

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

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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.

