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FILMMAKING ON HER OWN TERMS

Director Varsha Bharath speaks to *Lounge* about her film *Bad Girl*, her determination to do things her way, learning to work with women in an industry of men, and why she wants more women to watch her movie

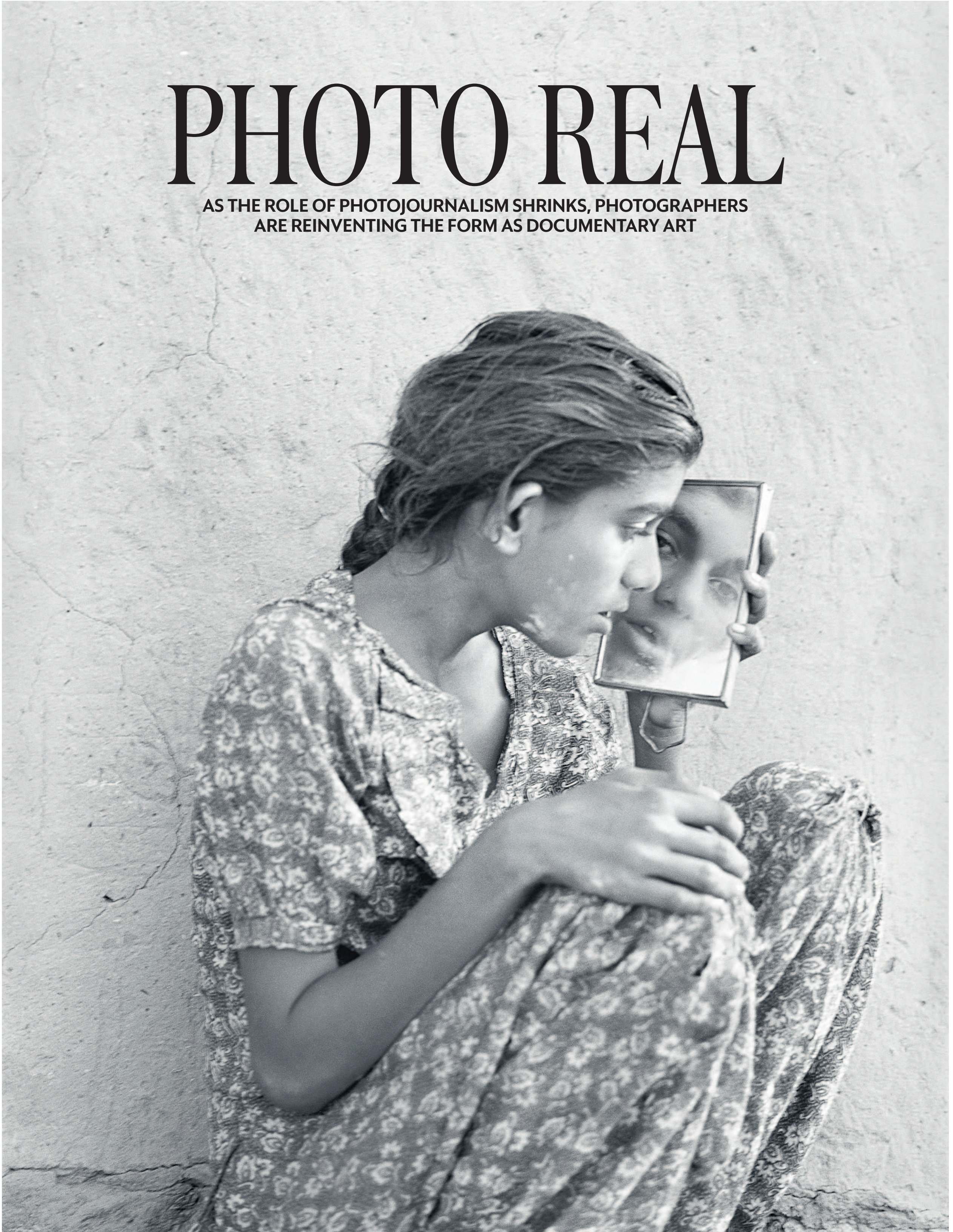
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PHOTO REAL

