1983
- Judging — 30th January 1983
- Notification — 7th February 1983
- Exhibition — 17th to 26th February 1983
- Return of Entries — 15th March 1983

Awards

- For each Category: Best Entrant Award Rs. 101/-
- For each Section: 1st Prize Rs. 101/-, 2nd Prize Rs. 51/-, Best Club Award: Rs. 101/-
- A special prize will be awarded for the best Wildlife Photograph.
- A Certificate of Merit will be awarded for each 100 entries in the Open Category and 50 entries in the Students Category.
- All awards will be given in form of gift cheque.
- Gift cheque of Rs. 11/- will be given to each exhibitor.
- All accepted entries will be given recognition stickers.

MAIL EARLY: LAST DATE 22.01.1983

Image 11. The entry form of the JUPC Salon, 1983. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

The salon became central to JUPC's practice as the production of images was often driven by an urge to achieve acceptances and awards. Most of these contests were affiliated to FIP, which mandated stringent guidelines for participation and selection, furthering an already ossified aesthetic model. In an essay presented at the first Calcutta Photographic Conference in December 1971, Shantanoo Chakrabarti, a JUPC member, rallied against the formulaic, vapid nature of the photographs exhibited in the salons. Arguing that their makers and spectators belonged to the same small coterie, he asserted that the situation could be salvaged only by bringing photography closer to the "pure art" of painting, by raising "the stature of photography... from imitation to creation." The photograph titled *The Quest*, by Saktipriya Bhattacharyya, one of Chakrabarti's peers, would agree with his contention. The image, a photomontage overlaying the image of an eye on the centre of a spinning wheel cracker, won the third prize in the All India Students' Section of JUPC's salon in 1970.

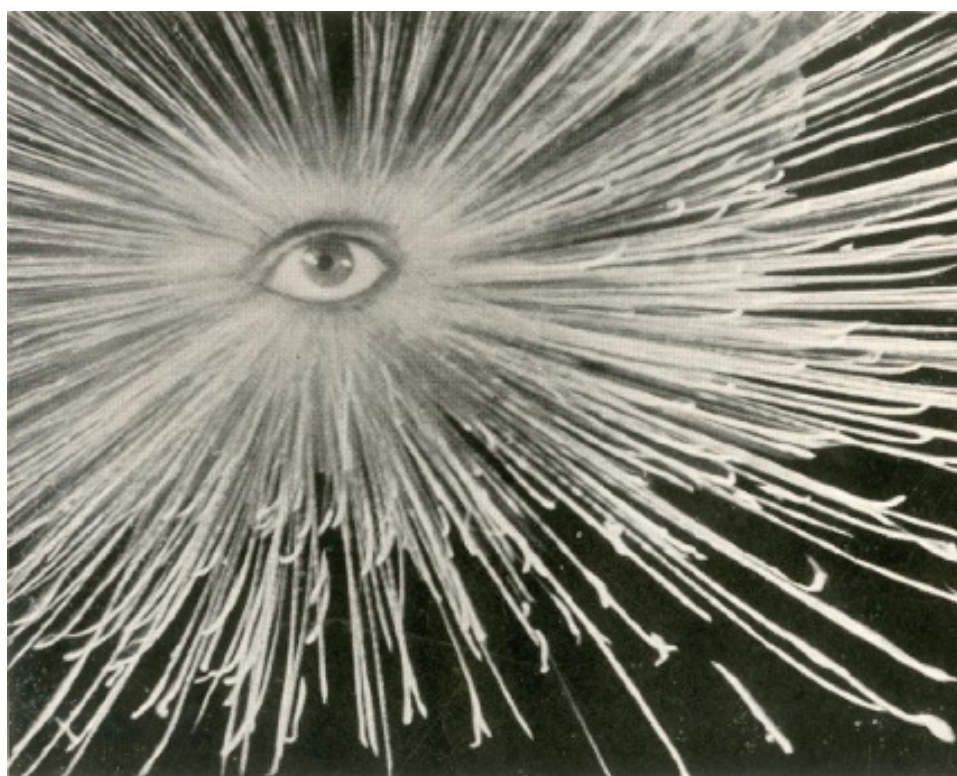


Image 12. Saktipriya Bhattacharyya, *The Quest*, Kolkata, c. 1970. Halftone print. The eye in the image is of Pankaj Saha, who was back then a student of International Relations at the university. Saha went on to become a celebrated television producer at BBC London and Kolkata Doordarshan. Scanned from the souvenir of the Fourth Annual Exhibition 1970. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

