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DIGITAL AGE

## Transformations in photography

Neha Thirani | April 9, 2011

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EMOTIONS & THE CITY: Kainaz Amaria's work captures small moments on the streets of Mumbai



In photography, the smallest thing can become a big subject, an insignificant human detail can become a leitmotiv. We see and we make seen as a witness to the world around us; the event, in its natural activity, generates an organic rhythm of forms," these words of Henri Cartier-



Bresson, resonate, more than ever with the current transformations in the field of photography in India. From an exclusive art form used to document the lives of royal families, photography has permeated through Indian society with everyone from street children to studio artists using the camera to record their personal lives. The digital age has democratised it.

"Photography has always been a democratic medium around the world," says photographer, curator and critic, Ram Rahman. "Economic factors had made it an elite medium in India through the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s. It is now again a public medium." With a rise in the photo medium in the art world, and the astronomical costs of oil on canvas, documentary photography offered a viable proposition to buyers.

In the last few years, there has been a revival of the documentary form of photography with several practitioners turning the lens on their own surroundings and bringing the personal to the fore. "From the turn of this century, many artists abandoned their conventional tools and started to work with photography and video," says Rahman. "Some started to work with the self as the documentary subject or tamper around with older photographs and create a newness in them."

The advent of digital capture technology has allowed for experimentation in the medium that moves away from the traditional limitations of the medium. When photojournalist Kainaz Amaria came to Mumbai on a Fullbright scholarship to document her own Parsi

community, she was overwhelmed by the sensory overload. Her visual diary, *Dream Mumbai*, was largely taken from her iPhone while she navigated the streets of Mumbai. The camera captures the small moments between the monuments, of a cow tied to the side of a road, a lady sitting sideways at the back of a cycle, the view through a train window of a horse on a street side.

"My goal was to highlight the emotions of the city; the exhilaration, isolation, desperation, etc. as well as the contradictions. The viewer floats through the streets of Mumbai, into five-star hotels, inside people's home and back out onto the road," says Amaria of her collection which was displayed at the Kala Ghoda Café. "Many of the images were taken on my iPhone and shared on Facebook. It was a way for me to stay connected with people back in the States and share with them what I was seeing. People started responding with positive feedback; before I knew it, an obsession was born."

Whether in repressive regimes that restrict freedom of expression or today's combat zones where one needs to be embedded to capture pivotal moments, the 'man on the street' has the ability to document his surroundings. The increased accessibility of cameras combined with cellular phone technology means that these images can be made available globally, instantaneously to mass audiences. From being an elite, specialised medium, photography itself has been democratised in this sense. "If you think about some of the most important images out of Iraq, you'd have to note the Abu Ghraib prison images which were taken by US soldiers and not professional photojournalists," says Amaria. "What has changed is the immediacy of the imagery. Once a major news event occurs, there is a demand for immediate 'on-the-spot' coverage."

The ability to bring the authenticity of experience to the image is encouraging more and more citizen photojournalists to turn their lens on their own surroundings. Urbz, an urban research collective based out of Dharavi, recently held workshops conducted by photographer Lasse Bak Mejlvang from Denmark and Himanshu S, where the children of MG Road and New Transit Camp photographed their environs and neighbours.

"What we understand is that the amateur is an expert when he talks about what's near her, what she is familiar with," write Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava from the Urbz collective, which is researching a project on 'water systems' where the kids from the shelter take pictures of where the water supplied to their homes comes from, the way it is used, how it gets evacuated and where it goes afterwards. "Photojournalism is an engagement with the context, with the subject. The most moving and insightful work in that field has always been one which constructs its own story and doesn't try to elude the presence and subjectivity of the photographer."

The camera then, has moved from being a neutral bystander to a privileged insider, with many such personal narratives coming to the fore in photojournalism and documentary photography in India. The Urbz duo believe that it is the relationship of the photographer to the subject that shapes the outcome of a photographic project; "What we love the most about the photos taken by the kids at the shelter is that they could never have been taken by an outsider," say Echanove and Srivastava.

"People in the photos would simply have responded differently if they had been taken by unknown adults. Some of the best shots taken by the kids are the ones that let us sense the relationship between the person behind the camera and the person being photographed. They are full of subjectivity and realism." The images take an honest look at the daily life and industry of Dharavi; a shopkeeper at his window surrounded by wares, a child squatting at a street corner, a child perched on a bicycle.

As memoirs and biographies take the fore in the publishing industry, art galleries are increasingly receptive to personal narratives. Nine years ago, when photojournalist Atul Loke moved away from the chawl of his childhood, he began to make frequent trips back to visit friends and family accompanied by a camera. "Earlier a photographer was expected to follow the brief given to him or her and maintain a neutral perspective," he says. "I wanted to capture the intimate moments of life in the extended family of a chawl - almost like a personal diary. Not a lot of people understood the impulse behind the project. Now that it has become more common to photograph personal stories, people are more responsive to this body of work. Now photographers are able to express themselves without any restrictions and be true to the experiences they are documenting." Loke's photographs range from the euphoria of a Holi celebration in the courtyard, to the quiet dignity of his father in his room. The series of vivid and playful pictures of his neighbors, friends and family, documenting a lifestyle that is fast vanishing, will soon be published in the form of a book designed by Loke.

In the past five years, museums and gallery spaces have revisited the works of Umrao Sher Gill, Homai Veryavala, Kulwant Rai, Ram Dhamija and Richard Bartholomew. Pablo Bartholomew, who has recently brought to the fore his father and his own archives, argues that documentary photography now has an audience and a market in India. "In India, the documentary school of photography has always been neglected and that is because so much emphasis has been given to photojournalism or news photography," he says. "One big reason for this has been that photojournalism offered photographers a way to earn money with having captive jobs with media houses. Being a documentary photographer meant being out there alone in the cold with nowhere to go, no audience and no money." Bartholomew premiered the archive of his diaries of the '70s and '80s, *Outside in*, at the Arles Photo Festival in 2007 (*Rencontres d'Arles*) where most of the shows dealt with self, friends, family and personal spaces.

The images of a band playing at the St Stephen's winter festival, pictures of his parents in their Delhi home and a night at a friend's house transport the viewer to 1975. "That is why my early work got put away till about 2005, when the gallery and festival worlds opened up to showing this kind of work."

The shift in technologies has also meant a transformation in the style and aesthetics of photography. "The aesthetics of imagery has always changed with the advent of new technology - from black and white, to colour neg, to chrome, to digital, to photoshop, and now to the iPhone - but what will always remain the same is the use of light, and first and foremost, content," says Kainaz Amaria, who believes, along with most others, that photography's basic ability to document something with candid honesty, has remained unchanged. "What hasn't changed throughout the years is the power of storytelling. The visceral reaction the viewer has to a strong image. The ability of that image to educate, illuminate and create an understanding."

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**Abhay Sonigara** Apr 14th, 2011 at 12:26 PM

indeed, the technological transformation and the ease with what it can be used today can make a novice person turn a pro with no extra efforts. plus we get to see more talent with such gadgets and blogging sites

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