AS THE ROLE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM SHRINKS, PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE REINVENTING THE FORM AS DOCUMENTARY ART



How photography is merging reportage with art

The role of photojournalism as a tool for documenting social change has been shrinking in Indian media. So photographers are reinventing the form with the encouragement of mainstream art galleries

Shweta Upadhyay

Two years ago, photographer Gauri Gill became the first Indian to receive the prestigious Prix Pictet photography prize for her documentary series, *Notes from the Desert*. From nomadic journeys to farming cycles, drought to dust storms, festivals to feuds, the minutiae of daily life of marginalised rural communities across Barmer, Lunkaransar and Osiyan in western Rajasthan is captured in this decades-long project. An adolescent girl looks at her reflection in a hand mirror, an elderly woman sticks out her tongue for examination in a clinic, a woman is camouflaged by the leaves of a tree on which she is sitting... through such expressive images of the everyday, Gill maps the patterns and passage of time in the desert.

But when Gill first pitched the project to a weekly magazine in 1999, it was rejected for it had "no news peg" and was unlikely to cater to a mostly urban audience. This prompted Gill to take a sabbatical—and ultimately leave photojournalism—to engage deeply with rural communities, which resulted in projects like *Notes from the Desert* (1999-ongoing), *Acts of Appearance* (2015-ongoing), featuring performative portraits of residents of a Maharashtra village known for mask-making, and *Fields of Sight* (2013-ongoing) in which Gill seamlessly combines images of landscapes in rural Maharashtra with over-inscribing by Warli artist Rajesh Vangad to communicate two distinct ways of seeing.

Over the years the myopia of Indian mainstream media has led to a decline in photojournalism, an important strand of documentary photography for raising awareness, storytelling and social change.

At a time when self-published photo books and interdisciplinary photo installations are flourishing, documentary work too is morphing and transforming to acquire a new shape. It is expanding its scope and blurring the lines with conceptual photography in its format and feel.

There are many factors that are leading to this change. For one, the changing nature of print media is behind the shift, says Delhi-based photojournalist Prashant Panjiar, who has worked in the photo team of *India Today* and Outlook Group of Publications. "Most people who worked in the documentary tradition were in mainstream photojournalism or had a link to media and publishing," says Panjiar. "There was an avenue for publication, support, even money."

In 2004, he edited *The Definitive Images: 1858 to the Present*, featuring iconic photographs encapsulating the history of modern India, including Raghu Rai's 1984 photograph of a victim of the Bhopal gas tragedy and D. Ravinder Reddy's photograph of *kar sevaks* bringing down the Babri Masjid in 1992. In the introduction to the book, Panjiar writes: "We all know that photographs are a means by which we relive important moments as well as everyday lives... The still photograph forces us to concentrate, to contemplate. Which is why it leaves such a lasting imprint in our memory."

With the advent of digital imagery, the space for such photojournalism diminished, he says, "which is a contradiction as the digital space is actually unlimited and you can publish a lot of work."

Today, most photographers doing documentary work are commissioned by foreign publications. Danish Siddiqui, who was killed in Afghanistan, stood out for his documentary photography work for Reuters. His photographs capturing mass cremations during the second wave of the covid-19 pandemic are seared in national consciousness.

Kolkata-based Ronny Sen, well known for his documentary work on Jharia coalfields in Jharkhand, says the space for this genre has shrunk further with the advent of mobile phone photography. "The desire for images is satiated by the glut of imagery in social media, so photographs still have value. But this social media trend, when combined with lack of editorial imagination, has led to the belief that it is just an image and anyone can take it, so who's going to spend on photography? Any good reportage or documentary work requires time, resource, energy, flesh and blood," he says.

Sen shot his 2014 documentary work in Jharia with an iPhone, in the vertical instead of the usual horizontal format used for landscapes to suggest that the way of seeing is more important than the instrument.

