



In conversation with Pablo Bartholomew

Description

Of the nine photographers, whose works are on display at the Old Distillery, Pondicherry as part of the ten day photo festival Pondy Photo 2014, Pablo Bartholomewâ??s photo essays on the tribal communities of the north east India feature as well. A recent recipient of Padma Shri Awards, Pablo Bartholomew shared some his thoughts with The Inquirer team.

An excerpt from the interviewâ?!

We had read that you were expelled from school for insubordination when you were 15. And after that you discovered a fascinating world of weirdos, druggies and white hippies. We would like to know a little bit about that from you.

Well, those are not my words. Those were words written about me by some other writer. They chose those words, not me. But yeah, it is partially true. The 1970s was the end of the hippie era. It was coming to an end. A lot of them used to travel a lot in the east, in India, in Nepal and in other places. My school used to be on the way from the Nepal embassy to Connaught Place. And the people that I had met used to travel on the roads on which my school was. That is how I met them. And I found them very interesting. They were very different from the people that I usually interacted with, you know, the middle class. Generally the middle class is known to conform too much. And I found these people to be much more interesting than the middle class. The middle class, as you know can be very colourless. And that was my experience.

Anyway, I got to meet and photograph many people who form the outskirt of society, like eunuchs, prostitutes, and hippies. But I would never call them to be weirdos per se. They were just very different from the people I usually associated with.

You have photographed extensively in Calcutta and Bombay for many years. What makes you keep going back to those places?

Not really, the work that you saw [yesterday](#) was mostly the work of my teenage years to my mid-twenties. So there is a specific period when this work was done. So to put a time span on it, it will be about from 1972 to 1983, possibly 1984. By 1983 I was already going into photojournalism, international media, so there was less of the city documentation and more working on stories on a national level and surrounding countries, which was basically of interest to the international media.

You have actively photographed riots, among them the most famous being the riots that was the repercussion of Babri Masjid riots. Have you ever thought of doing war photography?

Not really, because there haven't been many great wars around India. I don't think the wars between India and Pakistan were anything very big, cause it was always one sided. India always bashed Pakistan up. Frankly, I was too young for the early wars, and by the time Kargil happened, which wasn't really a war, I was already moving out of conflict photography, photojournalism and all that sort of stuff. So for me it wasn't something that was very interesting. Because my attention was somewhere else. But I have never really been interested in going into some other country's war. Let's say Iraq, Afghanistan. It was of no interest to me because it didn't concern India.

You said your attention was somewhere else.

Yeah, there is all these work that you see here today (a collection of photos of the Naga tribes from Arunachal Pradesh and other states of North-East). There were also other projects. One of my big projects that I didn't show was Indians from different parts of the world. From 1987 I have been photographing them in America, France, England [and] Mauritius. For me there are other things more interesting than war. War is just one manifestation of a kind of change, or social conflict, or political conflict. I feel that there are better things in the world to do. There are great war photographers, and I think that work should be left to them. I may not be a great war photographer since I haven't proven myself in that field.

But you have documented other political conflicts haven't you? Indira Ganshi's funeral, Rajiv Gandhi's funeral.

Yeah, but those are things that happened in India. They also happened in Delhi. And for a large part of my media life I relocated myself back to Delhi. That was the national capital, it was also my hometown and it was easier to work from there. It was also the hub of national media stationed for South Asian region.

A large portion of your slideshow from yesterday was the work of your father juxtaposed against your own. In self-introspection when you see both the work, does any sort of comparison happen in your mind?

Well, it's not a competition going on. It's not a *jugalbandi* in music where two musicians are trying to outdo each other. Here it is looking at various aspects; whether it is the visual aspect, whether it is an aspect of subject matter, or it can just be mood and feeling. And through mood and feeling also there can be similarity of thought processes. It's not comparative that way. It's to show similar forts, maybe twenty years apart. Two people who are father and son, but may not be aware of my father's work, but then we brought it out, started to look at it in 2005. But once I did, I started seeing threads that are similar. So it has to do with similarity and that body of work is called 'Affinities'.

There was something we wanted to ask you. In the launch event of Pondy Photo 2014, you said something very profound about tribes. They are the first community. They are the beginning of civilization. But you are from Delhi, which is a metropolitan city. So where began the familiarization with these tribes?

Well, I told you yesterday, that my father when he left Burma during the Second World War, it was a thirty day walk that many refugees took through treacherous area. From a point in Burma you come out in Assam and you pass through Naga area. It was the stories of their hospitality and kindness. So when a refugee is evacuating, people extend help to them. There is some humanity in them. Even though these people are deemed savages, headhunters, by the modern society, they helped in providing shelter, food so that safe passage could happen. For me it was always something I heard as I grew up. When I was working as a photojournalist, I wanted to go and explore who these people were, what their emotional structure is, what is it that they do, and why is it that they helped. Because they have such an aggressive, hostile nature as described anthropologically. For me it was a quest and it took me a ten year journey to go to many parts of the Naga area, within Arunachal, Nagaland and Manipur, and of course there are some in Assam. There are some thirty Naga tribe. My father touched about two tribes, and

that also on the Burmese side, because there is what is called the Patkai range, on one side of which there are the Indian Naga, on the other side there are the Burmese Naga, so it was a process of understanding, learning and discovering and I think through that I came to some realization, which I talked about yesterday, how the base of culture rests on the environment. How they live on the environment, how they grow on the environment. They gather their food, make their clothes, jewelry. It's quite evolved. It's sophisticated. It's just that the outside world, especially the modern world that think that they know everything, which I think is mostly crap.

The modern world still doesn't know very much, they are still trying to figure things out. A lot of things that they try in the medical profession don't work. They won't agree but the amount of people dying in hospitals is enormous. So I think the lesson here really is that there is deeper knowledge that people have which includes working with nature and being able to cure themselves. That's one part of it. The other is how to live with nature and keep it regenerating and the fact that these are cultures and traditions that lived centuries and centuries ago. So even in the Mahabharata and the Ramayan, we have references to the tribes, and how they have helped the God Kings conquer and defeat their enemies. These are people who have always existed from time beyond modern civilization and the fact that now, within certain western cultures, there is a revision that is happening where they are being given their rightful place and title, in land and water.

So, you know I really hope in India we can, because we have a very colonial structure of looking at certain people. And the government hasn't really modernized in any manner or is in any hurry to do so. I think many of the people are suffering from afforestation. I think if the tribes were given work and allowed to live in the forest they would look after it much better than the stupid forest guards who are taking bribes and selling things off. I mean these are issues that are not very complicated, but it suits people's pockets for any change to happen.

About the Photographer:

Pablo Bartholomew is a Delhi based independent photographer and photojournalist who has a rich collection of photos depicting and documenting the lives of the Nagas, political conflicts of modern India, and visual diaries chronicling his teenage work.

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