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Decoding History Through Images: An Analysis of Select Photographs from Raghu Rai's 'A Tale of Two: An Outgoing and An Incoming Prime Minister'

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Abstract:

“To ignore photojournalism is to ignore history.”

-Howard Chapnick

Photographs articulate history. In the last few decades, photographs have become a numero uno means of conveying news. Capturing moments, photographs become visual testimonies of the bygone events, that can be re-looked and re-engaged with from time to time. Photographs are physical entities that furnish proofs of the past events. This paper studies two important photographs from Raghu Rai's book 'A Tale of Two: An Outgoing and An Incoming Prime Minister', published in 2014. The book contains a collection of Rai's works covering the 16th Lok Sabha elections. By using the theories of visual culture, the paper analyses the two photographs for a nuanced understanding of their technical, sociocultural and emotional aspects. Furthermore, these photographs, as visual documents of the elections, are studied for the effect they create by using the insights provided by affect theories. The paper highlights the importance of studying photographs to gain a nuanced understanding and profound perspective into historical events.

Keywords: Photojournalism, 16th Lok Sabha Elections, Visual Culture, Raghu Rai, Photography, History, Politics and Photography, History and Photography.

History, especially since the invention of the camera, shares a close and unbreakable relationship with photography. Photographs are non-neutral entities and can be used to create politically motivated narratives and discourses. According to Gillian Rose, photographs culturally construct our vision in various ways i.e. they create what she terms as 'visuality'. Photographs

collectively, over periods of time, create “regimes of truth” (Foucault), which Sofie Scheerlinck explains as “beliefs a society comes to value as true due to their socio-political and economic construction and perpetuation through institutions socially endowed with power, e.g. those involved in news production (16)”.

Photographs can be and have been used politically in the past as means of imposing the dominant viewpoint through the narratives that they create. The historical rhetoric that the photographs create might be pregnant with an underlining political dimension, suggestive of what the powerful wanted to depict to the masses. In the words of David Bate:

In this respect, it is clear that in the long history of human civilization, the ability to inscribe events, descriptions and traces is a site of social power: a means for some social groups to impose their will over others . . . A history that now involves photography in historical struggles, through their very accumulation in archives and in the computer, database is a means by which power is manifest. (248)

Eduardo Cadava points out in *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, “For Benjamin, history happens when something becomes present in passing away, when something lives in its death . . . History happens with photography” (128). Since photographs frame moments in time in particular ways, the dominant ideologies, can then be perpetuated through them by reprogramming human memories. “As sites of memory, photographic images (whether digital or analogue) offer not a view on history but, as mnemonic devices, are perceptual phenomena upon which a historical representation may be constructed. Social memory is interfered with by photography precisely because of its affective and subjective status” (Bate 255-56).

Raghu Rai is one of India’s leading photographers. He “has documented and frozen innumerable significant moments and faces, and has been adored as the country’s most influential photojournalist” (Sagar 1). Raghu Rai learnt photography from his brother S. Paul, a renowned photographer of his time. Raghu Rai became a photographer at the age of 23 and continues to work till date when he is 80 years old. Rai has worked with *The Statesman* (as its Chief Photographer), with *India Today* (as the Director of Photography) and *Magnum* (as a Photojournalist). In the words of Dawra, at India Today, “for over a decade, he delighted his editors with trailblazing picture essays that brilliantly captured the political, social, and cultural conscience of India” (3-4). His

work has been published in the world's most prestigious newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *Life*, *New Yorker*, *The Independent*, *GEO* etc. He has published more than 30 books which include titles such as *A Day in the life of Indira Gandhi (1974)*, *Faith and Compassion: The Life and Work of Mother Teresa (1996)*, *Exposure: Portrait Of A Corporate Crime (2004)*, *Mother Teresa: A Life of Dedication (2005)*, *Raghu Rai's India: Reflections in Colour (2008)*, *Bangladesh: The Price of Freedom (2013)* and *The Tale of Two: An Outgoing and an Incoming Prime Minister (2014)*.

Rai has won many awards and accolades during his career spanning over 50 years. Some of the most prestigious awards won by him include the *Padmashree* in 1972, *Photographer of the Year* in 1992 by USA, *Officier des Arts et des Lettres* by French government and *Lifetime Achievement Award* by Information and Broadcasting Ministry (I&B), India. In the words of Lakhani, "For the past 50 years, Raghu Rai has captured the entire gamut of life in India: from politics to industrial tragedies, from spiritual leaders to renowned musicians, artists and filmmakers, etc. The Magnum photographer shows no signs of slowing down" (1-2).

