

TAKE

Photo- graphy

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The Study and Practice of Photography in the Indian Context

by Dr. Deepak John Mathew



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Photography within art education in India is a relatively new phenomenon and the industry itself, both in terms of its commercial application and the art market, is expanding rapidly. Opportunities for employment in India are growing at an unprecedented rate. (As per Trends Research Group, the jobs in sector can rise by 10-12 per cent by 2014.)

For the artistically inclined, there are a host of interesting avenues that offer several career opportunities. Photography certainly is one of them. Though the latest digital camera is put into use, it still has the photographer behind it and his or her perspective and eye for detail could make a world of difference.

Photography in India for long had been considered as a rather expensive hobby, pursued by a limited number of people. However, today it is no more a mere hobby, but a profession that has immense potential. Today it is not only one amongst the most sought after careers in the world, but also one of the most lucrative careers in the India. Talking about the Indian context, the field was earlier limited to photojournalism only, but now, it accommodates a lot of other options. It is a fast growing industry with a lot to offer. In the present Indian context, photography offers a spectrum of career choices ranging from news, advertising, fashion, wildlife and travel, to environment, sports, nature, food, commercial, forensic and fine arts, just to name a few of them.

Photography as a career is definitely growing. It is becoming more and more niche, enabling youngsters

to carve a direction. A decade ago, specialisation in photography was mostly unheard of; professionals shot all kinds of subjects. Today, there are a number of newer avenues to identify oneself with.

The changes in photography as a profession, mostly positive, have been as rapid as the changes, mostly awe-inspiring, in camera technology. The technological progress, aided by changing lifestyle, has given a career in photography a new lease of life; a far cry from the past when making a living out of photography meant running a studio. The options are aplenty for those who want to turn professionals. But benefiting from the profession also means undergoing intense training to learn the art. Thus, with the present rate of economic growth, the ever expanding reach of media, and growth of advertising, photography in India has become a profession with an individuality of its own.

When people started considering photography as a medium of expression the discussions and debates around the medium also strengthened. Now the art world has started accepting photographs and the photographers have started considering galleries as the natural home for their work. Though in the past we could see many attempts to promote photography as a medium of expression, now it is very strong and we can see many supporting it.

Photography Education

With the growing interest in photography, a lot of photo clubs and training courses have mushroomed. Almost all of these training programmes look at photography as a skill. So, most

of the teaching involves technical knowhow and camera operation. Very few institutes look at it as a medium of expression. The National Institute of Design (NID) is an exception in this case. We can see the whole approach is towards creating awareness about contemporary photography practice and provide a platform for young photographers to practice them. NID's postgraduate programmes in photography focus on self-directed projects, and it is expected of all projects here that it be informed by in-depth, rigorously conducted research. Initially, research is done with reference to understanding of history, criticism, and theory in the chosen subject area.

Students are expected to not only become increasingly more knowledgeable in their subject area, including any production techniques and materials, but to be able to contextualise their practice within their field of study. Research during this study is framed by the nature of practice-based subjects, recognising that 'practice' both in terms of visual and written work may relate to specialist visualisation, conceptualisation design and making processes, the application of knowledge and skills within professional or business contexts, or reflect the nature of the object researched. The artefact and its social and cultural contexts or testing of different theoretical positions is what happens through the research work.

The aim of a formal educational programme in photography is to provide students with a creative and intellectual environment, enable them to develop

their personal aspiration within a community of their peers and a broader network of artists. Also, these support the advanced critical study and practice of a wide cause of photographic practices. The student's work is therefore diverse and linked by an interest in the question of representation, audience and meaning. The course provides a context within which the photographic practice of the graduate can be extended and discovered.

