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On Stale Images

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Abstract
This paper asks what it is to engage with a photograph as an artifact of the quotidian, if the photograph has exited the social sphere. The paper begins with recounting the importance of the labor migration from the South Indian state of Kerala to the countries of the Arab Gulf. Malayalam (predominant language of Kerala) literature and cinema on the Gulf has been unable to forge a new discourse around migration and the laboring body or the fantastic riches that symbolize it. Unburdened by a long tradition, photographs allowed the visual intensities of cinema to be unmoored from the pull of its narrative. In the process, the photographs became a site of communicating the affective intensities of the Gulf. However, these photographs from an earlier era now lay stowed away in forgotten corners of the migrant houses, if not lost completely. This poses questions for the academic who studies the photographs not only for their value as historical records but also as a visual practice–how to engage with this disengagement which wears out the image? How does this closeting affect our understandings of photograph as projects of memorializing? The paper closes with raising this need for a new vocabulary, a glimpse of which is available to us in Benjaminian "distraction."

Keywords: migration, photography, Kerala, Arab Gulf, distraction

This piece is on stale images. In the South Indian state of Kerala, with half a year of monsoons and a quarter of a year with humidity above 80 percent, things go stale–food from a previous day, photographs from an earlier era. Stuck to the covering film, discolored and decaying, a worn photo bears unique witness to the passing of time. Disallowing us to observe time's imprint in its contents, a stale photograph materializes form, that bearer of history, in its most concrete.

I took to photographs as the means of studying a lost generation. An unprecedented number of people from the South Indian state of Kerala made an arduous journey, many of them through undocumented channels, to the Arabian Gulf's shores in the late 1960s to mid-1970s. Many of them were never heard of again. The phenomenal migration, however, wasn't to cower in the face of possible and known dangers and continues unabated to this day, even though the end of the Gulf dream has been predicted ever since the first Gulf War in 1990. By the end of the 1990s, there were more than a million Keralites in the GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and by 2008 the figure was more than three million. These migrants, mainly young men, transformed the look and feel of Kerala. A poor state in terms of revenue generated through industries or agriculture, Kerala began to score very high, comparable to Western Europe, on human development indices, thanks to the emphasis on service sectors, called the Kerala Model of Development. As remittances began to flow in from the Gulf by those who toiled from dawn to dusk and beyond, slept on bunk beds, eight to twelve people in a room, Kerala witnessed a transformation in day–to–day lives. The rural areas, that locus of statist developmentalist fantasies, whose people had to be educated in citizenship or revolutionary praxis depending on who was looking (the liberal or the communist), now witnessed a short-circuiting of "development"–with gadgets flowing in (radio, tape recorder, camera, TV, VCR, mixer-grinder, whatnot), with houses spacious enough to compensate for the bunk beds in the Gulf, with heavy spending on shopping to life cycle rituals, with bright towns under starry skies–such that the rural soon became the "rurban." English medium schools sprang up in previously "backward" areas, and so did colleges also aided by the state government's creative policy of allowing private players to build the infrastructure while the government pays the salaries of the employees–an infrastructure that could, among other things, provide the foundation for future migrations to the Gulf, the US, and Western Europe, and persist in the tertiary sector-oriented developmental model.

A group of locals pose with an Arab at the foundation stone laying ceremony of a private college in 1984

The weight of the status quo

For all the changes that the migrant brought, s/he was denied a voice in Kerala's mainstream culture. The Malayalam film routinely depicted the migrant as garrulous, distasteful, *nouveau riche*, laughable, and abominable in his attempts to gain respectability. The migrant disturbed the peace of the neighborhood with the cacophony from his imported cassette player (while those who acquired such technologies in the "proper" way, that is, through inherited wealth, listened to western music, like in Padmarajan movies, in the artful quiet of their houses). He tried to prey for cheap real estate on landholding upper-caste families who have fallen on bad times (which he shouldn't have given, his servile caste background, as the common sense of these films goes). He tried to appear fashionable by wearing shorts and hats in the villages, his dark skin unable to carry the white man's touristy attire, coveted (mostly in vain) the protagonist's love interest, or produced films which brought down the good standing of the entire industry. The migrant figure's only shot at being a protagonist was becoming a failed migrant, soaked in melodrama, and ultimately a witness and a warning for the hollow dream that the Gulf is.

In their program of attributing Kerala's development model to a welfare state, the communist governments that ruled the state, or the community oriented mobilizations in the late nineteenth century, variously or in combination with academics, mostly overlooked the labor undertaken by these migrants. Migrants created an infrastructure through networking and the creation of community capital, which helped raise the standard of living in regions the state found too burdensome to take care of, whether in education, healthcare, or transportation. In academic literature, the figure of the Kerala migrant to the Gulf was mainly a figure of statistics whose influence was often reduced to the confines of his family and domesticity. Framed within the axiom of remittance, the migrant had gender, religion, and age-group, but no self. There have also been some notable works on the transformation brought out by migration in Kerala in terms of self-fashioning. Still, the Gulf was also absent in these studies except as a place of labor elsewhere.

