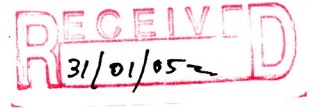


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Proposal for Grant for a documentary film  
on Family Photos in India

Proposal submitted by

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## **A Proposal for a documentary film on family photo albums in India.**

### **Working Title: All In The Family**

#### **Summary**

The proposed one-hour film will explore the connections between personal and political histories and individual memories, as located in or unlocked by family photos and albums.

*All In The Family* will combine four strands: conversations with a woman in her seventies who grew up in a social reformer's family, was in college at the time of India's Independence and has a large collection of family photos; encounters with three elderly siblings who have a few, precious photos from their pre-Partition years in Pakistan; the experiences of an American historian and gender studies scholar who has been collecting family photos, new and old, and documenting the stories that accompany these; lastly, the shooting of a trendy "family portfolio" for the scion of a wealthy family who is going abroad to study.

I hope in the process to gain some insights into the nature of the family photo, how photo-meaning is constructed, and how new meanings may adhere to such images with the passage of time and through subjective/ successive gazes.

## Background

Recently, I made a documentary film on photo studio portraits and posed photographs. Although complete in itself and offering an overview of how contemporary photos mirror their times as well as cater to individual fantasies, there were some significant aspects of the photo experience that went beyond the film's scope. It is these aspects that I would like to explore in another film that would be an autonomous viewing experience as well as an extension of the earlier work.

Some of what follows is based on research that was done for the first film. The suggested narratives are not necessarily the ones, or the only ones, that will feature in the proposed film, as I would like to be open to other stories; yet they are broadly indicative of the kind of photos and personal histories I hope to include.

## Concept & Ideas

"Family photos" refers to all photographs taken by family members of each other or shot by a professional photographer. They could be solo pictures or group portraits, or even photos of houses or objects to which specific personal memories are attached. For the most part, the term indicates photographs of people in which a familial gaze comes into operation, either between the persons in the photo or between the photo and its viewer, or both.

The proposed film will weave together four main narrative threads, each of which explores a photo experience that reflects different socio-political realities. Each strand will explore the ways in which we construct meanings in photos: through direct and indirect memory; through ways of looking; through the conventions of portraiture itself. We will understand how a photo may often fail to "show" us the "real picture". And we will see how family photos may be read as cultural narratives.

The four stories:

- 1) Sevati Mitra, in her seventies, lives alone in an old terrace flat with high ceilings and many family photos on the walls. A retired teacher, she is not much given to nostalgia, but when she opens her family albums, or looks up at the portrait of her blind grandfather, the scholar-poet, the stories come unbidden. It was an enlightened Brahmo family, with her mother an early beneficiary of the idea of women's education. Showing us a picture of her as a young woman, Sevati di points to how her mother liked to wear her sari high because she insisted on walking to college and didn't care to let her sari

“sweep the streets”! A photo of Sevati’s brother, who died young, elicits a moving tale of how, as a medical student, he volunteered to help when cholera struck a village and then caught the infection himself.

Sevati Mitra’s photos and the memories they conjure up recreate an era of social reform and political hopefulness; also a sense of a family that lacked neither money nor erudition, and chose to use these well.

She has inherited so many family albums and photos that she has given the older ones to a visual archive; what remains with her are the more personal photos, which are of people she herself has known or at least of whom she has heard. The photo, for example, of a servant known as ‘Raghur Ma Budi’—Raghu’s old mother. It shows a tribal woman in her eighties, squatting as she looks into the lens. This photo is a little blurred as the woman must have been shaking with the tremors of age; it is also now full of tiny holes. Yet it is a fascinating example of how so much of a person’s memory and emotion can reside in a photograph taken long before she was born.

Sevati di, even today, loves to look at the photo. Because she knows her mother was well looked after by Budi, it gives her “a sense of security” about her mother’s childhood—though the mother is long dead, and Budi herself died long before Sevati’s birth. Also, the photo reminds Sevati of how she and her sisters would spend hours talking to their parents and grandparents, there being no TV or other distractions then, which made the passing on of memories along with photographs a deeply lived experience. Her own children and grandchildren live abroad; she has many photos of them, too, of course, and looks forward to their annual visits home.

Home, after a life lived in other cities while her husband was alive, is once again the ancestral abode in Kolkata. Though converted now into a block of flats, and surrounded by higher buildings and noisier traffic than in her youth, it is still the place built by her grandfather, the place where she grew up. Here is continuity in the midst of change: how else could so many photos have survived, and so many stories?

