

## Along the Grand Trunk Road: The Photography of Raghubir Singh

Chaya Chandrasekhar

**Abstract:** For more than two millennia, the historic Grand Trunk Road, the busy thoroughfare that extends some 1500 miles through north India and Pakistan, served as the main artery of South Asia. It was also the gateway through which waves of immigrants, travelers, and invaders entered the subcontinent. As a result, a great deal of diversity and tolerance marks the road. Between 1988 and 1991, Raghubir Singh (1942-1999), one of India's renowned documentary photographers, traveled and photographed the Indian stretch of the Road. Ninety-six photographs from his journeys appear in the publication, *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India* (1995). Singh used the pictorial style of street photography that he is known for to capture everyday life along the path. Further, he emphasized the tremendous diversity he witnessed along the road through the selections he made for inclusion in the book and the specific manner in which he arranged many of them. By underscoring the heterogeneity, Singh provided a critical visual commentary on the political climate in India during the 1980s and early nineties. This period coincided with the rise of Hindu nationalism, which aimed to erase the subcontinent's diverse past and promote instead the idea of a homogenous/Hindu India. By documenting the road in his uniquely pictorial style and arranging the photographs in his book to draw attention to differences and tolerance witnessed along the path, Singh demonstrated that India was not monolithic, as the politics of the time claimed, but a rich interwoven fabric of many varied strands.

**Keywords** South Asia; India; Raghubir Singh; Grand Trunk; photography; street photography; pictorial style

The historic Grand Trunk Road cuts a swathe through north India, running from Bengal in the east to the Punjab in the west. On the other side of the border, it continues through Pakistan, reaching beyond Peshawar in the North-West Frontier Province. For over two millennia, this busy thoroughfare that extends some 1500 miles has served as the main artery of South Asia. So vital is the Grand Trunk Road to the subcontinent's long history that Raghubir Singh (1942-1999), one of India's eminent documentary photographers, traveled and photographed the Indian stretch of the route between 1988 and 1991. Ninety-six photographs from his journeys appear in his book, *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India*, which was published in 1995.<sup>1</sup> Singh is known for his style of pictorial street photography, which he has described as "the old *Life* magazine kind of photography."<sup>2</sup> A self-taught artist, he used the gaze of an observant traveler to develop lyrical photo essays of everyday life in India's cities and towns, and on its highways.<sup>3</sup> Singh's photographs of the Grand Trunk Road, or GT, show ordinary, albeit aesthetically charged, moments along the path: busy pavement shops; pedestrians and commuters in various towns and cities; overturned trucks and stalled traffic on the road; political rallies; and visitors to the Taj Mahal, the Golden Temple, and other sites along the route. Singh's colorful and picturesque style lends itself well to presenting the hypnotic culture along South Asia's main thoroughfare.

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However, it is his precise selection and arrangement of photographs for *The Grand Trunk Road*, in addition to the photographs themselves, which provide a critical visual commentary, and speak to the broader political issues of his time.

Singh chose and organized the images in *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India* to highlight the diversity that he witnessed along this crucial path. Pluralism and the acceptance of differences have long remained hallmarks of South Asian history and pervade the Grand Trunk Road, which has for over two thousand years served as the primary thoroughfare for travelers entering and exiting the subcontinent. By underscoring this heterogeneity through his creative choices, Singh critiques the political climate in India during the late 1980s and early 90s. At this time, Hindu-Muslim tensions intensified and violent communal strife erupted. Many of these sectarian conflicts found their origins in the politics of partition, the dividing of British India along religious lines into what was seen as Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. Armed gates at the India-Pakistan border, raised after partition, continue to underscore the political impasse. Singh chose to photograph the Grand Trunk Road, which, despite the strained politics, continues to connect the two nations. By documenting the road in his uniquely pictorial style and arranging the photographs in his book to draw attention to the diversity, general tolerance, and accommodation witnessed along it, Singh lays bare a cultural actuality markedly different from the divisive political climate in India at the time.

The slogan “unity in diversity” that is frequently used to describe pluralism in twentieth-century India also points to the long tradition of tolerance that has generally characterized the subcontinent. This is not to suggest an over-simplified, utopic history of India, without periods of violent conflict and severe persecution. Rather, the slogan highlights the ability of the subcontinent’s population to coexist, more or less amicably, even with tremendous cultural, political, and economic disparities. Indeed, several scholars have convincingly argued that despite fundamental dissimilarities among communities, as well as deep-rooted dislikes and resentments that people might harbor for each other, a surprising degree of diversity and acceptance has persisted throughout much of the subcontinent’s long and turbulent history. For example, Amartya Sen in his *Argumentative Indian* establishes that the subcontinent boasts a longstanding tradition of broad thinking, reasoned dialogue, and the accommodation of dissenting views.<sup>4</sup> Ashis Nandy describes India as exemplary of “radical diversities,” or the ability of people to live with cultural differences that oppose their own fundamental beliefs. Nandy notes that diversity in India does not mean that different communities entirely shed the distrust they might have, or the dislike they might feel, for each other. Nevertheless, fully aware of the prejudices on both sides, they accept each other as part of the Indian whole.<sup>5</sup> Shashi Tharoor is another proponent of the view that Indian identity is constructed in diversity:

Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces: ancient Hindu tradition, myth, and scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and two centuries of British colonial rule. The result is unique, not just because of the variety of contemporary influences available in India, but because of the diversity of its heritage... Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India’s geography and reaffirmed by its history.<sup>6</sup>

India’s diversity is especially pervasive and visible along the Grand Trunk Road, as the highway marks an ancient path that linked the kingdoms and people of the subcontinent to each other, as well as to the outside world. As far back as the fourth century BCE, when the Mauryas established the first Indian empire (c. 323-185 BCE), the Royal Road, the ances-

tor of the Grand Trunk Road, connected the capital city, Pataliputra, with points west and east. Megasthenes (c. 350-290 BCE), the Seleucid ambassador to the court of the emperor Chandragupta Maurya (r. c. 323-297 BCE), wrote an early account of India that provided a description of the road.<sup>7</sup> He underscored the multi-cultural makeup of the trail and its relative accommodation for differences when he noted that international trade flourished along the route, and that foreign merchants were afforded special care and attention.<sup>8</sup> Following waves of Islamic invaders,<sup>9</sup> who gradually established their new religion in the subcontinent, Zahir ud-din Babur (1483-1530) arrived along the route in 1526 and laid the foundations of the mighty Mughal Empire, the most prominent and influential of Islamic dynasties in South Asia.<sup>10</sup> The road today is officially named Sher Shah Suri Marg, after the sixteenth-century Pashtun Afghan who briefly displaced the Mughals to take control of Delhi. Sher Shah Suri (1540-1555) refurbished the old road<sup>11</sup> and further established safe and comfortable *serais*, which accommodated the needs of diverse travelers.<sup>12</sup>

The thoroughfare also formed a capillary of the great Silk Road, the network of routes that facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges across Eurasia.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have long recognized the religious diversity and cultural exchange that flourished along the Silk Road.<sup>14</sup> This network saw the transmission of a number of religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism, originating in India, was the most influential export from the subcontinent to also use this route. Not surprisingly then, the pluralism witnessed along the Silk Road permeated its Indian branch.

Under East India Company rule in 1839, the British paved the ancient path and called it the Grand Trunk Road.<sup>15</sup> Allowing the movement of troops from one garrison town to another as it connected the vast stretch of the empire from Calcutta to Kabul, the road was the lifeline of British India. Together with the railway, it permitted the transportation of goods and lucrative trade, which fed the imperial economy.<sup>16</sup> Rudyard Kipling in his 1901 novel, *Kim*, describes the route as:

... the Big Road...the Great Road which is the backbone of all of Hind... All castes and kinds of men move here... It runs straight...for fifteen hundred miles—such a river of life as nowhere exists in the world.<sup>17</sup>

Like so many observers before him, Kipling marveled at the constant flow of humanity on the road and recognized the heterogeneous makeup of the multitudes. For more than two thousand years visitors, immigrants, and invaders, whether their motivations were peaceful or aggressive, made their way into India through the northern arterial path. Raghbir Singh's photographs capture the continuing propensity of these diverse populations to coexist, accommodating, though sometimes grudgingly, each others' fundamental differences.

In the introductory essay to *The Grand Trunk Road*, Singh recalls how he covered the path in a manner similar to nineteenth-century European surveyors:

I travelled slowly...doing a distance of sixty to eighty miles a day, which approximated the distances travelled...by the nineteenth-century photographers like Samuel Bourne, Colin Murray, and Felice Beato.<sup>18</sup>

The colonial photographers, directed by the "picturesque" tradition of British landscape painting, focused on panoramic views of monuments along the path, which proclaimed the subcontinent's majestic past.<sup>19</sup> For instance, colonial representations of the Taj Mahal, though grand and monumental, noticeably lack people at the site. If people do appear in the frame, they are inconspicuous against a backdrop of the imposing structure. As Ariela

Freedman observes, the colonial photographers saw, without a problem, “a densely populated, vibrant country as a series of beautiful but elegiac monuments to the past. It takes a great deal of effort to photograph an empty Taj Mahal.”<sup>20</sup> Such an effort was worthwhile for the colonial photographers because the buildings, rather than the people who populated them, made up their vision of the subcontinent.

