The Anti-Camera

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I recently came across M.N. Srinivas' observation that his enthusiastic engagement with photography, during his fieldwork in Mysore in the late 1940s, earned him the nickname "chamara man". He notes that in Kannada *chamara* denotes whisks made of the long hair from a yak's tails used by servants to keep flies away from Rajas and by priests to preserve the purity of icons.

In the Madhya Pradesh village where I have worked intermittently since 1982 you will hear echoes of the metaphor that informs the South Indian description of Srinivas as "chamara man". For instance, Jagdish Sharma, the pujari of the Krishna temple once joked that my video camera embodied "yantra, mantra, [and] tantra", yantra being the design ("made in Japan"), mantra being the information it stored, and tantra being the magic of technology (its "mashinari").

Chamara whisks (called *chanvar* in Hindi and *pichhi* in Malwi) feature in printed images of deities (for instance of the renouncer king Ramdevji's devotees) and serve not only as devices for conferring value and signaling one's devotion but are often, when deployed in pairs a means of establishing frontality and symmetry which are key elements in local photographic aesthetics. Jains dance with whisks in temple festivals (for instance on the occasion of the *pran pratishtha* of a new *murti*), temples often display them by the deity's throne, and village shamans use peacock whisks to confer protective and curative blessings. The cameraman as chamaraman directs our attention to the expectation in rural India that photography, contra Walter Benjamin is usually seen as a mechanism for the preservation and consolidation of aura, rather than its destruction.

Frequently, photographs that I like villagers find puzzling because they lack frontality and symmetry, are not full body, and may catch people in informal poses or expressions which diverge from the idealized self image they hope to present to the camera. It is in this context that it becomes useful to make explicit that "mantra" (in its earlier usage by Jagdish Sharma) is conceptualized as something very different from the contingency that Benjamin theorized, the exorbitant flow of information that made possible the optical unconscious. Benjamin's approach to photography valorizes practitioners such as Rodchenko and Blossfeldt. He celebrates photography's "optical unconscious", its screen - its disruptive cut-offness, its surrealistic potential to create new revolutionary alignments, and film's ability to slow things down and speed things up so as to destabilize the familiar reality to which ordinary human vision binds us. These are all aspects of the threat that the camera poses to traditional "cultic" and "auratic" hierarchy.

A manoratha, recording devotees with an image of the god Shrinathji, illustrating how photography attempts to suppress contingency through the symmetrical staging of respect for an image within an image

The photograph as mantra brings with it a sense of something highly skilled, something learned and perfectly executed. In the village you will often hear mantras [such as "Om aim hrim clim"] articulated in such a careful manner that your attention is drawn to the materiality of sound and to the understanding that efficacy resides in perfect pronunciation. It is expected that cameras should be used in a similar way (this might be one route to understanding the expectation that villagers have that a re-photographed image of a mourned relative is likely to produce a better image than the original). Formality and re-framing, through which respect is performed to the image are dominant aspects of local photographic practice. Against this background Srinivas's self-deprecation of his photographic skills and all his talk of photographs as mere "snaps" shines

through as charmingly disingenuous, for his efforts and skills were evidently highly regarded by villagers. If we take the "chamara man" metaphor seriously then they conceived of themselves as kings or gods and Srinivas as a servant or *pujari* attending to their needs.

I contemplated the revolutionary potential of the camera last November in central India. I had been thinking about M.N. Srinivas's metaphorical association between the camera and technologies which help present divine and political power in their most potent and perfected form (sanctified, auratic, symmetrical, and if possible devoid of contingency) and how this might be thought of as a local supra-altern ontology of photography.

In central India I observed the visit of a Jain guru, Lokendra, to the village in which I was staying. He had come to perform the installation of a statue commemorating an important Jain (Bhairav

Bharatiya) who had been murdered during Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-77), and also to inaugurate a spice packaging plant run by Bhairav's grandson. The mix of political radicalism and cultic conservatism (Bhairav was an atheist communist now being serenaded by a religious renouncer), and of peasant socialism and capitalism was compelling. Then, in the Jain household in which I was living I found myself photographing Guru Lokendra's *chanvar* – his silver handled whisks, which should ideally, in this part of India, be made with hair from the tail of a *surya gai*, ie a 'sun cow' or free cow that lives in the forest. As I photographed these powerful instruments I found myself thinking of Benjamin's insistence that photography has a destiny or outcome that is "native" to it. I knew that Benjamin would have been both fascinated by and hostile to these whisks.

Chanvar while not exactly 'cameras' are devices for how to look and behold. One might think of them as constituent elements of that very re-auraticizing "frame" which Bazin had argued was destroyed by photography's "screen". From the perspective of Bazin or Benjamin they might be best thought of as "anti-cameras", technologies of representation caught up in an antagonistic relationship to photography.