

BOMBAY SHOWCASE

The beautiful and the damned



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Coal Workers, Dhanbad, Bihar State, India, 1989 © Sebastião Salgado / Courtesy The Deepak Puri Collection, MAP / Tasveer

One of the most important archives of our times, The Deepak Puri Collection is also a call to preserve the legacy of Indian photojournalism

What is the legacy of photojournalism in India? Glorious, expansive and dramatic could be one answer. Some of the most renowned photography in the world has been produced here. The contradictions of life, of politics, of humanity, have played themselves out in the streets of the subcontinent since the documentarian first arrived in search of narratives that could be carried away in rolls of film.

Another answer could be that the legacy is invisible, ignored and largely unknown. Though some of the foremost photojournalism may have been born in our midst, one look at our present

newspapers and magazines makes us question whether it was ever seen, absorbed, or understood. There is almost no value given to the photojournalist in the current hierarchy of the Indian media.

This is the contradiction provoked by the images in The Deepak Puri Collection: The Legacy of Photojournalism, preserved by the Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), currently showing in the city.

Few collections of photojournalism exist in Asia, and even fewer that have been shared with the public. This one is precious and unique for several reasons. First, the man who donated it to MAP is a legend among journalists who worked in the subcontinent between the 70s and the mid 2000s. As General Manager and Photo Editor of the South Asia Bureau of TIME-LIFE in Delhi for 30 years, Puri literally became the reason stories from the subcontinent were accessible to the world.

Second, this collection contains images from a wide variety of people who shot for magazines. There are images that we all know from some of the most famous names in the industry (Sebastiao Salgado and James Nachtwey) but also images few of us have seen from photographers few of us have heard of (Namas Bhojani, Santosh Verma, Tanwar Tekee) not to mention something from everyone in between (Raghubir Singh, T. S. Satyan, Prashant Panjiar). How did one man come to own all of these prints?

Because the photographs might not have existed without him. As Robert Nickelsberg, an American photographer covering the region for TIME for almost a decade between the late 80s and 90s, explained: Puri's prodigious abilities stretched from procuring visas on the phone (or entry without visas), to transporting film on a weekly basis through (often unknown) carriers on domestic and international flights to the TIME headquarters in New York, to presenting exhausted reporters with encouragement (at all hours of the day and night) from his desk in the PTI building on Parliament Street.

Prashant Panjiar, veteran photographer, added that it didn't matter whether the journalist in question was working for TIME or not. If they were stranded without transport, or had run out of film while in the middle of a conflict zone, or needed a laptop to be carried from London to Delhi – Puri was their port of call. He treated everyone's needs with the same familial urgency.

The best way for the photographers to show their gratitude was by gifting Puri prints of the work that was most dear to them. Puri rarely requested a specific print, he would say, "Give me whatever you like". And the photographers were generous. Almost every photograph, not to mention every photographer, on display is worthy of an essay.

But a painfully quick overview is all we can afford. It is 1986; Sebastiao Salgado has just given the world his titanic images of human labour from the Sierra Pelada Gold Mine in Brazil. The working masses are like an ant colony, the laborer like Christ climbing up the hill to his crucifixion. It is 1988; the Soviets are leaving Afghanistan, their tanks laden with flowers, the roads lined with Afghan soldiers standing in solidarity. It is 1990; the Rajdhani has just pulled into the station in Bombay, a line of coolies, mirroring the red of the train with the red of their shirts, stretches endlessly down the platform. It is 1996; chocolate skinned, bare-chested devotees of Shiva bathe under a waterfall, the white of the water like a milky downpour against the dark blue rock-face. Their hands bring the water close to their muscled bodies, each man transformed into a sculpture in that moment. It is

2001; the Maha Kumbh Mela brings us the quixotic sadhu. It is 2002; Afghanistan is an obliterated smoke haze that American soldiers are entering loaded with gear, like so many GI Joes. It is 2004; James Nachtwey is in Sudan and a woman caring for her sick child in West Darfur becomes the symbol of the war that has killed thousands.

With every step we take through the gallery, we alternate between the beautiful and the damned. The nostalgia of time gone by is thick in the air. There is no single artist, no single story; these are all fragments of history, seemingly irreconcilable. So how should we understand them? Perhaps simply as a peek into an era when the cover of magazines like Newsweek, Time and India Today became the collective memory of an event and there was ferocious competition among photographers to have that image be theirs or to have one more page given to them for the story. Perhaps as the time when India was romanticised: its explosions of colour, its spiritual depth and its manic streets presenting a chaotic feast for the camera.

Or perhaps this exhibition should serve as a reminder. The impact that the world's foremost photojournalists have had on our way of seeing is often forgotten. It is the aesthetics that they developed in the field over weeks and months that have become so contested and clichéd in photography today. The Instagram filters that we use so casually, the kind of image that we all "like" without thinking, was first given to us by these image makers, working in the darkroom for hours, standing in the light for days, trying to understand how to capture every subtlety within the frame.

We should also recognise that we have a legacy of our own to preserve, and a long road ahead in that process of recovery and preservation. Barring Raghu Rai, Raghubar Singh, Prashant Panjiar and Swapan Parekh, most of the Indian photographers on display have no records of their work in the public domain. In the 80s and 90s, and even the early 2000s, the documentarian's goal was to disappear. As Ed Kashi reminds us in his recently published *Unspoken Consequences of a Photojournalist's Life*, "Disappearing into the background is an effective strategy to bear witness to moments that would otherwise be inaccessible. Candid intimacy is the term I've used to describe my work, and my vanishing into nothingness is the imperative". But even if this was necessary for the work to come into existence, it is also now as necessary to retrieve these images and their creators from anonymity. The Deepak Puri Collection is a beginning, every image from the subcontinent seen here signals hundreds of others that no one has seen.

Let us hope that his example will encourage others to come forth. So that we may begin to write a real history of photojournalism for India. And so that many books, many exhibitions, many journals of history, sociology, anthropology and art may include these images. Because our visual culture, our understanding of ourselves is incomplete without them.

Legacy of photojournalism, the Deepak Puri Collection will show till May 26 at Tarq