



A DEVIANT'S DIARY

First stirrings of a luminous career: an exhibition harks back to a youthful Pablo Bartholomew

by Shruti Ravindran

SENSITIVE, reflective, intimate. These are not words normally associated with the oeuvre of Pablo Bartholomew, best known for his stark World Press Photo award-winning images: morphine addicts shooting heroin up gnarled forearms in cheap Paharganj hotels, and the glassy-eyed dead baby that came to symbolise the

Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984. But it was the feeling of having become "a hard-boiled egg" inured to historic images—"this riot, that PM"—that prompted Bartholomew to dredge up 35,000 black-and-white negatives of his "personal, collective history" that had gathered dust over a quarter of a century. And are now on exhibit at the National Museum as part of India Photo Now '08, the French Embassy festival coinciding with French president Nicolas Sarkozy's India visit.

Glimpsed through his experiments with his father's Leica, Zorki and Pentax Spotmatic cameras, these images document, as he puts it: "the contortions and convulsions of that phase", when he was kicked

out of school, and spent a pleasurable time in the company of musicians, hippies, and other assorted deviants. It is a visual diary of all that surrounded him at that time—friends, family and urban scenes: old girlfriends brooding in the gloom of his bedroom, his actor-activist mother and art critic-writer-artist father, self-portraits composed when he was coming down from acid trips, and the bell-bottomed students of St Stephen's College swaying at parties. "The freshness of an untrained eye was exciting to see," says Bartholomew. "With experience I've become comfortable, confident, to produce images, but the fuzziness and the bad lighting have their own drama, and create another expression."



Bedroom eyes (top left) Pooh, a girlfriend, in Bartholomew's Bombay home in 1975

Stephanian swing (top) Students shake a leg at the 1974 winter festival

Horse-drawn boatribe (right) At the strangely barren Chowpatty beach, Bombay, 1979



Curators and critics abroad have certainly held the same view. Bartholomew's early work got critically-acclaimed outings at the prestigious Noorderlicht and Rencontres festivals in Europe last year. At the latter, ironically, it was displayed alongside the work of upcoming Indian photographers trying their hand at the same thing: photographing their family, their friends, themselves. But Bartholomew's images are as buoyant as the others are mannered and stilted. "It's become the fashionable thing to do," says Bartholomew. "It's often done in a forced, self-conscious manner. But my endeavour was much more free-spirited." ■

On till Feb 29 at the National Museum, Delhi