A rich showcase

VISUAL ARTS

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DAG's exhibition, *Type-casting: Photographing the Peoples of India 1855-1920*, curated by Sudeshna Guha and held at The Alipore Museum, brought together an invaluable collection of almost 200 rare ethnographic photographs and photographic material. By undertaking the exercise of classifying a people they held sway over by photographing them, the British rulers were trying to discipline what was to them *terra incognita* — Prospero trying to understand Caliban. The subject class was categorised according to caste, communities, geographies and so on. 'Types' representing people across the length and the breadth of the subcontinent were all there — from the aboriginals, Todas draping their beautiful shawls (the first exercises in field photography), half-naked, well-muscled hill tribes, coolies and rickety marginalised castes to the elaborately dressed Hindu and Muslim nobles, hatted Parsis and Bohra traders to people belonging to various trades from barbers, *dhobis*, *chowkidars*, drug and charm sellers, carpenters of Lahore and blacksmiths to the accoutered dancing girls from various metropolises. The anthropophagous Aghoris are there as well. The variety is maddening. While some of these types have ceased to exist in India after the Partition or have been lost to time, many of them are instantly recognisable. The purpose for undertaking these photographic projects may have changed but the method is still sound. Such projects have been undertaken in recent times, albeit not with such thoroughness.

There were also glimpses of ordinary women, notably the proud and self-confident Brahmin girls (picture). There were also some portraits of working-class women like the comely *coolie* girl in a brightly printed *sari* who seemed to stare back at the viewer, her keen gaze shining through the accretion of years. There were the Afghans, the gun-toting warrior chieftains from the North-West Frontier, and a fruit



seller from Quetta. A handful of the photographs were hand-tinted but they are no match for the monochromatic prints. Dominating the exhibition space was the huge photograph of several generations of a Bohra family attributed to Deen Dayal. The most interesting section is devoted to the *bazaar* beauties from various regions. Of these women, the most famous was Gauhar Jaan, whose photograph was tinted by hand.

Publications showcasing ethnographic photographs were displayed along with photographic material such as prints, cabinet cards, *cartes-de-visite*, postcards, folios and albums that carried these ethnographic photographs and popularised them. There was a selection of folios from the pioneering *The People of India*, an eight-volume series of photographs, with descriptive letterpress. Compiled by John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye and published between 1868 and 1875, it featured some of the pioneering field photographers of India: Benjamin Simpson, James Waterhouse, William Willoughby Hooper and John Burke as well as the brilliant but little-known commercial firm, Shepherd and Robertson. Around this core were albumen and silver-gelatin prints by many other eminent photographers, including Samuel Bourne, Charles Shepherd, Darogha Abbas Ali, Lala Deen Dayal, G.R. Lambert & Co., Edward Taurines and Hurrychand Chintamon, covering a broad time span from 1855 to 1920. Miniature, 19th-century, life-like clay figures of people from various walks of life made by the famed Krishnanagar clay modellers were on display too.