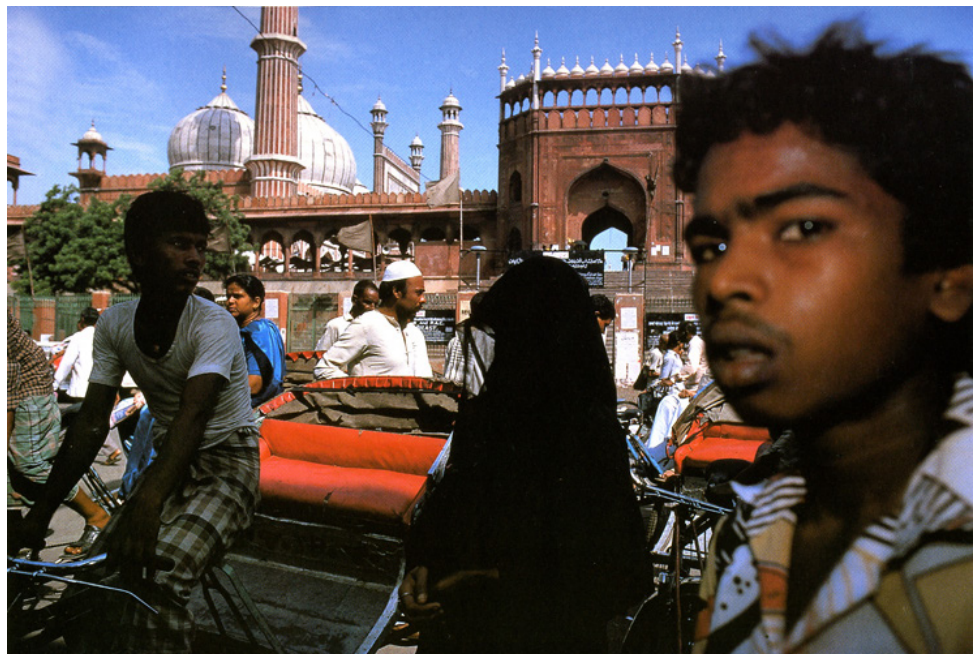
By contrast, Singh privileges the individual and the ordinary over the historically monumental. In the introduction to *The Grand Trunk Road*, he asserts:

I have looked at *the Grand Trunk Road* with a democratic eye, the eye that cuts monument and majesty down to size, and places equal importance on the truck driver...the groundsman at the Taj with his broom, the Sikh farmer, the housewife in her shack...and so many others who make *the Grand Trunk Road* a living panorama of north India's people.<sup>21</sup>

Freedman compares one of Singh's photographs of the Taj Mahal with those made by nineteenth-century European surveyors.<sup>22</sup> Singh's image reveals a close up of five visitors at the site. Four of the five people make eye contact with the camera as they walk toward the proper left of the composition. A young woman, closest to the viewer and facing in the opposite direction, draws the eye back into the picture. Rather than a panoramic view of the monument, the Taj's distinctive white marble architecture tightly frames the figures. The photograph is more a portrait of the individuals than a landscape featuring the historic building. Freedman concludes, “By displacing this iconic monument to desire, which has also stood for the western desire for India, Singh emphasizes the Indian subject rather than India as object.”<sup>23</sup> Singh's emphasis of the individual over the monumental allowed him to capture everyday life along the Grand Trunk Road. By making this choice, Singh is able to demonstrate in his *The Grand Trunk Road* book that the masses coexist despite their vast cultural, political, and ideological differences.

Another photograph from *The Grand Trunk Road* similarly differs from typical colonial representations of important sites and monuments in India (Figure 1). In this image, Singh brings into focus the hustle and bustle of the street outside the Jama Masjid, Delhi. In the center of the composition is a Muslim woman dressed in a black *burqa*, which covers her

Figure 1: Raghubir Singh, Jama Masjid and Bazaar Crowd, Delhi  
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face and body. A cycle rickshaw driver on his bike appears in the proper right foreground, while the close up of a young man's face, looking directly into the lens, occupies the left. Pedestrians, including a man in the white *tāqīyah* prayer cap that Muslims wear, busily move about in the middle ground. Sections of the distinctive red sandstone and white marble walls, arches, domes, and minarets of the mosque appear in the background. As in the photograph of the visitors at the Taj Mahal, in this example Singh brings into focus the people on the Grand Trunk Road, rather than the ancient monuments emptied of buoyant life.

Singh's approach of focusing on the ordinary and the individual rather than the monumental on the Grand Trunk Road may have been inspired by the Bengali writer, artist, and filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). Singh was born into a wealthy Rajput household in Jaipur, Rajasthan. In 1961, he moved to Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) where he began his photographic career and came into contact with Ray. Singh recounts Ray's influence on him: "In Calcutta, through my contact with Satyajit Ray and his work—deeply rooted in the pictorial, rising out of the communal spirit of India... I received an uplifting education."<sup>24</sup> Singh's method of focusing on the individual echoes Ray's own preoccupation with commemorating the local and the microcosm throughout his filmic work.

