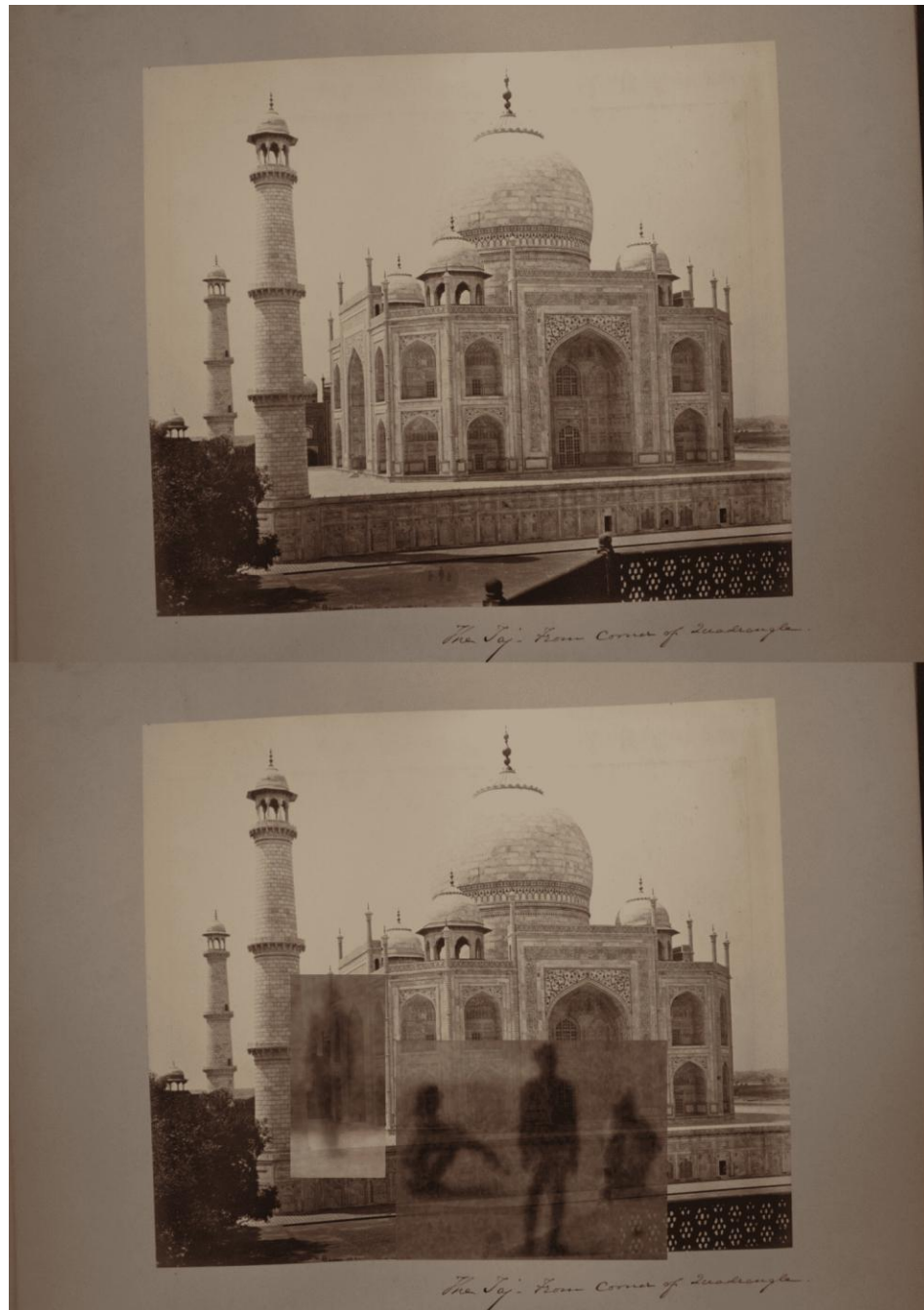


# Focusing People, Not Objects: Photography and Selective Narratives in Colonial India

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**Figure 1.** "The Taj from Corner of Quadrangle," photograph by Samuel Bourne, ca. 1860, Taj Mahal, Agra, India. CU Boulder Rare and Distinctive Collections. Edited version by Spandan Koirala, the author.

