Farming on Facebook, Camera-less Food Photography and a New Indian Pastoral

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ABSTRACT

Lacunae in media images and reports of death and agrarian based suffering, experienced by India's debt prone farmers, have only begun to be addressed in the Indian news media. While the agrarian crisis is spectacularized through 24 hour news cycle images, analysis of underlying causes is less common in print and digital media. Kheti Badi, a photo-series produced from screenshots of FarmVille (an Adobe Flash gaming application on Facebook), interrogates this media impasse. It critiques homogenized images of food and farming, which rise to the top of web search results, and photojournalistic images showing the dignified suffering of Indian agricultural workers. Kheti Badi's computer made images are an alternative to visual stereotyping of rural India in photojournalism. Its technological inventiveness neither spectacularizes farmer protests or suicides nor aestheticizes pastoral qualities associated with the land. To make visible the changing nature of food production and need to reform farming in India, and its media coverage, Kheti Badi supplants the Indian pastoral with a new pictorial.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian Crisis, Agricultural Workers, Computer-Made Images, Documentary Photography, Food Industry, Photojournalism, Visual Stereotyping

INTRODUCTION

I believe that we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images. Nothing moves us anymore, nothing has any meaning – Alfredo Jarr

Kheti Badi is a photo-series produced from screenshots of Farmville, an Adobe Flash gaming application on Facebook. The game's meteoric rise happened early, drawing more than one million daily active users within the first four days of its release. Chinar Shah, the photographer behind Kheti Badi, began making the series in the years immediately following Farmville's release in 2009. Shah quickly adopted the technique of pixelating jpeg files made from the original screenshots, a creative strategy that would exaggerate what she terms the images' 'synthetic' and 'cartoon' appearance. Kheti Badi's starting point of screenshots in lieu of camera-made images, preference for pixelated over sharpened images and use of digital visual effects as both means to and the subject of its representation situates the work outside the generic conventions of documentary photography. While Kheti Badi shares with social documentary photography its commitment to the social world, it captures images related to land and livelihood in India not from the field and through the lens of a camera but from the vantage point of a computer screen with software built into the computer's operating system. Party to a still unfolding history of photography, the photo-series expands the boundaries of photography

Figure 1. [Untitled] (© [2015], [Chinar Shah], used with permission)

to focus attention on digital media's displacement of issues affecting farmers and farming in the Indian context.

Chinar remembers sitting in class in what must have been second standard when she learned for the first time that India was an agriculture-based economy. The news came to young Chinar as a surprise on account of never having set foot on a farm. Neither was she aware of the importance of farming to the approximated 53% of the population who, according to the 2011 Census of India, made all or a substantial part of their livelihood from the land (Sainath, 2013). An agency operating under the Indian Ministry of Commerce put this figure at 58% in 2018 while describing the 157.35 million hectares dedicated to agriculture in India, which places it second in the world in terms of agrarian land use (India Brand Equity Foundation IBEF, 2019). All these years later, Shah is plowing the land, planting seeds, harvesting crops, and raising farm animals and livestock on Farmville's screen-based plots of land. She is, in her estimation, 'a farmer online and a photographer on the land' (Interview with Chinar Shah).

ONLINE FARMING

The measure with which the invitation of the game's developer Zygna to 'take a nostalgic journey into the countryside' resonated worldwide is evident in the 38,404,103 likes garnered by its Facebook fan page by 2015 (Farmville Facebook Page, 2015). More recently, the page would appear to have been 'un-liked' in reasonably significant numbers – at the time of writing, its page likes number 32,687,335 (Farmville Facebook Page, 2019). However, although the game earned considerable fandom on Facebook, its notional transposition of farming and animal husbandry to a virtual environment attracted ample criticism in the regular media: Time magazine named it among the '50 worst inventions' of 2010 for being predicated on a 'series of mindless chores on a digital farm' (Fletcher, 2010). In its editorial a little over a year after the game launched, and by which time 61,411,787 Facebook users

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