The majority of Ray's films are in the local Bengali language and set in Bengal. When asked in an interview why Ray made films, he replied, "Apart from the actual creative work, filmmaking is exciting because it brings me closer to my country and my people."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Singh's photographic oeuvre is a keenly observed visual and emotional response to India.<sup>26</sup> Singh asserts, "The breath I take is deeply Indian because all my working life I have photographed my country. In doing so, I have been carried by the flow of the inner river of India's life and culture."<sup>27</sup>

Ray and Singh were profoundly connected to India, and their broad and absorptive outlooks were undoubtedly shaped by South Asia's long ethos of diversity and general acceptance. In an insightful essay, Amartya Sen demonstrates how Ray's writing and films highlighted the differences between various local cultures and the importance of intercultural connections and communications:

In emphasizing the need to honor the individuality of each culture, Ray saw no reason for closing the doors to the outside world. Indeed, opening doors was an important priority of Ray's work... Ray appreciated the importance of heterogeneity within local communities.<sup>28</sup>

Singh similarly acknowledged that in photographing India he witnessed the rich diversity of people, artistic traditions, ways of life, and influences from both the west and the east, which have enriched and deepened the Indian spirit:

In India, I am on court, the tennis player's court, where the ball has to be hit to the edge of the camera frame, so that it raises dust, but yet it is inside. Within the tension of those frame lines, there is the buoyant spirit of Kotah painting; and there is the Zen of sight and sense... I have looked at the densely Indian characters of R.K. Narayan, I have looked at the acute analysis of today's India in the prose of V.S. Naipaul... I have looked at the pictorialism and bazaar energy of Salman Rushdie's fiction... I have looked at the Thames-side pictorialism pitched by Anish Kapoor, the Indian-born sculptor... I put within my frame the ancient sites, the crossings, the confluences of rivers... the big and small roads, the big and small cities...<sup>29</sup>

For people like Ray and Singh, who deeply advocated and celebrated diversity, the politi-

cal shift that occurred in India during the 1980s and early 90s, which threatened to undo the long history of general tolerance and acceptance in the subcontinent, would have been deeply troubling. This period witnessed the resurgence of the Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, and the rapid rise of its political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Hindutva ideology aims to present India as a purely Hindu nation. Its agenda espouses religious binaries to claim Hinduism's superiority over other traditions. This narrow view alienates religious minorities and threatens India's history of by and large accommodating sectarian differences, impeding twentieth-century aims to forge and maintain a pluralistic democracy. The BJP led the nation as part of a coalition government in 1998, but lost support in 2004 in large measure due to its overly zealous religious conservatism.<sup>30</sup> Singh said little publicly about his political views and opinions on the Hindutva. However, the photographs he selects for inclusion in *The Grand Trunk Road*, and their deliberate arrangement to create specific visual narratives within the book, betray his desire to underplay the partisan politics of his time and present instead an India that is not the purview of Hindus or Hinduism alone, but a domain that belongs equally to Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and numerous other religious and secular factions. For example, in *The Grand Trunk Road*, on the page across

Figure 2: Raghubir Singh, A Scooter-Taxi, New Delhi

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from the image of the Jama Masjid (Figure 1), is a tightly framed photograph of an interior of an autorickshaw in New Delhi (Figure 2). The viewer gets a glimpse of only the auto driver's arm resting on the vehicle's meter-reader. The focus of the picture is a colorful print of Hindu gods and goddesses, which conveys the driver's religious affiliation. The two photographs—the grand Muslim mosque with its patrons and the Hindu autorickshaw driver's divine protectors—displayed side by side, highlight the heterogeneous reality along the route. Through creative, visual means, Singh exposes the fallacy of a monolithic Hindu India.

Elsewhere in the publication, Singh conveys a similar message with a pair of photographs from the ancient city of Varanasi (formerly Benares), along the Grand Trunk Road as it cuts

across the state of Uttar Pradesh (Figures 3 and 4).

Instead of introducing the city through the temple edifices and iconic stepped *ghats* on the banks of the Ganges River, where throngs of Hindu pilgrims gather to bathe in the sacred waters, as so many photographers, and Singh himself in his other publications, have done previously, Singh includes the city's crowded streets and images of the commonly seen, but less published, India. One photograph from the pair reveals an aged Hindu ascetic passenger on a bicycle rickshaw stalled in traffic (Figure 3). Singh juxtaposes this photograph with another, arranged symmetrically on the opposite page, which features a Muslim family riding a bicycle rickshaw on a similarly bustling street (Figure 4). A woman covered in a black *burqa* confirms the family's religious identity. A man sits beside her on the seat and a child squats uncomfortably in between her legs on the rickshaw's footrest. The two photographs portray iconic elements within the Hindu and Islamic traditions—the wandering ascetic and a woman entirely covered by a black *burqa*, respectively. However, Singh does not depict these individuals as devout and dutiful followers of disparate religions. Instead,



Figure 3: Raghbir Singh, Rickshaw Traffic, Benares

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Figure 4: Raghbir Singh, Scoot-erist and Rickshaw Passengers, Benares

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they both are shown in nearly identical situations, navigating traffic on rickshaws in the all-too-familiar, overcrowded streets. When placed side by side, the photographs of the Hindu ascetic and of the Muslim family make a statement that Varanasi, despite its overwhelming association as a sacred Hindu city, is equally home to India's Muslim communities. Importantly, some of Singh's most well-known images feature Varanasi's impressive *ghats*.<sup>31</sup> Freedman observes that the steps, where religion and everyday life merged seamlessly, were among Singh's favorite places to photograph.<sup>32</sup> However, Singh deliberately downplays the *ghats* in his *The Grand Trunk Road* book, since featuring the steps and imposing temples would have privileged the Hindu affiliation of Varanasi over the other religious traditions that coexist there. The busy streets of the city, on the other hand, show territory where both Hindus and Muslims stake equal claim.