2) For Premalya Singh and her siblings, home is a fractured concept, and this fissure inflects their old family photos as well. Premalya and her younger sister Priyo Batra, both above 70, live in flats in different parts of Delhi. Their elder brother Pritampal, 83, lives in Pune by the edge of a lake. But home was Abbotabad, now in Pakistan. They have only a few photos from their years there, and these have been copied and recopied so they can all have their own set. One b/w family group photo, taken in a hilly region in winter, is of their

father, mother, and oldest sister, all now dead. Premalya tells us that this was the last family photo taken in Abbotabad, just before 1947. When Partition happened, they were holidaying in Kashmir and couldn't go back home. This narrative immediately invests what was an ordinary family picture with the aura of a lost world.

Other photos elicit other stories. Their father was a staunch Congress supporter, and important personages visited their home: Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Sarojini Naidu, Gandhi. One photo shows a teenaged Pritampal with his father and Gandhi. Gandhi is writing, while the others look on. Each of the siblings, when we meet them separately, has a different story to narrate about this photo. One sister tells a funny story about a nephew who recently saw the photo; another recalls her own conversation with Gandhiji. It is left to Pritampal to elaborate on the content/ text of the photo itself: Gandhiji was writing to Hitler, to ask him "to stop these terrible acts." In this way, a distant childhood, some deeply personal memories and the much larger histories of the last century are all inscribed in a single preserved moment of time.

Both sisters revisited Abbotabad a few years ago, when they travelled to Lahore for an alumni reunion at Kinnaird College. There are photos from this time as well, but these work very differently from the older ones. While the former are only about what they are about—whom they met, what had changed—the latter can be mined endlessly.

One of the things that these photo experiences tell us: as time goes by, leaving its traces now and then on a photograph, newer memories overlay the old. But when there has been a break, a separation, a partition, then, like pain, like the sense of loss, memories endure. And each of the few surviving photos can become a whole book of stories.

3) People talking about their own photos and sharing their anecdotes and memories is one thing, but what happens to the family photo when it is removed from its familial context? It begins to move from being specific to becoming generic, which implies a degree of loss. But Dr Geraldine Forbes is sensitive to this danger, and warns against glib interpretations by strangers. A professor of history and gender studies, she has been collecting family photos as she interviews Indian women and documents their lives.

We will look at some photos in her collection as she shares with us the stories that the women have shared with her. Only in conjunction with these personal memories does Forbes read the photos for the broader cultural narratives they offer.

Forbes has been studying through photos the period of social reforms, the rise of women's education and their participation in the freedom struggle. Her

findings will echo and connect with some of the things gleaned from our encounters with Sevati Mitra and the Singh family. For the post-Independence period, going up to the present, she has extended the scope of her inquiry to include the lives of poorer and less educated women.

We accompany her on a field visit, as she meets another woman, looks at more photos, probes gently and records the conversations. What will give this strand of the film a particularly dynamic structure and open out further meanings is the multiplicity of gazes here: the women looking at their photos; Forbes looking at them looking; and then the filmmaker and the film's viewers becoming extensions of this chain.

As we negotiate these multiple gazes, we trace with Forbes the impress of patriarchy in family photos, and listen as she talks with an insider's knowledge about how many of the women are striving for a space, and are aware of possibilities, that are at odds with the roles imposed upon them by the conventions of formal representation in these family photographs.

4) Although of some interest to the occasional researcher or collector, the family photo stands little chance, really, outside the circle of the familial gaze. Ordinary photos taken by family members often acquire deep meaning for loved ones; it is difficult as an outsider to feel the same passion, love or tenderness. Over time, photos devoid of the subjective gaze get objectified; in turn, their conventions become part of a common code that insidiously enters the making of new images.

In fact, the family photo has long been a genre by itself. Photographers and those posing before the lens alike understand what goes into making ideal family portraits. But a fairly new trend in India is the "family portfolio", commissioned by those who can afford the services of a fashion/art photographer.

Part subculture, part ritual, it's a fascinating phenomenon. While the regular albums happen over a lifetime of growing up, growing old, picnics, celebrations and reunions, the portfolio is a short cut, an instant playing deck that allows you to deal any card you fancy—Together At Home, The Family Outing, Grandma's Visit, Daddy Reading the Paper, Mummy Knitting A Sweater, The Family Dinner...

A frequent occasion for the portfolio is when adolescents are going abroad to study—the young people require these family pictures to show to their classmates in the USA or UK, according to one photographer who executes many such commissions. "They need to show that just because they come from India, they are not backward; they too have beautiful homes and loving parents..."

