



Clockwise from above: Rajabhai Clock Tower, Mumbai in the 19th century; Maharaja of Orcha-Sir Pratap Singh in 1890; and Raja Deen Dayal.

# Memories in black & white

The 'master even of masters', Raja Deen Dayal was a self-taught genius and pioneer of photography in India, whose work continues to evoke curiosity and fascination, capturing as it does, the spirit and beauty of a bygone era.

Text: Heer Kothari  
Photographs: Vikas C Jain (Foto Crafts)

Above: Rear view of the City Palace of Alwar.  
Right: Nawab of Kania.

India of the regal past couldn't have found a better historian than Lala Deen Dayal. A pioneer of photography in India, he took India to the world.

**Ushering in a new era**  
Photography just like railways and telephone lines was introduced by the British, back during the 1800s when *Daguerre type* (a photographic



process where the image made on a light-sensitive silver-coated metallic plate) started flooding the European markets, and the influence set a pace in other colonial nations as well. India was not penurious of the changes, which was the result of rapid industrialisation in the west. The influence of photography was vivid, and brought about a radical change in the way events were recorded.

Born to this era in 1844, was an outré talented photographer, named Lala Deen Dayal. He spent his boyhood years in Sardhana, Meerut (now in Uttar Pradesh). Brought up by a well to do family of Digamabar Jain Marwari jewellers, this academically inclined student topped his form, earning a Diploma in Engineering, from Thomason College of Civil Engineering at Roorkee.

The unflagging devotion to his métier won him the Royal Warrant appointing him 'Photographer to Her Majesty the Queen.' He was also appointed by the VIth Nizam as the Royal State photographer. His awe inspiring images pleased the Nizam so much, that he penned down a couplet, loosely translating 'in the art of picture making, surpassing all, a master even of masters is Raja Deen Dayal'. The images created by this self taught genius, conquered the hearts of many influential people, in the British hierarchy, Indian Maharajas, and Nobles.

## From Lala to Raja

When Deen Dayal concluded the course, he got a job as a Draughtsman, and Head Estimator, at the Public Works Department of the princely States of Indore. During his early 30s Deen Dayal decided to pursue photography as a serious hobby, which he eventually went on to take up as his vocation.

The wheedling of Sir Henry Daly, and European influence added to his motivation.

On Sir Henry's insistence, Deen Dayal was given the golden opportunity to photograph the Prince of Wales, and his entourage during his Royal Visit of India in 1875.

Quickly acquiring acknowledgement, Dayal went on to tour Bundhelkhand during 1882-83, with the then Agent, Sir Lepel Griffin. During this trip, he took rallying

images of many forts, palaces, temples (like the Dilwara temples of Mount Abu) is noteworthy. Eighty nine of these images were reproduced and published in Sir Lepel's, Famous Monuments of Central India, (London 1886), a book that reached the hands of Queen Victoria. In 1893, Deen Dayal, was commemorated by the World Columbian Commission at the United States of America, with a medal and a certificate. He won several other awards at various photography exhibitions held in Poona (Pune), Jeypore (now Jaipur), Calcutta (Kolkata), and London.

In 1894, Mehboob Ali Khan, Nizam VI of Hyderabad, conferred him with the title of Raja Mussavir Jung Bahadur—an astonishing journey spanning two decades from Lala to Raja! On 11th November 2006, the Government of India, Ministry of Communications, and Department of Posts, honoured Raja Deen Dayal by issuing a commemorative stamp.

## Striking differences

Deen Dayal set up his photography studio at Secunderabad in 1884. With twenty other studios in the city, Raja Deen Dayal and Sons emerged as the rising stars, outshining European





Above: Certificate awarded at the World Columbian Exposition 1893.  
Right: Victory Tower, Chittorgarh.

competitors, in size and composition. A decade later Raja Deen Dayal and Sons, inaugurated a De-Luxe Salon in Mumbai which is now occupied by Khadi Bhandar at Fort. The opening of the Bombay Studio was reported by the Press of England, as one of the most opulent studios in the East.

Deen Dayal was a visionary. His ambition saw no full stop. His business acumen provoked him to hire a lady photographer Mrs Kenny Levick, whose journalist husband further helped promote the business. Mrs Kenny Levick was given charge of the *zenana* (ladies) section. This enabled the ladies who followed the rigorous practice of the purdah to pose freely in front of the camera. Deen Dayal strived hard to get the exact image. His training in draughtsmanship helped him compose pictures accurately. The play of light intrigued this young man. He would visit the subject, several times during the day in order to make a memorable image.

Raja Deen Dayal took India to the world, through the images that he created. He documented a wealth of events, and every sort. Royalty dripping from the images of palace interiors, the affluent decked in finery, their dinner banquets, *shikars* (hunting expeditions), and panoramic views were among the many images he captured. However, the disparity between classes became evident when he took gut- wrenching images of malnourished children in famine-struck lands.

As and when time lapsed, photography was a means of acquiring publicity. In due course of time it became a curse



as political apathy became rampant, and images cheated simpletons of the real situation.

#### A legacy continued

Raja Deen Dayal saw his empire crumbling in his life itself. The unforeseen demise of his son Dharamchand and his wife in 1904 added to the dilemma. A few months later on Wednesday 5th July, 1905 the legend himself passed away. He took away his legacy with him leaving an abundance of wealth behind. After his death in 1905, his son Gyanchand continued the family business, but his untimely death around 1919 brought a temporary halt to the firm. It was Deen Dayal's youngest grandson Amichand who resurrected the firm's fortunes and won back the patronage of the VIIth Nizam. His grandchildren digressed into several other professions that were related to photography, while his great grand children adopted modern methods in photography.

Glass plate and gelatin negatives are a fragile legacy and



HIS BUSINESS ACUMEN PROVOKED HIM TO HIRE A LADY PHOTOGRAPHER MRS KENNY LEVICK, WHOSE JOURNALIST HUSBAND FURTHER HELPED PROMOTE THE BUSINESS.



Above: Medal Awarded at Jeypore Exhibition 1883.  
Top: Dilwara temple at Mt. Abu.

prone to be victims to the vicissitudes of time. While the most popular format of negatives people have seen today is 35 mm, negatives at the turn of the last century were larger – 4.5x7 to 12x15 inches. Deen Dayal maintained a meticulous record of his photographs in registers with each print having a serial number, description, size and customer details. The registers serve as a valuable archive of his prolific work. His registers serve as a valuable archive of his prolific work. His grandson Amichand took a keen interest in keeping them carefully, while carrying on the photographic legacy. Modern conservation methods are being used by the family to preserve the legacy that include acid free covers and mounts, archival polyester pouches and digitisation of photographs to minimise handling.

When Raja Deen Dayal, started out as a photographer, professional photographic material was not readily available.

So much so he coated his glass plate negatives himself (wet colloidon process). Companies like Kodak under George Eastman, were just starting out, and were on their verge of making a mark. Deen Dayal kept up with the advances in photochemistry (moving on from ambrotypes, tintypes to gelatine negatives, and albumin to gelatine based and platinum prints) and excelled in producing perfect prints—so confident was he of his work that his photographs carried a 100 year guarantee, and that is set to be exceeded!

On the negatives of views Deen Dayal, had scratched the serial number corresponding with the register; his early works even have the initials LDD or DD etched on to the negatives. This denotes an authentic Deen Dayal. The era may have ended but the aura Deen Dayal left behind is legendary. 🌟