

A home away from home?

Through B&W photographs, Dileep Prakash captures the ambivalence of someone who, even as an adult, still needs to ask himself about the sense of familial belonging that seemed to have been out of bounds for him as a child

READERS' FEEDBACK

Right example to follow?

This refers to the column 'Rebel, romantic, run-away' (MM, April 21).

It seemed a little unclear in its purpose for assuming that all Arab women are dying to break free and when they manage to do, the whole world or at least a few are ready to support them, though indirectly.

I fail to understand why a woman, who had quite a few vices (adultery, smoking, neglecting her kids, etc as written by you), is glorified?

Do you really want women to emulate her or is it that some people just want to portray the "oppressed Arab woman" and her "struggles"?

- Dr N Ahmed

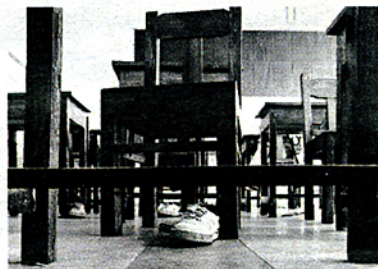
Devika Dault-Singh of Photoink, a celebrated photography gallery in Delhi, has very kindly sent me a book of photographs by Dileep Prakash who is currently exhibiting there. The exhibition, titled "What Was Home" has an essay by art historian and curator Deepak Ananth who lives in Paris, and has written on a range of modern and contemporary artists, European and Indian.

Dileep Prakash's exhibition is a series of stark, rather desolating black and white images of the "innards" of our great public schools such as The Lawrence School, Sanawar, Doon, St Paul's in Darjeeling, Mayo College, Ajmer and many others. They feature empty classrooms, empty dormitories, empty gyms, labs and washrooms.

This is very different from the aura with which these institutions have been traditionally invested: built mainly in the mid to late 19th century to impart the kind of education available in British public schools, they have illustrious histories, tasteful buildings, and beautiful settings. For instance, St Paul's in Darjeeling, built on the highest point of the town has an uninterrupted view of the magnificent Kanchenjunga range.

At the same time, life could be rigorous. It is said that the military training imparted at The Lawrence School was so rigorous that contingents of boys went straight from school to the battlefields of the Great War.

If the photographs are bleak, it is not because the photographer has any kind of simple-minded "subversion" in mind. Deepak Ananth writes that the title of the exhibition What Was Home "eloquently sums up the profound



Prakash's pictures, currently on the walls of an art gallery in Delhi, feature empty classrooms, dormitories, gyms and labs

ambivalence of someone who, even as an adult, still needs to ask himself about the sense of familial belonging that, as a child, seemed to have been out of bounds for him. That emotional wrench was, of course, part of the experience of growing up for generations of English schoolboys from the upper classes leaving home to attend boarding school, however much they might have put on a brave face".

Dileep Prakash was sent to Mayo when he was nine, and saw his family only twice a year. Returning to his alma mater as an adult, he wanted to record it in a documentary fashion but then decided on "a more contemplative

approach. My attempt was to explore memory, not descriptively but emotionally..." He then decided to explore other boarding schools in India, and felt "many commonalities that resonated with my years in Mayo".

There are lighter moments too. Ananth writes, "For all his mixed feelings about growing up in a boarding school, Prakash's retrospective survey is hardly oblivious to the occasions of levity that came his way: the skeleton in an anatomy class that is literally in a cupboard, the framed reproduction of a madonna and child presiding over a blackboard bearing a detailed biological illustration of reproductive organs..."

The first photograph in the exhibition features the word "SILENCE" framed on a wall. It is this word that Ananth uses to explore the work. "The unoccupied chair and its ghostly shadow, the lockers in (temporary?) disuse, the weathered wooden floor...everything suggests vacancy or emptiness and is resonant precisely for that reason - the familiar spiritual paradox of absence as presence, albeit inflected by the melancholy that Dileep Prakash brings to it."

Ananth's essay is a luminous piece of writing, a model of its kind. Full of empathy for the emotional journey of the photographs, and their technical achievements, the essay keeps the work and the viewer in focus, pointing to details which one could have missed, the play of light and shade, the passing of time indicated by the pictures of leaders on the walls.

All the essays I've read by him have this quality. I hope they will be put together in an anthology. In the meantime, it's a pity that Devika Dault-Singh has no plans for bringing the exhibition to Mumbai.