

FOCUS

Strike a pose and click to see the family wedding album

A social anthropologist explores the power of the photograph, which records a moment 'that has been', as a conscious way of seeing the world

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If you are an Instagram user you would know how important a fad pre-wedding photoshoot has become today. Social media is flooded with 'candid' photos of couples-to-be, inviting awe, vitriol and jealousy among their 'consumers' on digital platforms. In a few cases, intimate ("steamy", in the parlance of click-bait media) portraits of a few prospective partners went viral, triggering heated debates around such emerging sociocultural practices.

'An episode of history'

Pre-wedding photoshoots are relatively new, unlike the practice of

wedding photos which dates back to the early 19th century. The first wedding photographs emerged in the 1840s, not too long after photography itself was established in Europe, notes cultural anthropologist Sasanka Perera in his *The Fear of the Visual? Photography, Anthropology, and Anxieties of Seeing*. One of the first couples to be properly photographed was Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England in 1840. Evidently, the social practice of wedding photography was meant for social elites, courtesy factors such as cost and access to technology. But in the late 19th century and early 20th century, as access to technologies improved and "posing time" for each session reduced, wedding pho-

tographers started experimenting with multiple shots of the couples. This plurality of photographs paved the way for the advent of the wedding album, observes Perera in the illuminating chapter, 'Framing and Performing Intimacy: An Incomplete Social History of Wedding Photographs'.

For Perera, photography is not something technical, which one engages in by manipulating and impersonal apparatus, but it is a social document. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes essentially every photograph delivers just one message: "That has been." Barthes found 'death' in the photographic image. On that cue, each photograph represents an episode of his-

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tory. Inarguably, it is the most trustworthy representation of the moment it captures. Further, if you can take the example of the wedding portrait as an example, photographs reveal intricate and curious details about the society and people they represent. Still, social anthropologists do not take photography seriously enough, observes Perera. The book is his attempt to answer the question of why photography has not become a more conscious

way of seeing the world in disciplines such as social anthropology and sociology.

That said, Perera is not a run of the mill academic probing the anthropological possibilities of the photograph. His approach is personal. He is a photographer himself and belongs to a family that has taken the art of photography seriously. Perera turns his lens onto the evolution of photography in South Asia, the impacts of colonialism, imperial power on image-making and a clutch, to build a strong case for photography's importance as a sociological tool. In this journey, he introduces a bevy of characters, including his family members, scholars such as Susan Sontag (*On*

Photography) and John Berger (*About Looking*), studio owners, lensmen and businessmen who influenced the growth of photography in South Asia and beyond. He also looks into curious trends such as the selfies (and the meaning of Self, which is a must-read for millennials), and the need to have disciplines such as visual anthropology and visual sociology.

Perera's language is terse and his tone reassuring. With sharp insights and broad research, Perera has created a pioneering and deeply engaging work in the field of social anthropology that even lesser mortals can enjoy. The only blemish is that the photos could have been printed on better-quality paper.



The Fear of the Visual? Photography, Anthropology, and Anxieties of Seeing

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Orient BlackSwan
₹850