In December 1971, at the height of the Naxalite movement, the JU Vice-Chancellor Gopal Chandra Sen was murdered in broad daylight, a few yards away from the club premises. When I asked Bhattacharyya, who still resides in the neighbourhood of the university campus, why no one in the club kept any photographic document of such tumultuous times, he explained to me that JUPC had always been a strictly apolitical space. But more than that, he added, the members were already so burdened with mastering technical processes, that they could not

spare time for anything more exacting. A slippage however occurs in the archives in the form of a lone scrapbook album containing photographs of the annual convocation of 1981. It was compiled by a member Utpal Chowdhury, documenting the silver jubilee celebration of the university's founding, which was attended by the Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu and the President of India Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. Apart from the host of dignitaries, the photographs also captured the hand-written posters put up by various student organizations outside the convocation venue. One among these, belonging to the Democratic Students' Front (DSF), proclaimed their success in thwarting the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from inaugurating the convocation ceremony. Another meticulously designed sequence of posters displayed a timeline with protest-site photographs—documenting resistance against the Left Front government's order to abolish primary level English education in government schools.



Image 13. Photographer unknown, Kolkata, 1981. Protest posters outside the convocation venue. Gelatin silver print, 19.4 x 14 cm. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.



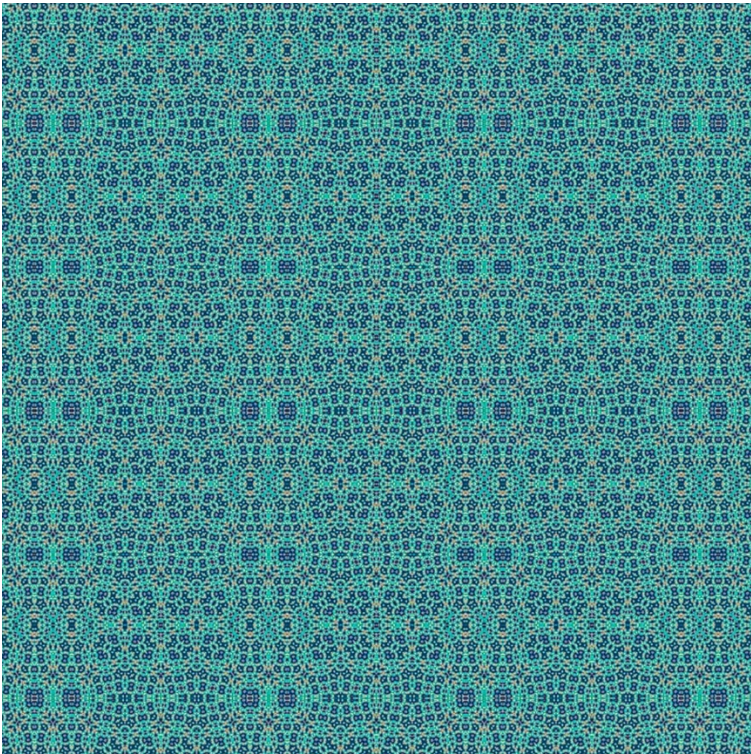
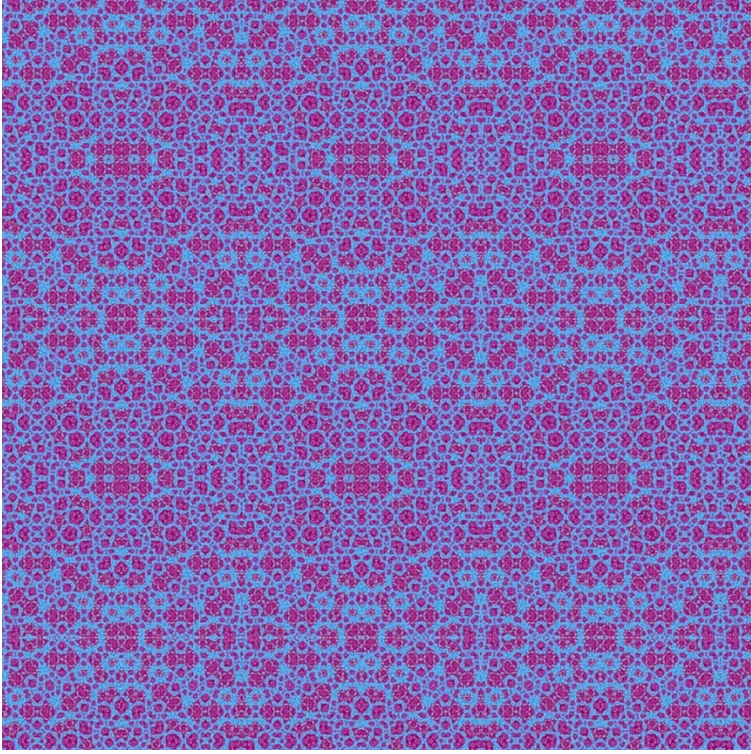
Image 14. Photographer unknown, Kolkata, 1981. Protest posters outside the convocation venue. Gelatin silver print, 19.5 x 15 cm. Courtesy: Jadavpur University Photographic Club.