The migrant laborer's voice was not listened to in the mainstream. It was not even clear if s/he wants to say anything at all. It was only from the late 1990s onwards that some memoirs were written on the Gulf. The memoirs and other written expressions of the Gulf life continue to be few and far between. They also speak in a heavily wrought discourse and mostly had to negotiate their space and say what they had to say within the tradition of celebrated writings in Kerala. Told in a language that romanticizes the rural, the monsoon, the local festivities and practices, the Gulf's depiction in the Malayali memoirs is mostly in a language of hurt and loss. The desert, the heat, the urban space compared poorly to the verdant home left behind. The narrative tradition of an unfolding self in a strange land, and that of the travelogue, impeded the Gulf's narration as a space that had (and has) millions of Malayalis. In its unfolding of an individual self, the written tradition often disregarded the network of kinship relations, language and community-based organizational structures, various get-togethers, visits by litterateurs, artists, and politicians, the frequent to and fro of letters, gifts, and people between Kerala and the Gulf. The grammar of the celebrated Malayalam rural cinemas of the eighties was similarly a tradition that every filmmaker with auteurist aspirations had to contend with. These films presented the migrants as a threat to the prevailing good sense of the rural. When presented within its framework, even films predominantly placed in migrant lives, such as the "home cinema" trend in the Malabar region of Kerala, had to produce the figure of a migrant whose transformation in individual and collective self will have to negotiate with the terms offered by the mainstream cinema.

