



Figure 1. Protester walking through the spray of water cannons near India Gate during Nirbhaya protests, New Delhi, 2012. Associated Press, Kevin Freyer

# **A Feminist Still: Documentary Form and Untimely Critique in Sheba Chhachhi's Protest Photography**

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## **Prelude: "I protest, therefore I am"**

It is incumbent upon us to understand the historical affinity between Protestantism and capitalist entrepreneurship as such, an affinity whose rationale may be ultimately paraphrased as, "I protest, therefore I am": the more one protests, the more work, business and profit one will generate, and the more this will become a sign that one is loved by God.

—Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

This essay is spurred by these questions: What does photographic form teach us about the ethics and aesthetics of feminist protest? What histories of activism are represented within the photographic frame? What stories are left out of the margins of the photograph and therefore the margins of history? I began this project in response to a series of protests following the brutal sexual assault of a young woman, Jyoti Singh, on a bus in New Delhi,

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India, in December 2012. While the events following this public outcry led to varied forms of legal and social change, recent cases of violent assault continue to make national headlines, suggesting that the outcome of these scenes of public outrage remain complicated, and that the struggle against sexual violence is very much alive.<sup>1</sup> In the years since these events, I have watched the archive of such images of women's protests and marches grow rapidly, scrolling through millions of results online. The typical image captures a large group of protesters, usually women, either looking somber and downcast or screaming into the camera with their hands raised. Often, the same subjects are reproduced at slightly different angles and varying camera distances. Taken in aggregate, the slew of images reveals the affective rhythms produced through choices of camera framing and distance. For example, where extreme long shots of large groups of protesters show us the scale of a large crowd, they also convey the strength of the movement through the sheer number of bodies that fit within the frame. Meanwhile, images that isolate particular figures (fig. 1) invite us into the scene by putting the rage and vulnerability of these unknown subjects on display in order to convey the urgency of their struggles. While individual images convey the urgent militancy of their moments, the ever expanding archive of protest photographs also illustrates their passage into obscurity. When each photograph becomes one more addition to an endlessly reproductive archive, the subjects and their particular struggles start to blur together and become indiscernible from the countless other scenes of mass mobilization across the world, serving as one more memorial to another politically fraught moment. Certainly, the images of protests following the assault in 2012 attest to the fact that women in India had taken to the streets, though why, when, and where remains out of the frame.

One such iconic photograph (fig. 1) of a lone woman walking through the spray of police forces' water cannons illustrates the function of these images of protest as a form of collective memorialization. The photograph, taken in December 2012 at one of the early marches held in New Delhi, depicts a lone woman in the foreground with her arm raised in the center of the frame. Walk-

ing down a wide road drenched with water, she is surrounded at some distance by other protesters. Her ankles disappear in the white spray at her feet as she walks toward the camera and the source of the water: the cannons fired at protesters by the police who were there to disrupt the marches. While most of the other figures appear to be young men leaping and running in the background, another woman is captured behind the first, her body perpendicular to the shot, her face turned toward the camera. The entire scene is covered in a misty haze. In the deep space behind her is the India Gate, a stone arch which houses the Amar Jawan Jyoti, India's version of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In the image, the encounter is framed as occurring between protesters and the repressive force of the state, signaled by the water cannons and the familiar yellow metal frames of the police cordons on the side of the frame. The protester's political desires are illegible, as are the causes of police intervention. The image's sense of urgency is facilitated by the fungibility of its historical origins; untroubled by the specifics of the encounter, the image circulates a figure of the woman as a protesting subject.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson made a similar observation about the transposable cultural function of memorials such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. As Anderson argues, the emptiness of the sign allows it to evoke a sense of national belonging by alluding to a shared past while simultaneously facilitating the forgetting of the complex political particularity of the violence that brought it into being in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Such memorials imbue the contingency of mortality and personal loss with the historicity of national belonging, just as this image of the woman protester links her individual action to the emergence of a national movement for women's rights. It is not incidental to this analogy that photographs are akin to the public memorials and tombs for slain soldiers. Indeed, photography has consistently been described as a technology fueled by the desire to overcome death through the memorialization of life.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of that desire lies a paradox: even as photographs capture an event, they simultaneously embalm it, already consigning the subject to its demise. As Siegfried Kracauer observed, "A shudder runs through the viewer of

old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person, but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her.<sup>4</sup> It is in this aesthetic paradox of erasure enabled by the photographic record—its photographic annihilation of the photographed subject, or what film theorist André Bazin refers to as its “mummy complex”—that makes possible the epistemic erasure of the very subjects that the protest photographs ostensibly portray.<sup>5</sup> As postcolonial theorists have argued, the fate of minoritarian or Third World subjects under liberal capitalism is conditioned by the “double bind” of needing political representation and visibility from the nation-state, which thereby reproduces our epistemic erasure. In other words, our entry into the political sphere of rights and citizenship only occurs through a language and structure of legibility that simultaneously reaffirms the sovereignty of the state over the subject and erases the plurality of subjectivity into the figure of the individual demanding rights.<sup>6</sup>

Postcolonial feminist theorist Rey Chow provides an incisive critique of the condition of political engagement for minoritarian subjectivity in the figure of the “protestant ethnic.” As Chow argues, racialized and gendered subjects engaged in political struggles against complex forms of state-sponsored violence are disciplined into performing legible forms of political speech and action, continuously putting on display our wounded subjectivity and protesting our subjection in order to earn recognition and our place in the social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Here, our labor as protesting subjects becomes the very site of our marginalization, occurring through the valorization of our “differences” and the co-optation of those differences into social capital exchanged for assimilation into a political order that sustains itself through our participation as marginalized subjects.

