

## **Witness to Paradise**

Photographic book project / **Sanjay Kak, New Delhi**

Supported in part by India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore

### **Objectives**

The project 'Witness to Paradise' asks us to look at the work of a generation of contemporary news photographers in Kashmir as an important cultural and artistic practice. The main outcome is the production of a book, with approximately 150-200 pages of photographs, brief biographies, and a curatorial essay. Following publication, a series of workshops and events will be organised around the book.

A small but significant change is in the working title of project – we now refer to it simply as 'Witness', which is a sharper reading of the role played by these photographers and their work in Kashmir. With the pictures slowly coming into place the irony of the evocation of 'paradise' seems both unnecessary, and distracting.

In the *first phase* of the project we look at the work of eight photographers in considerable detail.

- Merajdin b 1959
- Javeed Shah b 1967
- Yasin Dar b 1973
- Javed Dar b 1975
- Altaf Qadri b 1976
- Showkat Nanda b 1982
- Syed Shahriyar Hussainy b 1992
- Azaan Shah b 1997

In the coming weeks, we will confirm the availability of the work of two more practitioners:

- Tauseef Mustafa b 1970
- Sumit Dayal b 1981

### **Images**

In the *second phase* I am currently working with a consultant photo-editor, looking at a fairly extensive set of hard-copy photo prints in order to make a further shortlist. But arriving at this stage of 450+ prints has involved a series of fairly rigorous steps.

*Marking the boundaries –*

The selected photographers fall in three distinct phases of the 25 years that are under consideration (1989-2015, defined in more detail in my original

proposal to IFA).

A set of criteria had to be formulated in order to create a working short-list from amongst the many possible photographers.

- The work itself was obviously topmost, but *location* too became important. Many practitioners have long moved out of Kashmir, making careers, often outstanding ones, in other parts of India<sup>1</sup>. But to give a coherence to the project, and to the work of the photographers, I have chosen to concentrate on those whose careers have not only been fundamentally formed by their work in Kashmir, but continues to be shaped by their presence there.
- The one exception to this may be the photographer Sumit Dayal, Kashmiri by origin, but now a well-established photo-journalist based in New Delhi. We hope that his work in Kashmir, experimental in nature and framed as an act of “home-coming” provides a welcome dissonance to the work of the Kashmir based photographers.
- As photojournalists who cover the same beat, usually at the same place and at the same time, there is an inevitable overlap of concerns, even in shortlisted ‘best’ work. There is obviously a story in the repetitions too, but also a search for the nuanced differences that make the signature of photographers obvious to the viewer.
- The physical nature of the medium also created its own boundaries – apart from the general neglect of personal photographic archives, the cataclysmic flood of September 2014 also extracted a heavy price. The legendary photographer Amin War, archetypal witness of everything since the late 1980s, had stored all his picture negatives in two cartons in a ground floor office in Srinagar’s “Press Colony” in the heart of the city. He has lost everything to the flood. Others like Merajdin had a large number of negatives sucked into the deluge, but managed to pull most of them out without extensive damage.

#### *Dealing with contingencies –*

- The flood damage has had unexpected implications on the timeline (and resources) of the project. In January 2016 we finally purchased an entry level negative scanner (Epson V800) and arranged for it to be installed in the workspace of Merajdin, allowing him to gradually (and systematically) scan all the surviving negatives in his collection.
- This was not simply a case of making an important piece of hardware available to a participating photographer, but the manner and mode of what he has undertaken has obviously been shaped by the long-term goal of this project. Where a sense of the archive is an important dimension the formation and energisation of a culture of image making. At the end of May 2016, the scanner will be moved to the workspace of Tauseef Mustafa, in order for him to do a similar exercise with his (also partially damaged) collection of negatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Rafiq Maqbool, Mumbai; Aijaz Rahi, Bangalore; Burhan Kinu and Yasir Iqbal, Delhi

- Even with whose work is obtained mainly on the digital platform, the flood damage was severe. We have therefore had to invest time (and some resources) in assisting some of the photographers retrieve data from damaged HDs.
- In the case of at least two photographers, both working with the international wire service AP Photo, obtaining permission to use their work has involved a long and delicate negotiation. The 'non-commercial' intent of our project would not normally deflect the entirely commercial logic of those who manage the business of such massive photo repositories. However we have recently managed to negotiate a reasonable deal with AP Photo that will allow us to use the work of Yasin Dar as well as some by Altaf Qadri, both essential elements of the project.
- But perhaps the most important investment of time has gone in persuading the participating photographers to trust the intentions of the project, and open up their archives to us. This is more complicated than it might appear, and was suggested in the proposal to IFA. The act of witness, also carries within it the possibilities of surveillance, and the deployment of images in intelligence and police work. So whether these are images of the early 1990s, or of last week's protests, photographers have to negotiate a very delicate path through their neighbourhoods. Sharing their work with us has therefore been an act of considerable generosity, and trust.

## Text

In the course of the selection of images I have constructed fairly extensive biographies of the photographers. This has taken the form of detailed biographical notes for each person, but not at all limited to the 'facts' of their life.

In fact wherever possible we have also tried to carry on the conversation while moving the photographer through a familiar (or even provocative) space. In the case of the veteran Merajdin, we made several prints of a particularly iconic image shot by him in 1993, in downtown Srinagar, of a terrified family in the midst of a 'crackdown' by the military. We walked to the approximate location of the picture and by sharing it with people around eventually located the exact house, and even the central figure in the picture. The conversation that followed was not simply about Merajdin, but the universe in which he made his iconic images...

In the case of Showkat Nanda, born and brought up in Baramula, and whose work is usually located around this town, I spent a day walking with him in the spaces where he has made most of his pictures. Our trajectory started from the landmark 'Cement Bridge' that joins the old town with the new one, and which is invariably the border across which protestors and security forces face each other off...

This approach has yielded valuable results for the biographical material, but as we approach the design phase of the project I am toying with the idea that the individual biographies need not appear as a discrete *block* of text, of say 1200+ words each. Instead I am thinking of a possibly more fractured approach, using elements of my conversation as short text pieces that disrupt the pictures. And embellish them at the same time.

As part of the research, I have also begun to engage with two important repositories of archival images for Kashmir – the Alkazi Collection of Photography (the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century ) and the Mahatta Photo Studio (early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Apart from trying to understand the landscape of Kashmir in the colonial enterprise, I am also seeking a few images that could help frame the background against which this generation of photographers appear.

## **Design**

In the middle of May 2016 we begin design work at Itu Chaudhuri Design. A young designer has been assigned to the project and as part of her familiarisation with the context of the book, she will travel to Srinagar from June 1-4. Over the next two months as images for each photographer are brought down to the final 20, the design process will be accompanied by the careful re-scanning (at Hi Res) of negatives, as well as restoring and colour-correcting the images to prepare Master Prints for eventual printing.

We hope to have a dummy ready by early September.

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