

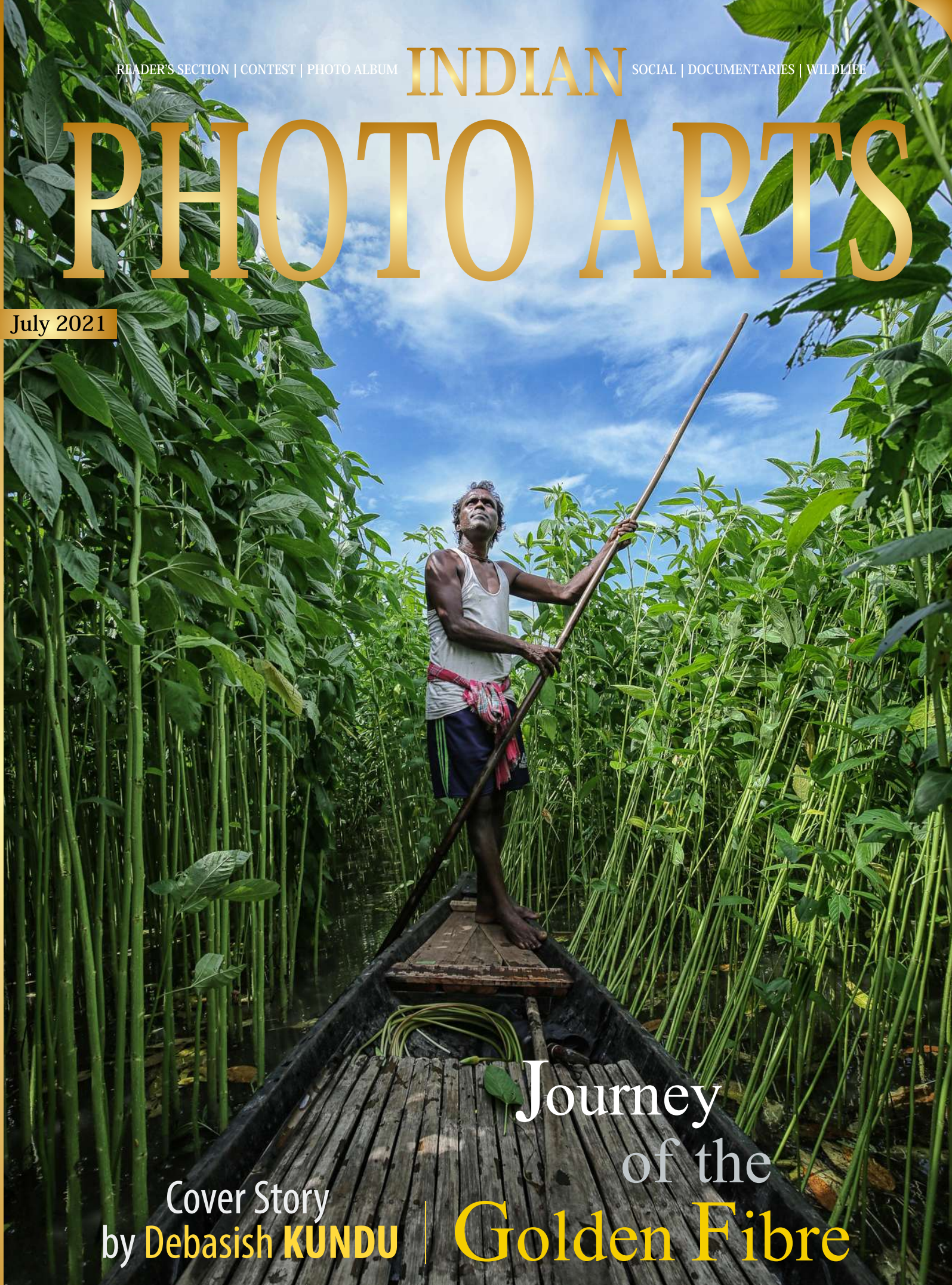
READER'S SECTION | CONTEST | PHOTO ALBUM

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PHOTO ARTS

July 2021



Cover Story
by Debasish KUNDU

Journey
of the
Golden Fibre

The saga of the iconic Banarasi silk and its future brought to the fore by ARPAN UZIR.
JAYSHANKAR MENON documents the success story of BAREFOOT COLLEGE's night school program.



Photograph by Debmalya Das

After unleashing the carnage during its second wave, the COVID 19 pandemic is showing signs of slowing down. However it would be premature to assume the virus has lost its potency and is on its way out, this relative period of lull could very well be the calm before the impending third wave which scientists believe will be brought about by the Delta variant of the virus. It is still imperative on our part to follow the COVID protocols and adhere to the vaccination drive as part of our preparedness for the third wave. Also let us not forget the sacrifices of all the frontline workers who by dint of their courage and superhuman efforts have kept the virus at bay. This issue pays tribute to one such frontline warriors and their contributions in this ongoing war against coronavirus- the ASHA workers.
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Journey of the Golden Fibre

by Debasish KUNDU

India is the largest producer of raw jute in the world, yet the road ahead for this significant cash crop is not as straight forward as it might appear.



The fertile plains of Gangetic Delta in the eastern and north eastern parts of the country are ideally suited for large scale cultivation of jute. West Bengal is the largest producer of jute in India contributing a staggering 75% of the total produce .



Jute thrives well in warm, humid, tropical climate, something which the jute producing districts in West Bengal are well acquainted with.

Introduction:

Among the major cash crops responsible for sustaining the livelihoods of millions of farmers in India, jute occupies a prominent position. This is largely due to the fact that India is the world's largest producer of jute with an average annual yield of over 10 million tonnes. The earliest history of the use of jute products in India dates back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. The fertile plains of Gangetic Delta in the eastern and north eastern parts of the country are ideally suited for large scale cultivation of jute and among the states where jute cultivation is practiced extensively; the state of West Bengal holds the position for being the largest producer of jute in India contributing a staggering 75% of the total produce in the country. In commercial terms, jute and mesta – a crop similar in characteristics to jute, are collectively known as raw jute and are used for almost the same purposes. Raw jute, when it made its appearance for the first time was deemed suitable for the packaging industry particularly as a raw material for the manufacturing of sacks, ropes and other packaging materials. However raw jute was not late in asserting its true value and soon the ingredient found itself becoming an essential component of a multitude of other industries ranging from textile, paper to automotive industry as well. Jute quickly and efficiently outmatched its synthetic counterparts in terms of being a more robust, high tensile and most importantly environment friendly

fibre. The relatively cheaper rates and the large scale cultivation of jute in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Assam further established jute as one of the most sought after fibres with oodles of commercial appeal. Jute stamped its authority in the socio-economic setting of undivided Bengal (present day Bangladesh combined) during the regime of the British East India Company in India in the 18th century as well. The British would regularly indulge in the trading of raw jute in parts of the United Kingdom. As the trading of raw jute increased in frequency and stature jute processing mills and factories were set up in Kolkata and other parts of Bengal. Historical records suggest the first jute mill in India was established in Kolkata in 1855 and the early 1900s witnessed a number of mills being set up in other parts of Bengal including in parts of present day Bangladesh.

Ideal Conditions:

Jute cultivation in West Bengal is mostly centred around the lower Ganges plains in the districts of Hooghly, North and South 24 Parganas, East Midnapore, Malda, Murshidabad and Bardhaman. Jute thrives well in warm, humid, tropical climate, something which the jute producing districts in West Bengal are well acquainted with. March-September is considered to be the ideal period for the cultivation of jute. An average annual temperature ranging from 15 to 35 degree Celsius coupled with an average relative

humidity in the region of 70% is ideally suited for the cultivation of jute. Moderate to heavy spells of rain ranging from 125 to 150mm in a month with intermittent spells of bright sunshine provide the most suitable conditions during the growth period of the crop. The fertile alluvial soil of the Gangetic Plain rich in silt deposit serves as the perfect platform for the cultivation of this natural fibre. It is estimated jute cultivation accounts for more than 5 lakh hectare of land in West Bengal. In the northern reaches of the state, in the foothills of the Himalayas, relay farming of jute and rice along with the newly introduced method of “zero till” farming have significantly increased the yield and lowered the expenses associated with jute cultivation. This could prove to be a monumental success for the jute industry in the Terai region of West Bengal where jute cultivation was steadily losing ground to winter crops.

Harvesting:

Jute is harvested within 120-150 days of sowing to ensure the fibres are rich in quality. The plants usually grow to a height of 8-12 feet during this period and are chopped off. The harvested plants are left in the open for the leaves to fall off. Once the leaves have fallen off the stems are tied into bundles and are made to soak in water. After harvesting the most important step involves extracting the jute fibre which is well concealed by the bark on the stem. In the first phase of this process

known as retting the tied bundles are left to steep in water for 8-30 days following which the bark can be easily separated from the stalk thereby exposing the fibres. Retting is followed by stripping off the exposed fibre from the stalk. Once extracted the fibres are washed in clean water and squeezed of the excess water are left hanging to dry in the sun for 2-3 days. Once dried they are tied in bales and packaged and are sent to the processing mills where the fibre is used as raw material for the manufacturing of a wide array of products.

Commercial Viability:

The commercial viability of jute in the global market remains undisputed. In the wake of climate consciousness the market has gradually shifted towards a more organic and sustainable approach, a shift that has greatly benefitted the jute industry. An important cog in the economy of the country jute often referred to as the “golden fibre” is an organic, renewable, biodegradable and environment friendly raw material. It is estimated that jute and its ancillary institutes support more than 4 million families mainly belonging to the rural and the marginalised sector. Much of the raw jute produce caters to the global jute bag market which is valued at US\$ 1.9 billion in 2020. The use of raw jute however is not restricted to the jute bag industry; jute finds use in the production of a plethora of products such as curtains, carpets and rugs, hessian cloth, canvass

and in various sectors of the larger textile industry. The environmental friendly nature of jute has prompted a multitude of industries shifting to jute as their preferred choice of raw material. One look at the global jute bag market and this becomes pretty evident. The harmful nature of discarded plastic bags and plastic covers and the dreadful impact they leave on the environment have prompted a vast majority of consumers across the globe to migrate towards the use of jute bags and jute sacks for everyday purposes. Low cost and high tensile strength of jute have appealed to the automobile sector too. Major global automakers such as Ford, Tesla, and Toyota have started using jute based composites for manufacturing various car parts like door panels and driver panels. A further addition to the long list of commercial use of jute is the industry of geotextiles. Geotextiles find widespread use in a number of geotechnical applications such as coastal and agricultural embankments and dikes, road and railway embankments and are put in place to aid the purposes of reinforcement, stabilisation, filtration and drainage. Geotextile products manufactured out of jute are used extensively for a number of agricultural and landscaping purposes primarily to contain soil erosion, seed protection and prevent the spread of invasive weed and plant species. The bio degradable nature of jute ensures past the expiry date the jute products can be left to decompose

organically.