Photography has a surprisingly long history despite perceptions of it as a modern technology. Some scholars argue that it originated in the Islamic Golden Age with camera obscura, dark rooms with a pinhole used by artists to help trace out scenes. The historical artifact I chose to remix comes from much later, during the 1860s. This photograph of the Taj Mahal, taken from the upper floor of a nearby tower, shows three figures in the courtyard and one guard at the entrance of the building. By changing the size and focus of certain elements in the photograph, I aim to highlight the Indian people in the image, who are often treated as background figures, while the architecture and natural beauty of Britain's newly acquired spoils are emphasized. The image's focus on one element over another reveals the priorities of both the photographer and British imperial society.

Emphasizing the people rather than the architecture of this very famous building changes the meaning of the artifact by placing this wonder of the world as background to the people living around it. This stands in contrast to the original version of the photo, where the person near the entrance is barely noticeable at first look. Resizing small portions of the image also degrades the quality to the point where the figures are still relatively difficult to discern. This reflects the limitations of the material we are working with—the photos have degraded over time, so their limited resolution means that enlarging small elements results in blurriness. This technical

constraint also ties into the meaning of the photograph: it is difficult to truly emphasize certain aspects of the artifact because the original material provides so little to work with. The minimal size of the people in the shot reveals British imperial photographer Samuel Bourne's disregard for the local population, which is further emphasized in his writings, where he states: "I was told by a missionary there that these wretched creatures marry amongst themselves! Can any idea be any more horrible?" (Bourne 1866, 175). This quote, referring to Indians with leprosy, demonstrates Bourne's dehumanizing perspective and shows the standard attitude of British colonizers at the time, documented in his published work.

My analysis reveals cultural and political implications by emphasizing people rather than the Taj Mahal, which contradicts the political landscape of the time. The photograph was taken shortly after the British took control of India and documents their colonial acquisitions. Images such as this one were intended for the colonial officers stationed in India and tourists, not for local people. Colonialism is further displayed through the perspective and subject matter of the photos. Northern India's natural beauty and grand architecture are the main subjects, while the local people who exist alongside these features—and the society that built and maintained these great architectural achievements—are reduced to little more than set dressing for the photograph. This marginalization

extends to those who assisted Bourne and basically made his expedition even possible, including to the point of even carrying him over difficult terrain (Bourne, 474). He does not even mention their names, instead referring to them as “coolies”—a derogatory term for laborers who were often pressed into service.

These photographs have deep implications for memory politics in modern-day India as well. The photographic records of this period are defined by the colonial forces that support a particular historical view. By relegating people to the background of images, their stories are similarly backgrounded—stories that are not often told. British Imperialism heavily relied on exploiting precolonial political structures to maintain control over vast territories. Those already in political power, such as the Nawabs and those of higher caste, were usually kept in their positions if they were willing to work for the colonial power structure. Consequently, their perspectives are often the only representations of Indians under British rule. Those who appear in the background of these images were likely of lower castes, as they would have been the ones performing physical labor. Even if they wrote down their experiences, these accounts are not likely to have made it into archives, as they would not have been part of neat collections that could easily be sent to and categorized in a national archive.

In conclusion, the lack of focus on the people of India in Samuel Bourne’s photographic series

*CJAS* Summer 2025, Vol. 12 Issue 1 reveals the racist and dehumanizing view held by British colonialists toward Indians. By editing and creating a collage that places the emphasis on the people that happened to be captured in this picture of the Taj Mahal, viewers are forced to notice them and wonder about their stories and what they were doing there, rather than seeing them as random figures in the shot. Creating curiosity about Indian people who are not typically the focus of colonial photographs encourages deeper engagement with the art, the context in which it was created, and how it affects how history is remembered. After photography's invention, photographs were often perceived as mirrors of reality rather than what they truly are—subjective lenses shaped by the photographer's biases and intentions.

#### **Photograph Info:**

“The Taj from Corner of Quadrangle,” photograph by Samuel Bourne, ca. 1860, Taj Mahal, Agra, India. CU Boulder Rare and Distinctive Collections.

#### **Bibliography**

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