

Ram Rahman: Shifting Perspectives

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Photography, initially a tool for documentation, evolved to redefine the standards of documentation and questioned established notions of ocular experiences. Though envisaged by the eye of the white European male and feudalism in its early days, photography turned out to be a Marxist tool by the 1920s, marking the arrival of various organizations and photographic discourses that leaned towards the Left. [1] It took on various deviations and shapes so as to contribute to multiple spheres of life, like entertainment, education, advertisement, art, etc. The 20th century marked significant shifts in visual representations, syntax of images and emphasized a re-evaluation of reality (considering the early belief that photography is more real than painting) as artistic essence rather than imagination. Photographic reality largely centred around an awareness of the “optical unconscious” (as discussed by Walter Benjamin), which had previously escaped our attention.

These developments in the Western world soon influenced similar patterns of visualization and circulation in the Indian photographic scenario. In its early stages, Indian photography seemed to conform to the expectations of colonial regimes and their cameras, portraying a sense of “otherness”. However, following the 1940s and the emergence of a new independent nation, indigenous photographers began to dismantle the cultural conditioning that viewed photographs solely as aesthetic items or ethnographic documents. This led to a new era of practitioners, whose works not only emphasized context, space and time in visual narrative, but also interpretative advocacy.

The Artist, the Zeitgeist and the Notion of Nation

Following in the footsteps of this modernist postcolonial legacy, Ram Rahman has worked for the last few decades as a contemporary photographer, curator and art activist based in Delhi. His body of images ranges across visuals of or from the streets, modernist architecture, portraits,

festivals, civil unrests, and unusual shots of celebrated personalities from various fields. A panoramic look at his works reveals ideas of resistance and intimate yet critical engagements with the city. Rahman's simple and realistic images move beyond mere aesthetic appeals to encourage a Saussurean analysis of power relations.

Rahman was born in an era of shifting photographic sensibilities in India, which witnessed the turn from pictorialism to realism (as outlined in seminal publications such as *Marg* magazine's December 1960 edition). This was also a period of nation-building, especially through visuals, as cultural practitioners sought representations of an *original* and *real* India, beyond geographic boundaries. Unlike seniors and contemporaries like Sunil Janah, Jyoti Bhatt, Jitendra Arya, Raghu Rai and the self-taught Homai Vyarawala, who through their deep interests in capturing ethnicities, monuments, political scenes, celebrities and other diverse frames, moulded new photographic genres with a certain gravitas (sometimes consciously, sometimes accidentally), Rahman's images resisted genre categorization and bore a strong sense of humour.

Besides reflecting on socio-political changes, another major focus of Rahman's oeuvre has been historical and contemporary urban sites and spaces. Almost as a contrast to the older fear of photography robbing the spirit of a site or individual (paralleling the dual meanings of 'shot'), Rahman captures sites that have already lost, or are in the process of losing, their earlier spirit. These photos also stand apart from Rayish visions of nationalism or Orientalism, as they delve into complex postcolonial politics and identities. More than his portraits of well-known socio-political and cultural figures and their lives, it is these architectural frames that have received wider attention, partly as a byproduct of the artist's self-representative agencies and oratory choices.

Rahman's Photographic Discourses

"We are no longer able to speak of meaning itself, and our unavoidable taking into account of the 'context' opens a door, which becomes an abyss: meaning is context bound, but context is boundless." [2]

While photography embraced evidence and event as its disciplinary attitude, this statement by Jonathan Culler from the mid-1950s provides a better framework to analyse Rahman's images, as it moves beyond aesthetics to exploring contextual significance.

Architectural Photographs

Architecture and photography have shared a fair number of interrelations in history. Recollecting and meandering through a visual trajectory from the art of the Renaissance to 20th-century photography, we find a discontinuity in time. Architecture was for the longest time not given the status of art, but considered a mere possession of certain individuals or organizations. It is only gradually that buildings have come to be seen as static yet non-static art objects, immobile in themselves but emotive, spaces of social reproduction and constantly altering syntax. Not fixed in time, they are not completely temporal: even with a physical presence that remains intact over the years, their cultural and historical significances keep changing. They also facilitate representation of human conjugations, cultural appetite and memoirs of history.

Rahman's interest has been centered on the modernist architecture of Delhi, which mushroomed between the 1950s and 1990s. His architectural photographs, which capture these buildings in their non-functional or ruined states, become a semiotic study of the socio-political occurrences that shaped as well as shattered them. Unlike the images of historical ruins as seen in Company paintings or colonial photography, that presented them as part of an imagined romantic past, Rahman explores his spaces in the context of a more contemporary public psyche and cultural milieu.