In the months that followed Jyoti Singh’s violent assault, a recurring thread in the news commentary emphasized how new such forms of feminist action were in India, alongside the changing social context for women given their newfound access to education and ability to work outside the home.<sup>8</sup> At the same time,

these freedoms were accompanied by more violent and spectacular incidents of sexual assault outside the domestic sphere as headlines repeatedly referred to India's "national rape problem." Images of women as protesters in this context can too easily be co-opted into a double erasure of feminist history. First, the narrative of India's recent attention to women's rights links such political progress to neoliberal capitalism, which allows women the right to protest as well as access to public space because they are productive workers and consumers. Yet responding to this compromised logic with older photographs of marches and screaming protesters in order to insist on the existence of feminist activism prior to this moment leaves intact a limited understanding of feminist activism as enacted only through visible collectivity and wounded subjectivity. In other words, when political activism is reified into images of massive crowds, where individuals face the camera with expressions of pain and anger, the screaming protester and the mass mobilization serve as visual shorthand for feminist political action.

In this essay, which is part of a larger project on visual histories of feminist political action in South Asia, I address how photographic form refracts the politics of feminist historiography and activism. I pay attention to the political stakes of documentary photography's formal conventions, particularly enumerating the distinct temporality and truth claims made by two genres of protest photography: candid snapshots of protests on the street, on the one hand, and staged portraits of activists, on the other. In order to address the contrasting politics of these photographic genres, the first half of the essay is a close reading of a snapshot of the feminist activist Satyarani Chadha taken by documentary photographer Sheba Chhachhi in 1980. In the second half of the essay, I read another photograph of the same subject, Chadha, by the same photographer, Chhachhi. The second photograph, a collaboration between the subject and photographer, is a portrait of Chadha seated on the steps of the Supreme Court of India, taken a decade after the first image. Through the comparison of these photographs, I track the formal shifts in Chhachhi's feminist documentary practice as a reflexive response to broader political debates in postcolonial feminist activism. In this analysis, I argue for the

potential histories made visible in the *feminist still*: images that capture minor scenes of tension and stillness. Such performances of stasis interrupt the epistemic violence against feminist subjectivity enacted by conventional snapshots of the screaming protester and challenge the framing of the history of feminist activism as merely the outcome of neoliberal capitalism's successful takeover of the nation-state.<sup>9</sup> Throughout, I illustrate the untimeliness of Chhachhi's photography in the multiple temporalities opened up within the image and in its avant-garde critique of documentary form in and through the practice of documentary photography.<sup>10</sup>

Postcolonial studies' commitment to problematizing history is central to my approach. Founding texts in postcolonial studies have continuously challenged and reevaluated official histories by asking: Who is the subject of historiography?<sup>11</sup> Which archives do we choose to examine and who gets left out of such narrations? These questions invite an untimely form of historical reading, one that pays attention to encounters that may not yet have occurred or were never quite finished.<sup>12</sup> In one sense, the dominant critical mode of understanding photographs is to observe their untimeliness, which is to say, following Bazin, that photographs preserve the likeness of a fleeting moment by removing it from the passage of time. In this vein, photo albums are handheld graves, removing the subject from the world and preserving their remains. In contrast, the "untimeliness" of photographs that I develop later in this essay follows Ariella Azoulay's injunction to "watch" rather than merely look at photographs, that is, to recognize the photographic encounter as an ongoing event rather than evidence of past encounters, thus demanding our reconsideration of photographic temporality.<sup>13</sup> Here, the "untimely" is not that which is preserved out of time but is rather an encounter with other times, challenging the clear division between past failures and unrealized futures that are axiomatic to narratives of linear progress.

Photography as a medium allows the contemplation of other temporalities—scenes we were never present for—and thereby facilitates the fabulation of histories that are hidden, lost, or only possible within the frame. An untimely reading of the photograph challenges its documentary function, insisting instead on its potential for political transformation in the present. As I illustrate in the

second half of this essay, photographs can open up untimely intervals, facilitating unlikely formal and political resonances between anti-colonial pasts and postcolonial futures and building unexpected alliances through a common repertoire of civil disobedience. “Common” in this case refers to the quotidian nature of such practices, as well as their ubiquity and frequent recurrence. Thus, the political function of the photograph is no longer to preserve the given temporal and political order by providing us evidence of scenes past, but rather to engender, through the aesthetic autonomy of the image, the potential for insurrectionary pasts to brush up against imagined futures that may otherwise feel far removed from our politically compromised present.

