

# A Jharkhand town, as a post-apocalyptic world

One of the three projects that won the Getty Images Instagram grant 2016 is now a book

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A contractual labour, who makes about Rs200 after loading four or five trucks with coal, at one of Jharia's coal mines.

In the winter of 2013, Kolkata-based photographer Ronny Sen went to Jharia, a coal mining town in Jharkhand, as a local point person for two French film-makers who were there on a commissioned project. He had no intention of shooting any images there, much less of winning an international grant for them three years later, or making a book of it.

He stayed in Jharia with the film-makers for close to three months. And ended up taking “hundreds of thousands of images” of the vast grey, barren landscape on his iPhone. It was almost a response to the boredom that had set in with the sort of photography he was doing back home in Kolkata, he says. He had been shooting in black and white, and his photographs were busy with people and movement. You can see this in his first artist book, *Khmer Din*, self-published in 2013. Here the images are fleeting glimpses—blurred faces, quick hand gestures in a freeze-frame, street corners and cycle rides, as if snatched from a place in his memories.

Jharia was a different ball game altogether.

“It overwhelmed me,” Sen recalls. There was so much space—to look at a landscape, and to look at one man in the middle of a landscape—it was all so much slower. I had done nothing like this before,” he says.



An Ambassador at a coal mine. Coal thieves flee when they see an Ambassador because they think a government official is coming.

The stories he was hearing, about the workers, the coal thieves, and about the fire burning underground, were all “pretty spectacular”, he says. Coal had been discovered in Jharia, a lush green forest, in the late 18th century, and mining started in the early 19th century. The underground coalfield fire—caused by the self-heating and oxidation of minerals exposed to coal—has been burning for a century. The flames leap 60-70ft in the air.

It was only in April 2016, almost three years after his visit to Jharkhand, that Sen compiled the Jharia photographs in an Instagram account (@whatdoestheendof timelooklike). In September, Getty picked this and two other projects—one by Uruguay’s Christian Rodriguez and another by Ethiopia’s Girma Berta—for its \$10,000 (around Rs6,46,000 now) Instagram grant instituted for “photographers and artists using Instagram to document stories from underrepresented communities around the world”. The project has now been compiled and published by The Nazar Foundation, a Delhi-based non-profit focusing on photographic arts, in a book called *End Of Time*.

“The basic idea of the book is that it talks about a post-apocalyptic world: What happens when everything (the coal, and all the other natural mineral resources) in this region has been extracted?” Sen says. He spoke to *Lounge* about a flux in the world of photography, and how mobile phones are introducing a new vocabulary to the medium.



Edited excerpts:

