

SMALL TALK with PABLO BARTHOLOMEW

# FINDING THE RIGHT FRAME

From a frazzled 15-year-old to becoming one of India's worthy photographers, Pablo Bartholomew is looking to find many closures to his eclectic past, says Sudipta Basu

Most of us, artists included, tend to stop and either stare into an incomprehensible distant future or turn the spotlight on frenzied energy fields of the past when we hit a milestone. We are talking about turning a corner at 30, 40, 50. Pablo Bartholomew touched 51 recently, and decided to come to a grinding halt and dwell on the time he was 15 and a little after.

The result of that dialogue with himself is expressed in a collection of photo documentation from his past titled *Outside In!* A Tale of 3 Cities, on display at the NGMA. The pictures are dated back in the '70s and project a Bacchanalian early youth—mostly Pablo in the company of his friends: beauteous women (Pooh, Bina, Nandita, Nommie, Medha, among others) and languid men.

After being thrown out of high school in New Delhi at 15, he arrived in Bombay to make himself useful as well as economically viable. Those were the days of rock and roll and LSD, and the young photographer was a willing wan-

ton spirit. In those heady days, all the good things in his life merged to reach a heightened crescendo when in 1976 he won his first World Press Photo award, for his documentation of the life of a morphine addict in Delhi's Paharganj, a neighbourhood which used to be infested with foreign tourists shackled up in crampy quarters. By his own admission, he became "somewhat of a wonder kid" after that recognition; not that it translated into monetary well-being, which brought him back to being a still photographer in Bollywood, although the pay off was working with Ray on *The Chess Players*.

Equally, for the general lot of lensmen not much has changed since that time, he observes. "There isn't any curry at the end of the tunnel for most photographers," he says. "I learnt early how fickle the media is. And even today you are worth something only if you photograph cricket. There are many photographers languishing away, like gifted people in any other field of art," he says.

Pablo was among the lucky ones; a job with an international photo agency

took him across the country and the world, and he eventually became a documenter of cultures and people; it brought him in close proximity with Rajiv Gandhi ("If I had played my cards well, I may have been offered the portfolio of the minister of culture; but we discussed photography and the latest equipment on the market in our free time," he jests) and gave him the opportunity to work with the tribes of the north-east over long spans. His second World Press Photo recognition came with his now-legendary frame of the face of a half-buried child in the event of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Ten years after that event, he returned to that city in search of the family of the child, like another famous photographer Steve McCurry did after photographing the 14-year-old Afghan girl for the *National Geographic*. Pablo was not as lucky in his search as the American photographer was though.

All the same, fifteen and thereafter, was clearly a significant time in more ways than one for the enfant terrible of

photojournalism, as he sheepishly says today, "what's wrong in being 15 at heart all along". It is in that mix of the innocence of youth and the responsibility of an adult that Pablo has now, at 51, decided to turn to his roots and back to documenting his chequered parentage—a quarter Bengali, a quarter Burmese, half Lahori-Punjabi. "I have been denied visa to Lahore many-a-time in the past and so must now focus on avidly documenting the Punjabi side of my family, all retired army people, before they pop off," he drawls. His other pre-occupation is to document the works and writing of his father who used to be a renowned art director in his time. "There are many closures to deal with, although I have not looked at the larger end yet," says Pablo. His father's works—photographs, essays, letters—will be put together and put up for an exhibit at the Sepia Art Gallery in New York in about six to eight months.

At 50, he is a mellow 15-year-old looking to his parents and pedigree, both of which in their quiet ways set him out on his journey earlier.

PIC : RANA CHAKRABORTY



## CELEBRATING SAYAL

As part of the Tongues on Fire Festival to promote films of South Asian woman film-makers will be, an In Conversation, with actress and writer Meera Syal at BAFTA, celebrating her life and achievements, conducted with playwright and critic Bonnie Greer, to be held on March 19. Meera is looking forward to a chat with lots of audience participation as she looks back over an eventful career of 20 years. Her concern for generation next is the draconian cuts in community arts funding that are bound to affect future careers that are



shaped via that route as hers was. Then there will be memories as old film clips are shown. "I'm sure some of the hairstyles will certainly raise a few laughs. But mainly I hope it will be a fun event," she says.

## ROLE MODEL

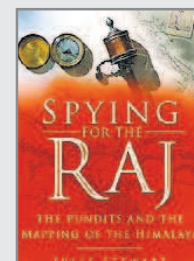
Sarvat Khan is a fashion model with a difference. The 36-year-old mother of two suffers from multiple sclerosis but that will not stop her from stepping onto the catwalk later this month at the My Style



fashion show to be held at the Multiple Sclerosis Society's annual exhibition MS Life, Europe's biggest disability event in Manchester. Sarvat and twenty of her fellow models, all afflicted with MS, will be styled and dressed by the team from famed fashion emporium Harvey Nichols. She says, "It's a chance to show people what we can do and hopefully we will raise money for the charity too!"

## AN OLD ASIA HAND

Journalist and author Jules Stewart's book, *Spying For The Raj: The Pundits and the Mapping Of The Himalayas*, traces the thirty-year-old effort by the British under the leadership of Captain Thomas Montgomerie to map the Himalayas, with the official name of the project being the Trigonometrical Survey Of India. It also highlights the recruitment of a band of men who were called Pundits not for their caste but for their ability to measure their steps and the task at hand. Stewart, a South-Asia hand is already onto his next book project, a history of



the Northwest Frontier, with 'good friend' President Musharaff having arranged a timely trip to tour the region!

## JAY WALKING



It was Jay Sean night at the UK Asian Music Awards sponsored by B4U Music at the Royal Festival Hall at Southbank Centre. The singer wowed screaming fans with a live rendition of his hit single 'Ride It' and went on to win awards for Best Urban Act and Best Video. Other winners included Adnan Sami for best International Act, composer Nitin Sawhney for his Commitment to the Scene with eighties Bhangra group Heera getting the Lifetime Achievement Award. The award for most inspiring speech of the evening would have to go to Jay Sean as well, as he admitted to paying for and producing his hit award winning video, for himself!

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