



BOLLYWOOD CONNECTION Fosso says Bollywood films help him emote in front of camera.

One man, multiple facets

ART Photographer Samuel Fosso uses the lens to compensate an undocumented childhood and explore issues.

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Renowned African photographer Samuel Fosso enacts different characters in his self-portraits. From a pirate, he goes on to play an African chief, a polished businessman and so on. As Fosso slips in and out of characters, his studio 'Photo National' in Bangui too shuttles between different looks to complete the setting. In the images, Fosso is the subject, object and the creator.

The civil war survivor, hailed across the world for his self-portraits, is a good actor too. Fosso's expressions and get-up in each image is convincing. "I was brought up by my grandparents who fostered an interest in narratives. That works as a crucial

reference point. I also watch a lot of Bollywood films which are very popular in Africa. I relate to the emotional trauma, gap between rich and poor shown in these films," says Fosso.

His work has been showcased at Guggenheim Museum in New York, Tate Modern, London and is being exhibited in India for the first time. The exhibition is a joint effort between Photoink and the French Embassy.

Fosso's work explores not just self, but African culture and identity. Wearing outlandish clothes against the exotic settings of his studio, his pictures are theatrical and influenced by studio photography. His own history plays a cru-

cial role. Born in Cameroon, he was paralysed for the first four years of his life. "My mother wouldn't go to the studio with me to get a picture clicked because she felt embarrassed," says Fosso. His mother brought Fosso to Edda in Biafra where her healer father and mother lived. In 1967, civil war broke out and Fosso with his family fled to the forests. The family lived there for the next three years. "Fosso didn't have any images from his childhood. Through photography, he is trying to compensate for the uncaptured childhood. Fosso communicates through photography to be recognised and acknowledged," says Benedicte Alliot, French cultural

attaché who is translating Fosso.

His studio

In 1972, his uncle brought him to Bangui where he opened his studio. During the day, he would take portraits of the locals and at night, he would use the remaining film to click himself. He would send these pictures to his grandmother in Nigeria to assure her that he was growing up well. The black and white pictures from that period are on display here. Though he has achieved international acclaim, he continues to be a studio and passport photographer in Bangui.

He kept taking pictures of himself until he was discov-

ered by French photographer Bernard Descamps in 1993. He first showcased his pictures in "Afrique en creation" in Bamako, Mali. The colour images from his Tati series commissioned by Paris' Magasins Tati are also on display.

The image of African chief "Le Chef", the liberated American women "Bourgeoise", a businessman among others can be viewed. "Many village chiefs were accomplices of colonialism. They were lured into selling Africa to these powers. I denounce them through "Le Chef picture," explains Fosso.

In "The dream of my grandfather", Fosso through a series of pictures portrays

himself as a healer, just like his grandfather, who wanted Fosso to become a healer and a village leader. Fosso has also done autoportraits of pioneers of the civil rights movement in the US or Black movements. "Having grown up during the war, I know the importance of freedom. Through my photographs, I want to make these people eternal who gave us freedom and to enable people to trace the history," says Fosso. And no prize for guessing, Mahatma Gandhi is Fosso's next project.

(The exhibition is being held at Photoink, MGF Hyundai building, Jhandewalan, Faiz Road till January 2, 2009)