A looming crisis:

In spite of the surging demand for jute products in the global market the jute industry in West Bengal and across the country is presently faced with a number of crises. Topping the list of crises is the shortage of raw jute. A number of initiatives and programs undertaken by the governments and the concerned authorities have failed to address this issue and currently the total available land for cultivation of jute is not sufficient to meet the demand of the jute industry and as a nation India is yet to be self-sufficient in terms of raw jute production. Amidst such a situation we are dependent upon neighbouring Bangladesh for raw jute in order to meet the excess demand from the jute industry. In addition to the shortage of raw materials the jute processing plants and mills are plagued with a crippling infrastructure. Obsolete techniques and decrepit machineries still remain a common fixture at these set ups. These age old machineries and techniques are not ideally suited for churning out quality jute products and manufacture them at a scale which would give India the competitive edge over other countries such as Bangladesh and Philippines which are fast developing a robust jute based economy of their own. The Jute Technology Mission which was launched in 2006 aimed at addressing some of the key aspects of the jute industry and



Jute is harvested within 120-150 days of sowing to ensure the fibres are rich in quality. The plants grow to a height of 8-12 feet before they are chopped off.



Jute cultivation in West Bengal is mostly centred around the lower Ganges plains in the districts of North and South 24 Parganas, East Midnapore, Malda, Murshidabad and Bardhaman. The fertile alluvial soil of the Gangetic Plain rich in silt deposit serves as the perfect platform for the cultivation of this natural fibre. It is estimated jute cultivation accounts for more than 5 lakh hectare of land in West Bengal. An average annual temperature ranging from 15 to 35 degree Celsius coupled with an average relative humidity in the region of 70% is ideally suited for the cultivation of jute. Moderate to heavy spells of rain ranging from 125 to 150mm in a month with intermittent spells of bright sunshine provide the most suitable conditions during the growth period of the crop.

promised to eradicate a number of these issues. The key areas of focus for this program included development of raw jute cultivation, processing and marketing of raw jute and upgrading and properly utilising the industrial aspects of raw jute. While the program promised a lot, it failed to deliver most of those promises due to poor implementation and lack of funds. Jute farmers too have been vocal about a number of problems which they have been traditionally faced with. According to the farmers the costs of the seedlings have skyrocketed with time and the expenses they have to bear during cultivation barely allow them to break even. The lack of facilities imparting the necessary skills required to implement some of the modern cultivation techniques forces them to resort to age old methods which are often less productive, expensive and time consuming ordeals. The authorities on the other hand put the onus on the farmers suggesting it is often the farmers who are reluctant to implement the modern technologies and upgrade their skill sets on jute cultivation. Caught amid this blame game, it is the jute industry in India which continues to reel. There also remains the pressing issue of a lack of storage area for raw jute. Huge stockpiles of raw jute often rot and their quality gets compromised due to the lack of proper storage facilities. This further creates a shortage of raw materials for the jute industry.

After harvesting the most important step involves extracting the jute fibre which is well concealed by the bark on the stem. In the first phase of this process known as retting the tied bundles are left to steep in water for 8-30 days following which the bark can be easily separated from the stalk thereby exposing the fibres.



With Bangladesh, China, Philippines and South Korea establishing themselves as major exporters of raw jute and jute based products the demand for raw jute and jute products from India has gradually started waning in the global market. The lack of modern infrastructure and shortage of raw jute serve as a further handicap to the jute economy of India as these problems do not allow the jute industry in India to remain competitive. While other countries in Asia continue to make the most of this, the Indian jute industry is slowly but steadily slipping into a state of stagnation. In West Bengal the situation is no different from the rest of the country. Once famous for its iconic jute mills, the jute industry in Hooghly district of West Bengal lies in shambles. A number of jute mill owners have permanently shut down their establishments in the light of thinning profits leaving thousands of mill workers unemployed. Mill owners and workers in other parts of West Bengal are faced with similar predicament. Agitations are becoming commonplace in jute industry and the entire working ecosystem is rife with frequent and indefinite strikes over issues such as minimum wages, wage revision and other incentives demanded by the workers. A fledgling demand, lack of modernisation and frequent unrest together do not paint a rosy future for the jute industry in West Bengal or elsewhere in the country.

The path ahead:

While the jute farmers and mill workers have repeatedly accused the government of remaining apathetic towards their plight, the government on the other hand, time and again, has promised a number of measures to revamp the jute industry, albeit with little efficacy in terms of implementing them. In 2014-15, the Textile Ministry along with the West Bengal Government announced a slew of measures to rejuvenate the jute industry in West Bengal. The measures announced entailed reopening of a number of closed jute mills, providing financial assistance to the mills which are on the verge of shutting down and creating a countrywide network of jute products and jute textile products substantiated with a robust marketing mechanism. While such initiatives led to encouraging results in the short term, the demand for Indian jute products in the international market kept plummeting in the face of synthetic fibres and finer quality jute products manufactured by Bangladesh and other Asian countries. Thus in order to bring the industry back to its former glory a number of other initiatives and schemes were put into action in the recent years. To ensure the farmers receive a fair return for their efforts and hard work Minimum Support Price for raw jute and mesta is fixed every year. To further assist the farmers JUTE –ICARE project was launched in 2015. The project aimed at providing the farmers with high quality



Once extracted the fibres are washed in clean water and squeezed of the excess water are left hanging to dry in the sun for 2-3 days. An important cog in the economy of the country jute often referred to as the “golden fibre” is an organic, renewable, biodegradable and environment friendly raw material. It is estimated that jute and its ancillary institutes support more than 4 million families mainly belonging to the rural and the marginalised sector. Much of the raw jute produce caters to the global jute bag market which is valued at US\$ 1.9 billion in 2020.

seeds at subsidized rates, seed drills to facilitate line sowing and making a number of newly developed techniques available to the farmers and training them accordingly so that they can implement these techniques. Encouraged by the success of this pilot project, the National Jute Board was allocated a fund of 44 crore rupees by the Textile Ministry to extend the project till 2020.

The problem of outdated infrastructure has been an age old one in the jute industry. In order to address that, the National Jute Board has been implementing certain schemes for modernization of the jute industry. One such scheme was “Acquisition of Plant and Machinery” launched in 2013 in which capital subsidy was provided to mill owners for acquiring modern machines replacing the outdated ones. While modern machineries can address the issues surrounding the scale and quality of production, in order to create a healthy demand for jute products in the domestic market the Textile Ministry and state governments have been proactively encouraging and promoting the use of geotextiles for a number of projects such as construction of road networks in rural parts and flood and river embankments in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

A jute farmer in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal is involved in separating the fibre from the stock. West Bengal accounts for more than 75% of the raw jute harvested in India.



A large section of the society in the rural parts of West Bengal and some of the other states are actively involved in the cultivation of jute. Sadly though, the newfound demand of jute products in the international market has done little to address the concerns of the jute farmers who are plagued by multiple problems.



Apart from this, the National Jute Board (NJB) has been implementing several measures for the benefit of workers, artisans and small producers and for promotion of the jute industry. These include facilitating manufacturers and exporters of jute products to promote their products in the international market, setting

up local units and agencies at distant locations around the country to carry out various activities, ensuring that raw jute is supplied to the mills and processing plants in a timely manner and at economic rates and involving the National Institute of Design to develop newer and modern jute products and jute based lifestyle and

fashion accessories which would appeal to the contemporary market, both within the country and abroad.

It would be fair to say, if such measures are implemented and executed in a sincere and time bound manner there is no reason why the jute industry in West Bengal and in other parts of India wouldn't be able to

reach the heights of its former glory. This ancient industry which provides livelihood to millions of people is not only a vital cog in the economy of India but also brings to the fore a slice of the country's tradition. Any effort to reclaim some of the lost glory is certainly worth putting in.



Jute farmers have been vocal about a number of problems which they have been traditionally faced with. According to the farmers the costs of the seedlings have skyrocketed with time and the expenses they have to bear during cultivation barely allow them to break even.

Such scenes of jute cultivation are commonplace across rural parts of West Bengal and along other stretches of the Gangetic Basin.





In spite of the surging demand for jute products in the global market the jute industry in West Bengal and across the country is presently faced with a number of crises. Topping the list of crises is the shortage of raw jute. A number of initiatives and programs undertaken by the governments and the concerned authorities have failed to address this issue and currently the total available land for cultivation of jute is not sufficient to meet the demand of the jute industry and as a nation India is yet to be self-sufficient in terms of raw jute production. Amidst such a situation we are dependent upon neighbouring Bangladesh for raw jute in order to meet the excess demand from the jute industry. In addition to the shortage of raw materials the jute processing plants and mills are plagued with a crippling infrastructure. Obsolete techniques and decrepit machineries still remain a common fixture at these set ups. These age old machineries and techniques are not ideally suited for churning out quality jute products and manufacture them at a scale which would give India the competitive edge over other countries such as Bangladesh and Philippines.



Debasish **KUNDU**

A chef by profession Debasish Kundu took a liking towards photography in 2011. Being the only food stylist in Kolkata, he used his professional knowledge and expertise to master the nuances of food photography during the initial days of his journey with the camera. As time went by he started taking keen interests in other genres of photography and soon started taking an active interest in the genres of fashion and street photography. The two things in life which are of utmost importance to him are – food, his love and photography, his passion.

ASHA Workers the unhonoured COVID warriors by Debmalya Das

Overworked and neglected, the ASHA workers are proving to be a potent force battling the pandemic.

An ASHA worker on her routine work checks the body temperature of an elderly man who runs an essential commodities shop in his neighbourhood.

Facing the wrath of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 at the forefront, were some 900,000 ASHA workers all over the country, some 53,000 of whom were active in the state of West Bengal.