Sen recalls his photograph of a baby floating in a wooden pot in front of her submerged house during the 2006 Kosi floods in Bihar making it to the front page of the *Statesman* in Kolkata and creating a sense of urgency among authorities and rescue teams to provide relief. "I remember that there was a sense of



Divya Cowasji, from the series 'There Are No Love Letters Here'.

purpose and you felt that you could play a small role in something that's gonna affect life," says Sen. "Today, everyday we see images of Gaza but people are immune. Or on social media someone posts a photograph of a person dying of hunger, and by the same person, the next story is of them celebrating at a party. It is a very strange time that we're living in. Moreover, the barrage of images prevents us from reflecting on one issue at length." Numerous studies show that exposure to this kind of succession of images on social media leads to a form of cognitive dissonance among users if they see conflicting information or ideas challenging their beliefs, resulting in reduced empathy and a distrust for images.

Gone are the days when a photograph could launch rescue missions or melt hearts. Now, in contrast, the veracity of a photograph is in doubt in a post-truth world. "The way we consume images has changed and there are new psycho-social ways in which we are remapping and reorienting ourselves to the question of digital control," says Rahaab Allana, curator, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, Delhi, a charitable organisation dedicated to the preservation and study of the cultural history of India. "On the one hand, we have all become captives of the digital (world), where we're negotiating and getting seduced by these virtual choices and inhabiting certain worlds in a cyber universe. At the same time, with the rise of AI and fake news, we are habitually reoriented to question images that are in front of us, which I think is a positive thing."

The simultaneous thrill and doubt over images, and the amalgamation of fact and fiction with the rise of deepfakes and artificial intelligence, require new visual templates. "The nature of documentary photography has to change in these fraught times when the place of witnessing, testimony and dissent are acquiring new vocabularies..." says Allana. "We have to lay open ourselves to the ambiguous and to the elusive. In this era, artists have to think of a poetic, and not a direct, form of critique. The documentary is now straddling the lyrical and the evidentiary."

THE BLURRING OF LINES

According to Delhi-based Anshika Varma, photographer and founder, Offset Projects, a platform for photo books and lens-based practices, the binary between fact and fiction has been dismantled. What defines the space today is the voice, urgency and intention of authorship. For documentary photography, the raison d'être of which was to objectively

record genuine moments as they happen without any interference or intervention, the idea of these blurred boundaries has been pathbreaking.

As a result, photographers have been grappling with various questions: can a staged image hold documentary value? Can a documentary perspective engage with myth-making to reveal some aspect of truth? These debates are as old as the medium of photography itself. However, it is only in the last two decades or so that Indian photographers have started introducing the idea of subjectivity, staging, stylised recreations, and storytelling into their documentary practice. Or, perhaps, scarcity has fuelled innovation. The introduction of new styles and narrative structures could have been necessitated by the reduced exposure in newspapers, and the need for the photographer to distinguish their work from the cascade of images on social media. Whatever the driving force, the end result is that this elasticity has led to the expansion of the genre.

For instance, through fictionalisation of photographs taken during a religious festival in a village by the sea in Tamil Nadu in his award-winning project *The Coast*, 2019, artist Sohrab Hura taps into the belligerent nationalism and discordance of contemporary Indian polity. The series that mimics the anti-aesthetic of images on social media features photographs of fighting angry men; closeups of made-up faces invoking the macabre; bacchanalian, fervent revellers; women in trance running into the sea; along with a short story steeped in magic realism about a woman who has lost her head. This is a multi-layered documentary capturing at the same time a state ritual, a national mentality, a story about a headless woman, and an all-pervasive image language, even though for Hura, who started his career as a traditional documentary photographer, the notion that photography is fiction is a given.

Kaamna Patel, photographer and founder of Editions Jojo, a photobook library and bookshop in Mumbai, has repurposed found print media to comment on gender roles and the male gaze in *In Today's News: Alpha Males & Women Power*, 2019. Patel documents what cannot be seen on the surface but is covert, what she calls "a sentiment that is pervasive but lurking behind the advertising and journalistic images that we are made to believe." By showing how women are cast in stereotypical roles of either glamorous or grieving beings, Patel makes a telling commentary on the long history of misogynistic and sexist advertising imagery.

In *Chromakey*, 2020, she staged photographs of her mother at her "dream destinations", based on itineraries from her mother's database as a travel agent, and images gleaned from archives. This could fall under conceptual photography, but the borders between genres are blurring. "I am interested in documentation that reveals hidden truths rather than a direct representation or description of the world," says Patel. "Which is why I argue that my work is in fact documentary—I see many artists challenging the idea of documentation versus reportage in our current landscape." For Patel, documentary photography is tied to the idea of "truth" and multiple visual devices can be employed to illustrate it.

