



A prototype of the National 35 camera

The forgotten camera factory

A project documents the ruins of Kolkata's National Instruments where India's only indigenous analogue camera was once manufactured.

BY DEEPALI NANDWANI

A SERIES of sepia-toned and colour photographs, and a few photo-animation works reveal in minute detail the ruins of what was once a buzzing, throbbing National Instruments Limited factory, where National 35 — India's indigenous analogue or film-based camera — was manufactured.

They are part of an exhibition, *Through the Lens, Darkly* by filmmakers/photographers Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya running at Delhi's Photoink Gallery. They

were commissioned by Media Lab, run by the Department of Film Studies at Kolkata's Jadavpur University, to document the factory as part of its project on the National Instruments Ltd. The company went into decline in the 1980s, finally shutting shop in the mid-1990s. Its sprawling premise is now owned by the Jadavpur University.

For those who have never heard of the National 35, it was an exact replica of an Bobsolete German camera from the 1950s — the

Regula Sprinty BC. The camera was considered a landmark in the history of photography in India because it was indigenously manufactured and cheap, making it accessible to amateur photographers who had minimal resources.

Part-nostalgia and part-documentation of Kolkata's industrial past, Mitra says that there is another way to look at *Through the Lens, Darkly* project. "It also records how old technology ultimately gives way to new. The factory had to shut



Clockwise from top left: Tools used by the workers, a framed photograph of Rabindranath Tagore, a film poster stuck on a cupboard, Soviet literature stored in a shelf and a forgotten shirt at a workstation



down when digital replaced analogue cameras. It seemed poignant that we were using a digital format to capture the death of the analogue but we needed to work fast and also wanted to do photo-animation works, which is not possible with an

analogue." A series of animations — each three minutes long — have been looped together to form one photo-animation work. "They emerged from the need to record small movements, mutations, discreet and subtle variations in the space, which

was not possible to examine through a still photograph," says Bhattacharya, "like the movement of an exhaust fan. It doesn't work anymore because there is a problem with the circuit. But the factory has huge windows and the exhaust fans constantly move be-

cause of strong wind." Mitra, 37, and Bhattacharya, 33, worked on the series for over six months, going back every day to record little details of the derelict factory. "No one works out of it anymore and everything is covered in dust. It is a dead space," says Mitra. "But as we worked, we came alive to little things that weren't apparent on the surface. We stumbled upon personal objects of people who once worked in the factory. In a cupboard, we discovered a love letter written by a woman

to one of the workers. In a room we found quotations scribbled on a wall, perhaps by a worker who liked to do that. There were books and small mirrors abandoned alongside tools and implements on a table, a comb, slippers..." Most industrial spaces tend to dehumanise people working there, so you end up seeing them as a mass rather than as individuals. "These photographs and photo-animations reveal their quirks and crazy habits. You could call them inanimate portraits of the work-

ers. Though most workers accepted VRS, the objects they left behind makes you believe they were in a hurry to leave and forgot to collect their personal belongings." The collaborative project is an extensive one and the two have begun breaking it down into several self-contained, though interconnected, series and would be showing bits and parts of it over the next year.

(Through the Lens, Darkly will show at the Photoink Gallery till February 12. Log on to www.photoink.net)