

MAGAZINE

Remains of the day



[Chintan Girish Modi](#)

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Atish Saha went to Rana Plaza for 16 days running, obsessively collecting objects that belonged to those who had died in the building collapse. Photo: Atish Saha

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Blood-stained clothes, photographs, torn umbrellas, and bones: Atish Saha's photographs capture the detritus of April 24, 2013, the day Rana Plaza in Dhaka collapsed and killed 1,135 people

On a sombre evening in Mumbai, photographer Atish Saha and I sit under a sprawling tree outside Tarq art gallery, not far from Gateway of India. The Dhaka-based photographer is in the city for the opening of art curator Kanchi Mehta's new show 'Feedback Loop', which includes Saha's work apart from seven other artists'. He is somewhat anxious but also excited. He lights up a cigarette and offers me one. I politely decline, and we begin to talk.

'Lost and Found', the series of photographic works Saha is here to exhibit, has taken up most of his waking life since April 24, 2013. That was the day Rana Plaza, an eight-storey commercial building in Dhaka, collapsed, leaving in its wake a death toll of 1,135. Most of the dead were garment factory workers who got buried when two illegally constructed floors, the substandard building material, and a heap of building code violations came crashing down. Saha, who trained at the Pathshala South Asian Media Academy, arrived at the site on his way home just minutes after the collapse.

He had no idea what he was walking into. He kept going back, day after day, for 16 days, to collect objects belonging to those who died — mangled mobile phones, photographs, gloves, umbrellas, vanity bags, undergarments, bones and human hair. He brought them home, along with the stench of human flesh and the stains of blood.

Saha felt "empty, as if something had ended," when he stopped visiting the site, so he resumed even after the government built a fence around the area. Six months into the process, Saha started taking photographs of the objects. "It was not a normal thing for me to do," he says. "For the first time, I was seeing so many dead bodies in one place. In fact, when my grandmother died, I ran away from the body. I could not bear to see it."

Overwhelmed by what he saw at Rana Plaza, Saha felt "the need to process it in some way". He also wanted to honour the memory of those who had died, particularly as he realised how, for the workers, it was an unequal world — in death, as in life. It hurt to know that some tragedies, despite their magnitude, pass off as lesser tragedies because they happen in the 'third world'.

Saha began working closely with '24 April', a collective of artists and activists involved in documenting the stories of these workers. "Almost half as many had died in the Rana Plaza collapse as those in the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001," says Saha. "The footprint of the building was no larger than a basketball court, while the twin towers covered 16 acres." The ugly reality is that these factory workers provided cheap labour for international brands such as Walmart, Benetton, Mango, and Primark.

On one of his visits to the site of the tragedy, Saha stumbled upon the broken head of a mannequin. It reminded him of a skull he had seen lying around months after the collapse. On another visit, he

found a torn umbrella, the metal shining through. “It was like a human skeleton,” he says. “I tried to imagine who the owner might have been. The cloth looked new. Perhaps the umbrella had been bought only a few days before the collapse.”

Much of what Saha collected continues to occupy his house, a collection that has won him, along with writer Jason Motlagh, the Overseas Press Club Madeline Dane Ross Award for best international reporting in the print medium showing a concern for the human condition. “The world is imbalanced. Human beings are imbalanced. I do not have any middle-class guilt,” he says about his collection. But equally, Saha is hesitant to accept any praise about his contribution to documenting human rights abuse in Bangladesh. That, he feels, belongs to the people “who really care, who fix problems, not just talk about them.”

On view till April 23 at Tarq art gallery, Mumbai.

Chintan Girish Modi lives in Mumbai, and writes on art, gender, films, education, peace and conflict.