For a colossal nation like India, both in terms of population as well as geographical extents, providing quality healthcare to all its citizens in every nook and corner of the country has traditionally posed the biggest challenge to the governments. India follows a multi payer healthcare model where public and private healthcare facilities operate alongside each other. The public healthcare system is essentially free for the citizens of India barring the odd occasion where one has to pay a nominal symbolic token amount to avail certain services or facilities. The private healthcare system on the other hand is essentially a business model and off late has taken a turn towards integrating itself into the corporate way of handling things. In the private sector one has to pay from their own pocket in order to avail the services that are being offered by that particular hospital. Quite understandably for a country like India with a population of 1.3 billion the healthcare sector has proven to be a vital cog of the Indian economy and a huge source of generating revenue as well as employment. The healthcare sector encompasses a wide range of industries such as – hospitals, nursing homes, private clinics, diagnostic centres, the pharmaceutical sector, insurance sector, medical equipment manufacturers even the hordes of patients from neighbouring countries who form a key component of the medical tourism industry. In this context, it must be mentioned the rising

population in India over the past few decades has significantly contributed towards the growth of the health sector; however a significant chunk of this demand is being catered to by the private players in the health sector. Rough estimates put the number somewhere between 65-70 percent in terms of patients seeking services from the private healthcare system. The public healthcare system caters to a nominal 25-30 percent. The huge discrepancy in these figures despite the fact that public healthcare in India is virtually free can be attributed to the limited capacity of the public healthcare facilities and the fledgling infrastructure, which often dissuades the population from availing the facilities at public set ups. While it is true public healthcare in India has come a long way since it was introduced in India by the British rule, there can be no denying that it is woefully lacking in terms of both capacity and infrastructure to cater to a significant majority of the population of the country. The first National Health Policy was formalized in 1983, later on updated in 2002 and yet again in 2017. In 2018, the Government of India launched a publicly funded health insurance program – Ayushman Bharat which aimed at covering the bottom 50% of India's population roughly estimated at 500 million employed in the unorganized sector with a view of providing free treatment to them at both public and private healthcare facilities. Historically certain reforms such as these

ASHA has been designed to be the initial responders to any medical emergency or health related demands of the marginalized section of the society.

have been implemented in order to create a more robust public healthcare system in India. With this in view, to address the issue of the lack of healthcare workers in rural India, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as a part of India's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) introduced the scheme of accredited social health activist popularly known as ASHA or ASHA workers designated to play the role of community health workers in rural India or in tier 2 or tier 3 cities in India. The policy was implemented in 2005 and was supposed to achieve its full target of instituting an ASHA in every village by the end of 2012. However that target is yet to be achieved although it must be said the scheme is quite close to completion in terms of its implementation.

ASHA has been designed to be the initial responders to any medical emergency or health related demands of the marginalized section of the society, particularly women and children in rural parts of India where both the public and private healthcare are yet to achieve the required penetration. ASHA workers are expected to fulfil certain basic responsibilities which entail generating awareness regarding proper nutrition, sanitation and hygienic practices and the various healthcare and other welfare schemes which are being made

available by the respective governments. In addition to these basic roles and responsibilities, ASHA workers are expected to assist pregnant women, new mothers and new born babies with information and basic assistance related to birth preparedness, importance of safe delivery, breastfeeding, immunization and myriad other common health related issues in women and young children. From an organizational perspective ASHA workers are also expected to liaise with the village governing body or the Gram Panchayat and its head the Panchayat Pradhan in order to facilitate the implementation of the basic health and hygiene protocols in the villages. It goes without saying millions of people have benefitted from ASHA and the scheme has to some extent eased the burden on the secondary and tertiary healthcare facilities in the Indian countryside. While recruiting ASHA workers an emphasis is given on drafting in women preferably in the age group of 25-45 years with a basic level of education which can be corroborated by a 10th standard degree or above. As the devastating coronavirus pandemic hit the shores of India in early 2020, the number of daily cases kept on leapfrogging the previous recorded highest, the Indian health infrastructure was stretched to its very limit with the very real and dangerous



Tanima Sen in her 30s is one such ASHA worker who courtesy the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic was thrust into the forefront overnight. A single mother, Tanima Sen would wear her PPE kit, step out in the notorious heat and humidity of the Indian summer and go about her daily routine in a north Kolkata neighbourhood. As was the case with the entire medical fraternity, the ASHA workers too were faced with an unknown monster, the brutality of which knew no bounds.

prospect of crumbling altogether. In order to tackle this unprecedented situation and the grave medical emergency the government and the concerned health authorities were left with no other choice but mobilise the last available resources to counter the carnage brought about by the pandemic. ASHA workers too were drawn into this battle against the coronavirus along with other healthcare workers namely Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM), and Anganwadi Worker (AWW). Now facing the wrath of the coronavirus pandemic at the forefront were

some 900,000 ASHA workers all over the country, some 53,000 of whom were active in the state of West Bengal. Tanima Sen in her 30s is one such ASHA worker who courtesy the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic was thrust into the forefront overnight. A single mother, Tanima Sen would wear her PPE kit, step out in the notorious heat and humidity of the Indian summer and go about her daily routine in a north Kolkata neighbourhood. She would be accompanied by her colleagues - Jayeeta Bhattacharjee, Nabonita Sen Sarkar, Rimi Das Majumdar, Namita Karmakar and

Dolly Das. A typical day in the lives of these brave frontline workers during a time when the coronavirus was wreaking havoc across the world would involve meticulously putting on their PPE kit, meet at a point in their designated locality, distribute the tasks they have been assigned and fulfil those responsibilities braving the many predicaments which stood in their way. With the emergence of the deadly coronavirus the typical job responsibilities of ASHA workers were burdened with the additional task of visiting their assigned localities and

keeping a tab of any new coronavirus case, in parts of the country monitoring the return of migrant workers, checking the body temperature of those engaged in essential services and monitoring if anyone developed any COVID like symptoms, conducting door to door visits and maintaining a data base on any returnee and ensuring they follow the quarantine protocols, making necessary arrangements for anyone affected with coronavirus and in need of medical assistance and assisting the concerned authorities so that the COVID protocols are being followed.

ASHA workers visit a household in a north Kolkata neighborhood to enquire about any guests or returnee belonging to the family and to ensure COVID protocols are being observed.





From identifying a coronavirus patient with symptoms to arranging a test for them and eventually making arrangements for them to be shifted to any medical facility or isolation centres, the ASHA workers have been engaged from the very beginning at the ground level in dealing with the catastrophic situation unleashed by the pandemic.



From identifying a coronavirus patient with symptoms to arranging a test for them and eventually making arrangements for them to be shifted to any medical facility or isolation centres, the ASHA workers have been engaged from the very beginning at the ground level in dealing with the catastrophic situation unleashed by the pandemic. Among all the frontline bravehearts who weathered the raging pandemic storm, the ASHA workers deserve a special mention. As was the case with the entire medical fraternity, the ASHA workers too were faced with an unknown monster, the brutality of which knew no bounds. Yet these brave workers, mostly women, didn't flinch and with calm, steely resolve carried out their day to day responsibilities, often with the bare minimum resources available to them. The lack of resources and other facilities have been a persistent issue the ASHA workers have been faced with. The situation remained much the same during the coronavirus outbreak too. ASHA workers were once again blighted by the shortage in supply of PPE kits, hand sanitizers and other basic facilities required to wage the war against this pandemic. The meagre wage, the long work hours, the physical and mental fatigue which they had to endure in the midst of the deaths and the despair they were encountering on a daily basis, the risk to their own health and their loved ones, certainly did not help matters and turned the already herculean task at hand into a seemingly unsurmountable

one. Yet the resolve of these tireless human beings while they bore the devastating brunt of this pandemic saved many lives and prevented many a catastrophes. Their task of dealing with the pandemic only kept turning into a more challenging one with every passing day as the number of cases kept soaring. In the light of such trying times, some state governments such as in Kerala and Karnataka took a more humane approach and opted for a substantial hike in the salaries of the ASHA workers. In other states like West Bengal, the state government with a view of acknowledging the superhuman efforts put in by the ASHA workers announced an incentive package of 51 crore rupees. However such gestures stand out as rarity, in most states the salaries of ASHA workers have been delayed or there have been no acknowledgement of the services they provided during the most critical outbreaks of this ongoing pandemic. Tanima Sen, after yet another gruelling day, trudges her way back to the comfort of her home, where her young son awaits her. She is drenched in sweat, the infamous Kolkata summer and the strict restraint of her PPE kit condemning her to unimaginable sufferings. She scours the neighbouring streets and grabs some food items and vegetables, ever so careful of not violating the COVID protocols. A few hours in the comfort of her home, in the loving arms of her son, and she will be up the next day, covered in the now so familiar PPE kit, out in the streets battling the

pandemic one doorstep at a time, one returnee worker at a time, one coronavirus patient at a time. This is the story of Tanima Sen – a brave human being to whom all of us owe a lot, she is a representative of thousands others who have been fighting at the forefront since the outbreak of the virus. The humongous roles played by the medical fraternity, from the specialist doctors to the health workers at the grassroots level are nothing short of a miracle. Armed with the bare minimum, fighting an invisible enemy which is a master of stealth, these brave health workers gambled their lives on a daily

Now facing the wrath of the coronavirus pandemic at the forefront were some 900,000 ASHA workers all over the country, some 53,000 of whom were active in the state of West Bengal.

basis to save the lives of others. Yet obscurity and apathy seem to be their most loyal companions in spite of such stupendous achievements in such unprecedented times. The apathy beginning from the bureaucratic level trickles all the way down into the psyche of the civil society. The pandemic also laid bare the moral bankruptcy which plagues our society today. There were disturbing news of ASHA workers, nurses and other frontline health workers being evicted from their homes or ostracized by their neighbours out of the fear of contracting the virus from them. Such inhuman and ghastly atrocities were far too common across the country than one belonging to the civilized society would

like to believe. Instead of hailing the indomitable spirit of these heroes, we have treated them with utter disdain and disregard. Maybe in the months to come our society will break free from the clutches of this deadly virus, we will once again revel in the festivities continuing to remain oblivious to the heroic deeds and the sacrifices made by our health workers and other frontline workers as they remain condemned to the realms of obscurity and neglect. Perhaps this attitude of ours towards the real heroes of our society, who live among us, who are our silent guardians, is a far bigger and present

threat to every fabric of a human society, a threat which has propagated in a far stealthier manner than the coronavirus and has found a secure home in the collective conscience of the civil society. It is time to hit that conscience and hit it hard, and in this regard it has to come from within, it is time to hail the true heroes – the likes of thousands of ASHA workers and all the other medical professionals and frontline workers, to whom we owe each night's peaceful sleep amidst such trying times.

Tanima Sen's day begins in a manner familiar to many of us as she offers her prayers while her son remains engrossed in his school work.





What often remains overlooked is the fact the frontline workers who are risking their all to protect us from this raging pandemic are real human beings with the very familiar longing to return to their loved ones.



Tanima Sen, after yet another gruelling day, trudges her way back to the comfort of her home, where her young son awaits her. She is drenched in sweat, the infamous Kolkata summer and the strict restraint of her PPE kit condemning her to unimaginable sufferings. She scours the neighbouring streets and grabs some food items and vegetables. A few hours in the comfort of her home, in the loving arms of her son, and she will be up the next day, covered in the now so familiar PPE kit, out in the streets battling the pandemic one doorstep at a time, one returnee worker at a time. This is the story of Tanima Sen – a brave human being to whom all of us owe a lot, she is a representative of thousands others who have been battling this pandemic.

Debmalya DAS

Debmalya Das is a Panchayat Audit Officer with the West Bengal Government by profession and a passionate documentary photographer. He frequently travels in search of stories to the farthest corners of the country. He has featured in Vogue Italia on several occasions and has been awarded by National Geographic Travellers India on multiple occasions besides being featured and honoured by World Photographic Forum. He has been featured by many print and digital publishing houses. He is presently part of an ongoing assignment called – Project Bismillah.