Classic works of postcolonial scholarship and their Marxist correlates across cultural studies illustrate how works of literature have reproduced imperialist doctrine and upper-class solidarity under the ruse of aesthetic autonomy, that is, from an insistence on art’s separation from politics and the text’s separation from its conditions of production.<sup>14</sup> The disinterested subject who renders aesthetic judgment, a figure canonized in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, has been repeatedly unmasked as a colonizing subject whose aesthetic choices reproduce his own literary and political dominance.<sup>15</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s argument in *Distinction* most succinctly updated this argument by revealing the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in reproducing their class interest as disinterested aesthetic judgment.<sup>16</sup> Hence, it is perhaps counterintuitive that I insist here on the potential of aesthetic autonomy, but I do so as a demand to recognize the potential that aesthetic labor still possesses in imagining the worlds we want to live in. Certainly, the history of aesthetic criticism has been the history of the colonizer’s self-representation; however, refusing to engage in aesthetic inquiry not only ignores revolutionary art that fosters our political struggles but also makes our revolutions as pleasure denying and nihilistic as those forces we struggle against. I am saying the same thing about aesthetic inquiry that I am about feminist struggle: that understanding these histories only through oft-repeated clichés and spectacular moments misses all the other undercurrents and forms of life that have been fostered in their midst.





Figure 2. Sheba Chhachhi, *Record/Resist*, 2012. Photo-video installation, Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy of the artist

### ***Record/Resist***

Sheba Chhachhi's entry into photography and activism occurred in the aftermath of the Emergency in India (1975–77), when then prime minister Indira Gandhi and her ruling Congress Party severely limited civil liberties and met all public opposition to the government with violent force. In the midst of such state repression, particularly of national media outlets, activist groups emerged across the country, utilizing strategies that included street performances, pamphlets, and political theater, thus rebuilding a vibrant civil sphere of democratic dissent.<sup>17</sup> By the early 1980s, another young girl's sexual assault was being debated at a national level: Mathura, a young *adivasi* (indigenous) girl, was sexually assaulted by two police officers in Desaiganj, a small village in the state of Maharashtra in 1972. The case took years to make its way to the Supreme Court, and the perpetrators were acquitted of the crime, despite the evidence and the testimony offered by Mathura herself. The suspects' acquittal in 1979 sparked protests across the country,<sup>18</sup> much as the Nirbhaya case would nearly fifty years later.<sup>19</sup> It was at this historical juncture that Chhachhi, then a recent graduate from the National Institute of Design, began to document her peers and colleagues in the emerging feminist activist communities in the streets of New Delhi.



Figure 3: Sheba Chhachhi, *Jaswanti's Mother Giving Public Testimony, Dharna at Nangloi Police Station, 1991*. Gelatin silver print, 30 × 20 in. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Sheba Chhachhi, *Motoyshree* (*Jan Natya Manch*)  
*Performing Aurat, Delhi, 1980*. Gelatin silver print, 30 × 20 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

In her snapshots of feminist activism taken in the early 1980s, Chhachhi captured candid moments at protests, street performances, and sit-ins, recording the emergence of a thriving scene of women's political action in this period. Images such as the ones collected for the retrospective *Record/Resist* (fig. 2) at the Gwangju Biennale in 2012 were documentary photographs that framed women as political actors. Snapshots of activists speaking in public (fig. 3) or performing street plays addressing gender violence (fig. 4) made up a vernacular archive of feminist activism at the time, circulating as pamphlets and slide shows at meetings. Chhachhi embraced a feminist approach to capturing the history of this period, turning her camera to scenes of women's collectivity and public participation. Chhachhi's snapshots documented the activists who worked for women's rights and reflect her own role as a participant-observer and archivist of the movement.

These images by Chhachhi circulated as a growing historical archive and reflected the photographer's political sympathies in their formal techniques of framing and distance. They call on the viewer to recognize the urgency of the scene, capturing shouts of anger as the subjects look either directly into the camera or just to the side of the viewer, their arms raised in gestures of defiance. Yet Chhachhi herself voiced her growing frustration with the photographic conventions that emerged in her work and that of other photojournalists covering these public interventions. She recalls arriving at one protest and finding other photojournalists "staging" the participants in familiar poses—"the angry eyes, raised fist, shouting mouth"—that she recognized from her own images. Chhachhi's anecdote describes the hidden labor that resulted in the protest photograph's fiction of immediacy, and the stultifying effect of the protest photograph's role as historical record on the photographed subjects themselves. The anecdote also makes literal Chow's critique of the politics of visibility: the revolutionary demands of minoritarian subjects remain unheard even as they are expected to perform certain kinds of legibility in order to be recognized as political actors. In the ensuing years, Chhachhi's practice changes in response to her recognition of the ossifica-

tion<sup>20</sup> that occurs through the photograph, and the artist develops what she describes as an interest in making the “constructed nature of photography explicit, and working with the photograph as fiction rather than document.”<sup>21</sup> Chhachhi subsequently develops a new practice of collaborative portraiture, drawing on the vernacular visual language of bazaar photography.<sup>22</sup> In what follows, I analyze two images by Chhachhi, both of the same activist, Satyarani Chadha, a leading figure in the legal fights against domestic violence and dowry-related abuse in the 1980s. I argue that they illustrate complicated relationships within the temporality of the photographic encounter, modeling distinctions between the linear temporality of the protest snapshots I’ve discussed so far in relation to the feminist still: an untimely portrait of civil disobedience that disrupts the historical boundaries between insurrectionary pasts and futures.

