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THE BARTHOLOMEWS
- Confronting the richness of the everyday

Telling tales: Amit Chaudhuri

The pictures taken by Richard and Pablo Bartholomew — father and famous photographer-son — in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, of family, apartment interiors, and the Indian art world Richard had natural access to (being an art critic) have now been in circulation for two years. Recently, I saw a substantial display in an art gallery on the third storey of an old house — where the viewers, quickly unmindful of the photos, were behaving with the easeful familiarity — a state of being poised finely between absolute contentment and boredom — that characterized all the figures in the pictures.

Each time I've seen these photos, I've remembered something from my 'other' life in childhood — not the imaginary life I was constructing for myself from the world I knew in Calcutta: my cousins' world of *Shuktara*, Narayan Debnath, and Manna Dey; but the life that was actually my own in Bombay. This life in Bombay, which was my own but utterly distant, which was familiar but devoid of intimacy, had, however, its discontinuities; and it's to these that, for me, the Bartholomews' pictures speak. Occupying one of these discontinuities is a family called the Baruahs, whom I found myself thinking of in the gallery.

Jolly Baruah was my father's friend, and he was a 'commercial' artist: that is, he worked in advertising in an office on Dadabhai Naoroji Road (roughly, Bombay's Chowringhee), quite a distance from the ground-floor flat he and his family lived in in Khar. To visit him at home was to visit another country: the country captured in the Bartholomews' photographs. Pets — a variety of dogs, but also a cat, and, at one point, a rooster — had free range of the flat, including the bits we wouldn't ordinarily access, like the shadowy space beneath the dinner table. Besides dogs, all kinds of filmmakers roamed about the place: I remember the nice bald man simply called 'Sarkar', who was always on the verge of making a feature, and also recall running into Subrata Mitra, Ray's cameraman for *Pather Panchali*. Jolly Baruah and his wife's brother, the artist and designer, Riten Majumdar, were the first two men I ever saw wearing the short *kurta* — the type that's now been in vogue for more than a decade because of John Bissell's Fabindia. But I'm speaking of the late Sixties — a time that belongs to the prehistory of the retail outlet — and was struck then by the curious shirts that couldn't be categorized or named, and seemed neither Western nor Indian, antique nor current. All around were other things that estranged me: the coir chairs in abundance; the unnaturally low centre table and divan; the strange, uncanonical visuals that hung from the wall, Jolly*kaku*'s own handiwork (only later would I realize what a gifted innovator he was); the fragile lampshades; the ashtrays that looked like bits of bone or wood till you noticed the lip for placing the cigarette on. All the objects we usually call 'furniture' or 'decorations' were actually the assemblage of a *bricoleur*. Speaking of cigarettes, Jolly*kaku*'s wife, Chitra, smoked endlessly. She was tall (5'8"), and grew increasingly large as the years passed — it's possible her constant smoking (and eating) concealed more than one sadness: she'd lost her first son to cancer when he was 11, and also missed her vocation as a singer (despite cutting a disc soon after coming out of Santiniketan) because of some unfortunate damage to her voice. I remember her dressed in handloom *sari*s and large-bordered Garhwals.

It was here, at the Baruahs, then, that I first encountered what Indians called 'ethnic' style. It's taken me about 40 years to realize that 'ethnic', in India, is not really a proclamation of identity, but a register of homelessness and displacement. For instance, Chitra Baruah *née* Majumdar and her brother Riten's Bengaliness was as improvised as any of the homespun or assembled things in the drawing room; they'd grown up in Patna. Jolly Baruah actually came from 'royal' Assamese lineage. They now lived — and would till they died — in a rented flat in Khar. Charminar cigarettes (Chitra Baruah's favourite brand), Kolhapuri *chappal*s, blue jeans (often tailored, since the authentic item wasn't available), cotton or *khadi* tops, sleeveless jackets with Nehru collars, cloth shoulder bags, a copy of