Photography as Art: Various Approaches and Practices

Photography is a means of visual communication, but the history of photography, as an art form has focused not so much on photographic communication as upon photograph as objects. Also, the history of photography focuses on pictures and the work of specific practitioners. Thus, until recently, the story of photography as art tended to be presented as a history of 'master' photographers. Such accounts not only separate photography as fine art from the longer history of photography, but also disconnects from the political and social contexts. With regard to photography, there are two things we need to look at – one, the

artists using photography as a medium for their expressions along with other media and primarily made for gallery viewing. In this context, photography is seen as 'art' shown in galleries, museums, and artists' publications. The second aspect is that the imaginary is made in other contexts, such as documentary or fashion and may later be taken up by galleries or museum. In this essay, I will be looking at the first set of photographs; the photographers who make their work primarily for exhibiting in the gallery. For the convenience of discussion, some characteristics of contemporary photography practice have been taken into consideration and the works of young photographers are also discussed. There could be many other ways too. Firstly, how a photographer has devised strategies, performances, and happenings for the camera. This challenges the stereotype of photography—the idea of a photographer going out daily and looking for subjects. This could be like documenting a performance, but the only difference is that in this case, the performance is done only for the camera. There is a time factor involved in the picture too. In the second type, the photographer stages everything in the frame. It focuses on story telling in photography. Instead of a series of pictures this could be one picture telling the entire story. So careful staging of each and every element is very important in this approach. We can say it is tableau photography wherein, the camera angle and frame are carefully planned. The third aspect is of documentary photography. It looks at how documentary photography

comes in the contemporary photography practice. It also challenges the convention of the documentary as capturing the decisive moment or by being there at the right moment. Photographers turned away from traditional ways of creating a picture. The photograph evolves from a strategy or happening created by the photographer for the sole purpose of creating an image. Although framing and creating are important, the central artistic act is one of direction, an event especially for the camera. This approach means that the act of artistic creation starts much earlier than the actual clicking of the photograph. This may be very close to the performance art; the viewer gets to see the images in photographic form instead of seeing the actual performance. Visaka Vardhan is a young photographer who pursues his work in this manner. He shoots organic things, which are left rotting. Through his project, he let the organic things age in front of the camera. He shoots the decomposition of fruits or meat and presents the images as a series; the images captured at different stages of their decomposition. The organic subjects have unique natural textures, and when they decay, one gets to see unexpected textures and forms, which in turn, result in a whole new quality to the subject. He shoots this with the technique called light painting and that adds some dynamic effects. He shoots the fish in straight top angle and keeps a simple paper as background that helps in giving a textured look as well as absorbs the fluid coming from the decaying fish.



Visakha Vardan, *Silver Fish*.



Visakha Vardan, *The Graceful Apples*.

The roots of such an approach lie in the conceptual art of the mid 1960s and 1970s, when photography became central to the wider dissemination and communication of the artist's performances and other temporary works of art. The motivation and style of such photography within conceptual art practice is markedly different from the established modes used in fine art photographs.

Staging and constructing images becomes an integral part of storytelling in photographs. When one looks at Abhishek Gangudi's work, one can see the use of storytelling in contemporary photography. This area of photographic practice is known as tableau photography. Here, the pictorial narrative is concentrated into a single image, a stand-alone picture. In the mid-20th century, photographic narratives were often done as sequences, mostly as photo essays or photo stories in magazines.

Though the body of work shown here is also part of a series, the narrative is loaded into a single frame. Tableau photography has connections to the pre-photographic era of figurative painting of 18th and 19th centuries, the same combinations of characters and props to create the moment in the story. This has nothing to do with revivalism, but this is simply an attempt to choreograph a scene for

a viewer so that the story can be understood by the viewer. Abhishek belongs to a joint family that still has 80-100 people living in the same house. Earlier it was 200-500 people living in the same family. His approach is to depict the missing faces in the joint families.

