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Snap, click 'n roll

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The Uttarkashi earthquake, the hijras of Mumbai, a fragmented NRI family in the US—the shutter closes, the 35 mm film starts rolling and the lens captures a moment that was.

For these photographers and cinematographers, working behind the lens is viewing the world through a different eye. Boundaries have expanded from the time when photo journalism was the dominant style.

Devika Dault Singh, director at a photography collective, Photoink, says that camera work is in a state of flux.

People are experimenting with autobiographical work that looks inwards and are exploring their physical space, like Gauri Gill with her Nizamuddin at Night series and Monika Ghurde with Uncovered and Impressions.

Preetha Jayaraman, 34

Preetha Jayaraman knew she wanted to be a cinematographer since she was in school. “I watched Nayakan and was mesmerised by P. C. Sreeram’s cinematography,” Says Jayaraman, of her uncle’s work. She joined the Film Technology Institute in Chennai, and began following her dream.

Two decades later, this Bangalore-based cinematographer wields the camera with confidence. “Sometimes, I feel cinematography is reality and life, a dream.” But her journey into filmdom hasn’t been a cake walk.

“It’s tough to get a break and the challenge is to stay focused,” she says. Jayaraman made her debut in Kollywood last year with Kannamoochi Yeneda and has moved to her next project, Abiyum Nanum.

Drawing inspiration from painters like Vermeer and Rembrandt, cinema and life, Jayaraman says she visualizes each project based on her instinctive response to the script. “I look for images and paintings that capture the essence of the story and use my imagination to shoot,” she says. But her mantra for success is “do your best irrespective of the size of the project, and work will keep coming your way”.

Anita Khemka, 35

To a casual observer, Anita Khemka would seem to have unusual acquaintances like Laxmi—a hijra, part of India’s third gender. “As a child, I was told tales of hijras spirited me away if I didn’t behave. When I started shooting, the camera became a tool to reach out and understand them,” says Delhi-based Khemka, a social documentary photographer.

Exploring alternative sexuality, she worked with German filmmaker Thomas Wartman

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on a film, *Between the Lines*, stills from which traveled to the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival in Amsterdam in 2007.

“More than the ultimate photograph, the process is important. When a subject opens up, so do I,” says Khemka. Photography was something she took up on the spur of the moment and the going wasn’t always easy.

Khemka would do a portfolio once in six months for Rs 3,000 to get some extra cash. But a little persistence had projects from Unicef and UNAIDS coming her way.

Khemka has since worked on a photo documentary on people living with AIDS, the mentally challenged and maternal health. “You’re only as good as your last assignment, so you have to deliver each time,” she says.

Sheena Sippy, 40

There is no doubt in Mumbai-based Sheena Sippy’s mind that photography was her calling. “It was instinctive. Having the family in the arts medium (she is the daughter of filmmaker Ramesh Sippy), could have had something to do with it,” she says.

Sippy’s repertoire of work includes celebrities, fashion, food and children, and books she has worked on like *Around the World in 80 Plates*.

“The first time I saw an image being developed, I was hooked. It was magical to see something emerge from a blank paper,” she says. Sippy did a lot of fashion photography, but stopped in 1999. “I got older, the models younger, and it became difficult to relate to them,” she adds.

That’s when she started photographing children, starting with her own, Shaira, 13, and Zahan, 16, and set up Rogues Gallery. Sippy is now shooting stills for *Chandni Chowk To China*, directed by Nikhil Advani and produced by her brother.

Fowziya Fathima, 35

“The joy of manning a machine and watching the world from above is amazing,” says Chennai-based Fowziya Fathima reminiscing of her flying lessons in college. Convinced that she had to have that sensation all the time, cinematography seemed the best bet.

“I knew I could satiate my appetite for scientific study coupled with aesthetic appeal with a camera,” says the mother of four-year-old Annapurna. Getting admission to the Film and Television Institute, Pune, strengthened her resolve to be a cinematographer.

After assisting her mentor, P.C. Sreeram, for a few years, Fathima made her debut with *Mitr, My Friend*, a critically-acclaimed film by Revathy.

“I’m still trying to recreate that experience,” she says, “I like scripts that are inventive and where the director is looking to go beyond the conventional.” Now working with

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debutant director Krishnan on First Time, Fathima says, “A film is also team work and I respect the director’s vision, trying to re-create that as best I can.”

Sarvesh, 50

For Delhi-based Sarvesh, photography is her provider, liberator and medium through which she can capture life. Married at eighteen, in a small town near Dehradun, Sarvesh was trapped in an abusive marriage for 10 years. Deciding not to take any more, she turned to a shelter, Saheli, for help.

That was her introduction to a world where women were independent. Gifted a camera by a friend, Sarvesh taught herself how to use it. “The first photographs I took were of a student protest, which looked bland. That’s when I learnt about aperture, lighting and composition,” She says.

Sarvesh calls herself a travel photographer, taking off to remote places, “copying life and feelings into pictures”. Her travels have taken her from the Uttarkashi earthquake in 1991 to the Kargil war. Eighteen years ago, she was ridiculed by her male colleagues for trying to be a photographer but remembers how proud she felt to see her name in the Navbharat Times for the first time.

She smiles, “Through photographs I try and create a positive universe by capturing simple aspects of life.”

Monika Ghurde, 30

Uncovered and Impressions—the two words currently occupy fashion photographer Monika Ghurde’s mind space. They are titles of her photographs on display at the Chennai-based Apparao Galleries. The journey of Uncovered began when Ghurde’s friend wanted pictures shot in the nude.

“It was a unique experience. I noticed in women both a sense of liberation and an awkwardness in expressing sensuality,” She says, “And I was confronted by a vulnerability which I never realised existed in me.” For nine years, Ghurde has journeyed with her camera.

Photography means more than a lens and light. “It’s about the mind and sight,” She says, “Capturing an emotion that even the human eye could miss, that’s what excites me.”

After a stint with different artistic mediums, Ghurde zeroed in on photography. “I wanted to make this world my canvas,” says the woman who has been married three years. But what sets her apart is her individual style. “I am passionate about fashion and I like to push boundaries. No two images should look the same.” She says.

Gauri Gill, 37

She is no stranger to the sound of film being forwarded and the half-second of anticipation before the shutter release is depressed, capturing a moment that was.

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Delhi-based Gauri Gill grew up as the subject of her father's lens, but didn't pick up a camera till college.

"I started out wandering the streets with a camera. It was an excuse to get out and rediscover the world," she says. A scholarship to study photography at the Parsons School of Design, New York, saw Gill choosing to make a career of it.

"Working behind the lens puts things in perspective for me," says Gill, who worked for five years as a photo journalist, shooting everything from farmer suicides in Punjab to the Kargil war.

Giving it up to freelance in 2000, Gill had time for her project on the rural communities of Rajasthan, which won the Fifty Crows Award in San Francisco in 2002.

The Americans, a project on the Indian diaspora in the US, which started in 2000 and continued through her fellowship at Stanford University, US, is now traveling the country. But what she continues to work for is visual literacy. "I want to build a culture around photography," she says.

– *Inputs by Akhila Krishnamurthy, Devayani Shahane and Bushra Ahmed*

Courtesy: [Woman](#)

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