And so, over one or more weekends, the photographer arrives and the family assembles, and all the well-known poses are adopted and stereotypical roles played to the hilt. Family members turn into models, advertising their cars, their clothes, their dogs, their lifestyle, their deep mutual understanding, trust and affection.

The family portfolio is all about conventions and codes. It has nothing to do with “reality” and everything to do with idealisation. The precise tilt of the head that will convey an obedient quality in a son; the light that will add tenderness to a mother’s gaze; the hairstyle that imparts to a younger sister the pertness she must possess: it’s all done by numbers, almost.

We will see some ready portfolios. The difference between one such portfolio and another, though mainly a surface one, is often very effective. One set that I have seen was in b/w, with everyone in subtly period hairstyles and clothes—the classic, elegant look. Similarly, we could have haute couture, or casual-cool. But the basic modes of representation are fairly unchanging.

Witnessing such a photo session is bound to reveal the artifice, the constructed-ness, of each image. Being present before and after each frame is composed and shot, we are certain to pick up on interpersonal nuances that the photos themselves gloss over or conceal—small tensions, mutual irritations, alienation, boredom. The contrast between the real and the imagined family would become fairly apparent. Conversations with family members as they pose, or change their clothes, or take a break, might also lead to confidences that belie what the photos would have us believe.

There is another possibility; another layer, that would deepen and make more complex the link between being and being photographed. Often the way we represent ourselves gives us a self-image that we aspire to live up to. We ask members of the family about this: does the posing instill in them a truly greater closeness? Are they inspired to be more like the people they pretend to be in these photos? Or can role play leave you unaffected?

Through these various strands I hope to understand some of the different ways in which personal photos work: as a prolific record of a certain era that has a continuity and congruence with the life of the person who owns them; as artifacts redolent of loss and separation, and so rare that each must be able to

assume different meanings, depending on who is telling the story; as impressions removed from the personal context and thereby beginning to acquire generic qualities; as a set of careful constructs that draw upon familiar conventions to create an idealised image of the family.

## Treatment

*All in the Family* will be constructed mainly from conversations and from the family photos themselves. I hope to avoid the use of a commentary, by letting the material speak through interactions, juxtapositions, and through the manner of my looking.

One stylistic device I plan to use is recreations of the past, using actors. These would be like memories themselves, rather than full-blown dramatic scenes. For instance, we might see Sevati di as a child of perhaps nine, listening as her mother's voice in Bengali tells her about being looked after by Raghur Ma Budi. From this we would come to the present, where Sevati shows us the brittle photo and completes the story.

Small moments like this would take the film from the margins of narration into the realm of experience.

I'd also like to bring certain photos to life, in a sense. Looking at a posed studio portrait of a newlywed couple from the 40s, for example, we could see the couple arriving in their wedding finery at a studio, then come to Geraldine Forbes telling us how the woman, now a widow, remembered the occasion.

From a group portrait taken in front of the family home, we could cut to a fleeting glimpse of the "same" people posing in front of the now broken-down but recognisable house. Or from a photo of someone's grandparents as a young couple, sitting in armchairs, we come to "them" in the same chairs, in the same positions, but having grown old.

Such re-imaginings will help to reinforce the notion of image as construct, and also to restore the frozen moment to the flow of time.

The most challenging part of making this film is to capture and read into the various gazes inherent within family photos and in the act of looking at these. The meanings of the onlooker's gaze will be teased out through a combination of looking and remembering. And something of the person in the frame looking back will be enhanced through the recreated photos.

## Anticipated duration of the Project

I expect to complete this film over a period of 9 months.



## **Work Plan**

### **1. Research and Recce (Two months)**

Identifying families –their photographs and albums. Although I have already identified some families/people, I would like to meet and talk to few more families to see where I could get best capture continuities or discontinuities in family histories as found in or suggested by family pictures.

Meeting with specialists in this field--photo collectors and researchers.

### **2. Script (one month)**

Based on interactions with possible protagonists of the film, try and develop a rough structure for the film keeping in mind the content and dramatic flow. Is it a subjective/personal film? Is it primarily a film on photography or a film on family histories?

### **3. Shooting Script (10 days)**

To decide the style of the film which in turn will inform shot-taking. To dramatise or not? Would dramatisation be organic to the subject? Camera should be restrained or free? Decisions on lighting.

### **4. Shooting (one month)**

### **5. Editing (two months)**

### **6. Sound Post, Music, Mixing (two months)**

### **7. Subtitling, End credits, Color Correction and Outputting (20 days)**