Photographer Divya Cowasji in her ongoing project, *There are no Love Letters Here*, embodies her ancestors by wearing their costumes and jewellery, recreating the past and her Parsi-Indian heritage in the setting of her ancestral house in Mau, Madhya Pradesh. This is an innovative take, where the pho-



Gauri Gill, 'Untitled (60)' from the series 'Acts of Appearance', (2015-ongoing); and (top) Prashant Panjiar's photo Jilawada at the wall that separates it from the Hindu locality of Vanmadi Vankani Pol in Ahmedabad, March 2007.

tographer is creating the real based on material culture and memory.

Photographers Soumya Sankar Bose, Soham Gupta, Rohit Saha and Abeer Khan also incorporate staged photography and fiction in their documentary work. In fact, this year, the Delhi-based Sher-gil Sundaram Arts Foundation, an organisation established to preserve the legacy of scholar and photographer Umrao Sher-gil, while announcing an open call for both documentary photography and staged photography, added the caveat that they recognise "the blurred boundaries between the methodologies and forms of both genres."

Another trend in documentary photography is the shift away from capturing a single iconic, definitive image. "Single images are powerful entities to communicate in the immediate sense, but a single image is not the complete story," says Delhi-based photographer Ishan Tankha, whose project *A Peal of Spring Thunder* (2007-15) recorded social life and environment in Chhattisgarh in the backdrop of a

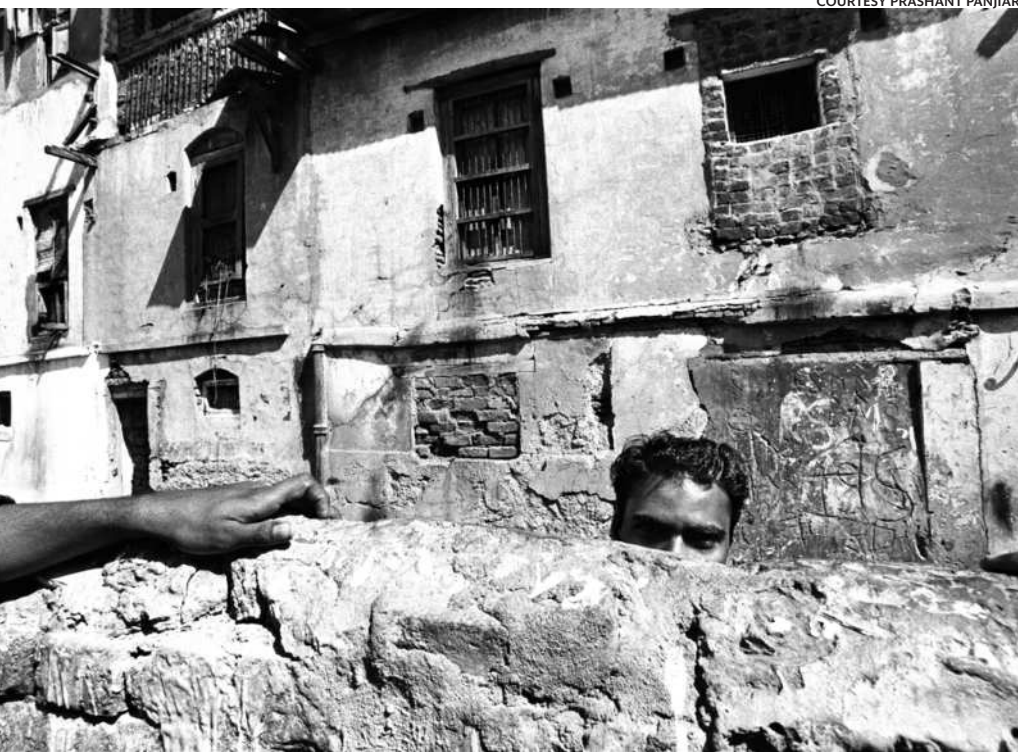
violent conflict between the state and Maoists.

