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Sindh valley

Photographer: James Guthrie

Date of Photo: 1932

Continent: Asia

Geographical Area: South Asia

Country: India

Region/Place: Jammu and Kashmir; Sindh valley

Format: Print Black & White

Size: 78 x 60 mm

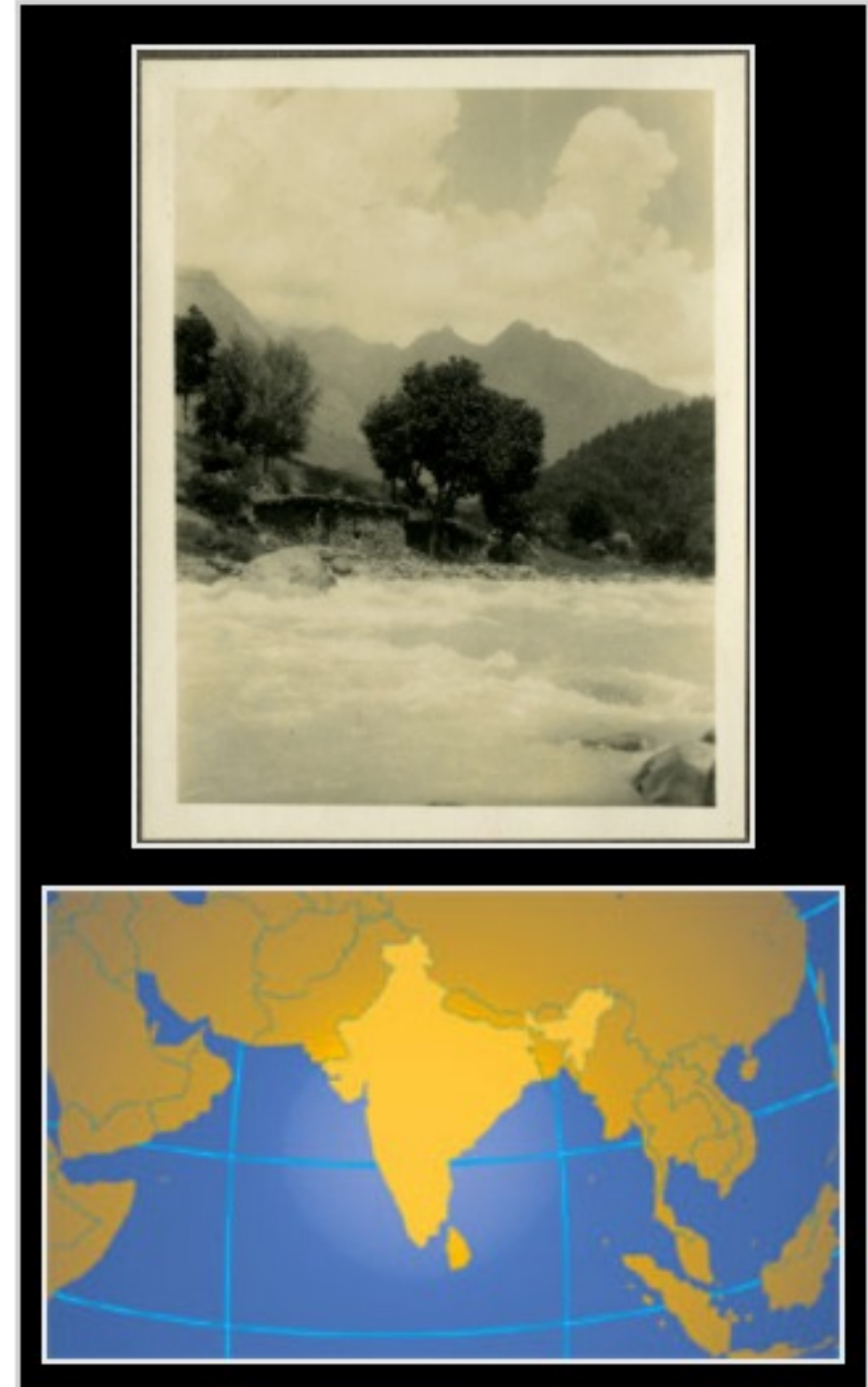
Acquisition: Christopher Guthrie - Donated 22 July 2009

Description

View of a river in the Sindh valley, with mountains in the distance.

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When I was just a little girl,
I asked my mother (pointing at strange man)
Who is he?
First came confusion, then understanding.
A glimpse into what my future will be..

