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India's development models have been flawed, says photographer Ronny Sen who won Getty Images Instagram Grant

From his reasons behind the Jharia project, his love for photographing crows to his opinion about post-processing, here's what the photographer had to say

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Indian Photographer Ronny Sen won the 2016 Getty Images Instagram Grant for his series “the End”, capturing lives of people in Jharia coal mine area. (Source: Ronny Sen/ Facebook)

For the first time an Indian photographer won the prestigious Getty Images Instagram Grant this year. The photo agency and Instagram awarded \$10,000 each to Ronny Sen of India and two others – Christian Rodriguez of Uruguay and Girma Berta of Ethiopia – for using the photo-sharing app, for highlighting stories of unrepresented people around the world, including the poor, the elderly and children. This is the second edition of the award and for this year, the presenters also encouraged “visual artists to submit portfolios that included art, photography and video footage to tell stories.”

Ronny Sen from Kolkata was honoured for his project “The End” which highlighted the struggles of people living in Jharia, a coal-rich city that has been on fire for more than 100 years. Christian Rodriguez’s work focused on teen pregnancy in the Latin American country and Girma Berta of Ethiopia captured the street life in the capital city, Addis Ababa.

There were hundreds of entries from all over the world and submissions were judged by a panel including photo experts like Nicolas Jimenez, director of photography for Le Monde, and Azu Nwagbogu, Adriana Zehbrauskas, one of last year’s winners, director of the Lagos Photo Festival. On top of the cash prize, the photographers are having their award winning photos exhibited at Photoville, a festival in New York, from September 21 to 25.

In 2012, Sen represented India at the World Young Artists Event in Nottingham and was the recipient of the Jenesys Creators’ programme for an artist residency in Japan. In 2014, he also won the first prize at the Media Foundation of India (MFI) Awards in the General News section. The Polish Institute invited him to be an artist-in-residence in Poland in 2015.

In this exclusive interview to IndianExpress.com, Sen speaks about the Jharia project and his love for photography

How did you get started with photography?

There wasn't any one specific reason, event, or feeling etc which inspired me to become a photographer. There were many reasons, I am quite sure, but mostly selfish reasons. It was a journey with many beginnings and too many dead ends. When we were growing up in Salt Lake in Calcutta in the late 90's and early 2000's, the kind of life me and my friends had back then, I don't remember if we wanted to become anything at all. We had no particular ambitions in life to be very honest. Most of us wanted to do nothing. I don't know if it makes sense. Mobile phones etc weren't there and photography wasn't so popular as it is today. It was much slower and quieter. We lived through that whole transition till now and so much have changed in such a short period of time, but what I am trying to say is at one point I do remember very specifically that I was quite drawn towards photography. And in some time, before I knew, it just became like a mad obsession. Like some sort of a game you suddenly fall in love with. It was indeed a game initially, it became craft and language and communication and art at a much later stage. Now it is something else completely which is again another conversation. But yes, back then life as usual was going on, but photography eventually, gave a certain shape, a kind of a rhythm to all this madness. I had stories to tell and I knew that only I had these stories to tell and photography was the only option that was available. That was the only thing I could do or I knew about. There was a sense of identity as well. When you do nothing and you have a camera and you are looking for adventure and freedom and so on, and people ask you, what you do ? I was tired of telling people that I don't do anything and then I started saying that I was a photographer and people believed me. It was just another con. But with time, slowly, steadily, the obsession got more problematic and there was no escape. Photography then became like a life and death thing in no time.

You highlighted the struggles of people who live in Jharia, a coal-rich city that has been living under extreme condition. Why did you take up this project?

The underground fire in Jharia is burning for more than one hundred years now. People who inhabit that space have seen this since they were born. So they are totally aware of it and it's very much a part of their life.

Many villages which were once thriving with life don't exist anymore. They have simply vanished. While some people have left these areas and shifted elsewhere for better jobs and opportunities in other cities, there is a big population which calls Jharia home and keeps on shifting along the blasting mines. They are mostly dependent economically on this huge coal industry. They don't have any other skills. So, even if there is fire and subsidence they don't have any other choice but to keep moving along the mines.

Various small and at times extremely ambitious projects were initiated to rehabilitate these people affected by the fire and subsidence, but nothing substantial has been achieved so far. Some houses were built for some of these affected people as a part of the rehabilitation and resettlement project which were far away from the mines. The one-room apartments were extremely small for these families, and on the other hand there was no livelihood opportunity for them. So, people who were shifted started moving back to different mines again.