### **Here/Then: A Snapshot**

Satyarani Chadha (1929–2014) was an activist and community organizer who worked with victims of domestic violence in New Delhi.<sup>23</sup> She is still remembered as “the face of women’s rights” in India and was a central figure in the legal battle for dowry prohibition in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Yet her entry into public life was unexpected and began through personal tragedy. In 1979, Chadha’s newlywed daughter Sashibala was struggling with the harassment and threats of violence she faced from her husband, Subash Chandra, and his family. Chandra had met with Chadha as well and demanded several expensive gifts for himself as a dowry payment. Chadha, who had little means to fulfill the demands, had provided as much of the dowry as she could at the time, though Sashibala continued to face threats and harassment in her marital home. Ten months into their marriage, Sashibala was murdered by her husband, who set her aflame in their house. Chadha filed charges against Chandra in the Delhi High Court, only to be confronted with negligent police officers and a misogynistic legal system that repeatedly failed to bring Chandra to justice. It took twenty-one years for the High Court to recognize Chandra’s role



Figure 5. Sheba Chhachhi, *Satyanari, Anti-Dowry Demonstration, Delhi, 1981*. Gelatin silver print, 20 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist

in Sashibala's death and to convict Chandra of abetting in a suicide. He posted bail and was freed a few months after his arrest. In the decades following Sashibala's death, Chadha took to the streets, initially organizing community aid networks for young survivors of domestic violence. Eventually, Chadha and her collaborator Shahjahan Apa established Shakti Shalini, a nonprofit community organization working to end gender and sexual violence in New Delhi.

Chhachhi's first image of Chadha (fig. 5) is an iconic image of the activist as she is often remembered: out in the streets protesting injustice. In the image, we encounter a crowded frame, packed with bodies half visible in a tangle of limbs. Front and center is the determined face of an older woman, her right arm raised out of the frame and her mouth open in a shout. In her left hand, she holds a portrait of a woman in graduation robes, perhaps holding her diploma in her hand. The framed photograph bears the creases of multiple unfoldings, white lines running across the black robes of the young woman as the frame glints in the daylight. A banner is held aloft behind her by an unknown hand; the word on it reads,

“Indian.” Other faces are visible within the image, and more arms are raised in protest behind her. But it is the woman in the center, Satyarani Chadha, who conveys the rage and the determination at the heart of the political struggle, with the glint of a tear in a corner of her eye. This photograph of Chadha circulated within an emerging visual grammar of feminist activism that reached public prominence in the 1980s in New Delhi.

The photograph that Chadha holds in her left hand, raised defiantly in the midst of the crowd, models the blurred lines between individual mourning and collective militancy.<sup>25</sup> Sashibala’s image, thrust up in the air, transforms a private event of loss into a collective act of memorialization, thereby placing her personal struggle into the realm of public life. In Freudian psychoanalytic terms, mourning is conceived as a personal working through of loss and a letting go of the object of our attachment.<sup>26</sup> In Chadha’s hands, Sashibala’s image allows a collective reckoning with her loss, akin to the melancholic refusal to mourn appropriately or let go of the love object, forcing instead a public confrontation with her death. Here, the melancholic position is reconfigured into a form of public memorialization, as the psychic impetus for political activism and a collective indictment against the failure of the state to prevent this loss. The image of Sashibala is saturated with her sudden death; the public commemoration of her demise tears apart the distinction between private and public loss; and the story of her life becomes inseparable from the history of the nation-state. In this fashion, the photograph aids the suturing together of a linear history of feminist struggle out of a series of disjointed personal events. Yet it does so through the temporal estrangement of the past and the present, making explicit the separation between Chadha’s life and Sashibala’s death.<sup>27</sup>

For Roland Barthes, the photograph’s magical power stems from its claim to reality through the invention of a new space-time category: “spatial immediacy, and temporal anteriority.”<sup>28</sup> A photograph flattens and frames what was already there, serving as a record of a moment that has passed. It is the peculiar space-time of the photograph (here/formerly) capturing an event that

has passed that grants the image its claim to truth. The present absence of Sashibala in the midst of the protest in 1980 emphasizes the enormity of her loss, just as the image of Chadha in the midst of the struggle emphasizes her place in the past event. The snapshot of Chadha fixes her figure in the past because the photograph ruptures the connection between movement and time. Chadha, captured in mid-shout with her arms raised, is paralyzed within the frame, forever consigned to be viewed in mid-gesture. By documenting the event, the image simultaneously embalms it. The “reality effect” of the photograph, following Barthes, is signaled by the sense of urgency in the protesters’ expressions and all the minor details of their movement, from the slightly blurred hand to the side profile of another woman looking away from the camera. These details convey the candid nature of the image, affirming that the photographer really was there, in the midst of this struggle. The photograph appears to be an unmediated record, a direct link between the signifier (Satyarani as a metonym of feminist struggle) and the referent (the anti-dowry protest).<sup>29</sup> The signifier repeats over and over again, *this happened*.

