



# Studio photography as a mirror of mores

## IFP hosts exhibition of pictures from a bygone era

M. Dinesh Varma

**PUDUCHERRY:** Can you imagine a time when the wrist watch was the ultimate symbol of wealth of a family, and even more so if it was adorning the wrist of a woman member of the household? Or wondered about what defined sartorial elegance in those times or why it was that folks posing in front of a commissioned photographer made sure that they had the Murphy radio in the backdrop?

An exhibition of family portraits shot in studios across Tamil Nadu hosted on Beach Road by French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) Social Science Department, in collaboration with PONDY ART, holds a mirror on not just the dress sense of a bygone era but also provide a compelling narration on social mores and local heritage.

The frames put up at the 'Pondicherry: Heritage of Family: Tamil Studio Portraiture (1880 – 1980) show take visitors through a series of select portraits collected from across Tamil Nadu by a team of FIP researchers led by Zoe Headley.

If Chinese and Greek philosophers appreciated the principles of a pinhole camera 2,400 years ago, it wasn't until 1827 in France that the ability to fix an exact representation of a person or object was discovered.

'Drawing with Light' as photography was known then was relatively quick to cross shores and reach India by the 1840s – in fact, there was even a photography society in



Visitors look at the portraits displayed at the exhibition on Wednesday. PHOTO: S.S. KUMAR

erstwhile Madras in 1856.

However, photography began as an elitist phenomenon with access to the technology and the studios restricted to colonial administrators and Indian aristocracy.

It was by the 1880s that commercial photo studios mushroomed across the bazaars of the fairly bigger towns. Being photographed must have become a craze as newly-weds, brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren posed in front of contraptions in studios.

According to the FIP researchers, these family portraits not only present a visual record of a family's history – often showcasing multiple family generations – but also provide insights into costume and Tamil social history.

That Madurai enjoyed a pre-eminence in studio photography is reinforced with several exhibits culled from that place. The exhibition also has an interactive panel,

'Looking Closer,' which asks visitors to search for trivia such as how many umbrellas can be found and who holds them, men or women, or spot portraits with family pets.

As the exhibition states, the personal history, technical skills or artistic sensibility of early Tamil studio photographers might be a history that will never be written. Studios sunk without a trace after the advent of mechanised processing and printing and subsequently digital photography.

Many of the earliest black-and-white portraits, which have survived over 100 years, are deteriorating.

The IFP team has been working to preserve this historical legacy as a digital archive in their library for public benefit. The full archive will be available for public access at the completion of the project.

The exhibition is open till March 24.