

'Only class I am familiar with'

After the crush and confusion at the opening of her exhibition *Ladies of Calcutta* at Bose Pata gallery on Wednesday evening, the next morning the photographer, known for her compositions with chairs and beds with depeopled spaces, for the book she created by urging the eunuch Mona to write about herself, for her intriguing photographs of Goa and for her intimate and revealing portraits of Calcutta's ladies of leisure, was ready to talk on any things. Her mother's photographs, the photography market in India and why she chose to photograph upper-class women figured in the conversation. Here's to sayanita Singh.

Who is this child ride?

That is, the eldest daughter of Shanta Ghosh. He is 21 now and wears glasses.

And that is Souraja Tagore of Pathuriaghat. She is a haratanatyam dancer now.

I had photographed Durgasururity, Souraja's grandmother Tagore. When I returned and asked if I could meet her to give her a print, there was a lence. I wondered if I had done something wrong. But she had an amazing presence even after she had passed away. You could feel it in her room. That is when the beds and chairs series started.

How did you start taking photographs?

That's a long story. I went to NID, Ahmedabad, to learn graphic design to become a typographer. We were given a class assignment to take photographs of many moods. I knew that Zakir Husain makes faces while playing. So I went to Bombay. He was not a star yet and he was playing with Ravi ji (Shankar). When I was focusing my camera, someone touched me (an organiser) and I fell. I was told not to take photographs. I was only 18 then and I felt so humiliated. I was in tears and after the programme, I told Zakir Husain what had happened and added that someday I will be an important photographer. He explained that Ravi ji had added a fret to his sitar and he did not want that documented.

Zakir Husain called me to his hotel next morning so that I could photograph him while he practised. I had trepidations... it was a man's hotel room... in those days. I sat up all night. He asked me to visit Porbandar where all the greats of classical music were performing.

That is when I realised this is what I want to do. In those days after college, girls got married. Photography was my ticket to freedom. It didn't start out of a great love of the medium. My mother took photographs...

You had worked as a photojournalist for a while.

After NID, I dreamt to be working for a magazine in India. I was 25 and an important photo editor said: "You don't have a voice. Experience true creativity in motherhood." I was devastated. I met Mary Ellen Mark (American photographer) by chance and she convinced my mother that I should be sent to New York.

But I had no special talent then, my mother was a widow and the cost of education was formidable. I told her she could pay for it in lieu of my dowry. It is in New York (International Center of Photography) that I found the beginnings of my own voice.

In 1989 I became a photojournalist with an American photo agency. That was in the 1990s. Prostitutes, politicians, poverty. It was too tedious.

I can't remember what story I came looking for in Cal-

Your mother took photographs?

Yes... she had an exhibition at Arles in the south of France. At 72 this was great for her. Her name is Nony Singh. She took black-and-white photographs with a Zeiss Ikon of her family, mainly women, and interiors. She gave me the negatives. Family albums are archives of Indian photographs waiting to be discovered. This is another history of photography. My mother made an album of all my father's girlfriends before he met her. Martin Parr (British photojournalist) saw them and wanted to exhibit them. She was the toast of Arles. Mobile phones have totally democratised photography. But it is problematic. Will this kind of archive remain? The technology will need updating.

You only take black-and-white photographs?

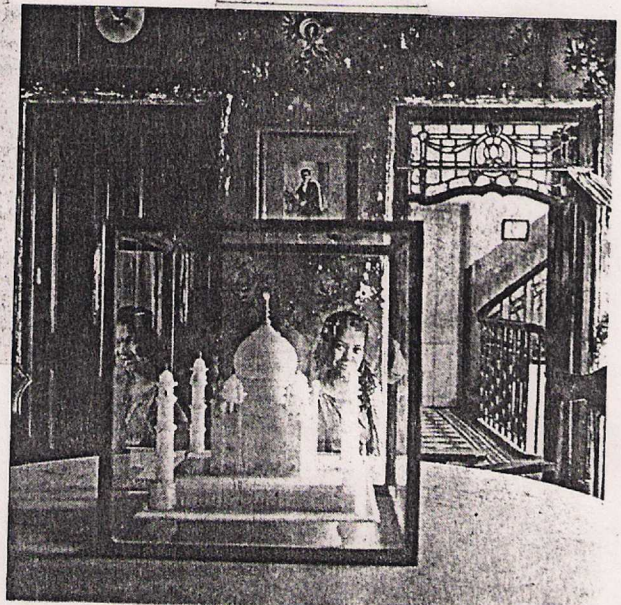
Colour is really, really difficult. Colours in prints are not what we see. To find a language for that is that much difficult.

cutta. But I absolutely couldn't continue with photojournalism. I felt like a pimp. I could become an activist but I had decided on photography. The alternative was family portraits. I could become a family photographer like a family doctor. It was in 1997 and it was an expensive project. I wanted to give prints to everybody I photographed. Nobody wanted those photographs of upper middle-class families then. But now this is all they want. I inadvertently catered to an-

other kind of stereotype. But everything fell into place. It was serendipitous. Robert Frank (photographer known for his outsider's view of America) sent me a cheque. There were three years of freedom.



Singh (top) and a photograph by her



In the best photographs here, maids have a strong presence. How was that?

Serendipity. Trance is too dramatic a word. Each session lasts two to three hours. Picture making becomes secondary. It is hit or miss. I can't plan a dog walking in, or a maid walking past. Now I wish I had paid more attention to it.

You use a flash sometimes.

To enhance daylight. I can't manage three or four lights. I just follow sunlight.

But why only upper class women?

This is the only class I am familiar with. It is like pointing a camera at myself. When I took the photographs of prostitutes I was a nervous wreck.

What do you think of the growing market for photography in India?

People are appreciating them for their potential value. People are buying in a frenzy.

Soumitra Das