This is a place where historically literally everyone has failed, the Maharajas, the British Raj, the Government of India, the Communists, the mafia, and now is the turn of the multi-nationals who will also eventually fail. I have imagined this space to be at the end of the world after everything has been extracted. What remains after that is what I am interested in. So, the basic premise begins with the future.

I want to share my concerns with a larger audience. Because, the story is not only specific and limited to India at all. It is just a coincidence that Jharia is here. It's an economic, environmental and deeply political problem which is predominantly visible all across the world. There are many areas which I am trying to touch upon with this body of work. Also the fact that it's a complex issue and it doesn't only deal with mining but how it is done and about the people who are the most affected and so on. I hope that this can initiate a dialogue and show people a small glimpse of a possible future that is coming towards us.

You have been invited for an artist residency projects in Japan and Poland, both works have been critically praised. What are your inferences from both these countries. What exactly have touched or intrigued you most about these two nations.

Their experiences have been very different from each other. Japan is about perfection, originality, perseverance and abundance. I don't know if there is any other country other than Japan I am so much inspired by. While Poland is romantic and it's about melancholia. It's about sharing the common burden of a communist past like back home in Calcutta.

Today there is debate about photographs taken by mobile phones and DSLRs. You work with both devices. What is your opinion?

"The best camera is the one you have with you."

There is no difference at all apparently on the surface level. But in reality there is a world of difference. For the first time in the history of photography there is this image capturing device which is the phone camera that will show us or lead us to a new visual language, something that has not been seen before.

The whole premise of conceptual photography or post photography is at some level dependent on the idea that we have gone into a total repeat mode. Photographers today are only making images that have been done before. The visual vocabulary of the phone camera is capable to radically challenge that very idea. Yes ! It's true that we can make new images that weren't possible before. Give a phone camera to a Picasso who is 15 years old and she/he will show you, surprise you. Imagine you have some coins in your pocket and you want to photograph that. Can you make that image with any traditional camera? It's only possible with a phone. This is just one random example. The history of photography will make a paradigm shift because of the phone cameras. Why do modern day DSLRs look like the old SLR cameras ? Why isn't there any evolution in the shape and its form ? While digital technology is capable of doing so much how come it has achieved so little? Tell me one photographer on the museum walls who shoots digital? There isn't anyone. And it's because there was no evolution, nothing that digital photography had to offer till now. You would make the same images with a Digital SLR that you would with an SLR. The mobile phone can break that. This new visual vocabulary which I say is quite revolutionary can take the history of photography to a whole new level. This is just the beginning.

Recently, celebrated photographer Steve McCurry came under radar for his photoshopped images. What are your views about post-processing of images?

I really don't care. I don't want to comment on Steve's practice at all. But, the post processing of images is an integral part of the whole process. Now, the context is very important. What's being done in what context etc. And I'd say if there are discrepancies regarding those valid questions can be asked. It's totally legitimate to raise questions. But, as far as the ethics are concerned, for me it's more about the politics and less about post processing. All the so called ethics should be done away with. Another grantee of this year's Getty Instagram award Girma who is from Ethiopia is a graphic designer and his images are heavily dependent on post processing. Many of us work in the border lines of journalism and art. So a lot of the work we do is both journalism and art. So the old conventional ethics are dying slowly. There shouldn't be any rules. No rules! Even if there is an effort to protect these old values, we will consciously work and kill them for good.

You have covered the 2014 general elections for the United Nations, many protest movements, particularly your pictures during the Hakkolorob movement. What, according to you, is essential while clicking pictures that have political implications?

Context? Why the images are produced and for whom? Which side are you on? There is no objectivity in many of the situations. We have to take sides.

Your work for WaterAid India project on country's children suffering from stunted growth have been praised. Tell us something about moments close to your heart while capturing those images.

The development models of the country and many other Third World countries have been flawed. We have associated certain symbols with the idea of development. Shopping malls, flyovers, so on and so forth. While most of the country doesn't know why they need to use a toilet. So, these are interesting times we are living in.

You recently had two exhibitions in Mumbai and Goa. How people in India generally respond to such exhibitions?

Both have been great. It was very kind of all these people. I am very grateful.

Your galleries are often clouded with pictures of crows, any particular reason for this special interest in the avian creature?

They remind me of death. And death is like zero. Like the only sure thing, everything else is a possibility.

Is there any project that may not have been recognised so widely, but is close to your heart? If yes, then what and why?

Let this be a conversation for the future. I have just begun my journey. And as I keep saying, the journey is the destination. No arrivals. No regrets and no promises.