After more than two decades of taking photographs of the Gandhi family and their political movements, Rai entered the political territory again in 2014 before the central government elections. In the same year, a collection of his works covering the 16th Lok Sabha elections emerged in the form of a book titled *The Tale of Two: An Outgoing and an Incoming Prime Minister*. In this book, Rai has captured two prominent leaders, one the outgoing Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and the other the incoming Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi. In an interview with Somak Ghoshal, Rai states his reason for covering the elections in these words, "I had lost interest in photographing politicians after Indira Gandhi's death. Very few leaders were as strong as her, and also, the circumstances of the work changed remarkably over the years" (3). Damini Ralleigh, a correspondent with *The Indian Express* quotes Rai on his decision to photographically record the elections, "The perception of the Congress was that they are non-performers . . . While Manmohan was considered a good man, he was also looked upon as someone who had made no difference to the party or the country. On the other hand, Modi brought with him all that drama. I just couldn't stay away" (3-4).

The book is divided into two sections - the first part shows pictures from the Congress Working Committee and the second contains photos from the Bharatiya Janata Party National

Council meeting. “Rai uses a time-bound frame to order his images and build a narrative of irony and pathos, signifying the isolation of the ‘accidental prime minister’ in sharp relief to the ebullient force that defines Modi”, writes Vijayakrishnan (4). The contrast between the personalities of Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi shown by the photographs in this book shed light on the political scenario in 2014. The front cover of the book reads, “The one who did not speak a word. His silence was deafening and the other who spoke much and it was deafening! Our great Mahatma would have said ‘He spoke enough for both of us’. But perhaps the nation was longing to hear something” (R. Rai, “A Tale of Two”). The photograph from the book, which is first under study here, was taken by Rai on January 17, 2014, during an All India Congress Committee (AICC) session that was being held at Talkatora stadium in Delhi, where he spent five hours photographing (Press Trust of India, “Narendra Modi and Manmohan Singh through Raghu Rai’s lens” 2).



Rai, Raghu. “January 17, 2014, 11:24 A.M.” *Scroll.in*, 26 June 2014, scroll.in/roving/667810/raghu-rai-captures-modi-in-victory-manmohan-in-defeat

During the session, Rai observed the whole scene with an acute eye and it felt strange to

him that when Manmohan Singh entered the stage, nobody spoke to him or got up to greet him. From his experience, Rai believed that since the Prime Minister is always the leader, he or she would be given due attention. He tells Bawa, “I was there for five long hours. He did not speak to anybody. No one spoke with him. He was a lonely, tortured man. As if he did not exist, leave alone being the prime minister of a country. It was shameful and shocking” (7). Looking at the photograph one can see how Manmohan Singh is sitting with a blank expression on his face and humility in his posture. This is in stark contrast to the photographs that Rai took of Indira Gandhi in the 1960s-1980s or the ones he took of Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, even before he assumed office. After the session, when Rai perused the photographs that he had captured, he said he was pained by what he saw and wrote in his book that, on seeing the pictures, he’d asked himself, “Who has done this to him [Manmohan Singh] and why have they done it to him or has he done it to himself?”

When Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power in 2004, Manmohan Singh became the Prime Minister of India and was re-elected after a five years term. As per the photograph, the man who served the country for a decade as the Prime Minister seems to have been reduced to a pitiable condition. In Rai’s words, “Earlier on I have photographed and experienced in various political sessions of leading parties, relationships, manipulations, sycophancy and power play. But the prime minister of the day used to be the focus of attention and interest and everyone in the party looked up to him for an interaction or even a smile”, which was utterly missing in case of Manmohan Singh who continued to bear an expression of gloom throughout the meeting. Even when he entered the stage, he walked behind Sonia Gandhi and sat far from her and Rahul Gandhi. The only time he gave a reluctant smile was when the three of them were garlanded together (Press trust of India, “Narendra Modi and Manmohan Singh through Raghu Rai’s lens” 2).

Being one of the most learned and scholarly Prime Ministers India has ever had, Singh was held in high regard by many prominent leaders, diplomats and writers including Henry Kissinger and Khushwant Singh, who famously wrote in his 2010 co-authored with Humra Quraishi book *Absolute Khushwant: The Low-down on Life, Death, and Most Things In-between*, “When people talk of integrity, I say the best example is the man who occupies the country's highest office” (71). He was widely lauded for the development India made during his first term as the Prime Minister

when he launched robust schemes such as liberalization of economy to ensure the country's economic growth. Apart from this, during his tenure, the government started the 'National Rural Health Mission', strengthened anti-terror laws, passed 'Right to Information' act and attempted to increase employment of especially people from rural areas under 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)', 2005.