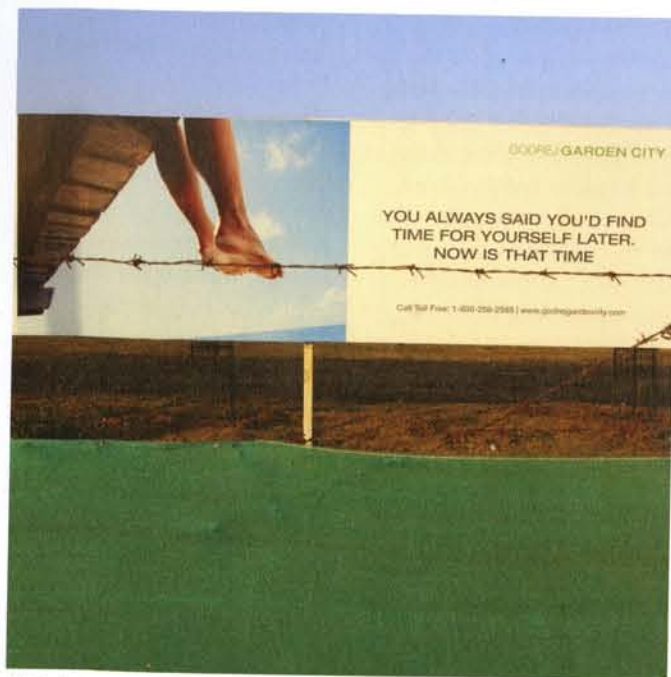
In the present times, for a nuclear family, the average number of people living in the house is four-six at any given point of time. And the tradition of 200 people living together becomes a story that is difficult to express. He uses digital technology to achieve the effect by superimposing the old images with the new images that he has shot. He reconstructs the traditional situations of yesteryears by making his models wear traditional dresses and carry

out the exact rituals that used to happen in the family. He is not taking sides regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the system. Every image has its own significant story, incorporating the presence of ancestors with other family people by using multiple exposures tells one story and usage of sepia tone or black and white tells others story of time and history. The costumes have been adopted to remind the time period and he uses a single photo in the back drop to bring in the personal connection.

One can refer to the works of Raja Ravi Varma and H Haldanker in terms of lighting and composition. Through their works, one can decipher subtle narratives of human behaviour



Abhishek Gangudi, *Missing One*, Ghoonghat.

Ajit Bhadoria, *Nature Under Construction*.

and history. Documentary has been seen as a genre, tradition, style, movement and a practice in photographs. 19th century photographers considered their work as a 'document'. But if all or most of the photographs are a kind of document, then how can we slot them into different categories? Historians have difficulty in defining documentary. One way of looking at it is to define documentary in terms of its connection with particular kind of social investigation. Documentary and photojournalism are closely linked and many practitioners of regular photography are known as photojournalists or documentary photographers.

Earlier, documentary photographs were taken as 'truth' or 'evidence' or 'real' but now with the advent of digital photography and the immense possibilities of image making, there are new ways of defining and understanding 'the real'. Nowadays, the image which looks like a 'real' photograph may be a creation of multiple images. With the use of a computer, montaged from

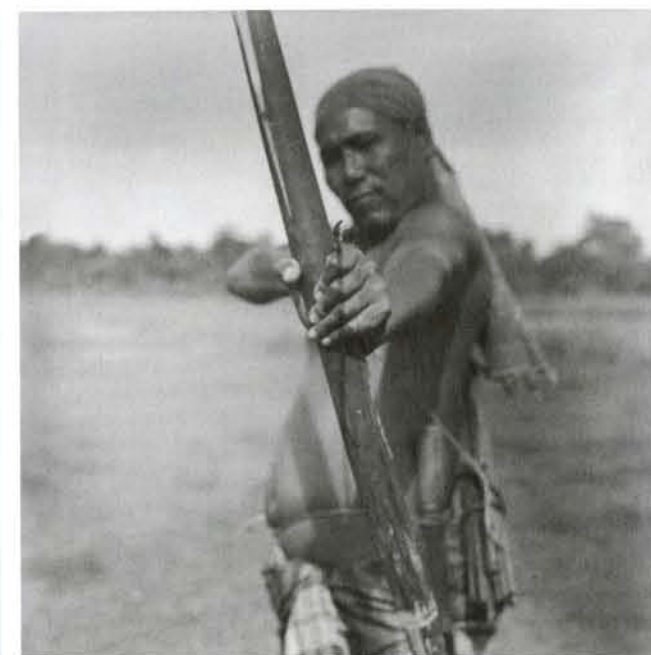
many sources, images may be altered in some aspects or completely transformed. These possibilities have influenced the way we look at photojournalism and documentary photography as a document of the 'real' that can be shown as 'evidence'. In 1930s, the documentary mode went through a dramatic change. The lightweight 35mm camera also had a role to play in this. In 1973, William Stott, in a book on documentary says, "The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content".