A young Malayali migrant poses in Arab attire, Bada Zayed, c.1985

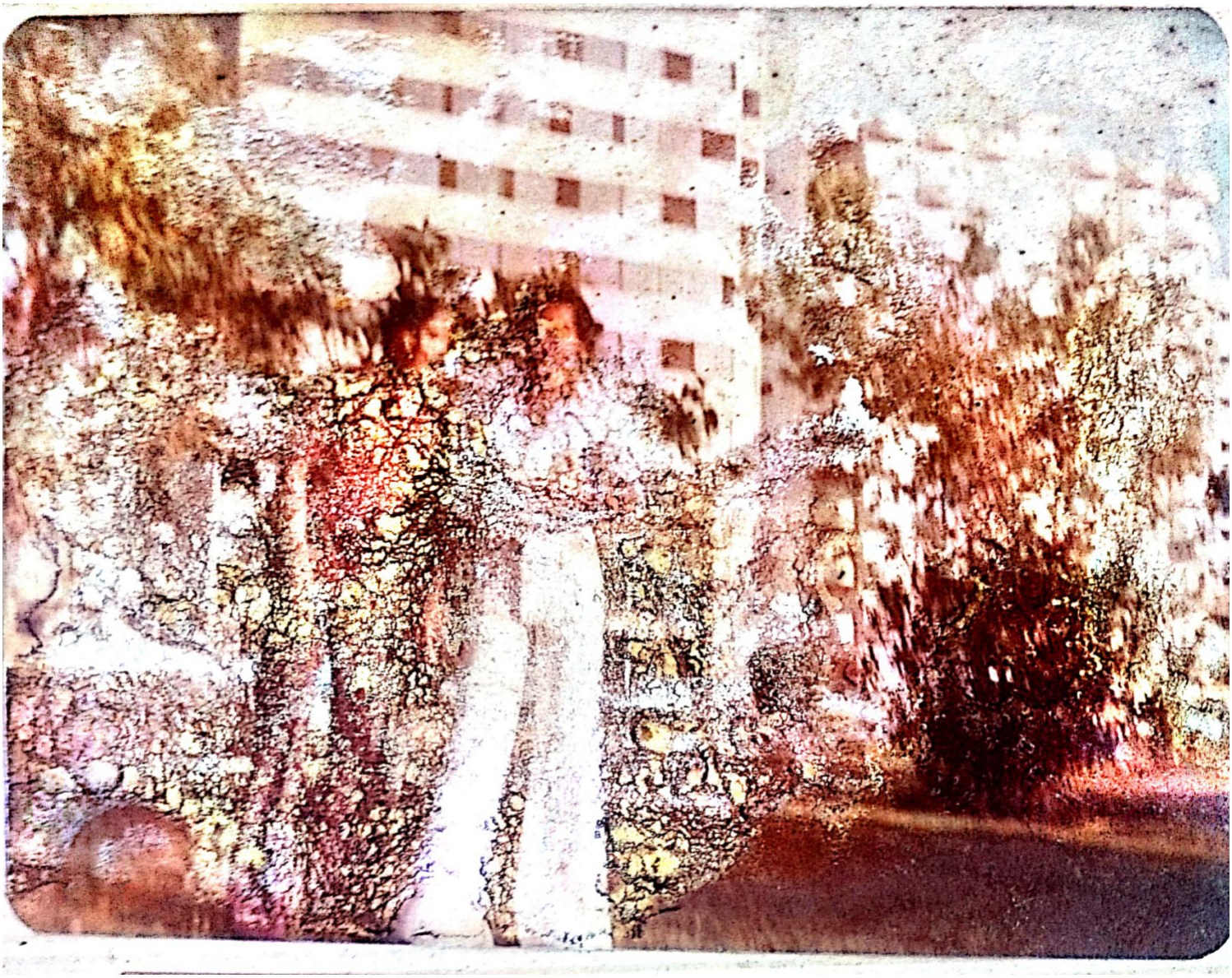
Photographs as counterpoint

In turning to photographs, I had multiple possibilities. Photos were undoubtedly the most prolific of Gulf cultural productions, eclipsed perhaps only by personal letters. Available to the upper classes in Kerala from the 1930s onwards, the camera became popularly available only in the 1970s with the Gulf migration. Unlike literature or later, films, photography did not have to fit a long tradition. There were the journalistic indexical photographs, the stylized photographs of the advertisements, and the stock studio photographs. But as a point of reference, it was the films that photos looked to. The

This worn photograph still manages to show a boy by a car. Bada Zayed, 1990

Gulf was absent as a diegetic space in the Malayalam movies until the late 1990s, even though it had an early appearance in the 1980 movie *Vilkkanundu Swapnangal*. Depicting mostly sparse outdoors, the film nevertheless establishes themes in representing the foreign–fashionable cars, suits and suitcases, rich indoor workspaces, visibly different people, etc. Many of these elements had a tradition of showing the upper-class in Malayalam cinema. The movie thus made a crucial metonymic relation between mobility and the foreign land. Two other Malayalam films of the time, *Love in Singapore* (1980) and *America America* (1983), starring, respectively, Jayan, who was noted for his action roles, and Mammootty, a rising star at the time (and now a "megastar"), also had all these elements while establishing the foreign land as the space of crimes, thrills, and adventures as well. The Indian city par excellence, Bombay, is also a presence in this visual ecosphere through Bombay cinemas and available as the space of glamour, crime, thrill, and mobility. When unmoored from the bounds of the narrative, the pleasures of looking that cinema offers also allows the photographs to be the site of communicating the extraordinary, the fantastic, the punctum of attractions, the intensities of a suspended narrative.

Photographs were a means of recuperating a lost chunk in the migrant life, that of migration itself. One abiding feature of migration to the Gulf from Kerala is that migration is presented, often to the potential migrant, to be a temporary resort to settle financial inadequacies. Like the protagonist in Benyamin's *Goat Days*, often the migrant himself thinks of the migration as a short-term affair. However, the typical lower-class migrant ends up spending decades in the Gulf (with mixed results in terms of social and financial mobility). The rhetoric of temporariness, as if the migration period was an outlier to the stay in Kerala, often amounts to the invisibilization of these decades from the discourse. The Gulf becomes a site of labor while life has to unfold elsewhere. The Gulf's work becomes convertible to remittance, displayed in houses and lavish ceremonies back in Kerala, and attendant social mobility and respectability, and a migrant is deemed successful or otherwise based on these value conversions. The Gulf becomes lost as a space of life where millions of young men lived years away from home and found their sustenance in those around them. In the Gulf photographs, we see the laughing, bantering migrant selves experimenting with life, in the clothes they wear, in the gadgets they hold and surround themselves with, in the neighborhoods they visit. As an excess not claimed by labor, leisure marks the irrecoverable belongings caught in the shared but non-codified sweet nothings.



Two young men in Abu Dhabi, 1981

In turning to photographs, I am not driven by the desire to capture an authentic migrant voice. Such an agent does not exist except as complex negotiations of a hardened tongue. But photographs afford us a different view of the Gulf away from the narrative of morose self-realization and labor. Pictures can move away from the weight of diasporic thought based on alienation and *Bildungsroman* and academic rationalizations of remittance and mobility. They present us with an imagery that accounts for the network of relations as a fact of diasporic existence, the foreign space as a space of leisure, the laughter and banter of migrants, and the affective intensities of the unfamiliar.