Dreams powered by the Sun

Barefoot College's solar powered night school program is transforming the lives of thousands of young girls and boys in some of the more impoverished corners of India.

by Jayshankar Menon

Barefoot College's solar powered night school program such as this one in Tilonia, Rajasthan was launched in 1975 with a paltry 3 schools. A little over four and a half decades later the program has multiplied manifolds and presently boasts of an estimated 150 schools spread across a number of states.

For an aspirational nation like India which aims at belonging to the same bracket with some of the world's major players, education can prove to be the most potent tool in achieving that. A skilled workforce can contribute in myriad ways to the overall progress and development of a country and above everything else has the potential to alleviate a significant majority of its population above poverty level. With this in view in 2009, the Government of India passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE). The act came into effect on April 1st 2010 and India earned its place in a list of 135 countries where education is a fundamental right for every child. The passing of this act was viewed by many as a watershed moment in India's public education policy one that promised to make education available to all. Among other things, the act specifies certain benchmark criteria for primary schools, free handing out of textbooks, uniforms and other stationary items, advocates against various selection criteria such as interviews or donation fees while enrolling a particular student, mandates a pre-defined teacher to student ratio, the availability of drinking water facilities at schools, separate toilet facilities for boys and girls and a fixed number of school days during the academic year. Each school has to oblige by these laid down guidelines as per the RTE Act of 2009. A little more than a decade since the act came into being, one can say the outcomes of the act have been

a mixed bag at the best. While the act came with lofty promises and undoubtedly well-meaning motives, the implementation of those guidelines and the eventual execution held the key to success. There can be no denying following the RTE Act of 2009 there has been a steady increase in the number of enrolments, especially in rural India, where for the hard-pressed families education still remains a luxury which the families can ill afford. A number of new schools with drinking water and toilet facilities were launched in rural parts of India, new teachers were recruited and appointed, however given the scale of the operation it soon emerged the implementation aspect of the project was not going to be a straight forward one. Prior to the RTE Act of 2009, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched by the then Prime Minister of India – Atal Bihari Vajpayee which aimed at providing free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan finds its origins rooted in the District Primary Education Programme which was launched in 1993-94. Supplementing the above mentioned educational programmes launched at different times is the Mid-day Meal Scheme which has been in effect since 15th August 1995 as “National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE)” and was later renamed as “National Programme of Midday Meal in Schools” in October 2007, which popularly came to be known as also

Prior to the RTE Act of 2009, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched by the then Prime Minister of India – Atal Bihari Vajpayee which aimed at providing free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14.

known as the Mid-day Meal (MDM) Scheme. The scheme aims at providing one wholesome free meal to children studying in class I to VIII enrolled in government and government aided schools and madrasas which are recognised by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. This particular scheme has been instrumental at increasing the enrolments in rural India where a free meal to the children of the families served as a huge incentive for the parents to enrol their children to schools. Educational challenges have been prevalent at both the centre and states for many years in India. In spite of all these reforms which have been brought about at different points in time by respective governments the state of affairs in terms of primary education in India remains a pretty sordid one. This can be partially attributed to the failures on part of the authorities to implement them, partly to the prevalent corruption in the system and also the questionable quality of the delivery of the promises. Some of the school buildings which came up under the RTE Act suffer from neglect or were constructed without being equipped with the bare minimum norms laid down by the act. The standard of teaching too in many such schools doesn't inspire confidence. The student attendance

still remains abysmal and unfortunately the same holds true for teachers and other school staff. Often the Mid-day Meal Scheme has come under severe criticism due to the poor quality of food that is being served or the measly amounts which are made available to the students. On many occasions it has been found the meals were prepared in extremely unhygienic conditions flouting all the norms and guidelines. In some of the remotest corners of the country, students enrolled in such schools are probably the first generation which has gained access to education. The parents are involved in farm work or daily wage labour and either do not have the time or the acumen to properly judge the quality of education their children are receiving. As a result of which on most occasions the poor quality of education imparted or the shoddy infrastructure goes unreported. Yet another criticism of these programmes and schemes has been the lack of monitoring mechanism from the concerned authorities. Most of these facilities especially in the remote corners of the countries remain unvisited by school inspectors and others entrusted with the responsibility of quality control.



The dry and arid landscape of Tilonia in Ajmer district of Rajasthan is a rural set up far removed the aspirational modern India. For most children in this region access to primary education still remains out of bounds.



In the village of Tilonia, children are often seen as an extra hand which would come handy in contributing towards the field work or the household chores. The scene is a familiar one in villages in poverty stricken rural India.

Then there are places in India, so remote and impoverished that even the stuttering journey of India's educational programmes is yet to make a halt at these places. One such place is the village of Tilonia in the Ajmer district of Rajasthan. In the village

of Tilonia, children are often seen as an extra hand which would come handy in contributing towards the field work or the household chores. The scene is a familiar one in villages in poverty stricken rural India. Poverty, coupled with the lack of

or the fledgling educational facilities have traditionally dissuaded the villagers from encouraging their children to access education. Instead an extra pair of hands shares the burden of work and also contributes to the overall family income.

In heart breaking turn of events such contributions are often encouraged from an extremely young age and although seemingly inhumane on part of the parents, the truth remains in the face of extreme poverty and helplessness the parents themselves are left with little or no choice at all. Yet there is something about Tilonia which doesn't seem to fit in with the all too familiar face of poverty across many rural parts of the country. Amidst the poverty, the decrepit state of affairs the very potent force that is hope has found its way into this village courtesy Barefoot College-a voluntary organisation based out of Tilonia. Remarkably this flame of hope in the village was lit primarily by a bunch of elderly women in association with other female members of the community who got trained to install and maintain solar powered lamps in the village.

Sanjit Bunker Roy is a name which will be forever remembered in the field of social activism. Bunker Roy is the man responsible for the founding of the Social Work and Research Centre in 1972 and the organization has popularly come to be known as the Barefoot College. Bunker Roy an alumni of the St. Stephens College in Delhi came up with the idea of setting up a vocational training centre primarily with a view of imparting trainings and vocational skills to the women in some of the most impoverished parts of the country blighted by poverty, illiteracy and casteism. Bunker Roy, who was conferred with the

prestigious Padma Shri award in 1986 and listed by TIME magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world for his achievements in the field of social activism while growing up had access to the highest quality of education coveted by many in India. Interestingly after finishing his education he was soon to realize the formal education which he received, to which only a handful in India have access to, instead of being able to integrate him with the lesser fortunate section of the country, had in more ways than one insulated him and thousands other like him from the ground reality which persists in the rural and poverty stricken parts of the country. He felt the education which he received unfairly never took into account and never acknowledged the practical knowledge, the wisdom and the acumen possessed by the people of rural India, often deeming them as simple village folks which borders on being condescending. He made a deliberate attempt to mix with villagers in remote corners of the country and was amazed to witness their approach towards life, their problem solving techniques and the skills, wisdom and knowledge about nature, environment and other things around them and quickly realized such wisdom was beyond the capable ambits of the formal education which he had received. Yet he was quick to realize, this traditional wisdom would be of little use unless backed up by the technological advances which have been achieved in the fields of

science and engineering. This vision, thus took concrete shape in the form of Barefoot College in the village of Tilonia in Rajasthan in 1972. Bunker Roy identified the problem of water supply in some of the severely drought prone areas in India and the Social Work and Research Centre was established in 1972 to address this issue. His primary aim was to set up water pumps in the villages and imparting the necessary training to the local people for properly running and maintaining the pumps without the dependency on any outside aid. Along with this in order to address the fledgling, virtually non-existent healthcare in these parts he embarked upon the mission of training the villagers as paramedics so that some of them can be the initial responders in case of any medical emergency. Bunker Roy was soon to realize the access to electricity will play a huge role in transforming the lives of the villagers. He came up with the idea of training the villagers especially the women in installing and maintaining solar panels in their homes and villages to lower their dependency on kerosene lit lamps and bring electricity to the village. One of the primary aims of Barefoot College was to empower women; hence it comes as a little surprise today that the unassuming campus of Barefoot College in Tilonia has more than a healthy representation of women, belonging to all age groups. Over the next four decades the benefits of such projects created ripple effects and finally the benefits have trickled down to

taking care of that one thing which is possibly the most needed in a child's life. The concept of solar powered lamps in the villages no longer meant the dark of the night would be of any hindrance to the villagers. This opened up a plethora of avenues and one of those was the setting up of the night school in Tilonia for young children. The children, most of whom have never set foot inside the premises of any school assist their parents in field work or household chores during the day. Previously the dark of the night restricted them to the confines of their homes but

The concept of solar powered lamps in the villages no longer meant the dark of the night would be of any hindrance to the villagers. This opened up a plethora of avenues and one of those was the setting up of the night school in Tilonia for young children.

now once they are done with their household chores the children gather under solar powered lamps for their lessons. The solar night school revolution which was started by Barefoot in 1975 has today spread to far and wide corners of India and finds prominent presence in states like Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Manipur and Karnataka. It must be said the program does not restrict itself to the borders of India and has established a foothold in the neighbouring country of Myanmar as well. At the heart of these programs are the solar powered projectors – a product of Barefoot College.

The projector is a small, compact one thus being highly mobile and is compatible over a wide array of devices such as tablets, laptops and even mobile phones. The projector system eliminates the need of traditional text books which are often hard to come by in rural India. The teaching and learning modules which play out on the projector serve as the perfect audio visual models for teaching and often provide a hands on experience for students who are instantly drawn into the process of learning courtesy the smart and hassle free execution. The trainees who receive

valuable training at Barefoot College when it comes to the upkeep of such set ups play a vital role. Each year courtesy the night school program conducted by Barefoot, thousands of young children, particularly girls gain the invaluable access to education in a number of states in India. Even during the harsh lockdown induced by the raging pandemic in India, the program went ahead largely unhindered in these parts of the country. The students were provided with pre-recorded learning materials, audio books, e-stories which they were able to access with the help of the electronic devices such as mobile phones and tablets made available to them.

Once relieved from their day time responsibilities of assisting their elders with farm work or household chores the children make a beeline for the night school premises and set up their makeshift classrooms.





The success of this program is largely due to its successful integration with other programs which are being conducted by Barefoot, such as providing sustainable drinking water facilities, lighting up the villages through solar powered lamps, imparting vocational trainings and empowering women...

schools saw greater number of enrolments as the years rolled by. The parents were not particularly averse to the idea of sending their children to the night school program since the timing of it did not interfere with the responsibilities of the children during the day time. The success of this program is largely due to its successful integration with other programs which are being conducted by Barefoot, such as providing sustainable drinking water facilities, lighting up the villages through solar powered lamps, imparting vocational trainings and empowering women through a number of self-sustainable programs. In other words the night school program of Barefoot is a vital cog in the intricate and intertwined ecosystem of sustainable growth and empowerment for the marginalised communities in some of the more impoverished parts of the country.