We can see that the argument for context has come back today in the digital world too. From the 1970s, documentary started rejecting the notion that acts of recording or looking can ever be neutral, disinterested, or innocent. Today, people continue to make documentary photographs, which are shown in magazines, books and newspapers, but the practice changed from working for somebody to working for oneself. Many documentary works can be seen on the gallery walls as large prints. In these contexts, what future might there be for documentary? Here, it will be useful to look at some practicing photographers' work that can be formally labelled as 'documentary', but they operate in the framework of a gallery space.

Ajit Bhadoriya works in premises very close his homes in the city of Delhi and Ahmedabad. He looks at the signboards of the apartments like Rainforest, Orchid Yard, Garden City and several others. The names given to the concrete structures have no connections to the buildings. He looks at the dreams of a city

person to live next to nature and the businessman's plan to encash these dreams. His work also looks at the irony that all these concrete buildings have come up in places where once a farm, a forest or a lake was. His work is a document of human greed and how urbanisation is taking away 'real' nature and substituting it with artificial replacements. Though Ajit looks at the real estate boom for 'evidence' of the 'selling of dreams'; he also documents other places where the imitations of nature is creeping into urban lifestyles. In his photographs, he avoids the human presence and looks for the evidences in objects. And the objects act as symbols of the invasion of human into nature. His work also shows how non-human things that are quite ordinary, everyday objects can be made extraordinary by being photographed. Another aspect of documentary photography is the rarity of the subject, and the risk photographer had to take to produce those images.

Tashi Norden works in Bodoland and he goes to the core of the villages and meets people who are the inhabitants of Bodoland. The ethnic clashes in Assam have caused innumerable deaths and almost four lac people have been displaced. Tashi, instead of choosing to do a conventional photo story or documentary, decided to do a set of staged portraits. He travels to the villages, meets people, and requests them to pose for him. At stages, he gets more involved and he moves from making their portraits to shooting a performance done by them – they wear cloth masks and pose for him. Here, Tashi

Tashi Norden Leptcha, *Bow and Arrow*.

plays between documentary and performance. This way he takes a stand and he make his opinion is visible through his work. Normally, documentaries will want to play 'neutral' roles. But there is no neutral position. The viewpoint of the photographer is always there. But by the use of masks and making his subjects perform for the camera, Tashi makes his stand clear. He uses film and a medium format camera. This is bulky and it takes time to compose each frame. So by choosing this medium, he makes it more evident that the act of photographing is conscious. There is no chance of a 'snap shot' photo. Also, every person Tashi photographs, is looking into the camera and they take the central position in the frame. Here, these conscious efforts acknowledge the relationship between the photographer and the subject. The landscape in the background change but the position and the gaze of the subject remains the same.

Most often in documentary shooting, the 'decisive moment' is considered to be very important. That means being in that place and moment is one of the most important factors of conventional documentaries. Siddharth Dharmjeet goes to rehabilitation centres and takes pictures there, after the decisive moment is over, he shoots their portraits after their moment of agony is over. He proves that it is equally powerful and communicative even after six months. His pictures are of those who have overcome addiction. His simple and straightforward portraits make the statement very direct and clear.

Many other photographers

Siddharth Dharmjeet, *De-addicted Raj Kumar*.

including Paul Sea Wright and Simon Norfolk have adopted similar approaches. Since the early 1990s, they have been influenced in part by the movement of documentary photography away from catching the action in close-ups. All the above approaches in documentary photography continue to co-exist and the debates about the potential differences between objective and subjective approaches continue. Every day, the meaning of documentary is being reinvented.

The aim of formal educational programmes in photography is to enable students to produce a body of original work and to be able to contextualise the practice and theory of photography in relation to fine art, popular culture, and the mass media, to explore the social, cultural and critical issues involved in practices of photographic representation. It needs to establish the relation between theory and practice.

Images courtesy: Dr. Deepak John Mathew