Allana feels a constant reframing of documentary photography by unpacking the archive is crucial to bring forth nuances. "One needs to ask what is left out and what is remembered, when one considers issues of iconicity and un-iconicity, archive and counter archive," says Allana.

TURNING TO PHOTO BOOKS

The shrinkage of space for photography in the mainstream media has led to the proliferation of self-published photo books. It was Dayanita Singh who ushered in a wave of photo books in India through her engagement with the form that influenced several younger practitioners. Singh's oeuvre boasts of 15 photo books.

Varma started Offset Projects in 2018 as a creative platform for book-making and engaging with diverse photographic practices by organising residencies, reading rooms and collaborative exercises. The Offset Bookshop, which is part of the initiative, is India's first



COURTESY PRASHANT PANJIAR



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A medium of paradox: Gill

Even before the advent of AI and digital image manipulation, the authenticity of photographs could be suspect. Photographer Gauri Gill says, "I am well aware of how, at some level, it is all an entirely subjective interpretation by the photographer. Even in conventional documentary photography, when I am taking a so-called straight photograph, I make certain artistic choices—I choose what shutter speed to use, which will determine whether the person will be a blur or in sharp focus; or based on what kind of lens I use, will I have the background out of focus or with every detail visible clearly? So, the medium itself is prone to paradox."

To her, documentary photographs are "fragments of facts", which also makes them a kind of fiction "because the photograph is very much how I have creatively selected and interpreted particular facts, how I have mobilised the instrument, and my particular interaction with the scene. This is not to say that photojournalism or truth-telling is not relevant, so long as we know that it is only ever relational, and multi-dimensional," she explains.

Gill has taken time and put in thought to balance the power between the photographer and the subject. She spends years on her projects, and much of her recent work has taken a collaborative turn, which attempts to correct the one-sided gaze of the photographer. In Acts of Appearance, for instance, she has collaborated with Kokna and Warli artists in Jawhar in Maharashtra, who pose wearing papier-mâché masks they have made for the project.

Gill and the subjects of the photographs discussed the themes of these masks and construction of photographs at length. The masked figures are both humorous and disruptive in Gill's recreation of ordinary scenes of village life. "The mask here is also a kind of refusal," says Gill.

"We are programmed to think that when we look at a portrait, we will focus on the person's face as a kind of punctum, or centre. So, we are also making a political point here—a denial whereby instead of having access to the faces of people without power, we direct your view to their art instead via the masks, and thereby reorient an extractive gaze."

spectacular and big moments of violence or rupture, especially in my work in Chhattisgarh, but the everyday detail gets lost, which is essential to understand the complexity of a situation."

WITHIN THE WHITE CUBE SPACE

Documentary photography has found a place within the mainstream gallery as the art world has begun to recognise the complexity of photography practice. "The criteria of working with artists extends beyond medium for us: it's about their artistic process and practice as well as their integrity and commitment to the subject," says gallerist Roshini Vadhra, who has represented Raghu Rai in the past and now represents Sunil Gupta and Gill. "All these photographs offer an empathetic engagement with the social, cultural and political realities of our country."

Devika Daulet-Singh, founder of PhotoInk, a gallery for lens-based practices in Delhi, says that developing serious patronage for limited editions of photographic works was not easy. Conservatism in collecting and a peculiar hesitancy in embracing the limited-edition print were initial barriers. But she adds, "Lest we forget, patronage for contemporary art itself didn't come easy—it's not even two decades old."

While the opening up of the book and gallery space bodes well for documentary photography, the need of the hour is patronage and a public platform for mass circulation. Sen feels that documentary photography will continue to reinvent itself and find a platform. "The world might not see documentary photography like we used to see in a *Life* magazine or *National Geographic* or *Outlook* of the 1990s. Maybe that is not gonna be the form, but something similar in its soul, defined by truth, critique and expression." Photographers have shown their resilience to adapt to the changing landscape of patronage and aesthetic ideas, it is time for institutions to step up.

Shweta Upadhyay is an arts journalist and co-author of *I'll be Looking at the Moon but I'll be Seeing You*.



The Chennai Photo Biennale showed an archive of Tamil cinema sets belonging to T. Lakshmi Kanthan in the exhibition 'Maasaru Kaatchiyavaruku'.