A spectator confronted with this image sees bodies frozen within the frame, caught on film in unfinished motion. The proximity of the camera to Chadha’s face, which catches the light in the middle of a sea of protesters, conveys the feeling of being in the crowd and witnessing Chadha’s struggle through the relative intimacy of the medium close-up. Yet in functioning through the temporal disjunction conveyed by the phrase “here/formerly,” the image of Chadha caught in mid-shout signals an event that ended soon after the shutter closed, leaving her to endure in a state of permanent paralysis in the midst of her protest. The paralysis engendered in the snapshot also consigns this moment to the viewer’s past, serving, as Sashibala’s image does, to bring together an individual act with the collective history of feminist struggle, only to alienate the present from this past.



### **A Feminist Still**

Does the photographic encounter possess any potential if the photograph only reproduces the separation between the spectator and the photographed subject under the ruse of an immediate encounter with the past?<sup>30</sup> This was the question that Chhachhi herself was reckoning with in the 1990s, disillusioned by the behind-the-scenes staging of documentary photographs and the emergence of a dominant photographic style that resulted in the tedious repetition of similar scenes of screaming figures stripped of their particular political contexts. Chhachhi's challenge to the truth value of her own images and her desire to make the "subjective and constructed nature of photography explicit"<sup>31</sup> were worked through in the collaborative photo series that she began in 1990, a decade after her iconic photograph of Satyarani (fig. 5).

Over the course of several months in 1990, Chhachhi invited women's rights activists who had already served as photographic subjects in her earlier work to collaborate with her on staged portraits that they developed together. The images emerged from long conversations with each of the photographs' subjects. Eight subjects from the first series of images, including well-known community organizers such as Chadha, were invited to participate in the production of their portraits, and seven agreed. The women were invited to bring objects that represented their history and labor and to choose locations where they felt most at home. Despite these measures, which were explicitly meant to enable the subjects to present the truth of their experience within the image, Chhachhi describes her intent to "work with the photograph as fiction" (161). The contradiction between revealing the truth of oneself in the portrait and the task of staging the photograph as a "theatre of the self" illustrates the heart of the tension between the estranged paralysis of her protest snapshots and the feminist stills that emerged in Chhachhi's later experiments with portraiture (161).

In Chhachhi's collaboration with Chadha on her staged portrait (fig. 6), the subject is seated on the steps of the Supreme Court of India, surrounded by various objects, including files and

an image of her daughter. Seen in a low-angle long shot, Chadha towers over the viewer, directly facing the camera with an impassive gaze. At first glance, this image works in a different affective register than the first image of Chadha (fig. 5): the first appears to be an immediate, realist representation of a scene of protest yet is stripped of history or context. In contrast, the second image represents a serene, impassive engagement with the viewer and a deliberate turning away from the institution of the law. In both images, a government building looms in the background. In figure 5, the building is off in the distance while Chadha is lost in the crowd of protesters far below. In figure 6, however, Chadha is all alone, centered in the foreground of the scene, with the Supreme Court of India in the background. The files archive Chadha's decades-long legal fight against domestic violence and her many successes with political activism, even as the image of her daughter in graduation robes reminds us of her loss.

These simple differences in the staging of the two images already enumerate opposing approaches to feminist representation: a screaming protester, captured without her explicit consent, presents a marked contrast to the serene and commanding figure of the activist, surrounded by the successes of her political organizing, who collaborated with the photographer to create the image. Yet the distinctions between the two photographs do not end with the conditions of their production. Both images are fundamentally distinguished by the radically opposed modes of stillness within the image, particularly how each image severs the link between movement and time. While the snapshot's ruse of immediacy captures the fleeting events it attempts to represent, legible in the frozen paralysis of the screaming protester, the second image displays a deliberate stillness of the subject, a stillness that functions as an untimely interval.<sup>32</sup> By "untimely," I am naming the way in which the seated portrait betrays no sense of the beginning or end of its subject's actions, placing the sitter in an ongoing encounter with the viewer, both outside of time, and seemingly in a recursive present. This stillness isn't the same as the paralysis of motion in the first photograph. Rather, Chadha's

pose portrays a stasis that Tina Campt has described as a form of tension, of “holding a complex set of forces in suspension.”<sup>33</sup> As Campt argues in her reading of colonial missionary photographs of South African women, the seated pose of the photographed subject is a deliberate stillness, one that cannot be understood as merely the absence of motion. Such stillness or stasis is the condition of an active holding in abeyance of contradictory forces: the epistemic capture and vulnerability of the colonized, along with the subject’s defiance of her subjection. Chadha also holds in tension the temporal disjuncture between the flow of lived time and the recursive temporality of the photograph. Her seated form provides no clues about the passing of time, no gesture to indicate when the event begins and ends within the frame of the photograph. This feminist still opens up an interval in which the event is no longer foreclosed in the present. Instead, it enacts a duration that makes visible the enduring nature of Chadha’s struggle and the ongoing labor of feminist protest.

