

When did the magic of photography capture you?

The magic began when I saw my father create beautiful images out of negatives. We used to go to a hill station called Almora for our summer holidays like most families do in India; there my dad would take pictures of our family. Then the roll was sent for processing at the local studio and later in the evening he would make contact sheets of the 2B size images against lamplight. The magic really began when the paper would go into the developer and an image would come up. There was a dark room at home, so I was able to play around and learn by just observing my father who although an art-critic had a passion for photography and art. However, he did photograph the artist community he wrote about which, is an important document today.

What kind of subjects and issues attract you as a photographer?

There are two layers here. One is of the friends, family, people and places I came across who I documented and photographed. Then there was a kind of group that attracted me, the outcasts. I guess I was one in my own way. In the 70s Delhi society was very conservative and a lot closer than it is now and I was not the conservative kid. Word got around that this guy was a freak and I became an outcaste of sorts. My earlier black and whites captured the fringes of society,

Visual Anthropology of The Negars



which reflected my role as an outsider as well.

I have always been a wanderer and a traveller so exploring frontiers and encountering people, getting to know them, going underneath their skin, receiving a sense of them and then being able to visually show all of this also excites me. I am half-Indian and half-Burmese. I have a strange name and maybe I am a strange kind of guy. I also questioned the whole identity issue, of what it is to be Indian. On the other hand, when I am documenting news, the events govern me. If there

is trouble, natural disaster or political discourse then you just concentrate on those issues or spot news for magazine oriented work.

And, of course there are my long-term projects that are of interest to me. It has always been a hunt and a search and that is what is exciting. You start to move in one way and then the whole thing takes over and you become that project. In any creative process there is a madness that kicks in and then you grow with it, eat, live, sleep and breathe it.

What was the

reaction to receiving the World Press Award for the Best Picture Story in 1976 for *Morphine Addicts in India*?

As I was into this stuff I found people that were into it as well. In Mumbai, I sought out the opium dens and we were into ganja, hashish etc. I was a part of this and started documenting it and you can see the intimacy within my images. The *Morphine Addicts* was never an assignment it was an extension of me. The award I received for this was only really a flash in the pan. From being the 'enfant terrible', I became this 'problem child' and 'the wonder kid'. But the award didn't really do much for me because at that time in India there were magazines that hired captive photographers and wire services were not that developed so there was no real avenue to go forward and the Mumbai scene proved a lot more exciting and interesting as a city therefore I shifted base.

What was Mumbai like in those days?

I went to Mumbai to hang out with my friends who were part of Bollywood, theatre and music. I was experimenting a lot in those days so I ventured into photographing film stills to learn and study lighting since I did not have any formal training. All my learning came from being on the job. It helped me decide two things, that I did not want to go into the moving image and I learnt how to light. From

there I was able to go into advertising and did that for about five years. Although my advertising career was flourishing tremendously, it wasn't exciting, challenging or stimulating and everything we did at that time was to try to teach the 'natives about style and how to do something in the western way'. The art directors were rather limited in their thought process. And in time I began to concentrate more on photojournalism.

How did life change after you received *The Picture of the Year* in 1985 for your image on the *Bhopal Gas Tragedy* especially since you were nominated along with India's top photographers Raghu Rai and Dilip Mehta?

It was very exhilarating as it had only been two years since I had been in the news business. The push was not very drastic but it did put me in everyone's head and that did translate into more work. I had also begun work with a photo agency called *French American Photo News Agency: Gamma Liaison Network*, which got me a lot of attention and these things do matter in the west. My name was in every photo editor's head but I was very busy at that time as it was one of the most intense times in Indian politics and history. Indira Gandhi died and Rajiv Gandhi took over. Everyone thought of a 'new India' with Rajiv Gandhi as the new avatar. There was this huge exuberance. Bhopal happened, there were problems in Punjab and Kashmir and issues catapulted while the western media was watching India. It was that history that I photographed and documented.

What made you get into technology?

By the late 90s, photo agencies were changing. They were grappling with technology. There was the birth of the Internet and I wanted to ride along with this wave, as it was very exciting to be in step with technology. I could see if I had to go independent I needed tools to be online. So I thought of starting a small technology firm primarily for myself, I started to develop photo databases and we deploy them for a few people. I have chosen to remain small. One of the most exciting projects that we do in a closed environment is that for the *World Press Photo*. We have built, designed and supported their entire workshop-mentoring program. There are programs, which allow student-teacher interaction, the worked on images becomes a gallery, and it's all archived on our site. It's a very



Bhopal Gas Tragedy exciting and thriving site but it's closed to the community and the participants of the workshop of the *World Press*, which engages with at least fifteen countries. I think it's one of the most exciting ways for distant learning.

Aries got to see a side of Pablo and his photography that has never been seen before. What made you dig out 30-year-old photos?

It was last year that I started to pull out stuff that I had put away over the past 35 years. My own reaction was of shock and awe because memory has a way of dulling and forgetting. It was really the exhilaration of rediscovering that magic that was there and that had gone unnoticed for many years. The voice of it finally emerged. If it had been heard before then maybe the journey would have been different. In a way it was thrilling that it was finally being noticed and in a way it was sad because it had gone unnoticed for so many years.

It was sitting there in negative form and I was thinking that I am 50 now and over that hump, what am I going to do with myself and where am I going to go? Media is not exciting me that much. The whole photo agency scenario in the west has changed drastically. There has been a sort of corporatisation. The big magazines don't necessarily do the interesting stories. Even with *National Geographic* the number of days that you get for an assignment has been slashed to 1/4th. Then there is stock photography. People very rarely pay for a unique image to be created. In these circumstances I wanted to fall back on my old ideas and therefore the series is really an amalgamation of the documentation of my family and friends.

You mentioned that

your earlier works are your most gratifying ones. Why?

When the medium is new and fresh there is that sense of discovery. The most exciting thing is to be able to see how I was looking at things back then. The magic of looking was fresh which, becomes jaded over time. You get more conscious as you grow older and I think that sets into any creative form. You could allure people with the finesse of your skill but you can't bring about freshness to an idea and that has its own death.

What is your take on digital versus analog?

I think both have their place. I work 50-50. Most of the time I work digitally because I feel nowadays everyone prefers work in this format. Digital cameras are improving but I feel there is a certain magic that is captured through film that can't be replicated and I think you need to know when to use film and when to switch to digital. With the younger kids there is so much automation that I don't think they go through the process of being able to photograph, process or develop their contact sheets and that in itself is a way of learning as you are staying with the medium and you really know when and how much to push it. Analog photography is like playing unplugged and it's really how true you can be to this medium and to know where the push and pulls of it are.

What is your opinion on photographs that illustrate reality vis-a-vis a staged reality?

I have never staged reality as that has never been my discipline.