*Holi Festival Day*, another photograph in *The Grand Trunk Road* series, further under-

Figure 5: Raghubir Singh, Holi Festival Day, Red Fort, Agra

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scores India's largely tolerant past, which continues into the present day (Figure 5). In the background, the imposing ramparts that enclosed the Mughal emperor Akbar's (1542-1605) imperial city at Agra stand as testament to India's rich Islamic heritage. In the foreground, three vendors idly await customers who are seen exiting the monument's arched gateway. One of the vendors wears a shirt and pair of pants stained bright magenta, while another, seated on a low wall and peering into the camera, has his face smeared black. A visitor exiting the gateway similarly wears a white shirt stained pink. These men's appearance indicates that they have partaken in Holi, the Hindu festival of color. Holi marks the yearly onset of spring, with revelers tossing color at each other to celebrate. The inclusion of this photograph, which shows Hindus celebrating amidst a landscape of Mughal monuments, shows Singh's creative challenge to the polarizing and combative Hindutva political climate that was rapidly rising in India at the time.

Hindu nationalists demonized Mughal emperors as iconoclastic Muslim outsiders who had indiscriminately desecrated and destroyed Hindu lands. The Hindutva's anti-Muslim campaign centered on reclaiming north Indian temple sites previously conquered by Islamic rulers. The watershed moment was the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, built by Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, after the supposed destruction of a temple that marked the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama (Ramjanmabhumi).<sup>33</sup> In 1984, the BJP entered mainstream Indian politics and endorsed the Ayodhya Ramjanmabhumi campaign, which called for reclaiming the Babri Masjid site for a temple dedicated to Rama. Special bricks commissioned by supporters from across the country and from abroad were to be used in the temple's construction. In 1990, the BJP launched the Rath Yatra (temple chariot procession), during which the BJP leader L.K. Advani galvanized crowds over loudspeaker as the parade moved from town to town across north India. Muslim communities along the way were threatened, and pockets of violence erupted. When the procession ultimately reached Ayodhya in 1992, angry mobs swarmed and demolished the mosque, prompting deadly and widespread religious riots across India.<sup>34</sup> Singh's *Holi Festival Day* conveys the disconnect between the Hindutva's anti-Muslim agenda and ongoing life in India. Politically motivated religious radicalism, Singh shows, ultimately does little to undermine the extensive history of assimilation and solidar-



ity in India.

The origins of much of the communal politics that escalated in the eighties and early nineties, when Singh photographed the GT, may be traced to the 1947 partition of British India into Pakistan and Hindustan (India). The line on the map cut through the Punjab, splitting the Sikh homeland;<sup>35</sup> the resulting discontent experienced due to partition exacerbated Hindu nationalist sentiments.<sup>36</sup> Drawing attention to this history, Singh's *The Grand*

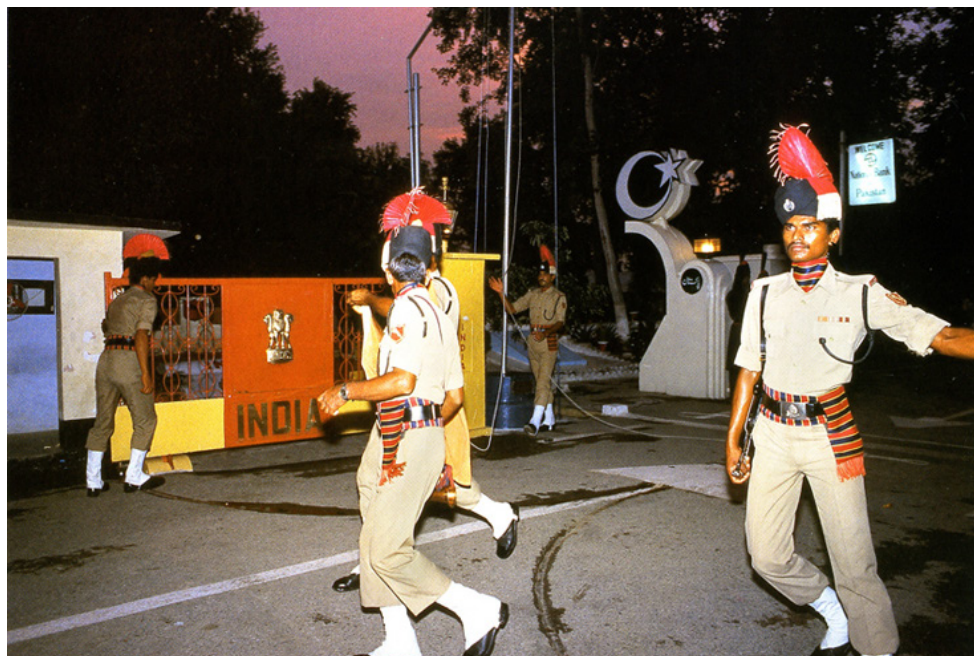


Figure 6: Raghbir Singh, Indian Border Security Force Soldiers at the India-Pakistan (Atari-Wagah) Border, Punjab

