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PHOTO FEATURE

Photographer captures death of old professions in Indian cities

Dhobis, shoemakers and calligraphers: as cities change, they're all vanishing rapidly.

Scroll Staff

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The last two decades have completely transformed India's cities. With economic restructuring, traditional industries have been rendered redundant and new technologies have made mechanised laborious tasks. It isn't just factory workers who have been affected by these changes. Urban craftsmen have also seen a huge decline in demand for their products.

For the last six years, photographer Clare Arni has been chronicling dying occupations

in seven Indian cities. "I didn't want to document the obvious," said Arni. "I was more interested in the things hidden from view."

British-born Arni will exhibit her images in Mumbai from the end of the week. "In each place we researched the professions traditionally associated with the city or state," says the catalogue for the exhibition, which has text by writer Oriole Henry. "We wanted to explore the historical patterns of professions, whether they were vanishing and how they are trying to adapt to survive. We also looked at the broader traditional trades that are being marginalised and are disappearing across the urban landscape. These changes, which happened in the West over hundreds of years, are occurring in India within a couple of decades. Many of the skilled artisans documented were struggling to adapt, most said their children were not going to follow them into the profession and some have since ceased to be employed."

Here are some of her images.

Woon Son Shoes, Kolkata



Christopher Francis Lin's card said that he was an 'Expert footwear designer and

shoemaker'. At one time, each of the shoe moulds – or lasts, as they're called in the trade – were custom made to the shape and size of the customer's feet. But now, they sizes are standarised. “Then it was good money.”

The Calligrapher, Delhi



In Delhi, Arni researched professions that had been associated with the Mughal court. Among the people they found was calligrapher Quri Mohammed Yaqub, who is still in business because it isn't easy for computers to deal with Urdu. His customers are businessmen who come to him and then take his work to be scanned for their letterhead, shop sign or business card.

Tinning Process, Delhi



Copper is one of the best metals for conducting heat and was often used in cooking vessels, so that the heat spread evenly across the surface of the pot. The metal can, however, react with acidic foods to produce toxins, so in workshops like these the pots are lined with tin on the inside. This profession is now vanishing due to the availability of cheaper stainless steel vessels.

Dhobi Ghat, East Madivalara Sangha, Bangalore



There are 40 permanent workers at this dhobi ghat and 17 shift labourers. They each pay Rs 450 a month to rent a workspace. They get between Rs 5 and Rs 7 per item they wash, depending on the size. They start work at about 5.30am and finish by noon. After this, they deliver the clothes. But with washing machines, demand for their services is falling.

The Potter, Duza Siguiera, Goa



Several members of a family work together in a small red laterite workshop producing hand-pinched pots as well as thrown pots on something that looked like a modified bullock-cart wheel. Duza Siguiera was producing pots to sell at St Mary's feast. "The market has become less as everyone is using plastic and stainless steel," his niece said. She couldn't understand why. "It is good for the health to use terracotta to cook," she said. Then she cupped her hands into an imaginary bowl and raising it to her lips she said, "and it is delicious to eat from them. No?"

*Clare Arni will be showing her work at **Tarq**, Mumbai, from March 1.*