Lorca, an interest in Bergman, a passion for the *dhrupad* — all or some of these elements, with a few others thrown in, added up to this ensemble of homelessness, of belonging nowhere — an odd, vibrant cosmopolitanism. I should include in the list the *sari*s a certain kind of woman wore — predominantly the cotton *tangail*, with one or two striking, simple colours — as well as the large *bindi* (not a stick-on, but actual vermilion) on the forehead. These bold and simple patterns were then replicated on bedspreads, such as the one on which Pablo Bartholomew photographs a child lying back, as if the ambition of that generation were urgently to move from identity into abstraction — to become, in themselves, or to at least be woven into, a sort of Rothko painting. So much of that world seems organic, and yet so much of it was design, that it becomes difficult to tell where the apparently natural ends and the created begins.

Naturally, the Baruahs had pedigree, but we were only half aware of it at any given time, as were they, apparently: the rather bankrupt obsession today with familial connections — discovering or inventing them — was still nowhere in sight. Chitra*kaki*'s older sister was Sucheta Kriplani, India's first female chief minister; the filmmaker Pramathesh Barua was Jolly*kaku*'s maternal uncle. And so on and so forth. All this — in the vacuousness of present-day India — would be of terrible import; but at that time these facts were worn casually. They were significant, though, as part of the texture of what the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, called, expressively, 'symbolic capital': a domain of artistic and intellectual glamour and power, as distinct from real political power. The bewitching magic of 'symbolic capital' only made itself felt in environments in which there was relatively little capital of the non-symbolic variety: such as the Baruah's rented ground-floor flat, with its beautifully put together *bric-a-brac*, which risked getting ruined every year when the monsoon flooded the apartment. Similarly, the faces, places, and families the Bartholomews photograph: *émigré*s, artists, men, children, women, whose world possesses the new, idiosyncratic, evocative marks of 'symbolic' wealth — an easel, an ethnic bedspread, a copy of *Thought*, the folds of a printed wrap-around cotton skirt; a rolled-up joint. This is the sweet, frayed incarnation of the new aristocracy, and it extended — like most of the photos — only to the end of the Seventies. 'Symbolic capital', like light, displaces meaning restlessly: an artist looks like a student and *vice versa*; an easel becomes a bit of furniture; the exterior of a house is like a giant canvas. The Bartholomews are partly aware of this shifting social texture: that's why they photograph themselves obsessively — not existentially, in anguish, but self-reflexively, to capture the special symbolism they're part of, and which they can't — and don't want to — transcend or escape; to insert themselves into this largely visual 'symbolic' panorama. The Bartholomews' portraits differ, as a result, from Dayanita Singh's great pictures of the affluent of Bombay and Calcutta — photographing the rich requires a shrewd adjustment to the inequality between portraitist and sitter, so that the photographer can make herself invisible, and yet leave an unsettling trace of candour on the portrait. With the Bartholomews, especially Pablo, every picture of the time, every portrait, is also a self-portrait, every self-portrait a picture of the time.

What else can we recall from the peculiar itinerary of habitation and magic in those decades? There are the flecked mosaic floors, like just-begun Pollock paintings, grimy with our footsteps. There's the constant battening of the ceiling fan, which — with the democratic white glow of the tube light, illumining everything from a coaster to a book of poems — once formed the aural and visual prism of these lives. One also notices, from the photos, how lissom Indians are — they will lie and sprawl anywhere; they read (and think) in the oddest of positions mixing languor and total immersion. Nirad Chaudhuri — in another context, that of *petit bourgeois* Bengali life — said that the bedroom, not the drawing room, was the main locus of sociability in these homes. Perhaps, with regard to Pablo's pictures, the bed itself: where people take stock, ponder, make conversation and pacts. And what of sleep? The Bartholomews' portraits of recumbent and, in Richard's photos, sleeping figures are a reminder of their curious, topsy-turvy take on sociability: that one is never not part of a particular social world — itself charged with mysterious meaning, like a dream — even when one is no longer aware of it, or of oneself. How lovely to confront the richness — I use the word in a Bourdieuan sense, without Bordieu's reductiveness — of the everyday in a country where we struggle to find a language with which to speak of it.