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Daily Stories

An ode for Richard

By Simon Digby



Richard Bartholomew was a friend who died nearly a quarter of a century ago. I had thought that the man and his art were almost forgotten until the current exhibition of his photographic prints at PHOTOINK in Delhi, which has already been the subject of a review in *Tehelka* in its issue dated 21st February.

The catalogue of the exhibition is a small book, not far smaller than the size of the original prints. It should establish Richard Bartholomew's reputation as one of the greatest Asian photographers who preserved for us images of South Asia's landscapes and townscapes as they stood in the late twentieth century. As for the people of that time - their individualities and often desolate environments are incorporated in his work with an empathetic and compassionate gaze that has absolutely no trace of any condescension.

The introspection and austerity of Bartholomew's prints invites comparison with the work of another great Asian photographer of the twentieth century, Lionel Wendt from Sri Lanka. Wendt and Bartholomew were both men of Eurasian ancestry, but Wendt came from a more privileged and sheltered background. Richard however, was Anglo-Burmese, from a community whose identity has now been all but obliterated in contemporary Myanmar. He was only twelve years old when following the swift collapse of British rule only weeks after the Japanese attack, he and his mother survived the horrors of the retreat in which many thousands of Indians and Anglo-Burmese tramped without food or clothing through trackless and parasite-infested rain-forests and swamps to seek refuge in Assam. I think that this experience affected his compassionate adult vision of the world around him. Richard and his mother settled in Himachal, and Richard ultimately found his way to St Stephen's College, Delhi.

Bartholomew's prints of everyday scenes are often static as if in a frozen moment of time. They exploit the repetitive visual pattern of the familiar uncared-for objects to achieve an astonishing richness of texture. For example, the rows of loop-backed chairs at Tibet House, New Delhi, Plate 64, taken in 1969. Another great work of his, "A barefoot woman on the streets of New York 1970-1971", is an image of astonishing bleakness; the desolation of the harsh geometrical concrete environment of the unfrequented "Merchandise Mart" emphasized by the diminutive image of the lone barefoot woman defiantly flouncing along with her raised handbag.

To understand these prints as a major record of the rapidly evolving Indian cultural scene one must pay close attention to the captions and dates of the prints. So many of India's creative artists and writers have been recorded by Richard's unique vision, and so many are no longer with us.

The contemplative images of the prints are at odds with another quality in which Richard excelled, journalism. He earned part of his living as a reporter and an action photographer employed by leading Indian dailies. I particularly value the advice he gave me more than half a century ago about how to photograph turbulent street scenes - holding a reflex camera high above the head and calculating the necessary angles when one is not positioned to get a full view. Richard's skills as an action photographer have been inherited by his son Pablo, famous for filming the Babri Masjid episode.

My friendship with Bartholomew dated from 1957, when I came to the University of Delhi on a modest grant. I moved to an apartment in Timarpur, close to Khyber Pass just across the street from Richard and Rati Bartholomew, and I spent many hours in their company, both private and amongst common friends.

Richard taught me how to print from negatives. The darkroom in his flat was truly dark only during the nights in the Delhi of those days. I watched him and listened to his comments and acted as a spare pair of hands for him. He showed me how manual masking and feathering could be used to enhance the special effects of the dream-like silvery lights and velvety black shadows of his prints. He was truly a great friend. A little brochure handed out at the exhibition bears witness to the friendships that he shared with the greatest modern Indian writers and painters, among them Dom Moraes and M.F. Hussain. The brochure contains the facsimiles of handwritten notes that they wrote after his death in 1985. The note by Hussain faces a magnificent photo of the painter in his full vigour taken in 1962.

I last saw Richard in 1982; the year of the Festival of India in the UK, where his son Pablo was among the chosen Indian photographers whose work was on display. Richard stayed in my flat for some nights. I remember that Richard suddenly looked up for a few moments at a water colour on the wall and remarked, "That's a picture of Almora before the houses were built." He was of course right and the remark was a testimony to the sharpness of his observation and skill.

The exhibition of Bartholomew's prints is currently on at MGF Hyundai Building, Jhandewalan, New Delhi