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*Trunk Road* comes to an arresting halt with a photograph of the border post at Atari in the Punjab, where a white line on the ground and boundary gates divide India from Pakistan (Figure 6). Indian Border Security Forces maintain vigilant watch on the Atari side. On the other side of the line lies Wagha, with Pakistani Rangers on patrol. National flags announce the border limits of each country.<sup>37</sup> To date, every evening at sundown, Indian and Pakistani security forces at Atari-Wagha ceremoniously beat retreat to call truce for the night. Crowds of spectators occupy bleachers on either side of the gates to witness their respective national soldiers perform the ritual. Stephen Alter in his travelogue, *Amritsar to Lahore*, describes the pageantry:

The ceremony began with one of the soldiers presenting arms and marching with vigorous strides to the gate and back. Orders were shouted in belligerent voices, the words virtually unintelligible. A second soldier repeated the same maneuver... Across the border we could hear similar commands being shouted and the clatter of hobnailed boots. This posturing continued for at least ten minutes until the gate at the border was finally thrown open. The two separate audiences rose to their feet and peered across at each other like the supporters of opposing football teams... Two commanders came out of the gate and shook hands... Two buglers played... and the flags were lowered in unison.<sup>38</sup>

One might reasonably expect a photographer at the border to capture some of the bristling patriotism that Alter vividly describes, such as the border security forces in full uniform marching to and fro. At the least, since many of Singh's *The Grand Trunk Road* photographs focus on ordinary people, one might anticipate images of enthusiastic crowds

as they watch the retreat from the stands. However, Singh chooses to record this location by altogether sidestepping the nationalistic exhibitionism and the ordinary citizenry serving as spectators. Instead, he selected a photograph that shows the ceremony's humdrum aftermath.

As if to underscore the futility of borders and divisive demarcations, the image shows members of the Indian Border Security Forces nonchalantly moving about as they close the day. One man folds the Indian flag that would have been lowered during the ceremony. A bugler, who would have only moments ago fervently sounded the instrument as the soldiers strutted back and forth during the retreat, walks casually beside the man with the flag. He faces away from the camera, possibly to converse with his companion. The flag and the bugle in the men's hands are barely visible. Three other soldiers finishing up their daily routines appear by the gates and the flag post. Aside from the crescent-moon-and-star insignia on a wall, a barely visible Pakistani Ranger with his back to the viewer, and a lighted sign that announces the National Bank of Pakistan in the background, little else in the photograph suggests that the area across the white line is a separate country. Singh, it seems, saw little point in the separation and the guarded protectionism on either side of the border. Instead, the image recalls his photographs wherein Hindu, Muslim, and others equally occupy the camera frame.

Singh was denied permission to cross the border into Pakistan and continue his photographic journey along the Grand Trunk Road. He concludes the publication with a "Note From the Photographer," in which he writes:

...The powers that be in Pakistan refused me permission to photograph there, in spite of my offer to allow myself to be conducted, to photograph only the culture and common people along the route, to focus on historic sights, and to show text and pictures to Pakistani representatives.<sup>39</sup>

The note makes clear that there was no will for rational negotiation on the part of the Pakistani government. Singh's words indicate his frustration with the authorities. Similarly, by focusing on the post-retreat banalities rather than any aspect (monumental or ordinary) of the pomp and pride of ceremony, Singh's photograph of Atari-Wagha echoes his disapproval of the unyielding implementation of restrictive religio-political border bureaucracies. The photograph invites reflection on a provocative question raised by Alter: What meaning could Atari-Wagha's choreographed displays have when combat soldiers dangerously face off over the border dispute, and wage actual war at Kargil and other sites across the Line of Control in the Kashmir region to the north?<sup>40</sup>

The Kashmir border dispute, the crystallization of divisive politics in South Asia, dates back to the time of partition.<sup>41</sup> In 1949, only two years after gaining independence, the fledgling nations of India and Pakistan waged war over the territory, which resulted in the Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir region and the smaller Azad Kashmir area under Pakistani control. Two additional India-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971 saw the redrawing and altering of the Line of Control. The Kashmir border dispute reignited in the 1980s, at the same time that Singh undertook his journey along the Grand Trunk Road. This conflict marked a shift from the earlier uprisings. Disenfranchised Indian Kashmiri Muslims, in part threatened by the conservative, pro-Hindu swing in politics, led an insurgency against the Indian government, demanding a separate state. This allowed the BJP and other Hindu-tva factions to fan the flames of growing Hindu-Muslim tensions.<sup>42</sup>

