

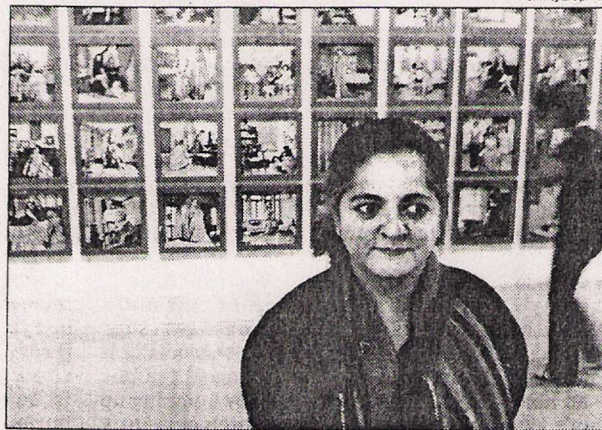
# Glimpses of nameless faces from a lost time

Aritro Ganguly | TNN

**Kolkata:** “*Madam, yeh to sab antique pictures hain, ekdam black and white TV-ke zamane ki tarah,*” told a carpenter to Dayanita Singh, when she asked him to be careful with the photographs put up at Bose Pacia. That, for her, was the most candid response to her exhibition titled *Ladies of Calcutta*.

For, Dayanita is on a quest to trace glimpses of a lost time. She talks about a line from Michael Ondaatje’s poem *Handwriting* “All this we burned or traded for power and wealth...”.

“Although Globalization has changed India, I thought it would be more gradual in Kolkata. But the city has changed quite a bit in the last few years,” she laments. Perhaps sensing that the sands of time were slipping through her fingers, she focused her lens on the upper-middle class families during her four visits to the city in the ’90s and this decade. Although the ladies are in focus, she creates depth in the photographs by occasionally capturing a maid fleeting across or standing by the door — although out of focus — at the margin. The magic unfolds as the eyes, captivated by the subject(s), look



Achintyarup Ray

Dayanita Singh at the exhibition

beyond and spot the blurred figure in white. “She looks like a Bikash Bhattacharya painting. But the effect was sheer fluke,” Dayanita reveals. Dayanita finds these figures a spot in the sun — or in shade — by concealing her face in sudden brightness or in mellow dark.

The nameless faces (some though are easily recognizable) look at ease. Whether it’s the flamboyant Dolly blowing a kiss or the bold *balika badhu*, or the handsome babu, who is present for being a “ladies’ man”, each face tells a story that brings alive the bygone era. And they

are complimented by the props — paintings, furniture and the *banediana* — in those frames.

*Ladies of Calcutta* is mounted like a painting exhibition with around hundred frames dotting the walls. But that may change soon. For, the ladies in the photographs plan to converge on the venue before the conclusion of the exhibition on February 9 and walk away with their photographs. Dayanita now plans to invite them in the first week of February and hand over the frames. “I don’t want the blank walls to greet people,” she signs off.