The learning materials which have been made available to the students provide a perfect mix of formal education and the practical knowledge which various communities possess, something which has been passed on through generations.

The teachers responsible for conducting these programs periodically stayed in touch with the students over phone calls and kept a track of their progress. The learning materials which have been made available to the students provide a perfect mix of

formal education and the practical knowledge which various communities possess, something which has been passed on through generations. Such knowledge includes awareness of their local environment and the importance of

conserving them, a multitude of practical skills among others. The curriculum also encourages and provides the students with materials which would help them further hone such skills and makes them aware of their real life implications. The night

The unassuming yet mighty effective set up of the night school program of Barefoot College such as this one in the village of Tilonia in Rajasthan has been transforming thousands of lives over the past four decades across several states in the country.



This endeavour, now over four decades old has successfully transformed thousands of lives. People, particularly women and children, who previously did not have a fighting chance courtesy the cruel twist of fate now have a voice of their own, armed with certain skill sets and a smart mix formal and intercultural education...

Barefoot College as part of their modus operandi zeroes in on a village where they would want to extend their night school program. A typical meeting comprises of representatives from the village council and a handpicked committee which has a healthy representation from women of the village. Following the consultation with this committee a list is drawn out which contains the names and backgrounds of students presently unable to attend the day schools. Teachers are then appointed as per the requirement and the number of enrolled students and the program establishes a foothold in yet another new village or hamlet in the country. Once set up, the village governing bodies – the panchayats as they are known as are encouraged to monitor the progress of the students. Often Barefoot College collaborates with external agencies and bodies to effectively monitor the program and incorporate any changes or



The solar night school revolution started by Barefoot in 1975 has today spread to far and wide corners of India and finds prominent presence in states like Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Manipur and Karnataka.

modifications suggested by similar third parties. This endeavour, now over four decades old has successfully transformed thousands of lives. People, particularly women and children, who previously did not have a fighting chance courtesy the cruel twist of fate now have a voice of their own,

armed with certain skill sets and a smart mix of formal and intercultural education model which encourages local knowledge and skills, they can now dream of venturing out into the bigger cities or previously uncharted territories. And many have successfully done so. There is no substitute for education when it comes to eradicating

poverty and uplifting communities. Barefoot night school program is doing precisely that. In 1975, when the program was launched for the first time a paltry 3 schools fell within the purview of this initiative. A little over four and a half decades later the program has multiplied manifolds and presently boasts of an



-warming change, threatens to bridge those divides.

At the heart of these programs are the solar powered projectors – a product of Barefoot College. The projector is a small, compact one thus being highly mobile and is compatible over a wide array of devices such as tablets, laptops and even mobile phones. The projector system eliminates the need of traditional text books which are often hard to come by in rural India. The teaching and learning modules which plays out on the projector serve as the perfect audio visual models for teaching and often provides a hands on experience for students who are instantly drawn into the process of learning courtesy the smart and hassle free execution.

estimated 150 schools spread across a number of states in India. The success of the model has encouraged a number of state governments to implement similar models and methods of teaching in government run establishments. In the lives of millions across the country, particularly young children who have been

robbed of a normal healthy childhood by the burden of poverty they were born into, the night school program conducted by Barefoot College offers more than a glimmer of hope. One can only hope, the program under able leadership and in the hands of most capable individuals will prosper even more in the days to come

and will penetrate farther corners of the country. There can be no nobler deed than bringing education to the doorsteps of children who have been victims to the artificially created divides in the society, divides which have thus far condemned them to the dark realms of poverty and misfortune, Barefoot College in a heart



The night schools saw greater number of enrolments as the years rolled by. The parents were not particularly averse to the idea of sending their children to the night school program since the timing of it did not interfere with the responsibilities of the children during the day time. The success of this program is largely due to its successful integration with other programs which are being conducted by Barefoot, such as providing sustainable drinking water facilities, lighting up the villages through solar powered lamps, imparting vocational trainings and empowering women through a number of self-sustainable programs.



Jayshankar **MENON**

Jayshankar Menon is a visual communication designer. He works on projects in illustration, identity design, documentary and portrait photography. He is particularly drawn to projects that involve skilled work, physical labour, problem-solving and human habitat. He often collaborates with filmmakers, social workers, labourers, and athletes, helping them document both their process and their topic. Alongside his professional practice, he has been actively involved in tutoring and mentoring people interested in practising photography and print.

More of his work is available at:

Website: www.jayshankarmenon.com

Instagram: www.instagram.com/jayshankar_menon/

Silhouettes

framing the tales from the streets...

a photo album by [Ananway GANGULY](#) where his love for the silhouettes on the streets manifests itself through his photographs.

















Ananway GANGULY

Ananway Ganguly is an undergraduate student of Economics. His interest in photography piqued one and half years back and ever since he has immersed himself in mastering the nuances of photography. Due to financial constraints, initially he started out taking photographs with his mobile phone and later on with the help from his family got hold of his first DSLR camera. He is particularly interested in street photography and he compulsively roams around the streets of Kolkata in search of those captivating frames. He endeavours to tell the tales from the streets through silhouettes which he feels add depth to street photography. He has been recently featured twice in the world's largest street photography page and also on other major photography platforms. He also took part in one of the most prestigious international photography contests and secured 12th position among 173 other countries in the street photography category.

Featured Photographer



Mandeep ARORA

"I am a qualified Chartered Accountant from Delhi and working in an MNC. My passion for photography bloomed early and I used to take photographs with point and shoot cameras

but could not purchase a DSLR due to financial constraint. Finally, in 2015 I liquidated some investments and purchased my first DSLR, a crop sensor. My job didn't allow me much spare time hence I would spend hours reading books and studying materials available on the internet. Like everyone, I started clicking everything but within a year, I identified my interest in long exposure photography. In 2017, I upgraded to a full frame Nikon D810 camera and invested in ND filters as well. Along with clicking landscapes, I love astro-photography and my craze for Milky Way photography takes me to new places in India and across the world.

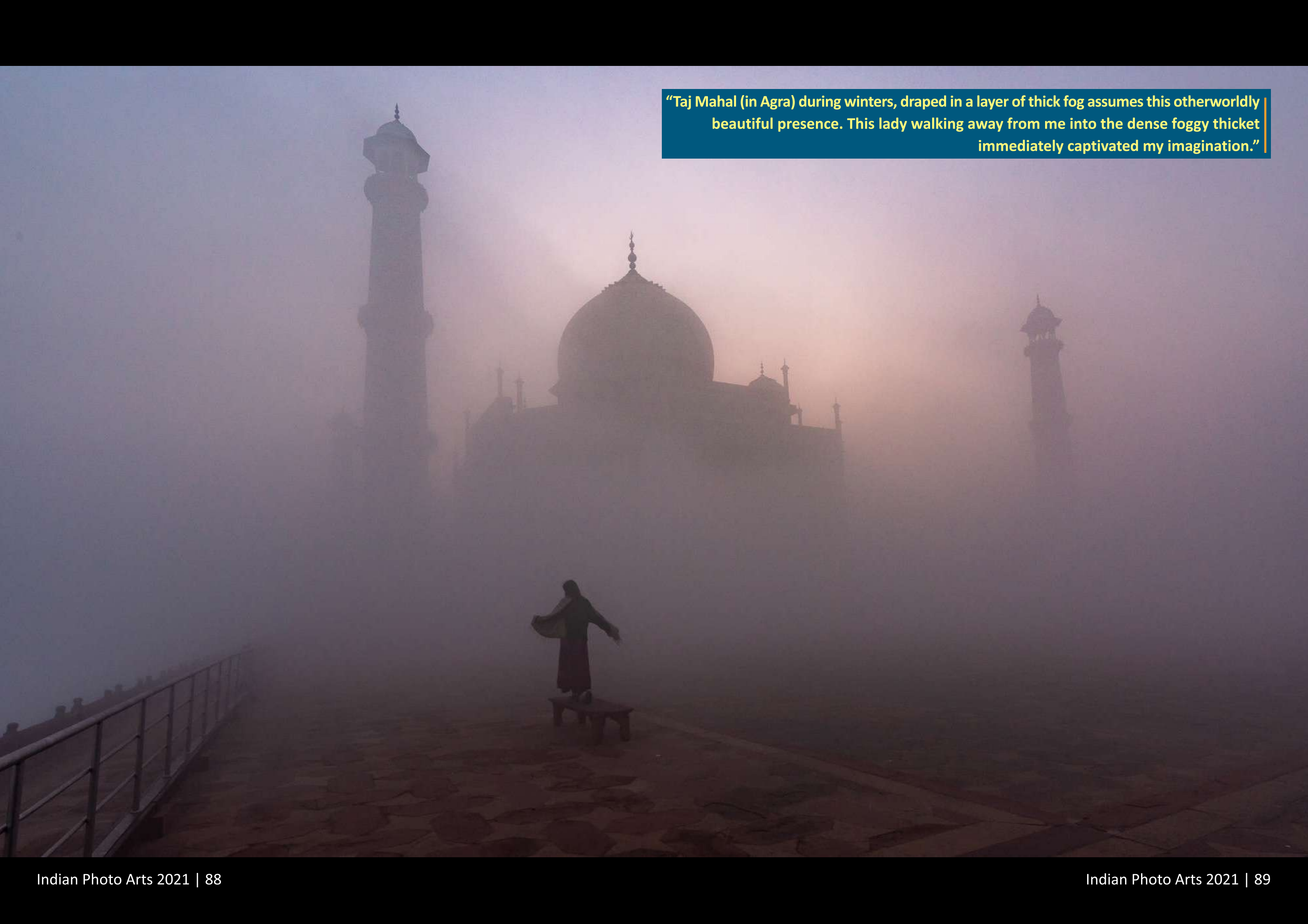
I try to share my experiences and knowledge as much as possible on various social media platforms. Time to time, I conduct live sessions on Instagram sharing my knowledge and answering questions on landscape and astro-photography.

My pictures have been published or featured on National Geographic, Nikon, Tamron, Incredible India and a few other magazines as well. Apart from travelling in India, I have also been to USA, Iceland, Philippines, Abu Dhabi and Dubai."