“Hall of Nations, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi” (2017)

In his book *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger articulates how art was originally created for the nobility, and placed in a building with limited access, that continued a mnemotechny of palaces or temples where visitors were allowed in only for few hours, to maintain a mystery of life. In Rahman’s vision, the **Hall of Nations**, the **Nehru Pavilion** and many other modernist administrative buildings in Delhi emerged as the places which catered to the modern Indian nobility.

They are museums in themselves as well, twice museumized by photography, thereby becoming an image, a death of the actual interactive space. These photographs bring in two questions. Would these buildings have held a different meaning for the public or a trained eye if they were intact or functional? Also, do they move beyond the artist’s individual loss—which either masqueraded or unsurprisingly got classified into the category of significant buildings of the Nehruvian era—as the loss of representation of a time period affluent in socio-political developments?

Rahman's photos make strong comments on architecture as a socio-political organism. They resonate with what Susan Sontag said in her book *On Photography*—about photography as the vanishing extendedness of family—as well as Barthes' idea of the spectatorial longing to participate in countless photographs placed in an image, or a specific point of time or space within the picture frame. [3] Many of Rahman's architectural photos are devoid of human presence, even though a few have the artist's own presence. *This operates on a dual level. Firstly, the depiction of vacant administrative buildings, designed by Rahman's father and peers, serves as an invitation for ordinary people to engage with them. Secondly, it reflects the photographer's efforts to project his self and integrate with the spaces captured.*

One also finds an interesting binary in certain images, such as the one of a non-functional **Kishangarh Palace** (1990) with broken doors in the corridor. Even as the place seems to invite the common man for a historic invocation, one is reminded of how these architectures have in the past been entrenched in hierarchies of power that denied the entry of the masses. It is only when these spaces become bygone monuments (or devoid of the social syntax which made them palaces) that they are freed from those trappings. In further contrast to these works, Rahman's insightful frames of the private and social lives of public personalities (considered the personifications of modern cultural and political power—**Rajat Sharma, Sitaram Yechury and Manmohan Singh at an Iftar, Delhi** (1994) or **Ram Vilas Paswan at Home, Delhi** (1994)—feature them within homes and architectural spaces which often lie beyond the bounds of commoners.

While discussing Rahman's architectural imagery, it is also inevitable to connect notions of architectural embodiments with the syntax in female portraiture. We come across a marginal and ambiguous sense of feminine attributes in both the architectural shots (spaces of cultural femininity) as well as in the portraits of women. The artist intentionally or unintentionally departs from the fragmentary, sequential and close-up methods of picturizing buildings and modern urban interior spaces, which play a major role in recording and defining the intense emotional quality of these socially produced spaces and intimate angles. We come across this

interesting irony; while modernity is largely associated with the dialogues on feminist interventions, the architectures and photographs associated with the period seem to defy that.

Rahman's subjects also classify as minimally decorative postcolonial administrative structures: they are the kind of masculine, utilitarian public spaces that Rabindranath Tagore compares and contrasts with feminine spaces that blend utility with intricate decorativeness. [4] Finally, when women are presented in Rahman's images, they are singers, dancers, theatre actors and performers, who largely exist as cultural symbols. They are part of an exercised repertoire of public and social life, distanced in their portrayal of spaces of intimacy and atmospheres which are feminine in attitude.



“Humayun’s Tomb, Delhi” (1999)

Drawing a parallel with Raghu Rai's sub-textual effects in images of national multiculturalism, history and politics, Rahman finds his city as a universe of inspiration and intervention. Rai's picturing of the Taj Mahal on a devastated bank of the river Yamuna contrasts with Rahman's

lit-up colourful image of **Humayun's Tomb**, as the former passes a subtle, ironical comment on history, while the latter appears as tinged with political anxiety. [5] Rahman's images, by and large, associate either directly or indirectly with the Mughal architectural school. His photographs of structures designed by his father, Habib Rahman, appear to be in a constant search of defining what is secular architecture, as they were attempts to blend the Bauhaus with Mughal-like arches, windows and corridors. Rahman's architectural photographs engage in a semiotic discussion regarding these structures, suggesting meanings that fluctuate between "seeing" and "vision" while exploring their socio-cultural relevance in contemporary society.