However, during his second term as the Prime Minister, things became different. Sanjaya Baru, a media advisor to him during his first term, revealed in his book titled *The Accidental Prime Minister: The Making and Unmaking of Manmohan Singh* that there ended up being "two centres of power" in the UPA government's second term, i.e. the party President Sonia Gandhi seized power for herself, to whose authority Manmohan Singh ultimately resigned. Singh has been criticized for his silence when the government came under trouble for several scams that corrupt leaders in the party had been committing. In the photograph shot by Rai, Singh sits with a desolate expression and this "stoic grim expression" on his face, writes Vijayakrishnan, "is the most arresting, affective bit of the book and the central seed of this project" (5). Throughout the meeting when Rai was taking pictures of Singh, he said there was same expression on Singh's face, "as if he was living a nightmare" (R. Rai, Press trust of India, "Narendra Modi and Manmohan Singh through Raghu Rai's lens" 2). He further adds, "Those few hours that I was there at the Congress session, nobody came to discuss or share anything with him as if he did not matter anymore. He looked isolated, ignored and deserted" (2).

Don Slater writes in his work *Domestic photography and Digital Culture*, "We construct ourselves *for* the image and *through* the image" (134). Anwandter adds that "Our relationship to our photographic image becomes a reflection of consumerist ideology, whereby we turn to commodities in structuring our identity . . . Because we live in a hyper-visual culture, we are continually aware of how we are presenting ourselves" (8). However, if we refer to the photograph under study, then Manmohan Singh seems to be unconcerned about the image he is projecting to the outer world. As a person, he is decent, graceful and without pretence; his silence throughout the meeting is epitomized in this single monochromatic frame. One can observe in the background the photographs of famous congress leaders of the past, such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sarojini Naidu and Subhas Chandra Bose. This is one of the ways for political parties to gather

support from people and to create favorable emotional response by using pathos associated with the idolized leaders of the past. The way Rai has chosen to frame this photograph i.e. by including the poster in the background further enhances the downheartedness of Singh. The famous faces in the background are more animated than him and can be seem smiling. The frame is balanced on both sides with equal negative space, and the focal point remains Manmohan Singh, whose expression and posture carry the visual weight of the photograph. After covering this meeting, Rai decided to go and cover the BJP's National Council meeting at Ramlila Grounds on 19th January 2014.

When Rai reached at the site of BJP National Council meeting, just a day after the Congress meeting, he observed that, "All senior leaders of BJP were presiding under larger-than-life headshots of Narendra Modi which formed the backdrop of the main stage . . . Each of these leaders got up to speak, Modi's image looking out over their heads. It was clear that Modi was to be the projection of the day" (Press Trust of India, "Narendra Modi and Manmohan Singh through Raghu Rai's lens" 3). Ghoshal quotes Rai, saying "There was every emotion and drama going on at the BJP meeting" (3). Rai narrates the trail of events to Bawa, "I saw LK Advani, Arun Jaitley and everyone else looking very serious. Modi entered and the crowd went 'Modi, Modi, Modi'" (7). He further recounts the highlight event of the meeting:

Then Modi stood up to speak. A newly programmed, well-designed, well-worded campaign declamation came pouring out of him with proper emotional punctuations. The audience listened spellbound. He projected himself as a comprehensive and well-aware leader of a party that was missing ever since Vajpayee withdrew from active political life. (R. Rai, "Narendra Modi and Manmohan Singh through Raghu Rai's lens" 3)

Here is the photograph Rai took to present the contrast between the outgoing Prime Minister and Modi:



Rai, Raghu. "January 19, 2014." *Scroll.in*, 26 June 2014, <https://scroll.in/roving/667810/raghu-rai-captures-modi-in-victory-manmohan-in-defeat>

As seen in this photograph, back in 2014, before the elections, the BJP candidate for Prime Ministership, Narendra Modi, spoke confidently with vehement gestures. Hailing from a humble background, Narendra Modi, gradually moved his way up from being a member of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) since 1971, to being deputed to BJP in 1985, to becoming an Organizing secretary of BJP's Gujarat unit in 1987 (Marino 48). Gradually, he became a very prominent and in 2001 became the Chief Minister of Gujarat, an office he held till 2014. The 2014 election campaigns by BJP, undertaken mainly by Modi, used many tactics to mobilize masses and presented him as the ideal candidate for prime ministership. His messages revolved around development of India, unity amongst masses and good governance. In an article titled "Just the Right Image", Shamni Pande quotes political analyst Manisha Priyam to describe the effect of Modi's campaigns, "The impact of this relentless campaigning has been felt across different age groups, geographies and sections of society. I have even heard young children, far removed from such debate, mentioning the word 'NaMo'" (4).

