



DELHI CAMERA OBSCURA

A DEFUNCT FACTORY IS THE SETTING FOR THIS PHOTOGRAPHY SHOW

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Tucked away from the main road across from Jadavpur University in Kolkata is a relic of Bengal's once vibrant industrial economy — the factory of National Instruments Ltd (NIL), India's first and only still camera manufacturing factory. NIL used to make the National 35, a 35 mm camera which was quite popular in the early to mid-1980s before the Canons and Nikons flooded the markets. NIL went sick sometime in the 1990s and its 2,000 or so workers were forced to take voluntary retirement; today, its vast premises are deserted and in ruins.

Manas Bhattacharya and Madhuban Mitra, two Kolkata-based artists and photographers, spent the last year and a half exploring and photographing the

factory and offices. The exhibition, 'Through a Lens, Darkly', at the PhotoInk gallery until February 12, is the result of their labours.

This is an interesting exhibition, and not just because it captures a little-known chapter of our indigenous history of technology and photography. NIL had its roots in the Mathematics Instruments Office set up by the colonial administration in 1830 to make survey equipment. "Post-1957," says Bhattacharya, "it moved to its current premises and began manufacturing specialised high-precision optical instruments, infra-red binoculars, etc., for the Indian army." Sometime in the 1970s, the company came out with the National Mini Queen, a 16 mm still camera, a format that is now defunct. Just before it closed down, NIL had designed the National Reflex 2000, which would have been India's first SLR camera.

But this exhibition is no academic exercise; refreshingly, also, the photographers have steered clear of valorising their subject. "The National 35 was anything but the iconic 'people's camera' it was made out to be," Bhattacharya says. "It was an exact copy of the Regula Sprinty BC, made by German company King KG, which went obsolete in the 1970s. NIL bought the licence for the design and reverse engineered it," he adds. The photographers seem very alive to the irony

(Clockwise from top left) From the series, 'Autopsy of the Great Indian Camera', broken camera shells around the NIL shop floor; from the series 'Persistent Circuits', where "The worker in the lens assembly room was an eccentric one," as Manas Bhattacharya says, "and had scribbled quotes such as this one by Ibsen all over"; and from the series 'The Archaeology of Absence'

of the "indigenous marvel" being a copy of a Western reject, and the knowledge gives their work (especially in the photo-animation *The Phantom Camera*) a playful irreverence.

Movingly, the photographs capture the residual "human presence" of the workers who had long left the factory. A *gamcha* (cloth towel) hangs from a clothesline in the middle of an office room, an autographed film still of Dharmendra and Hema Malini, a love letter in an office

cupboard... it was as if the workers had just got up and left. "It was quite ghostly, because these were people who had left more than 15 years ago," says Mitra.

There are scores of such factories all across Bengal — once thriving, now dead as a result of trade unionism or because, post-globalisation, they didn't survive the competition — and few now talk about them. In that sense, Bhattacharya and Mitra's project serves an important sociological purpose.