Against a backdrop of divisive politics that first led to the severing of the subcontinent, followed by decades of bloodshed and hostility in post-independence times, Singh's

photographs show a world beyond borders and divides. Singh's carefully constructed visual narrative in *The Grand Trunk Road* underscores the irony of metal gates and a white line on the ground blocking a path which, for millennia, had allowed a constant flow of traffic and helped build and shape the capacious and absorptive cultural ethos of the subcontinent. For over two thousand years the thoroughfare connected India to the outside world. It allowed the transit of differing ideas and rich exchanges, which fostered in South Asia a culture of acceptance and tolerance. Singh brings India's open and accommodating history into focus in order to contrast the intolerant and small-minded politics of the day, which aimed to homogenize and erase the subcontinent's long history of diversity. His photographs, and the manner in which he arranges them in *The Grand Trunk Road* book, reiterate that India is not the domain of a single group, but a complex, rich interwoven fabric of differing strands. Such pluralism in India extends beyond religion alone. In Singh's photographs one sees not only religious contrasts, but also contrasts of a variety of other aspects of Indian life. Cycle rickshaws juxtapose with motorized vehicles, men and women in traditional dress stand and walk next to those in western clothes, life in the cities is contrasted with life in rural India.

One might question whether or not Singh's outlook of the Grand Trunk Road reflects nostalgia for a fading past, when no gates prevented entry and few inflexible bureaucracies hindered movement along arterial paths. On the contrary, Singh's photographs convincingly show that diversity is not a thing of the past in India. A heterogeneous matrix visibly persists along the Grand Trunk Road. Singh's concluding words in the publication's introduction reflect this view. "At the end of my own journey through life, I would like my ashes to be scattered where the Grand Trunk Road crosses the Ganges. There all castes and all kinds of men and women walk."<sup>43</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Raghubir Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1995).
2. Singh quoted in "Conversation: V.S. Naipaul and Raghubir Singh" in Raghubir Singh, *Bombay: Gateway of India* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1994) p. 5. Singh was a prolific photographer, who published several photo essays during the span of his photographic career. These include *Calcutta: The Home and Street* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988), *The Ganges* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), *Tamil Nadu* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1996) and his last book, published posthumously, *A Way into India* (London: Phaidon, 2002).
3. Sabeena Gadihoke describes Singh's work as that of a *flâneur* photographer, a casual wanderer and connoisseur of the street, who adeptly seeks out and captures aesthetically-filled moments of ordinary life. See Sabeena Gadihoke, "Journeys into Inner and Outer Worlds: Photography's Encounter with Public Space in India" in *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010) p. 36.
4. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2005). Throughout the book Sen acknowledges the turmoil and tumult of India's past, but convincingly demonstrates that India also has had a long tradition of accepting different groups and allowing them the right to follow their own beliefs, which were frequently dramatically different from, and even opposed to, those of others around them. Singh uses the Sanskrit word *swikriti*, acceptance, to describe this pluralist toleration. For more on this, see Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* pp. 34-44.
5. In a talk on Asian cosmopolitanism, Nandy explains, "All communities [in India] are internalized... your self-definition included the other communities... one learns to host the otherness of the other... not the sameness of the other." Quoted from Ashis Nandy, "Ashis Nandy on Cosmopolitanism." Filmed September 8, 2011, posted by Asia Society, <http://asiasociety.org/countries/traditions/ashis-nandy-asian-cosmopolitanism>. Also see Ashis Nandy, "The Political Culture of the Indian State" *Daedalus* 118 (1989): 1-26.
6. Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997) p. 10. In an article Tharoor wrote for *The Guardian* in 2007 to mark sixty years of Indian independence, he draws on the idea of the American melting pot and compares India to a *thali*, a meal made up of different dishes served in individual bowls placed within a single platter. Each does not necessarily mix, but contributes to making a satisfying plate. See Shashi Tharoor, "Indian identity forged in diversity. Every one of us is in a minority," *The Guardian*, August 14, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/aug/15/comment.india>.