When photos bring hidden pasts to life

Curators are dipping into photo archives to tell fresh stories on subjects as diverse as colonial history and industrialisation

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How does a photograph capture the spirit of the city, its citizens and the revolutionary spirit prevalent at the time? It's an idea that informs a forthcoming exhibition, *Disobedient Subjects: Bombay (1930-31)*. Here, Bombay of old essays the role of a protagonist—its architecture and landmarks serving as sites for protest. The show, which draws from an archival album, *Collections of Photographs of Old Congress Party—K.L. Narsey*, presents a multi-layered narrative. For one, it harks back to a significant chapter in India's freedom struggle, the civil disobedience movement, which is often centred around the figure of M.K. Gandhi.

"We associate the Civil Disobedience Movement quintessentially with Gandhi, but the album appears to be making a different argument: that the people of Bombay made the movement that in turn made Gandhi globally famous," curators Sumathi Ramaswamy and Avanti Bhatnagar, both faculty members at Duke University, US, write in an email to *Lounge*. About five years ago, when the two started working formally on the *Narsey* album—part of the private archive Alkazi Collection of Photography (ACP) in Delhi—they became interested in the place of the camera in the visual culture that emerged around Gandhi.

Presented by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) and Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, the show is set to open in Mumbai on 12 October. It is accompanied by a book, *Photographing Civil Disobedience: Bombay, 1930-1931*, published by the ACP in association with Mapin Publishing. Besides the widely known historical events, the exhibition foregrounds the role of ordinary people in expressing dissent against colonial rule, and "turning the streets of Bombay into sites of nationalist assertion, as captured on camera." The curators also examine the role of women in this dissent.

Disobedient Subjects adds to the ongoing discourse around the photo archive as a pulsating entity, rather than a static repository of images. In fact, the archive has now become a starting point of inquiry into a myriad of subjects.

In such a scenario, the role of the curator and the archivist in "reintroducing the archive to the public" has also become important. "Who accesses the archives and then interprets it? How inclusive are they in their approach? All of this plays a key role," says Aditya Arya, who helms the India Photo Archive Foundation, which runs the Gurugram-based Museo Camera, a contemporary venue documenting the history of photography. A prominent archive that Arya restored and catalogued belonged to the photojournalist Kulwant Roy (1914-84), who covered the last years of colonial rule and the early decades of India's independence.

As a historian and archivist, Arya likes to go beyond the physical image to question the technology and process by which a certain photograph was made. Digging out stories buried in the visual material requires time, patience and understanding of a particular body of work and the period when it was made. He gives the example of industrial photographs of the 1990s shot by various photographers. "Who was allowed into this realm and why?" he says. "Where do you draw the line between documentary and advertising?"

Arya recently came across an archive of a photographer, who was on the ground in Delhi during the 1984 riots. He calls it a "gruesome archive", a visual testimony to the violence of the times. "I am trying to understand why he shot a particular angle, what was influencing his vision."

What finds a place in visual culture, and what doesn't? Do images enable myth making? These are critical questions that researchers and curators are trying to answer through the archive.

Ramaswamy first came across the *Narsey* album while working on another major project in the US on Gandhi and visual culture and the manner in which artists of India had helped create the iconic image we now have of him. Bhatnagar then visited the Alkazi Foundation's office in Delhi to look at this collection of photographs. She was struck by the way the *Narsey* album captured a rare side of a well-known historical event, bringing into view details she had not seen in existing scholarship.

They started working on the album in summer 2020 at the height of the covid-19 pandemic. The project was first conceived as a digital exhibit, which over time has materialised into the exhibit that will be launched at CSMVS. "What's fascinating about this archive is how it reveals a moment when documentary photography in India was still finding its visual language," the curators write. "Photographers carried the formal, carefully composed style of the studio into the public sphere, into streets, markets, and political gatherings, so even images meant to record 'facts' were aesthetically shaped and intentional."

