

Calcutta Cameraman

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Apart from being his personal re-engagement with the city, Pablo Bartholomew's visit to the '70s Calcutta stands as a significant documentation of what the era stood for

The black-and-white grainy images that stare back at you at Art Heritage Gallery of Triveni Kala Sangam are haunting remnants of the past. An old woman, her face heavied down by age, walks hunch-backed, as a lone jalopy awaits on her front porch. There are instances of people caught in fluid, reflective moments on the streets — two brass band members rest after a hard day's work, an acrobat in the middle of an act and a man pulling a dead cow on his cart, among others. A couple of photographs have filmmaker Satyajit Ray in myriad moods during the shooting of his film *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. In the '70s, when photographer Pablo Bartholomew went to Kolkata, he re-engaged with the city like never before. After nearly 40 years, the photographer has dug out his intimate conversations with the city through his current exhibition "The Calcutta Diaries".

From a lone Dental Goods Supply Co. at Bipin Behari Ganguly Street and sparse interiors of restaurants to Bartholomew's grandmother from his "Grandmother Series", the collection ranges from vivid insights to some of the most popular faces on and behind the screen. A poignant picture shows Amitabh Bachchan during the shooting of *Ganga ki Saugand*. Perched on a chair, he is seen surrounded by aging extras, representative of an indication of his rising stardom.

All of this happened around the time when Delhi-based Bartholomew went to work with Ray and spent a lot of time at the Tollygunje Studios. Having come to the city as a child during the summers, the "stifling" studio sets had him out on the streets. "It was therapeutic to get away and wander the streets to feed the inner churning," says Bartholomew.

With 46 photographs on display, one of the key explorations that Bartholomew undertook at that time was related to the Hakka community living in the South Kolkata districts of Tangra and Dhapa. "It was also, in a way, to look at my mixed Indian Burmese origins and find a way to deal with these churnings that started to occur in my late teens and early twenties," says the Delhi-based photographer. The community, who lived in and ran the leather tanneries, was his first documentation of a "community in transition". Other interesting sightings included strong visuals of individuals going about their routine life with political wall murals sprawled behind them.

The diverse subjects of the exhibition justify the title. "Hence the term 'diaries', because it connotes a bunch of notes, put together in short-hand or notations," says the artist, about the photographs that were also a part of a group exhibition in Sydney last year. Bartholomew says that he saw Kolkata more differently than any other city he has shot previously. "I was young and there was a certain way to look at life. While Delhi was boring, Calcutta was real — a city of culture and history," adds the photographer.

The series is also, in a way, a harp back to his previous exhibitions, which depicted photographs taken around the same time— from capturing the self-consumed youth in "Outside in: A Tale of Three Cities" to documenting the microcosmic world of Mumbai in "Chronicles of a Past Life". However, Bartholomew laughs off how a few people have been labelling "The Calcutta Diaries" as concluding the trilogy. "The three collections are loosely connected, mostly because of the period they were taken in. But that doesn't mean there wouldn't be more from the time," he says.

The exhibition is on at Triveni Kala Sangam till January 23.

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