

# Reimagining History

*The newly discovered visual archives of Kulwant Roy shed light on Independence-era India*

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There are stories of Kulwant Roy, his spirit broken, spending the last years of his life hunting through Delhi's post offices and garbage dumps for his lost work. The images, photographed during a global trek that would last the first three years of the 1960s, had been shipped from stops along the way to his home in Mori Gate. He returned to India in 1963; he learned the boxes had never reached.

Aditya Arya remembers this Roy – a depressed, jaded bachelor – as a daily fixture at the dinner table. An old family friend, Arya's mother insisted Roy took one meal a day at their household, during which he sometimes reminisced on his days as an Indian press photographer, chronicling some of infant India's most important moments. But by the time Arya was old enough to remember him, Roy had, for the most part, hung up his camera. Depressed his life's work had vanished, he seldom shared the images that remained.

It was later, when Arya expressed an interest in photography, spending his post-college summer occasionally working with Roy in his lab, that Roy discouraged him. Photography had become just a passing hobby for Roy, no longer a source of passion or income.

"He was adamant that I should not be a photographer," recalls Arya of the man whose past would haunt his future, "but I was convinced that I would make it one day. It was a bit

of a clash of ego."

Little did Arya know he would eventually spend years tracking Roy's ghosts.

The industry Roy had first become enamoured with had long since vanished by the time of his death – a new era of aggressive young photojournalists had taken over the industry. Gone were the days when press enjoyed easy access and chummy relationships with politicians.

Developing leukaemia later in life, Roy would die broke, alone and unnoticed, disenchanted by the passion that once took him around the world. All that remained of his work was bit by bit left with Arya leading up to his final days, carefully stuffed into boxes, envelopes, and two medium-sized canary yellow trunks.

"He started coming home and leaving his stuff slowly with me," says Arya. "He told me: 'There are important pictures in there.'"

The boxes were promptly stashed in corners and closets and forgotten about. They followed Arya to three different flats, untouched as he struggled to break into the photography business. He first worked in Bollywood's art film industry, eventually becoming a successful commercial photographer and travelling the world, as Roy once had, shooting for high-paying clients like Oberoi. The boxes sat, neglected – Arya too busy with his own career to spend the time mulling over someone else's.

Nearly a quarter of a century

later, in December 2007, Arya decided enough was enough – it was time to open the boxes. "I knew that once I opened them, there would be no time. There would be no looking back," says Arya.

He had an inkling that what he had been hiding away in the dusty corners of an upper story guest bedroom was important. The images, which number well above 10,000, sprawled across the entirety of the bedroom. Neatly collected in envelopes and boxes with labels like "Muslim League photos," some of the negatives had become brittle, some were stuck together, weathered over years and years of storage clumped together, often in high humidity.

But what had survived intact of Roy's portfolio were the priceless, rare images of India's birth: Nehru, Gandhi, Sardar Patel. Roy's photographs were the photographic evidence of history in the making.

Roy found his way to Lahore after a childhood in Baglikalan in Ludhiana, Punjab. There he met Raj Gopal, Arya's great uncle, who ran a photo studio called Gopal Chitra Kutter studios. Gopal taught Roy photography, and Roy was hooked. In 1941, he joined the Royal Indian Air Force as aerial photographer, but it was not long before he became disenchanted with the way Indians were treated in the British establishment.

"Indians were only allowed to use the swimming pool on Sunday,

All images courtesy the Aditya Ayya Archive



*Top left: Gandhi at a railway station in the early 40s, riding in third class. Top right: Nehru at a railway station in the early 40s. Bottom: Nehru, Gandhi and Sardar Patel at a special meeting of the All India Congress in 1946 to discuss an interim government.*

because on Monday they changed the water,” explains Arya. “These guys went and revolted.”

A fed up Roy left the Air Force, and refocused his lens. In the mid-40s, he joined another of Arya’s great-uncles, Gopal’s brother Lalit, in Delhi. They set up Associated Press Photos in Mori Gate; Roy went on to capture some of the most important events of Independence-era India.

Roy had emerged as a press photographer in the 1930s just as new-camera technology was allowing photographers to leave the studio, and come out onto the street. Cameras like the Speed Graphic, Rolleiflex, and Leica – Roy’s personal choice – were portable. Then entered India’s first photographic press corps.