**Would your images have looked different had you shot on a DSLR ?**

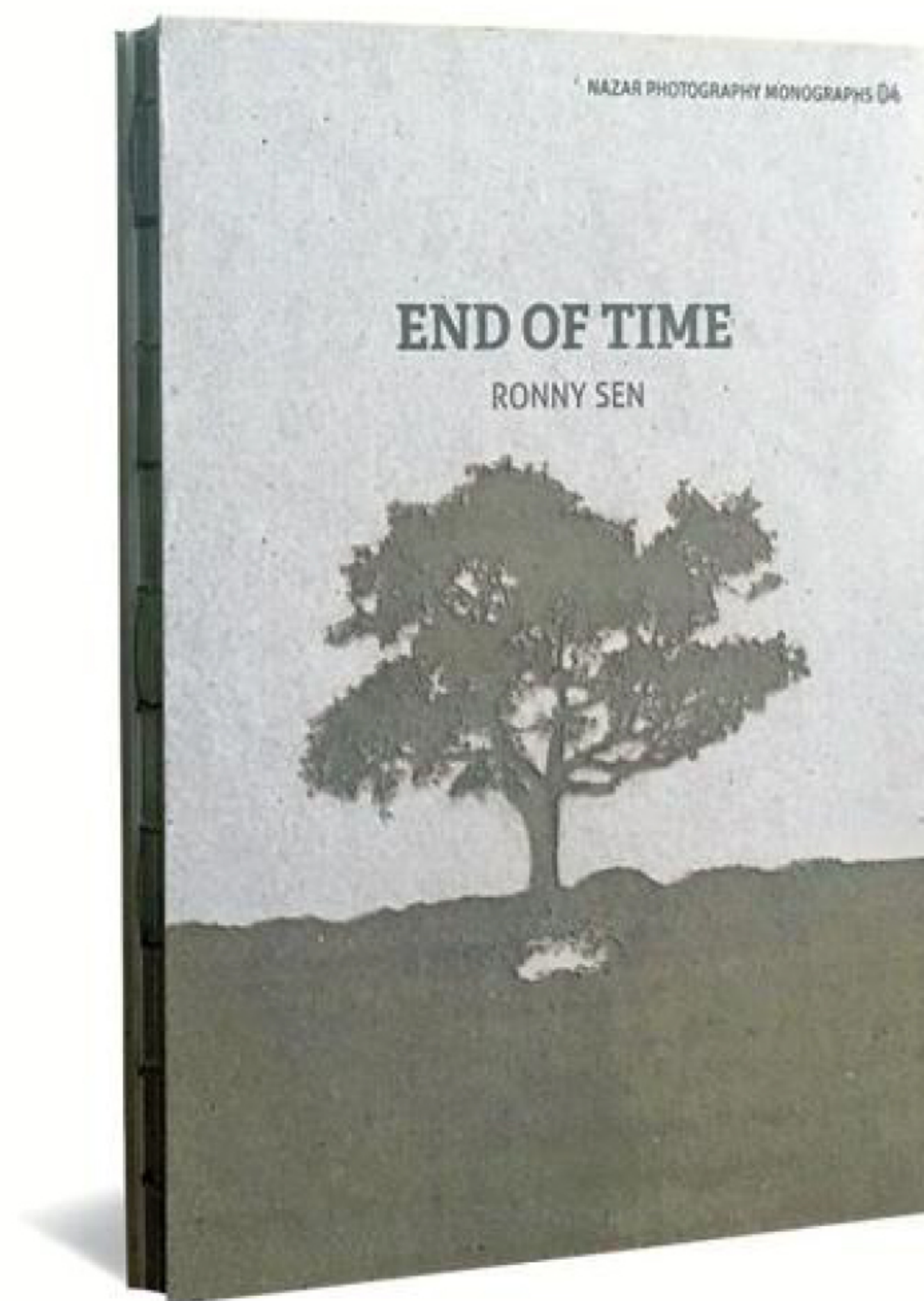
There would have been no difference at all. Any camera is a good camera. At the end of the day, it's really about the images. If somebody would have carried a medium-format camera to Jharia, then maybe they would have made the same images.

Yes, the quality would have been better (had it been shot on DSLR)... shooting on a mobile phone means you can't print big and (displaying on) the traditional gallery wall then is a problem, but who cares about prints today? Everybody is looking at images on the screen. Photographers hardly print today. We have been going through a massive change in the last five-six years. The way photography is made and shown... it's all going to change.

**Will mobile phones play a role in this larger change?**

Yes, apart from this (Jharia) work, I consider mobile phones to be a breakthrough in photography. The new digital technology (DSLR cameras) could not achieve anything more than the analog days, but phones are very different as far as new vocabulary is concerned.

Look at the history of photography—you will see that different languages (in photography) came in because there was an evolution in technology and photographers took to it. For example, when the Polaroid (camera) came in, people started taking new kinds of photos; when the point-and-shoot-camera came, people started taking images that later became the "snapshot aesthetic". After digital, not much could be achieved other than the increase of a few megapixels.



End Of Time: By Ronny Sen, The Nazar Foundation, 96 pages; Rs1,500.

The whole idea of post-photography now is based on the idea that there is no new image to be made. Even many legends in photography, like Joan Fontcuberta, say this. But I feel like a large part of this was also because of this (stagnation in technology). I have a strong feeling that the phone now can radically change this.

**What then is the relevance of a photo book such as ‘End Of Time’ vis-a-vis Instagram, which in itself is perhaps a virtual photo book?**

My generation has the freedom to do whatever they want to because there is no one way (now) of looking at photography. I’ll respect a photographer who is a gallery artist as much as I would someone who does amazing work only on Instagram. That wasn’t the case before.

Even champions of the gallery world— for example, photographer Stephen Shore—have said they’re only going to do Instagram from now. There are so many like that. We do this to get the images out to people, but as for the (commerce) of it, there’s still a lot to figure out.

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