Urban Landscapes and Street Imagery

In Rahman's images of urban landscapes and streets, enwrapped public buildings find a significant place. The film posters, sign boards, painted gates and cutouts act as cultural residues in the growing stages of a city and as extensions of architecture and other built structures. A photograph of a studio in Delhi's Connaught Place is emblematic of Rahman's cityscapes: it plays around with the concept of hide and seek or a constant sense of presence and absence. Rahman observes the street as a gallery whose evolving images are designed by the mob's cultural ethos. [6] He deploys wit in capturing unconsciously juxtaposed contrasting images, while also reflecting on popular culture. To illustrate, an image from **Daryaganj** (1994) sees a mythological scene, political personality and an image of an actress comes together. **Gate** (1983) has a text that says "Janata Opticians" with a strong female gaze (contrary to the gaze's more common associations with masculinity); each pair of eyes is decontextualized, but as a whole, they come together to act as sign boards of a city and a nation in the making.



(top) "Capital Studios, Connaught Place, Delhi" (1986)

(bottom) "Gate, Hyderabad" (1983)



These images contain two layers of eclecticism: firstly, the buildings within the frame are eclectic in themselves; secondly, we come across fragments of a modernist city, covered from time to time by colourful billboards, hoardings and posters that represent an imaginary cultural past. Moreover, Rahman's choice of black and white photography of these colourful streets seem to speak to other facets, such as philosopher Pliny's concept of colour as a distraction to the intensity of a subject, as well as nostalgia for a bygone era or semantic otherness. The image of the Connaught Place photo studio's windows covered with portraits of individuals from different spheres of life not only demonstrates a hierarchy of significance, similar to the pattern of scale divisions in Mysore traditional paintings, but also emphasizes the studio as a site where history is being made (even though its own architecture is invisible). In its visual montage, it echoes an 18th-century painting by Giovanni Paolo called "Gallery of Views of Ancient Rome".



(left) "Cobbler, Ernakulam" (1987)



(right) "Gents Urinal, Delhi" (1991)

Conclusion

Born into a cosmopolitan interfaith family, Rahman grew up with an inbuilt sense of eclecticism and multicultural tendencies that feeds into his works. He should be placed in the context of contemporaries like Sunil Janah, a senior photographer who captured ethnicity and industrial landscapes of an evolving nation, and Madan Mahatta, who framed the architects of modernist architecture against the backdrops of their projects, thus reinforcing their visual signatures or ownership of designs. Despite their stylistic differences, what unites these practitioners is their celebration of Bauhausian influences in the subcontinent. A lot of Rahman's works lean towards artistic activism, foregrounding the photographer's political viewpoints on various shocking historic moments from the 1990s and the shadows they cast on present political scenarios.

Rahman's interests also extend to curation of projects and exhibitions, compilation of archives of public images, and presentations on Delhi's modernist architecture, talks to which he brings in a chain of socio-political and visual narratives with a theoretically Marxian awareness. His attempt to structure a collective memory through photographs echoes a ritualistic invocation of spirits to reoccupy or re-inherit various spaces. His photographs also deploy a certain amount of ambiguity, when seen in relation to John Berger's statement: "a photograph celebrates neither the event itself, not the faculty of sight", [7] with the spectator oscillating between relative contemporariness and visual historiography. Rahman's artistic trajectory seems to prick and challenge archetypes through negotiation rather than confrontation—as seen in images like **Gate** (Hyderabad 1983), **Stalin** (Ernakulam, 1987) or **India Day Parade** (New York, 2002)—while retaining insight and a sense of ambiguity characteristic of the threshold of photographic gestalt.

All images in this essay are courtesy Ram Rahman.

Notes

[1] This observation is distilled from diverse sources, including Karl Marx's *Das Capital*, George Didi-Huberman's *Images In Spite of All*, Richard Bolton's edited collection *The Contest of Meaning: Critical History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin's *A Small History of Photography*, John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, and Steve Edwards's *Marxism and Photography: A Reading Guide*.

[2] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2007, as cited in Baetens Jan, "Conceptual Limitation of Our Reflections on Photography—The Question of Interdisciplinary," in *Photography Theory*, edited by Elkins James (Routledge, London, 2008), 2.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).

[4] Rabindranath Tagore, *On Art and Aesthetics* (Shantiniketan: Subarnarekha, 2005).

[5] Rahman captured this celebratory image of Humayun's Tomb in the 1990s, an era which saw a spate of communal violence and a demand for a revisionist look at Indian history, undermining the contributions of the Mughals to syncretic influences on native culture.

[6] Discussion with Ram Rahman.

[7] John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2013), 18.