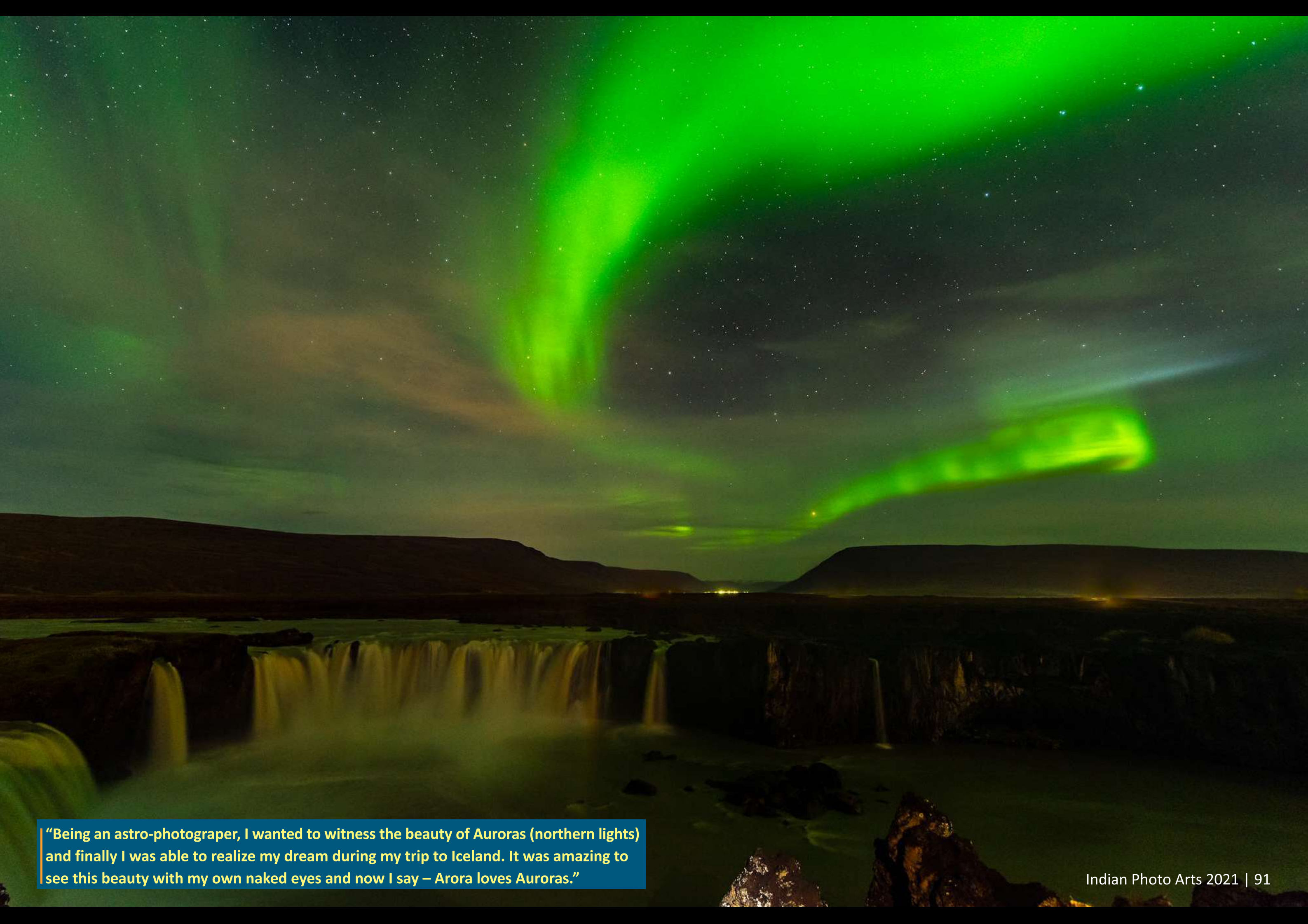
Instagram - @aroramandeep

Facebook - www.facebook.com/aroramandeep

Clubhouse - @aroramandeep

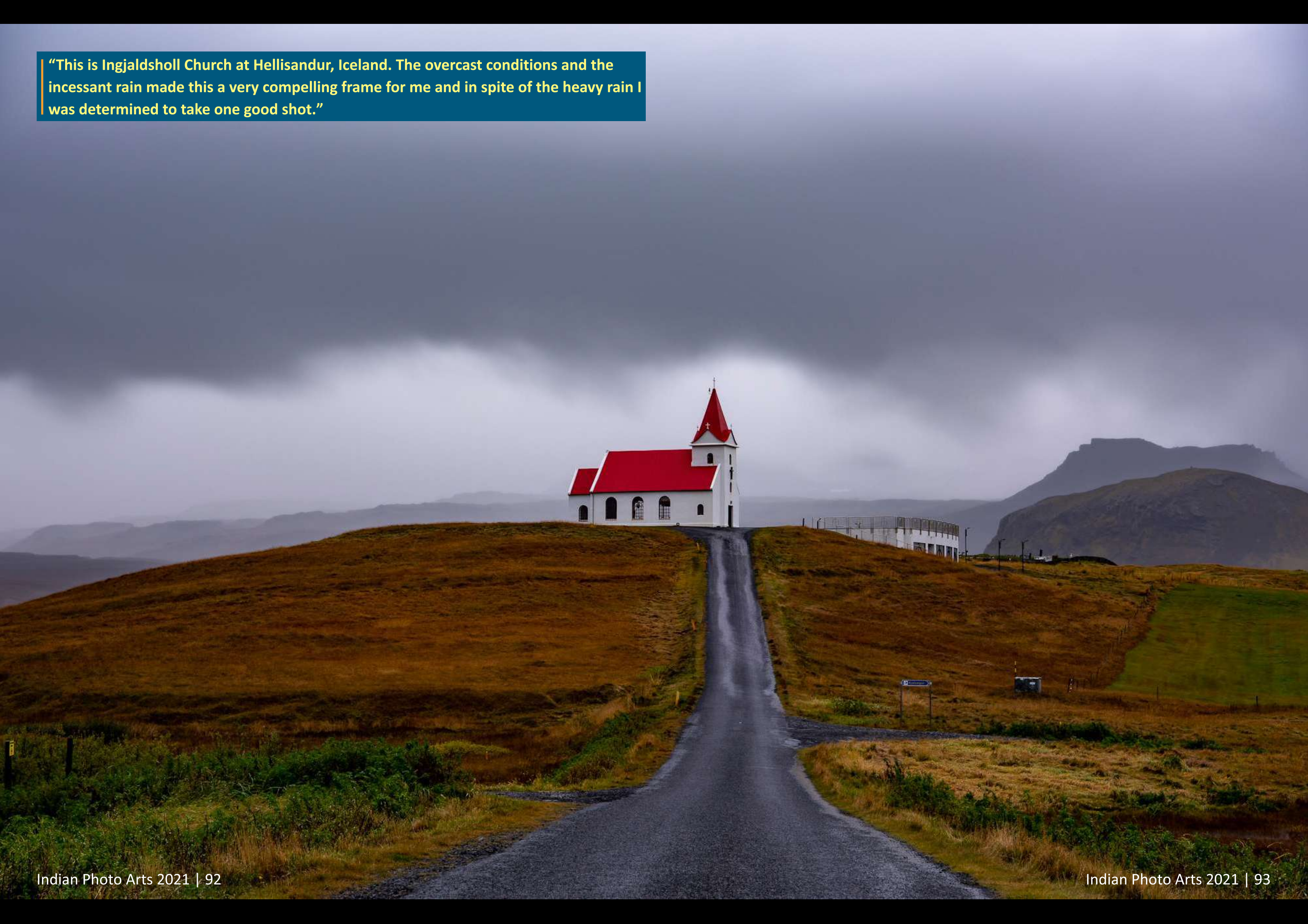


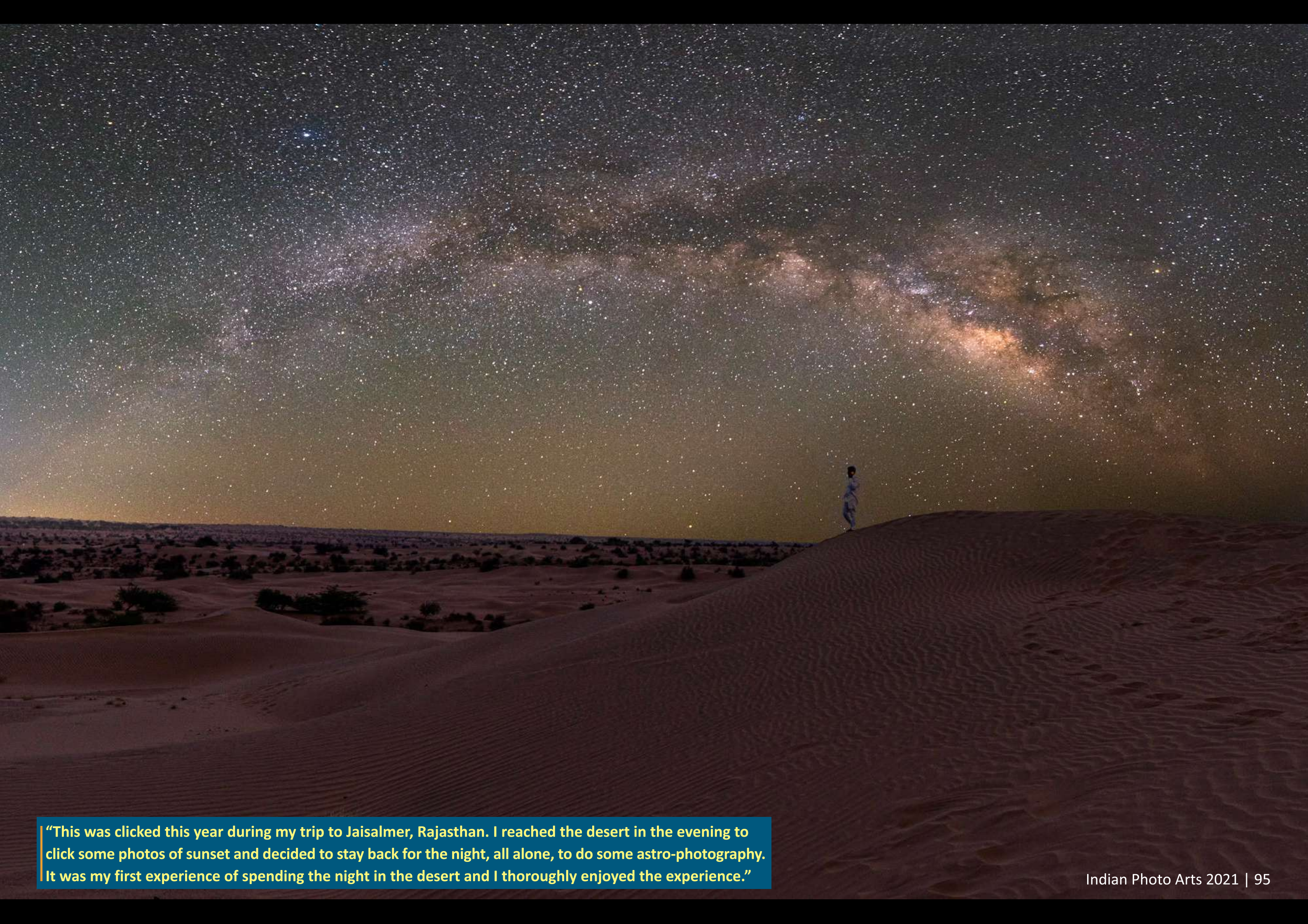
“Taj Mahal (in Agra) during winters, draped in a layer of thick fog assumes this otherworldly beautiful presence. This lady walking away from me into the dense foggy thicket immediately captivated my imagination.”