FROM THE STUDIO

In Delhi's Mahatta Studios, the Mahatta family has been working to restore and catalogue the vast repository of photos, dating back to 1915. Madan Mahatta joined his family's photo studio in 1954 in Delhi and worked across portraiture, dance, theatre as well as industrial and architectural photography. His photos of the Hall of Nations (1972), Shri Ram Centre (1968) and Palika Centre (1983) etched a portrait of Nehruvian modernism in Delhi, while documenting the work of architects such as Raj Rewal, Habib Rahman, Shiv Nath Prasad and Kuldip Singh. These photos have now become vital documentation, given the demolition of some key buildings of the time. An exhibition of Mahatta's architectural photographs, titled *Delhi Modern*, was organised for the first time in 2012 at PhotoInk, Delhi, and curated by Ram Rahman.

Mahatta's industrial images, which are just as revelatory of the economic and social transformation at the time, the rise of the middle class and changing gender norms have also been showcased far and wide. "These images, which document factories that came up around 1991, offer a lot of nuance now. You see a lot of male-driven professions being photographed before 1991, and there is a gradual change with women making their presence felt in the factories," says Arjun Mahatta, the photographer's grandson, who has been actively preserving his family legacy. With a team of 15 people, he is studying the vast repository for threads and connections.

There are hundreds and thousands of archives waiting to be discovered. They remain relevant due to the way people respond to them, including those who own them

Arjun is linking the past with the present through the book *Maha Kumbh: A Spiritual Odyssey*, dedicated to his grandfather. To be launched in New York next month at the Indo-American Literature Festival, it juxtaposes images of the Kumbh Mela taken by Madan Mahatta in the 1980s with those taken this year by Arjun, his father and uncle.

EXPANDING SCOPE

The photo archive has also led to interdisciplinary responses—over time theatre directors, performance artists and art collectives have responded to it. During the 2019 edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale, curated by Pushpamala N., Mumbai-based artist collective CAMP entered into a visual conversation with the photo archives of *The Hindu* in the work, *A Photogenetic Line*. This featured a 100ft-long branching sequence of cutouts as a way of "reframing and rebirthing existing photographs as new organisms".

The discovery of newer kinds of archives has expanded the scope of study and curation. The recently concluded edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale featured a few of them.

"This year, we discovered a photo archive of Tamil cinema sets belonging to T. Lakshmi Kanthan, who had shot these images over five decades," says Varun Gupta, director, Chennai Photo Biennale. He got to know about the archive through friend and movie producer Suresh Balaji—Lakshmi Kanthan had been the set photographer for nearly all the films produced by the family, besides working across Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Telugu and Kannada films. "These images were showcased in a park in the photo exhibition, *Maasaru Kaatchiyavaruku*, with lakhs of people stopping by. The images featured some of the leading film stars, but we tried to find ways of looking at these photos beyond the superficial view by linking them with lines from Tamil poetry," he adds.

The curator, Nirmal Rajagopalan, who is a Tamil cinema enthusiast, came up with this idea of combining the images with lines from *Thirukkural* by poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar—"the lyrical nature of the photographs complementing the verbal brevity of the couplet".

In Gupta's view, there are hundreds and thousands of archives waiting to be discovered. When they reveal themselves, they become part of the folklore of photography. "There is the body of work by photojournalist T.M. Satyan (1923-2009), which is just sitting there and has been exposed as much as it should have been. There are hidden archives in cinema, which would be very popular if they emerged. Holiday imagery—casual images of family, what they wore, how they travelled—have been neglected as they are seen as less valuable," states Gupta.

Archives remain alive due to the way people respond to them, including those who own them. Arya, who helps restore and digitise family archives, is often approached with requests to not show certain people in the repository due to lingering family feuds. "Having said that, I help a lot of people put together stories of their families. We have an interesting archive of Dev Shumsher Rana and his family, who ruled Nepal for 199 days and was then exiled to Mussoorie. We showcased this as part of *Nirvasanama: Portraits of a Life in Exile through Changing Viewfinders*, in 2018," he adds.

Gupta too welcomes requests to help families preserve their archives as part of Chennai Photo Biennale's scope of work. "A lot of people keep putting off looking at their archives as they worry about the money and time to be spent on digitisation. Many of them reach out to us after their negatives are too far gone. I would urge them to give it a thought. You never know in what context your archive of photos becomes important—not just for the family but for the field of art," he says.