There was a radical difference that Rai observed between Singh and Modi. Taken from a vantage point, with a shallow depth of field, Rai's composition foregrounds Modi's powerful style of speaking. In this frame, one can see a similarity or sync between the BJP symbol, the lotus and the gesture made by Modi's hands. While the previous photograph had other faces in the background,

Modi's photograph is full of himself. On being questioned about his inclinations towards both the parties and their prime candidates, Rai told Ghoshal that, "My loyalty is not to one party or a politician but to the spirit of the moment" (1). In an interview with Khushboo Joshi, Rai once said that a "Perfect photograph is the one that captures the real feelings and strengths of a particular situation" (3). This statement is true in the context of the present photograph. According to Vijayakrishnan, there is a "certain candidness" evoked by Modi's photograph that was "taken in moments of 'being' rather than 'posing'" (4). According to the insights provided by Affect Theories, politics is "not simply as a set of ideas that are neutrally and objectively evaluated, but as a performance. And like all performances, power is a dynamic between actors and audience . . . Whereas rhetorical analysis asks how affects are being mobilized to achieve certain political objectives, affect theorists argue that politics is being done in order to achieve certain affects" (Schaefer 2). Just as Rai is an expert in the field of photography, as he has proven it multiple times, Modi is an expert in politics and knows how to achieve his ambitious goals through rhetoric, especially through pathos.

When both the political portraits are examined side by side, they present "the differences in the public image of, and party positions occupied by, Singh and Modi" and present a disparity between Singh's "silence" and Modi's "effervescence" (Vijayakrishnan 4). In the words of Neha Dani, while Singh looks like an "isolated man who looked resigned to his fate", Modi comes across as someone who speaks "to his supporters with confidence and purpose" (2). The photographs in the book make a strong argument about the difference between the two leaders and present a sincere picture of political competitors in India in 2014. According to the description of the book *The Tale Of Two: An Outgoing And An Incoming Prime Minister at Author's Upfront*, "Both are photographed amidst the cacophony of their party meetings, but there is a silence at the centre. One is tinged by despair, the other by a sense of overwhelming power" (1). Ghoshal has also commented on the contrasts shown in the book, in these words, "Arranged one after the other in Rai's new book, *The Tale Of Two: An Outgoing And An Incoming Prime Minister*, these two sets of photographs present a study in contrasts—at once full of irony and pathos. If the outgoing prime minister looks conspicuous for his lack of will, the one waiting in the wings impresses with his will to triumph" (3). Back in 2014, there was indeed what many called "the Modi wave" in the country, which led to a tremendous victory to BJP led National Democratic Alliance. BJP and its allies won the elections with a high majority and Modi became the 14th Prime Minister of India.

Both the photographs evoke different kinds of emotions in the viewers. While Singh's photograph, largely through body language and expressions, evokes the emotions of pity, distress, diffidence and dejection, Modi's photograph arouses interest, excitement and hope. Rai himself believed firmly in the medium he practices to record events and has stated more than once in his interviews that "The purpose of photography is to capture the time we live in. History can be written and re-written, but photo history [or visual history] cannot ever be re-written. It will remain etched in the frame of time forever" (Dawra 1; Bawa 3). In his book *A Tale of Two*, Rai has chronicled the election campaigns of the two largest competing parties by capturing the aura of their prime leaders through his camera. Varma praises Rai in these words, "His pictures do speak more than a thousand words and continue to dazzle people across the planet . . . His photos on a wide spectrum of social, economic and political issues have won many awards and have been widely acclaimed the world over" (1).

No other photojournalist has so thoroughly explored and represented India as Rai has. Rai's body of work is an embodiment of his sincerity and his passion towards photography. Always creative and consistently trying to tell a powerful story, Rai captures the intensity of emotions as revealed by nature, people and situations in their exceptional moments. His coverage of India's landscape, its people and its major political, social, cultural and tragic events has aesthetically presented the nation to the domestic and outside world. He phrases it this way, "India lives in different centuries at the same time, in the same place. My job is to reveal the human experience in trying to negotiate this tension" (Dawra). For more than 50 years now, one of India's "most devoted archivist", Rai "has been elevating the humdrum news photograph into an art form" (Bamzai). He is one the most passionate and devoted photojournalists of India and describes his enthusiasm for his profession to a reporter from *Time of India* in these words, "I go like a wild man and shoot so intensely that even breathing, I find, is a waste of time" (1).

Rai's photographs of Indian politicians Dr. Manmohan Singh and Mr. Narendra Modi mark a relationship between politics and affect. It shows, to quote Schaefer that "The political is not just occasionally interrupted by affect. It is affect" (2). The photographs show a complex set of emotions influencing the viewer's opinion about the political leaders and their choice in elections. Historical photographs function as sites that can reveal various nuances and insights into the human past when studied contextually. Researching historical photograph, along with their political and subjective intent, by using the interpretive acumen offered by Visual Studies, can open up new dimensions of historical

understanding. With our culture becoming increasingly visual, photojournalistic images will become indispensable for studying, negotiating and re-negotiating history.

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