



Images courtesy of Ketaki Sheth/Photoink

Two of a kind

by Janice Pariat

It is impossible not to think of Diane Arbus' "Identical Twins" when you browse Ketaki Sheth's current photo exhibition Twinspace. Arbus' picture of two little girls in headbands taken in New York in 1967 was part of her large repertoire of "odd" portraits that included, among others, dwarfs, giants, transvestites, nudists and circus performers. While she strove to capture figures on the margins of society, Sheth aimed for the very opposite – to dig her teeth into a community very much in the forefront and mainstream.

This happens to be the burgeoning Patel community both in England, where Sheth moved to after marriage in 1995, and in Gujarat, where the Patels originate. The idea was planted in her mind after she was handed a directory listing over 30,000 Patels in the UK complete with biographical details and professions. Whether unintentional or not, the collection of about 40 pictures form a well-constructed documentation of social standing and class. There is a lot to be gleaned from the residential addresses at the bottom of the photos, which range from rural Ode in Gujarat to Elephant and Castle in London's exclusive Zone One. The differences are stark, yet herein also lies a discreet sociological study of how the Patels have "evolved" economically and socially from being essentially farmers to professionals such as doctors and accountants. On a more intimate and compelling note, however, is the notion of "twin" identities, not just between siblings but also between people settled in different continents. The Patels were the first to move in large numbers to East Africa and then further migrate to the US and UK. The photographs capture, through the juxtaposition of Indian and UK Patel twins, a "splitting" of roots, identity, belonging and homeland.

The photographs are a great departure from Sheth's usual candid street photography style. They are formal, sometimes even stiff, portraits with a certain archaic charm. Her subjects, usually posing in and around their houses, stare boldly at the camera, and their surroundings tell the fragment of a story about their lives. Ram and Lakhan stand in front of their tobacco field in Ode, Sanjiv and Sandip at their parent's corner shop in Ascot, Luv and Kush in a classroom in Dharmaj, Shilpa and Sheetal in a large shiny car in Harrow. Since the pictures often exclude anyone else in the frame, it is a world inhabited solely by the siblings. The image of triplets Rohan, Roshni and Rinkin in their garden is a particularly beautiful and stylish example of this. They sit on the ground and are hemmed in by a protective cover of trees.

Another striking picture shows Parshottam and Thakor in their ancestral home in Motapore, Gujarat. The twins lounge on a bed while through an open doorway, on the other side of the house, stands a third figure looking in – mirroring the photographer's role of voyeur and outsider. Probably the most evocative photograph of the collection is of Bijli and Bindiya, outdoors in Kent. Behind the two posing girls springs a bare, beautiful tree outlined against the sky. It serves as a symbol not just of life but also family and community, separated yet born of a common root.



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