“Being an astro-photographer, I wanted to witness the beauty of Auroras (northern lights) and finally I was able to realize my dream during my trip to Iceland. It was amazing to see this beauty with my own naked eyes and now I say – Arora loves Auroras.”

“This is Ingjaldsholl Church at Hellisandur, Iceland. The overcast conditions and the incessant rain made this a very compelling frame for me and in spite of the heavy rain I was determined to take one good shot.”





“This was clicked this year during my trip to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. I reached the desert in the evening to click some photos of sunset and decided to stay back for the night, all alone, to do some astro-photography. It was my first experience of spending the night in the desert and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.”

"I took this photograph at one of the many Dussehra fairs organised in Dwarka, New Delhi. I wanted to capture the mood of this fair from an elevated point of view. Luckily, I found a tower and climbed on top of it for this picture."



“This is Dubai’s iconic building – Burj Khalifa in the backdrop. I wanted to photograph this iconic structure from an elevated place and found this hotel rooftop perfect for the purpose during the blue hour.”





“Yamuna Ghat in Delhi transforms into such a picturesque setting with the arrival of flocks of seagulls. The human element against the beautiful backdrop made this frame extra appealing to me.”



Hanging

by the

Thread: by Arpan Uzir

The ground reality of Varanasi's silk weavers...

Once coveted by the royalties across the country, the Banarasi saree has managed to find a way to tug at the hearts of common citizens across the country while maintaining its status.

If there is one aspect of Varanasi, the most holy city in the world to millions of pious Hindus, which finds mention in the same breath as the city's holy predisposition, it is the famed fabric of this region, to be more precise the unparalleled Banarasi silk.

The silk originating from this region gives birth to the iconic Banarasi Saree, celebrated all over the country for its rich colour, beautiful motifs, superlative fabric, coveted by millions and a must have for many for special occasions. Once coveted by the royalties across the country, the Banarasi saree has managed to find a way to tug at the hearts of common citizens across the country while maintaining its status.

The history of this fabric is as ancient as the city itself. The gorgeous sarees with their bright colours and celebration of superlative craftsmanship stand out in fine contrast to the early morning calm and serene along the ghats of this ancient city. Interestingly, the city has traditionally been a hub for weavers. Ancient Buddhist texts made repeated mentions of the finesse and the quality of the cotton from Varanasi.

These texts also allude to a thriving silk weaving industry and speak highly of the skilled artisans who would weave one of the finest qualities of silk into shawls and other garments during the 500-800 CE. In spite of its mention in the Buddhist texts, it is largely believed the silk industry during this era was still at a nascent stage, and the garment industry in Varanasi was

largely indulging in weaving cotton and manufacturing cotton garments. Banarasi silk owes a large chunk of its prominence to the patronage of Mughal Emperors, notably Akbar. During the reign of Akbar the silk industry of Varanasi received continued patronage from the emperor and it was also during this period the influx of Persian motifs heavily inspired some of the designs and patterns which the weavers in Varanasi were weaving. The influx of Persian motifs could be attributed to the notable presence of Persian intellectuals in Akbar's court. While Banarasi silk was gaining prominence across the country courtesy the continued patronage from the Mughal Emperor, the Banarasi saree was yet to make its grand appearance. During the Mughal era, the handlooms of Varanasi mastered the craft of weaving brocades. The brocades were known for the finest quality of Banarasi silk and the rich and intricate embroideries on them with the use of gold and silver threads. These pieces of clothing were much preferred by the Mughal royalty and soon found their way into the royal courts of the Mughal Emperor. Brocade weaving gained further prominence in the 17th century when hordes of skilled artisans from Gujarat made their way to the ancient city in search of jobs and to escape the ensuing famine in Gujarat. The superlative quality of the silk from Varanasi and the skilled hands of the artisans from Gujarat forged the ideal partnership and laid down the paving stone for the rich success that was to

Ancient Buddhist texts made repeated mentions of the finesse and the quality of the cotton from Varanasi. These texts also allude to a thriving silk weaving industry and speak highly of the skilled artisans who would weave one of the finest qualities of silk into shawls and other garments...

follow. The existing influence of Persian motifs and the use of gold and silver threads or zari coupled with the newer techniques and craftsmanship which the Gujarati craftsmen brought with them created the perfect recipe which made the Banarasi silk saree such a coveted piece of handloom. After decades, even centuries of catering to other pieces of clothing such as turban clothes, different pieces of fabrics, in the 19th century the silk from Varanasi was put into use for the weaving of silk sarees. Quite understandably it was during the 19th century the Banarasi saree made its appearance and soon established itself as a much coveted item in the wardrobes across the country. The influx of Persian designs and motifs during the Mughal era, the introduction of newer techniques by the Gujarati weavers and the experience of the local artisans in weaving silk fabrics of unmatched quality, together guaranteed the finest nature of the Banarasi saree which the world was about to witness. The influx of different techniques, styles, even methods of weaving is obvious on the sarees. The style of weaving or gharanas as they are known locally, vary from one part of the city to the other, and the Gujarati weavers in the 17th century brought with

themselves an entirely different gharana of weaving. This exchange of ideas and the intermingling of them certainly elevated the standard of craftsmanship in the region and the results of such lofty standards reflect themselves upon the gorgeous flowing creases of the Banarasi saree. These different gharanas also gave rise to the different types of Banarasi sarees which are available today. For instance the Butidar saree showcases a generous use of gold and silver threads and are dotted by floral motifs. The Jamdani on the other hand, largely considered the crown jewel of the Banarasi silk industry, uses the finest silk available with the designs and patterns woven onto them with the use of cotton threads. In spite of the superlative nature of the fabric, the elaborate and intricate designs comprising of flowers, betel leaves and linear patterns are bound to catch anyone's attention, even someone uninitiated in the field of fabrics. While Jamdani commands undivided attention and exudes glamour, the Tanchoi on the other hand reeks of elegance and royalty. The Tanchoi also quite possibly remains the most sought after Banarasi saree. Soft in texture, rich in designs and patterns, the Tanchoi is nothing less than a magnificent piece of



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Banarasi sarees are more than exquisite items of clothing, these 6 yards of fabric have imprinted on them the culture and heritage of the region, they are reflective of the rich history of the region and above everything else these are canvasses upholding the finest artistry and hours even months of dedication, creativity and skills of the artisans who toil relentlessly in the dim nooks of the handlooms often for meagre return. It could be the rather myopic approach of owning this piece of fabric from the stores overlooking the stories of labour, affection and the history associated with them which is threatening this ancient industry with the very real possibility of bringing it to a grinding halt. Once famous across the globe, lusted after by royalty, the iconic sarees from Varanasi are suffering from a serious lack of patronage today. The condition of the artisans is similar to the situation faced by millions across the country who belong to the unorganised manufacturing sector.

It can be hard to comprehend such unassuming, dimly lit set ups housing the looms in Varanasi are responsible for churning out the finest silk sarees in India, the appeal of which has spread far and beyond the confines of India.

art. Quite interestingly the history behind this saree is as rich as its design patterns. It is believed the silk has its origin rooted in China and was brought to the shores of Varanasi by the Parsi traders. In the middle of the 19th century a wealthy and

influential Parsi merchant Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy commissioned the trip of three weavers from a certain Joshi family in Surat to China, with the aim of further understanding and mastering the weaving techniques for this particular type of silk.

The brothers upon returning adopted the name of their Chinese master “Chhoi” which along with the term “Tan” which sounds closest to “Tran” meaning three in Gujarati, together gave rise to the naming of this particular art of weaving as Tanchoi.



The largest cottage industry of the world employs an estimated 5 lakh workers and has about 5000 establishments of varying sizes engaging in different aspects of the manufacturing process.

The young artisans spend a lot of time assisting their more experienced counterparts and in doing so pick up the nuances of this craftsmanship.





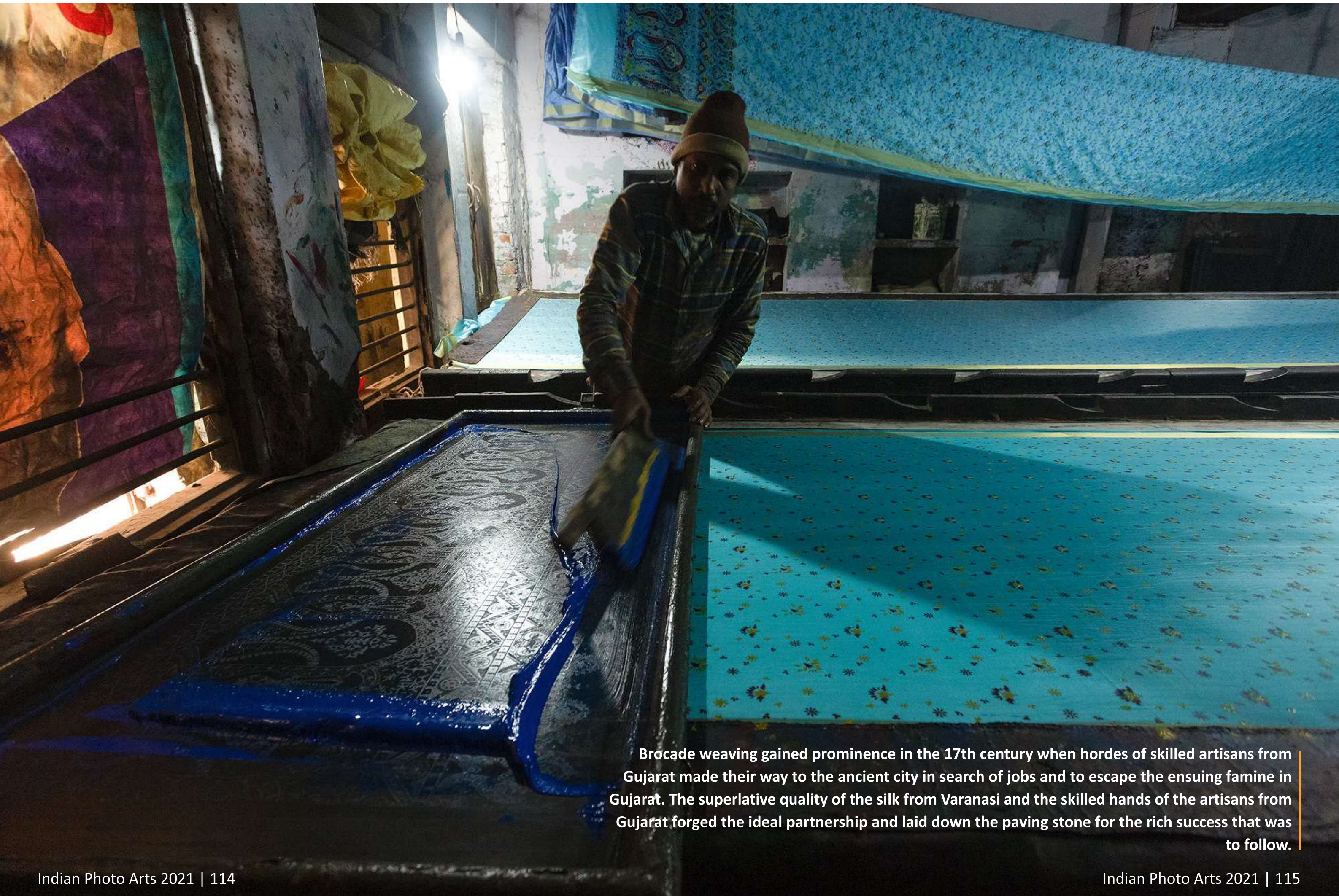
dwindling eyesight – a result of the dimly lit interiors of the handlooms. The weavers unanimously put the onus on an apathetic state and central government for their miseries. This humongous and the most ancient cottage industry in the country is largely devoid of most of the benefit schemes of the government. The welfare schemes and insurance packages are made available only to the weavers who are part of a co-operative, however it is a fact only a miniscule percentage, 5-10% of weavers in Varanasi and the adjoining regions indulging in this craft are part of any co-operative. The women on the other hand, comprise of a large section of the workforce, yet often they are not recognised as labours as the predominant notion suggests the industry primarily employs male workers and the women's contributions are at the best recognised as voluntary effort outside the ambit of the household chores. As a result of which the women are often denied of the health benefit or other welfare schemes which trickle down to their male counterparts.