7. Strabo, *Geography*. (Tr. H.L. Jones), Vol. VII. London, 1930, p. 17, cited in Abdul Khair Muhammad Farooque, *Roads and Communications in Mughal India* (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 1977) p. 4.
8. K.M. Sarkar, *The Grand Trunk Road in the Punjab: 1849-1886* (1927, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1986) p. 2.
9. From as early as the eighth century, when a part of the subcontinent first converted to Islam, non-Muslims were categorized as *dhimmi*, or protected people. They were allowed to practice their religion and have autonomy over their jurisprudence, but they had to pay the *jizya*, or poll tax, levied on non-Muslims. For a general discussion of religion in Islamic India, including the *dhimmi* and *jizya*, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004) pp. 107-141. During his reign, the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605), whose openness to religious differences and celebration of diversity is legendary, revoked the *jizya* and allowed Hindus the opportunity to hold high administrative posts. Amartya Sen addresses Akbar's broad, pluralistic views at various points throughout his book, *The Argumentative Indian*. For a more extended discussion see pp. 17-19. Aurangzeb Alamgir (1608-1707), a later Mughal emperor, set out to transform India into a purely Islamic nation. He staunchly enforced *shari'ah* law and the *jizya* was reintroduced in 1679. See Schimmel, based on the *Fatwa-yi Alamgiri*, a set of laws instituted during the time of the Aurangzeb, p. 110. Aurangzeb's heavy-handed policies and attempts at homogenizing the country were unsuccessful perhaps at least in part because it was antithetical to the general acceptance of differences and tolerance that prevailed in India.
10. Annemarie Schimmel notes that in January 1505, Babur entered the subcontinent through Kohat and Bannu, in what is today northwest Pakistan. See Schimmel, p. 23. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* indicates that the Grand Trunk Road and nearby Kohat and Bannu formed a network of roadways in the North West Frontier Province. See *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Vol. XIX Nayakanhatti to Parbhani* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908) p. 186.
11. Based on the *Tarikh-i-Khan Jahani*, cited in Farooque, p. 11, notes 28 and 29.
12. Basheer Ahmad Khan Matta writes that *serais* during Suri's time provided separate lodgings for Hindus and Muslims and housed mosques with an *imam* and a *muezzin*. Basheer Ahmad Khan Matta *Sher Shah Suri: A Fresh Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 210-213.
13. For a discussion of the section of the Grand Trunk Road in present day Pakistan that formed a part of the Silk Road, see Saifur Rahman Dar, "Caravanserais Along the Grand Trunk Road in Pakistan: A Central Asian Legacy" in Vadime Elisseeff, *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2000) pp. 12-46.
14. Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 5.
15. Sarkar, p. 3.
16. For more on roadways and railways during British rule in India, see Sarkar, *The Grand Trunk Road in the Punjab: 1849-1886*.
17. Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (1901, New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1999) p. 59.
18. Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 4.
19. For more on this, see Clark Worswick and Ainslee Embree, *The Last Empire: Photography in British India, 1855-1914* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2001) p. 2.
20. Ariela Freedman, "On the Ganges Side of Modernism: Raghbir Singh, Amitav Ghosh, and the Postcolonial Modern" in Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005) p. 119.
21. Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 7.
22. Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 72.
23. Freedman, p. 119.
24. Raghbir Singh, "River of Colour: An Indian View" introduction to *The River of Colour: The India of Raghbir Singh* (London: Phaidon, 1998) p. 13.
25. Quoted in Bert Cardullo ed., *Satyajit Ray: Interviews* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) p. viii.
26. For more on Singh's work and relationship to India, see Singh, *Bombay*, p. 5.
27. Singh, *River of Colour*, p. 10.
28. Amartya Sen, "Satyajit Ray and the Art of Universalism: Our Culture, Their Culture" *The New Republic* (April 1, 1996): 32. Reprinted with permission of the author and accessible at <http://satyajitray.ucsc.edu/articles/sen.html>
29. See Singh, *River of Colour*, p. 13.
30. For a concise discussion of the rise and fall of the BJP and its political allies and ideologies, see Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, pp. 45-72.
31. See, for example, *Swimmers and diver, Scindia Ghat, Benares, 1985* in Raghbir Singh, *The Ganges* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992) plate 53.
32. Freedman, p. 121.
33. A large body of scholarship exists on the Ayodhya incident and the politics that surround it. For an excellent introduction, see Richard Davis, "The Rise and Fall of a Sacred Place: Ayodhya Over Three Decades" in Marc Howard Ross ed., *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) pp. 25-44. Also see Ashis Nandy, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi and Fear of Self* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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34. Hindu-Muslim hostilities, warfare, and persecutions also occurred in pre-colonial times. Nevertheless, the blatant religio-political agenda of the Hindutva, and its political factions like the BJP, to many seemed to be in direct conflict with twentieth-century India's aim towards maintaining a pluralistic, secular democracy—however imperfectly realized. See Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and War* (New York, London: 2004) p. 174. For an excellent study of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and civic life in India, see Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Yale University Press, 2002).
  35. For a review, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). For a recent account of partition and the Punjab, see Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
  36. Davis, p. 39.
  37. For a description of the Atari-Wagha post and discussion of the travails of crossing the India-Pakistan border, see Stephen Alter, *Amritsar to Lahore: A Journey Across the India-Pakistan Border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) pp. 52-73, 154-170.
  38. Alter, p. 53.
  39. Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 127.
  40. Alter, p. 53.
  41. I have drawn the brief outline from Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* (London and New York: I.B. Tarius, 2003).
  42. For more on this, see Sugata Bose, "Hindu Nationalism and the Crisis of the Indian State: A Theoretical Perspective" in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal eds., *Nationalism, Democracy, and Development: State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy eds., *India's 1999 Election and 20th Century Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2003); and T.V. Paul ed., *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
  43. Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 7.