Chadha’s seat, her claim to the space at the center of the frame and directly in front of the central building, makes her presence impossible to ignore for those who enter for their day in court. Yet she faces away from the building; her seat is centered in front of that edifice, and she simultaneously refuses to acknowledge the looming presence of the law behind her.<sup>34</sup> Chadha stares directly into the camera, arms crossed in front of her, at rest on her lap. The piles of files at Chadha’s feet extend beyond the borders of the image, suggesting that her labor cannot be contained within the frame. The garland around the image of her daughter participates in a common mourning ritual in which images of the newly deceased are offered flowers or have a candle lit in their honor during a prescribed period of mourning (usually for the first year after their death and annually on the anniversary of their loss). The garland also indicates an entry into a period of mourning in a psychoanalytic frame, that is, as a ritual undertaken in order to externalize a loss and let go of the object of our attachment, in contrast to the melancholiac’s introjection of that loss, which results in a turning away from the social.

Sashibala's portrait faces the viewer rather than the target of her address in the earlier image. Chadha is addressing us, the spectators, rather than representatives of the state. Her search for justice appears to no longer take the form of a demand for legal recognition; indeed, the files at her feet attest to her success at attaining such recognition. Instead, in addressing the viewer, Chadha utilizes what Ariella Azoulay has named the "civil contract" of photography: the ability of photographs to mediate between subjects whose unknown and contingent sense of collectivity emerges in the moment of encounter, facilitating a form of engagement among equals rather than among marginalized subjects and the sovereign power of the state.<sup>35</sup>

### **Untimely Dharna; or, the Stakes of Untimely Histories**

The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future.

—Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*

Gandhian historian C. Dharampal, chronicling the history of civil disobedience under British colonial rule, described the "dhurna"<sup>36</sup> as a practice of sitting, "usually at the door of a house as a protest against some wrong doing by the particular householder."<sup>37</sup> The practice of being seated in front of another to demand justice constitutes a recurring tactic in nonviolent civil disobedience throughout the world, and the dharna is still a living mode of protest in feminist struggles in India today.<sup>38</sup> We can read Satyarani's seated form as engaging with this minor and ubiquitous form of civil disobedience, one that is common both in the sense of the frequency of its occurrence as well as a shared language of protest among minoritarian subjects transnationally.<sup>39</sup> Reading Satyarani's portrait as an event of dharna also conceives of her challenge to the institution of the law that she is seated before as a conflict between equals rather than a demand for rec-

ognition from the sovereign state. The feminist still, as a portrait of a feminist activist, is also an iteration of an anti-colonial tactic of protest, drawing on a common political repertoire, thereby engendering resonances between multiple historical scenes of political confrontation and Chadha's particular dharna. Here, a third valence of the disruptive political potential of the still image becomes apparent: as stasis. While the common English usage of the term conveys a sense of equilibrium or the cessation of motion, its usage in the political life of ancient Greece conveyed the inverse: civil war. *Stasis* named the internal conflict or challenge to the governing order that occurred despite the existence of a democratic society with norms of political action, a system of representation in voting, and the rule of law. As historian Nicole Loraux argues, stasis, or a period of civil war, was not an exception to the democratic order but rather at the heart of democratic politics.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, Chadha's dharna constitutes a democratic challenge to a juridical system that has refused to recognize violence against women as a crime and has neglected to mourn those who have been lost to such violence. It is a challenge as well to the state-sanctioned forms of political action. Such a performance of political engagement is the very basis of democratic citizenship, and it occurs in this instance through the temporal disruptions facilitated by the image of a woman seated on the steps of the Supreme Court, which is also a portrait of a never-ending dharna. In the recurrent temporality of this dharna, we can read the potential for a future politics—one that links anti-colonial antecedents to postcolonial feminist struggle today.

If, as Derrida observes in the epigraph above, the technical structure of the archive determines the production of present and future archivable content, the stakes of understanding photography's role in historiography amount to nothing less than the potential to image a future politics. Thus far, I have described the feminist still as "untimely" because it simultaneously arrests the linear flow of lived duration and functions within its own time, and because it mediates between past and present, opening up an ongoing event of encounter between spectator and subjects. However,

there is another valence of the “untimely” at play in this image, in which “untimely” describes the counterintuitive task undertaken by any work of critique when challenging the dominant logic of its time.<sup>41</sup>

In the introduction to this essay, I drew together the ways in which the photograph’s truth claims captured individuals and rendered them as gesticulating figures, a process that manifested the epistemic capture of minoritarian subjects into stereotypically wounded subjects performing their marginalization in order to be recognized by the state. Through my reading of the image of Chadha’s dharna, I propose that this dominant approach to the photographic encounter need not be the only one and that photography of minoritarian subjects need not remain complicit with their political marginalization. As Chhachhi’s practice has shown, an attention to form need not come at the price of political commitment. Indeed, Chhachhi’s political commitments have shaped the formal choices of her images, and such aesthetic interventions are crucial sites of imaging and imagining other futures.