As these relationships between the archival pieces slowly began to unravel, I was intrigued to observe how an underlying desire to do something new had always coexisted alongside the more apparent resistance towards change. JUPC ended its salon journey in 2003 and shifted to a more open, flexible model of theme-based contests. Around the same time, some of the club members, who were assisting the advertising photographer Arindam Mukherjee, brought in the idea of feature photography and the portfolio. In 2006, when the club organized its first national contest of photo-stories, Tumpa Mondal, a JUPC member, won the second prize for her remarkable series on the life inside a women’s hostel. She represents the women, not as some jaded symbols, but as they are—vivacious, ordinary, aspiring and sexual beings. When I joined the club in 2012, much of the earlier iconoclasm seemed to have faded away. It was still reeling under the weight of the shift from the analogue to the digital world. The darkrooms had fallen into disrepair and the sources of photographic influence started relocating to streams of social media and photography blogs. In the following years, a gradual exposure to alternative forms of photographic practice persuaded many to experiment with what they would call their “visual language”, and some others were ready to explore subjects of concern.



Image 15. Tumpa Mondal, image from the series *Future Professionals*, Kolkata, c. 2006. Digital scan. Courtesy: Tumpa Mondal.

The apogee of this metamorphosis was the 2017 Jadavpur University Photo Fest (JUPF) whose stated intent was “to understand the role of photography within the realm of contemporary art as well as promote alternate discourses”. The highlights of the programme included a keynote lecture by curator Rahaab Allana, workshops by the photographers Sarker Protick and Altaf Qadri, and open-air exhibitions spread across the Victoria Memorial Hall grounds as well as the university campus, curated by Harsha Vadlamani. This precipitous upscaling of the annual event took its toll on the club, as the ground for absorbing change was still tremulous. Yet, a few nonconformist practices now found assurance, like that of Lokesh Das, who digitally manipulates random snapshots and stitches them together to generate kaleidoscopic patterns—a provocation to rethink the notions of signification and truth we attach with photographs in our everyday lives.



Images 16 & 17. Lokesh Das, images from the series *Patterns*, Kolkata, c. 2017. Digital. Courtesy: Lokesh Das.



Image 18. Installation shot of an image from Vivek Singh’s project *Frontier Dispatches* exhibited in the Jadavpur University Photo Fest, 2017. For the festival, the images were printed on newsprint paper and stuck on the walls of the university buildings. The ways in which people would interact with these photographs were documented over a course of time. Photographed by Sourajit Saha, Kolkata, 2017. Courtesy: Sourajit Saha.

One of the other conditions that impacted the formation of the JUPC archives and made it more idiosyncratic is its social space. The fact that JUPC works as a commune, raises money to buy its equipment through shared labour, distributes the resources equally among its members and travels together for photographic expeditions, fosters a unique sociality. The outings, some members feel, are more about training than practising as they relish the conversations, even if they end up taking similar photographs. Here, art making veers away from individuality and transpires partly outside the field of photographer–apparatus–subject interactions, flourishing within collective engagement. Today, JUPC stands at a queer threshold where the future is contingent and the past is rusted. Its historicity has always remained suspended in a state of perpetual flux—it is populated every year by a fresh generation of students as an old batch bids adieu. In such a situation, these archives, regardless of being dispersed, become the only mirror for JUPC’s present.

Notes

- Peter C. Bunnell, “Pictorial Photography”, *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 51, no. 2 (1992), 11–12. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3774688>. Accessed March 18, 2022.
- “RPS | History.” *RPS | History*, [rps.org](https://rps.org/about/history/), <https://rps.org/about/history/>. Accessed March 20, 2022.

- The journal *JUPC Monthly Bulletin* and the paper titled *The Monotony in Recent Photography – A Close-up* by Shantanoo Chakrabarti were accessed from the personal collections of Saktipriya Bhattacharyya.
- A substantial portion of the information provided in this essay is based on the numerous informal interviews/conversations I have had over the past few years with past as well as present members of JUPC. Special thanks to Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, Saktipriya Bhattacharyya, Bibek Guha, Kushal Gangopadhyay, Rajarshi Bandopadhyay, Tumpa Mondal, Sourajit Saha, Lokesh Das and Prapti Roy for their support.
- A part of this research was conducted as an academic project at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.