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom”

I remember moving to Kashmir, but I can't remember times how many.
We were separated by housing rules labelled- 'Family safe' vs 'Army only',
I didn't understand these boundaries,
Till I did. One meant safety, the other- Shambolic.
Unsettling and entering an unsettled territory.
Always a broken painting-

See it's hard to understand.
You stand and draw at the edge of the meadow-
At some distance, you can see a gleaming blue river.
Almost as blue as the sky above it. ALMOST.
there are some hues of muddy browns from the banks, but you paint it out.
I make excuses.
'The ice-capped mountains in the winters make for a better painting than the brown ones
in the summer.' My mother, of art and disagreement says,
'There are no rules- you can paint those mountains ice-capped in the summer too- take a
photograph this winter!'

She doesn't understand.
I am painting through a foreground of a coiled mesh, the barbed wire of hatred.

I see this photograph, and even through the grains, I see the meadow, the river and the
mountains more clearly than I ever have.

My great grandfather, a second generation officer of an India with no boundaries. No
chalked up lines on a sand model in a conference room at a high altitude warfare zone,
telling men what they were meant to stand guard on.
My Grandfather, a third generation officer in the newly formed Indian army.
Of a newly formed Hindustan, a sovereign, socialist, secular nation
My father, a fourth generation officer of the frontier forces
My father, of his men and his battalion
and then, My father- of me.

“Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now.”

I remember standing in the kitchen, helping my grandmother, as she complained about the size of the pantry.

‘Saumya, our house in Rawal Pindi, you could store a year’s ration in that pantry!’
Leading to ‘All of us girls used to go to this special shop for freshly dried spices, I can still remember the fragrance, makes my mouth water.’
Gradually extending to ‘Shadipur was named after your Babaji.. when we walked the streets, we wore that Shama name like a beautiful garment.’
An abrupt escalation to a silent, penetrating halt.
‘What’s left, but a little jewellery and some pictures...’
She shows me the picture. The bright smiles blind me.
A sudden contrast to the passing shrug, and a deep setting melancholy.
I ask her to continue..and what she says with casual nonchalance haunts me to this day.
‘All I could really save was the knit jute sack, used for potatoes, the bag I was put in and transported to India during partition. I couldn’t get rid of it. It was the last piece of home I carried with me’.

See it’s hard to understand.

I hear no malice, no anger, no contention.

All I hear is a sad reminiscence.

Of a life left behind on a train; cloaked in patriotism
which is symbolically both the saviour and transporter;
of refuge and corpses.

Trains that previously served to bring people and goods from disparate worlds closer together,
now burning, charred and lifeless carriers of scarred memories.

Through the grains I see my grandmother happier, more clearly than I ever have.

My father, of honour and of valour

Of stories packaged in a pragmatic baritone.

Kill or be killed.

My mother, of separation and of patrimonial grit.

of anxiety ridden nights next to PCO booths, telephones, then cellphones,

My sister of hazy paternal memories

sprinkled with less surprises, more false solace..

My friends, of lost fathers, years and tears

and of bodies wrapped in the Tricolour.

A future fermented in familial diaspora.
In their tryst with Duty, humanity is put to rest in a grave.

Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom; so is prosperity now; and so also is disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.

I remember living in Kashmir and going for walks with my parents.
My father always said 'this is Pir Vaer, Saumya,' the valley of saints.
We often crossed meadows full of Bakarwal goatherds, stopping to greet this old man, who once healed a grave injury my father had incurred in the valley.
He told us about adventures in the hilly grasslands, his worn out kaftan woven in stories of camaraderie and festivities.
He said 'I miss wandering. If I cross the river now, I'll be shot.'

See it's hard to understand,
A land home to the Indus valley civilisation, Now a land of burial grounds, divided by religion.

I wish there was a supervillain to blame.
Khushwant Singh said 'Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians—or the Pakistanis'
We are prisoners of stories steeped in manipulation, marginalisation of religion on both sides of this Indus border, of self thriving agendas, and of malign religious indoctrination, of Jai-Hind and of 'salaam valekum'.

I wish there were no government letters stamped 'missing in action'
I wish there were no young boys strapping bombs, martyred to Allah's cause.
I wish and I wish, for everyone to feel like they belong.

I see this picture in the archive more clearly than I ever have, my own.

You see, It's hard to understand.
you might have understood what I am saying, you might have not.
My picture couldn't go up in an archive.
My picture isn't a version of well documented, static images with sanitised bios viewed through the eyes of the elite,
obscured and free to see the beauty of that gleaming blue river in the valley.
It doesn't sit in a tree on a tapestry or a spotlighted wall of privilege, preserved with care and structure.
With a future hopeful of reparation, of anti colonisation.
Mine is a picture of a Vividly collaged, circular, chaotic, confused memories, incapable of restitution.
Waiting to become irrelevant.