I have argued that close readings of images of feminist stasis as historical record and aesthetic intervention allow us new insights into the potential for visualizing alterity, in the double sense of imagining other relations to community and the potential for alternative feminist politics. Visualizing alternative feminist futures is as much a concern of photographic form, I argue, as it is of political imagination.

## Notes

1. Manveena Suri and Omar Khan, “India’s Problem with Rape: Do Women Feel Safe?,” *CNN*, 8 May 2018, [www.cnn.com/2018/05/08/asia/india-women-rape-intl/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2018/05/08/asia/india-women-rape-intl/index.html); Soutik Biswas, “Why India’s Rape Crisis Shows No Signs of Abating,” *BBC*, 17 April 2018, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43782471](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43782471).
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 9.

3. See, for example, Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977).
4. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 57.
5. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1:9.
6. I am referring here particularly to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framing of the double bind of rights as that which we "cannot not want." Spivak has used this formulation consistently in her writing, but see especially Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 24–50.
7. Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 46–48.
8. Sumnima Udas, "Covering the Rape Case That Changed India," *CNN*, 15 December 2013, [www.cnn.com/2013/12/04/world/asia/india-rape-problem-udas/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/04/world/asia/india-rape-problem-udas/index.html); Heather Timmons and Sruthi Gottipati, "Woman Dies after a Gang Rape That Galvanized India," *New York Times*, 28 December 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/asia/condition-worsens-for-victim-of-gang-rape-in-india.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/asia/condition-worsens-for-victim-of-gang-rape-in-india.html).
9. To be clear, I am not equating the labor of all public marches and protests with the management of minoritarian bodies under neoliberal capitalism, nor am I dismissing the real political changes effected by spectacles of revolutionary struggle. Rather, my aim is to draw out other forms of political engagement that occur adjacent to or outside marches and protests, and to reconsider the valorization of certain forms of bodily motion, political movement, and affective labor over others. Similarly, I do not aim to rewrite the feminist histories of South Asia that have made my own research possible; rather, I explore how photographs are read and used in the production of such histories.

10. Though the opening section of this essay references digital images and their accumulation and circulation online, Chhachhi's images are analog photographs shot on film. While the emergence of digital photography has raised new conceptual problems about truth, indexicality, and documentary, I believe the central argument about the temporal structure of the protest photographs I discuss holds across the analog-digital divide, whether shot in 1980 or 2012. That is certainly not true for other genres of photography, including the very founding definitions of "indexicality" in the field of visual criticism. A broad-ranging taxonomy of photography's genres and temporality is beyond the scope of this writing, though certainly relevant to the larger political themes addressed in this essay.
11. I am referring here to the canon of postcolonial studies, including Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), as well as interventions from within the discipline of history by the subaltern studies collective, including Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), to name a few.
12. Such attention to events in a minor key is indebted to Leela Gandhi's discussion of "ahimsaic historiography," or an attention to everyday scenes of strife and local encounters of difference that appear in the margins of official histories. See Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
13. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14.
14. See, for example, Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and Said, *Orientalism*.



15. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
16. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
17. For an extended discussion of Chhachhi's role in the feminist movement, see Nancy Adajania, "Obey the Little Laws and Break the Great Ones: A Life in Feminism," in *Arc Silt Dive: The Works of Sheba Chhachhi*, ed. Kumkum Sangari (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016), 229–44. For a discussion of the changing role of civil society in the aftermath of the Emergency, see Arvind Rajagopal, "Emergency as Prehistory of the New Indian Middle Class," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2011): 1003–49.
18. For a detailed history of this moment, see Mala Khullar, ed., *Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2005); and Radha Kumar, *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002). The movements described in these accounts were later published and documented by the very activists who came of age in this period, including Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, who began Kali for Women, the first independent feminist publishing house in India. I mention this to underscore the following: while feminist political engagement emerged within a moment of active protest, public organizing has taken many forms in the aftermath of the Mathura case, not all of them apparent in the legal changes sparked by the protests.
19. For an account of Mathura's story in relation to the Nirbhaya protests, see Moni Basu, "The Girl Whose Rape Changed a Country," *CNN*, November 2013, [www.cnn.com/interactive/2013/11/world/india-rape/](http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2013/11/world/india-rape/).
20. Or what Kracauer describes as the photograph's ability to subtract from the subject their particular individuality. See Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 57.
21. Chhachhi mentions this event in passing several times. See Jyoti Dhar, "Sheba Chhachhi: A River of Memories," *Art Asia Pacific* 77 (2012): 66; and Sangari, *Arc Silt Dive*, 153.

