

A Critic's Eye*

Richard and Rati Bartholomew were part of the group of artists, architects, theatre personalities and musicians who began to flock to Delhi in the years immediately following independence when India, and particularly Delhi, was shaping the Post-Independence Modern. Presided over by Nehru, Maulana Azad, Humayun Kabir, Dr. Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain, there was some state patronage to support the arts, and young artists, such as M.F. Husain and Satish Gujral were commissioned to do large public mural projects on government buildings. The three Akademis were conceived at this time while Rabindra Bhavan and its galleries opened in 1961 (designed by my father, Habib Rahman). The late '50s and early '60s saw a spate of symposia on theatre and architecture. The All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS), was one of the larger gallery spaces and had a fine library and journal. Another fine

By **Ram Rahman**

publication of this time was *Design Magazine* brought out by Patwant Singh. Richard's wife, Rati Bartholomew, taught for many years at IP College in Delhi University and was an important figure in Delhi's expanding theatre world

The 1950s may have been a heady decade, yet lifestyles were simple – almost spartan by today's standards. M.F. Husain, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna, Tyeb Mehta, Laxman Pai, Biren De, G.R. Santosh, Dhanraj Bhagat, Amarnath Sehgal, Satish Gujral... were young and in the first flush of their careers. Most of them lived in barsatis or small flats in Nizamuddin, Mathura Road, Jangpura and Defence Colony.

Richard Bartholomew had also taught at Modern School on Barakhamba Road in the '50s. In those days and the following decade, this was where the children of most of the Delhi artists, dancers and musicians were schooled. Modern School, under M.N. Kapur (art critic Geeta Kapur's father), also provided a home to many artists who worked there as teachers. Among them were Kanwal and Devayani Krishna, photographer O.P. Sharma and dancer Narendra Sharma.

Richard started writing art criticism in the mid-1950s in Delhi, when the older, influential Charles Fabri was a powerful voice in the *Statesman*. Read the quote below from 1955:

There is no colour which is taboo on the palette of the modern Indian painter today. It is the combinations which have changed. Painters no longer take the line of the least resistance and soak their drawings in sentimental twilit shades that come easily in wash. Canvases on exhibit these days are resplendent in warm colours – violets, ultramarine, scarlet lake, madder, emerald green and the whole range of rampaging yellows and reds. The Bombay painters, almost without an exception, have strong colour preference, facetting the chromatic arrangement so that it hits the eye. Husain's 'Zameen' at the Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition this year proved that with even a painting of such magnitude brilliant colours could be subtle, controlled and are far from being pastiche. Whatever be the content, the manner generally is expressionistic, groups having affinities within and divergences without. The Delhi painters in the Silpi Chakra are as different from the Bombay Progressive Group as they in turn are different from the Madras

painters. Colouring and drawing are of course only the means, and often the end in view (conditioned by the content) is different. Art school training, a bias for a foreign master, subject matter and individual predilections condition the work of all. But apart from the patchwork pieces of a transitional period in the output of a particular painter, the result is consistently Indian, if in a new way. Generally speaking, for instance, Pai is decorative; Raval is poetic; Husain is expressionistic.

(*Thought*, 13 August, 1955)

You can feel the youth in the voice and the words, and the freshness of seeing a work like 'Zameen', an iconic modern painting for us today. This provides the context within which Bartholomew lived and worked and a frame of reference to his writing. But, most of all, it provides the backdrop to his photography, unseen by the public till now.

The serious amateur is a tradition going back to the earliest days of photography, and some of the best practitioners of the medium fit this category. Bartholomew used both medium format and 35 mm cameras. The earlier photographs in this collection are family snapshots, taken at home and on mountain vacations near Delhi. These have a spontaneity and intimacy that also record the simplicity of the lifestyles of the times. The photographs of the artists' milieu are mainly from the mid-1960s onwards.

Bartholomew wrote reviews of many photography exhibitions, and given the decline of serious writing on photography in the last three decades, these reviews are worth reading again. They also provide a clue to Bartholomew's own photographic eye. Critical of pictorial sentimentality, he makes a distinction between photographers who made pictures of 'people' as opposed to those who made pictures of 'persons'. The distinction here is clearly one of a psychological connect with the subject. Ram Dhamija, T.S. Satyan, Sunil Janah, T. Kashinath, Kishor Parekh – all came under his critical gaze. He is as unstinting in his criticism as he is in his praise, the kind of writing that may surprise younger critics today. It is clear he has the greatest respect for Kishor Parekh for Bartholomew's love for the straight document is forcefully articulated in his writings.

So in this sense it is an act of perception, selection, and of emphasis. And more than in painting, for instance, or in graphics, what photography has to fight against is the commonplace, the mundane, the workaday, the rejected, spent images which the eye as an organ of sight and experience cannot ignore. It has to select from reality that quantum of reality which has a basis of naturalism. This may seem like a paradox: but it is a fact that the eye does not see the nature of things as they are. It sees the use, primarily, that things can be put to. And the good photographer's vision, as such, is to put his seeing eye firmly and with conviction, and with technical ingenuity behind the glass, optics and the precision machinery. He knows that in the last analysis he is manipulating light and time, that he is concerned with chiaroscuro and the human moment.

(Thought, 23 April, 1960)

What Bartholomew is articulating here is the distinction of the camera eye, formed as it is by the instant freeze of the shutter, the editing by the frame edge, the flattening caused by the optics and the chiaroscuro of the black and white film. As a writer skilful with words, he understands the old connection of writing with the photographic document with its rich quotidian detail. While his art criticism seeks to analyze, educate and contextualize the formal experimentation taking place in the work of his artist friends, his photography is an adjunct to this project: with it he captures the life of the close community as an insider and participant. And the photographs capture the kind of detail and texture that words can rarely match: Biren De on a mountain holiday in a jacket smoking a pipe, the same Biren De in his studio in a *ganji* and *lungi*. Husain with his feet up in a Miesian office interior talking on the *moderne* single unit phones in the WHO offices, while he was making the murals there, Krishen Khanna painting at an easel in *lungi-kurta* with a poster of Che on the wall. Ram Kumar at innumerable openings inevitably in a jacket, surrounded by swirls of cigarette smoke, Husain painting live on the floor at the Shridharani Gallery (an idea of Bartholomew's when Husain lamented he had no work to show in the booked gallery).

The details of the studios, the flats, the galleries, which fill these photographs, are as formative a part of the ethos that shaped the work of these artists, as did cubism or Indian sculpture. Bartholomew

made pictures which are strong as pictures, though they may fascinate us more now because of their subjects. His sensitivity to the mundane detail can be seen in his pictures without people. The detail of the cracked glass in a bus behind a hand holding an old short-wave radio, the cats on his staircase and windows, bottles in the kitchen – all these show an eye attuned to the world through a poetic mind (incidentally, he published a collection of poems in English with the Writers' Workshop).

While these pictures may have been made on the fly, all the people in them are artists who became significant. The cultural moment Bartholomew recorded in these photographs is now an important part of the Nehruvian Modern, a time that shaped who we are now. When Richard Bartholomew died at the young age of 59 in 1985, he had been the Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi for seven years. We are lucky that Richard was a serious photographer, and placed as he was in the heart of the arts community at its budding and flowering, he has left us an invaluable artistic document. We have to thank his photographer son, Pablo, for bringing out this archive into the public, so that Richard will finally find a place in the history of Indian photography.

- * *A Critic's Eye* will be on view at Sepia International, 148, West 24th Street, New York City, until 1 September 2008.

Online gallery at

www.bartholomew.tv