In the 40s and the 50s, Roy chronicled Muslim League meetings, the visit of Sir Stafford Cripps to India in 1942, and the building of the Bhakra Dam. He trailed Gandhi and Nehru. He caught on film a heated argument between Gandhi and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, a rare image as the two were rarely seen in the same room together. Roy sold many of his images to news agencies around the world – the photo of Gandhi and Jinnah appears in the archives of Getty Images, one of the world’s largest photo agencies. The photograph is attributed, simply, to a “stringer.” Often times, photographers of this era went uncredited, unaware of the importance of their images or the times they were documenting.

As a young boy, and budding photographer, Arya saw little if any of Roy’s work. “He was very vague,” says Arya. “If I had known I would have asked him lots more questions and probably documented him. Sometimes photographers are like historians.”

His role in Arya’s life was that of an eclectic uncle, rather than a mentor in photography. But the images Roy had captured earlier in his life were some of the most important images of their time.

“Historically, these images are



*Kulwant Roy in Japan in 1961.*

All images courtesy the Aditya Arya Archive

very important. There is no such collection,” says Arya. “People want to buy them, and I say take your money and get out. I’ve known this guy all my life, it’s not like I can just sell them.”

Indivar Kamtekar, a professor of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian history at Jawaharlal Nehru University who is collaborating on a book about the collection, explains why the images

are so historically significant: “These images give a lot of insight the leaders of the Indian national movement, and the relationship between various political leaders. Like the photograph of Gandhi and Jinnah, you can tell more from their body language than you can from correspondence. They do not say something that is not completely unavailable in the text, but they sup-



All images courtesy the Aditya Arya Archive

Aditya Arya and the mess when he first opened Roy's boxes.

plement the text. You could read entire volume to get the insight which one image gives you.”

The images left behind by the press photographers, the ones that have never seen much light of day, are invaluable sources years later. “There are photographs of Gandhi and Nehru which I haven’t actually seen in newspaper print. We don’t have a good collection of 20th century images, especially the mid 20th century. Roy was one of a group of press photographers, but most of them have perished, most of their collections are lost. This collection is extraordinarily rich.”

**I**n a cluttered office at the top of his Gurgaon house, one room over from where he first unveiled Roy’s collection, Arya pulls from his desk a variety of treasures. From one drawer, a box of badly preserved, stuck together Muslim League negatives, and from another, old postcards written to Roy’s nephew. Roy was not close with his family after his father died while he as a young boy, but frequently wrote to his nephew, Vijay Kumar, from his stops around the world, including on his postcards little history lessons. In another folder, stashed in his basement studio –

now a sort of hectic museum of Roy’s work – Arya pulls out another folder, containing letters from a Japanese lover, newspaper clippings, taped to sheets of paper, pronouncing the death of old photographer friends, and copies of the newspapers and magazines from around the world where Roy’s work appeared.

Since uncovering the contents of his inheritance, Arya – a self described history nerd, who graduated from Delhi University with a degree in the subject – has embarked upon a detective mission of sorts, tracking down old contemporaries of Roy’s, attempting to piece together the life that Roy led before he hung up his camera and became the solitary old bachelor that came to his family’s house for meals once a day. There were calls placed to Japan, in an effort to find Roy’s lost lover; old friends from Lahore interviewed on camera. In piecing together information about Roy’s images, Arya has simultaneously began a journey to join together the life of his unlikely mentor.

“You have a box full of negatives with only one caption, and it’s a puzzle,” says Arya. “You have to think like him and what a photographer would do. It’s very interesting.”

“The idea is to create a huge database, as well as information, and resource material on him. We’ve had great revelations about how he worked. He was an amazing, enterprising guy.”

A year and a half after first opening the box, Arya’s two hired assistants work full time, six days a week, scanning the thousands of images on four scanners in his Gurgaon office. They have been scanning now since the discovery in 2007 and anticipate finishing in a month or so, in time to launch the book for Independence Day.

For the first few months after his discovery, Arya attempted to keep his incredible findings under wraps. The story leaked when a friend from *Hindustan Times* found out and gabbled. Since then, the archives have received tremendous praise. Arya says he often fends off calls from publishers and buyers.

“He travelled all over the world and he took pictures and he lost those pictures,” says Arya. “That’s what shattered him.”

Arya paused, considered how Roy might feel about his sudden fame.

“I think he’s going to get his due recognition.” □