22. “Bazaar photography” refers to a style of photography that is still common in postcolonial India and emerged in urban photography studios which were often located in the main bazaar, or market. Subjects would often have their portraits taken at these studios to mark important social occasions such as weddings and birthdays. Inside the studio, usually a cramped space with bright lights, the photographer offers clients a range of backdrops to choose from (ranging from popular tourist attractions, such as the Taj Mahal, to iconic foreign locales and beautiful natural vistas), and props to include in their images. The very stylized photographs that result from this experience reflect the aspirations and aesthetics of their subjects rather than serving as a document of their everyday life. For a longer discussion of the visual politics of bazaar photography and other vernacular visual practices, see Kairi Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Also see Arjun Appadurai, “The Colonial Backdrop,” *Afterimage* 24, no. 5 (1997): 4–7.
23. Satyarani Chadha’s name is commonly spelled as Satya Rani or Satyarani in several of the sources I have cited so far. I use Satyarani in accordance with the titles of Sheba Chhachhi’s images for consistency. Accounts also vary on the name of Chadha’s daughter, with some references to her as Kanchanbala. Here I use the name Sashibala for consistency, based on another photograph that Satyarani Chadha shares with the viewer in the documentary film *Unlimited Girls* (dir. Paromita Vohra, India, 2002).
24. For coverage of Chadha’s life and her contributions to the struggle for women’s rights, see Namita Bhandare, “Satya Rani Chadha: The Face of India’s Anti-dowry Movement,” *livemint.com*, 2 July 2014, [www.livemint.com/Specials/ltOkZTJFgpkky8dWh8NarO/Satya-Rani-Chadha-The-face-of-Indias-antidowry-movement.html](http://www.livemint.com/Specials/ltOkZTJFgpkky8dWh8NarO/Satya-Rani-Chadha-The-face-of-Indias-antidowry-movement.html); Juhi Jain, “A Tribute to Satyarani Chadha, the Face of India’s Anti-dowry Movement,” *Feminists India*, 7 July 2014, [feministsindia.com/tribute-satyarani-chadha-face-indias-anti-dowry-movement/](http://feministsindia.com/tribute-satyarani-chadha-face-indias-anti-dowry-movement/).
25. Douglas Crimp’s incisive engagement with the conceptions of mourning and militancy were illuminating for my

- understanding of Chadha and the psychic life of feminist struggle. See Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October*, no. 51 (1989): 3–18.
26. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 237–58.
  27. I am indebted to Jean Ma's discussion of the freeze-frame and its location between life and death in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A City of Sadness* (Taiwan, 1989) for this extrapolation of collective mourning. See Jean Ma, "Photography's Absent Times," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 98–118.
  28. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 158.
  29. Barthes observes that the "reality effect," whether in photographs or literature, occurs through the erasure of the tripartite nature of the sign (i.e., the forgetting of the signified in its confusion with the referent, thereby ignoring the text's nature as representation). See especially Roland Barthes, "From History to Reality," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 127–56.
  30. Recent critiques of documentary cinema's failed truth claims take up questions similar to those that I pose to documentary photography here. See especially Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
  31. Sangari, *Arc Silt Dive*, 161.
  32. I drew this argument on deliberate stillness in portrait photography in contrast to the snapshot initially as an engagement with Thierry de Duve's writing on the time exposure photographs of the late nineteenth century and their differences from snapshots, as a response to Roland Barthes's discussions of photographic temporality. See Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October*, no. 5 (1978): 113–25.

33. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 51.
34. Thanks are due to Anna Thomas for talking through the reading of this image with me and for stressing the importance of understanding rest as an intentional “facing away” from the demands that surround us.
35. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*.
36. I follow the more contemporary spelling of *dharna*, which has also been anglicized as *dhurna* in older historical sources, including in Dharampal’s writings, which draw on scholars from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
37. C. Dharampal, *Civil Disobedience in Indian Tradition* (Mapusa, India: Other India Press, 2000), 175.
38. While a thorough history of *dharna* is beyond the scope of this project, some recent uses of this tactic include the *dharna* undertaken in 2014 by members of the family of two young girls who were raped and murdered in the village of Katra in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, a collective of *adivasi* (indigenous) villagers, feminists, and environmental activists, has undertaken several *dharnas* throughout the 1990s in the Narmada Valley to demand restitution for local populations displaced by state-sanctioned industrial development, including the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. I thank the anonymous reviewer who raised the Narmada protests in their comments to this essay.
39. Leela Gandhi’s discussion of making “common cause” and the history of minor insurrections in the postcolonial archive are the basis for my emphasis on the quotidian nature of such protest here. See Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
40. Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2002).
41. I derive this conception of untimely critique from Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings on history and the role of the critic. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1997), particularly the essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”

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Figure 6. Sheba Chhachhi, *Satyanani, Staged Portrait, Supreme Court, Delhi*, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 30 × 20 in. Courtesy of the artist