We were modern

The question of fidelity

The study of photographs has undergone various shifts. Once studied as an indexical document, the linguistic, cultural, and material turns have left their mark on the study of pictures. The images have been analyzed for their content, composition, meanings, place in the discourse, their engagement with the everyday, their material constitution, their negotiations with the looking body, and their concretization in the haptic. When reading migrant photographs, I read them from the vantage point when they were

produced–typically from the late 1970s to early 1990s. In such a reading, migrant pictures, in their representation of the foreign as a fantasy land but with realist moorings, put to question the analytical separation of the indexical and the iconic, the private and the public, the contemplative and the performative.

A researcher studying Gulf photographs is faced with, among other problems arising from photographs being a much more sensitive medium, the fact that the photographs themselves inhabit a temporariness. When looking at the Gulf photographs, I found that the albums are always stowed away in some old suitcase in a forgotten rack of knick-knacks. The study of a picture, no matter the paradigm, still requires us to foreground the photograph. The image becomes a prominent presence which may then be analyzed for its place in the broader system of significance. This is the case even if the importance of the picture does not lie in the deep structures of meaning but at the very surface. The image is still drawn attention to, its contents explicated, its placement elaborated, its uses examined, its affects made effable. The theorist assumes what her/his subject is indifferent to–that is, the theorist still finds it necessary to draw attention to the image even when the subject of his study is the undeliberated tactility of the images. What is lost for the theorist is the possibility of dealing with the picture as it exists. In "distraction," by which he means the non-contemplative engagement with the image as if in order of quotidian tactility, Walter Benjamin sensed the dawning of a new democratic age. What if, like Benjamin, who gave a positive spin to "distraction," we could speak of staleness as a mode of relation to the past that is not built on experiencing the past as if the past is a foreign space but as one that has claimed and has become oneself?

To turn to the "stale images," as I do in this paper, is not to suggest an engagement with the photographs as much as disengagement. It is to signal a peculiar type of engagement which is disengagement. In reading the stale images, my vantage point is that of the present. Where to locate these photographs in the present, these photographs which are away from sight and feel?

The stale photograph bears on its body the signs of negligence–that it has not been taken care of in the face of time. Tucked away in an album and exuding the weight of its enfoldment, the stale photograph marks the unmourned. Not available as a visual reminder of a phase which is arguably the source of all that changed in the lives of these migrants and their families, these photographs, which were once upon a time the site of a narration of worlds elsewhere, now lie hidden.

A stale image

I have read migrant pictures as suggesting past, present, and conjuring a future. However, in its historical role, the pictures also now lie in forgotten corners, decaying. Stale images confound our characterizations of domestic photographs being projections into the future or as anticipated memories. As forecasts into the future, the worn pictures speak of a future in which no one (except the theorist) cared to look at it. As an anticipated memory, again, the stale photograph tells us that they were hardly consulted. With failing memories, and aspirations that are already out of date, these photographs suggest a breakdown of the linearity of time as it was anticipated. Reading these migrant images therefore involves culling time out of its trajectory and revisiting it as projections of possibilities of a different time-space, that is, as projections and anticipated memories of a time which cannot be remembered and whose trajectory has escaped us. These photographs now belong to another dimension, one that is lost to gaze.

Conclusion

The stale food becomes one with the soil. Now part of our body, the past migration becomes the unthought, forever unfolding in the now. I can only conclude with questions: What is it to study photographs which have ceased to be photographs? How does one make one's study truthful to the experience of the artifact if the experience is in the register of the no-more-seen, the no-more-heard, and the no-more-thought? It is possible that soon these photographs will find their way into digital archives, facilitated no less by the academic and general interest in representing lesser known pasts. The pictures will then have a very different trajectory. The *gulfsouthasia* page on Instagram is exemplary in illustrating how the photographs of another time can be recuperated and contextualised, an alternate history activated, and how these pictures can move back to their zone between private and public, both indexical and iconic, demonstrative and affective. However, it also remains that one still has to invent not just a vocabulary but also a mode of being to engage with disengagement as the most common state of being of these images from another time.

Not in the race: in school uniform on fancy dress day

Contributor's biography

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil is an academic and teaches at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka, India. His research looks at the cultural dimensions of circular migration of labor from the South Indian state of Kerala to the Arabian Gulf countries, persistent for the last five decades. Shafeeq's focus has been on the visual aspects of this phenomenon. His paper "The Islamic Subject of Home Cinema of Kerala," published in *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies,* looked at one of Kerala's amateur movie practices. The article argued that these films, though attempting to lend voice to the migrants, still had to follow a predominantly migrant-blaming tradition of middlebrow cinema in Kerala. His subsequent papers, "Reading Aspiration in Kerala's Migrant Photography," which appeared in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, and "The Days of Plenty: Images of First Generation Malayali Migrants in the Arabian Gulf" published in *South Asian Diaspora* both looked at photographs by migrants from the 1970s and 1980s and read them along the vectors of aspiration and memory respectively. These articles established pictures as a site of reading migration differently.