The skills required to weave the perfect specimen of Banarasi saree often take years, even decades to master. The skills are passed on from one generation to the other and the young artisans waste no time in starting their apprenticeship.

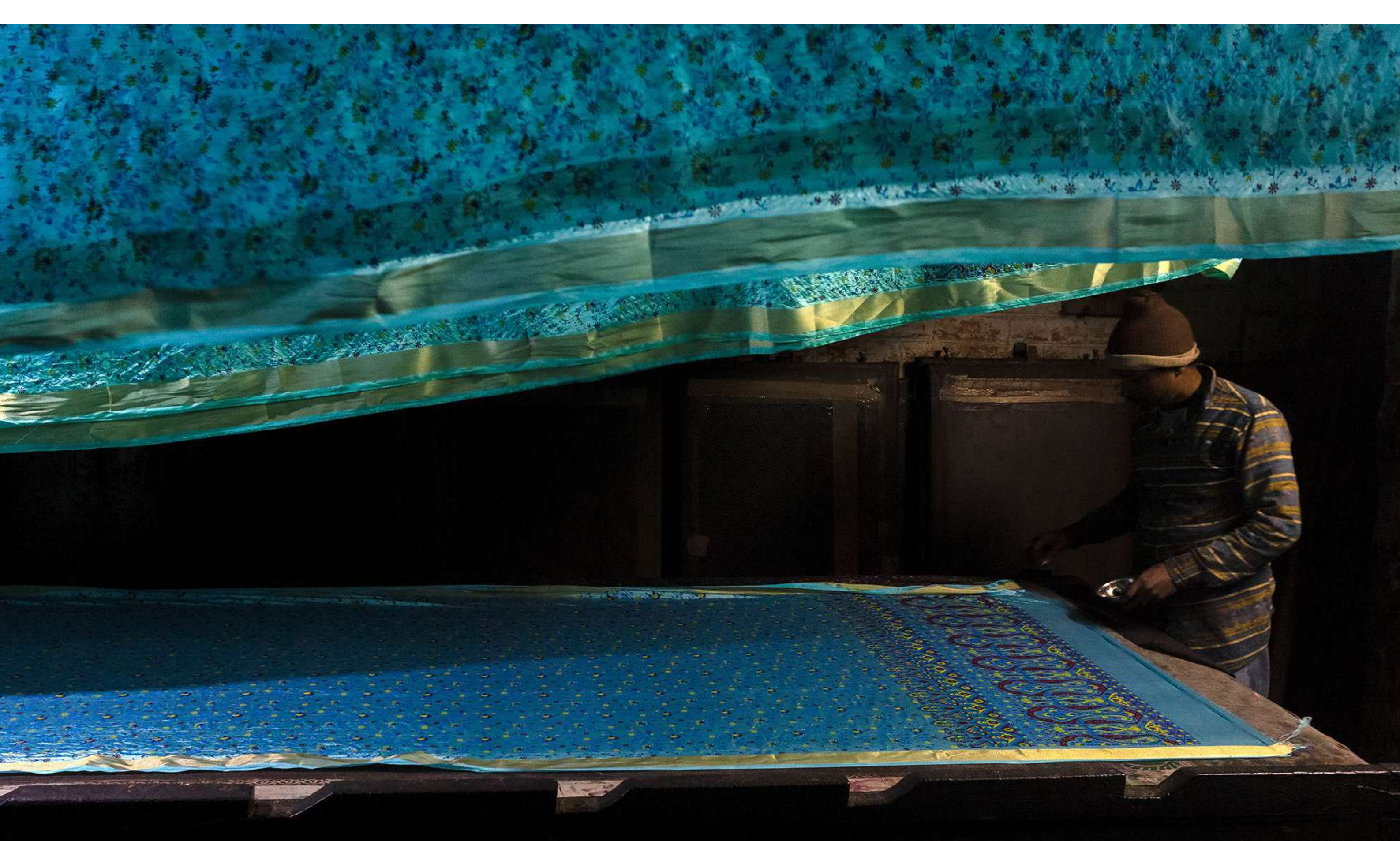
Meagre daily wages, which are far below the recommended numbers suggested by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment, often fail to sustain the family of the weavers. In addition to this, the long work hours were the artisans are

constantly exposed to chemical dyes and toil in dingy, cluttered handlooms take a serious toll on their health and well-being. As a result of which many artisans are forced to look for other avenues of employments or shift towards other

business opportunities with the promise of better returns for their hard work. A significant proportion of workers complain of mild to severe ailments in the form of joint pain, back pain, bronchitis, various pulmonary illness and even



Brocade weaving gained prominence in the 17th century when hordes of skilled artisans from Gujarat made their way to the ancient city in search of jobs and to escape the ensuing famine in Gujarat. The superlative quality of the silk from Varanasi and the skilled hands of the artisans from Gujarat forged the ideal partnership and laid down the paving stone for the rich success that was to follow.



Inside a loom in Varanasi, a Banarasi silk saree is in the making. Weavers would often spend hours even months on occasions in perfecting their craft and weaving the finest sarees.



During the reign of Akbar the silk industry of Varanasi received continued patronage from the emperor and it was also during this period the influx of Persian motifs heavily inspired some of the designs and patterns which the weavers in Varanasi were weaving. The influx of Persian motifs could be attributed to the notable presence of Persian members in Akbar's court.

The grievances do not end here. The weavers are of the opinion that subsequent governments have turned a blind eye towards their plight. Although the name Banarasi silk might suggest the fabric and the handloom is restricted to the confines of the city, in reality this massive cottage industry spreads far beyond the reaches of the city, even to parts of the neighbouring districts. The largest cottage industry of the world employs an estimated 5 lakh workers and has about 5000 establishments of varying sizes engaging in different aspects of the manufacturing process. The weavers complain there has been little done on part of the authorities

to provide proper infrastructural facilities to these establishments. Little advancement has been made in terms of automation and other modern techniques over the years. The problems ranging from poor road connectivity to fluctuating power supply further hinder the manufacturing process. The intricate nature of this industry also serves as a drawback in the face of rickety infrastructure, if any one aspect of manufacturing is hit hard, the effect ripples through the entire chain of the process. In addition to all of these this industry still relies upon traditional methods of marketing and promotional practices, in other words it is still heavily reliant upon

its past glory days. At the best, the industry has been reactive in adopting more contemporary approaches to market and package its finished products. As a result of which the ever changing and fast paced world of fashion has been providing the consumers with newer and attractively packaged alternatives in innovative manners, thereby eating away into the existing customer base of Banarasi saree. Plagued by all the uncertainties and the above mentioned problems, the industry suffered a body blow when the raging COVID 19 pandemic in 2020 brought the country to a standstill. In the wake of ever increasing caseload the Government of

India was forced to implement a strict lockdown across the nation which remained in effect for a little over 2 months. The lockdown was particularly brutal towards the unorganised sector and the cottage industries across the country with millions of people losing their livelihoods and slipping back into the grasp of poverty. The silk industry of Varanasi suffered similar fate. There was an acute shortage of raw materials since raw silk could not be imported from China. In the middle of the lockdown and the pandemic which severely crippled the global economy there was a steep fall in the demand. The guidelines of lockdown

A significant proportion of the workers complain of mild to severe ailments in the form of joint pain, back pain, bronchitis, various pulmonary illness and even dwindling eyesight – a result of the dimly lit interiors of the handlooms.

resulted in absolutely no activity in the handlooms which resulted in zero net revenue while the expenses kept on mounting forcing many handloom owners to permanently shut shop.

The dwindling fortunes have forced many weavers to shut their looms down and look for other alternatives. A steadily waning interest among consumers due to the lack of efficient marketing techniques and policies, an apathetical approach from the government and the meagre returns which are not enough for sustainable livelihood, have forced the weavers to take such drastic steps. In yet another new emerging trend the involvement of middle men or “gaddidar” has further added to the woe of the weavers. The gaddidars act as a broker between the customer and the weavers and use various avenues and even illegal means to exploit the weavers while enjoying the riches of the weavers’ hard work. The reluctance on part of the weavers to practice this craft which has been in their families for generations is obvious from the steadily decreasing enrolments at the government-run Indian Institute of Handloom Technology in Varanasi. The skills and expertise required to master this craft take years to learn. Most artisans start out early in their lives

by assisting the elder and more skilled craftsmen. They pick up the nuances of this craft by carefully observing their seniors at work. However the changing times and changing fortunes have led to many weavers and artisans discouraging their next generation from becoming a part of this cottage industry. Many activists who have worked closely with the weavers and are well aware of their plights are of the opinion that it will take intervention from the government to reverse the tide, something which they believe can be achieved through well thought out policies. The government in some of its earlier promises had alluded to creating robust marketing strategies in order to gain further foothold in the overseas market as well as encourage private players to become a part of this industry through public-private partnership. Also the government had promised a lot in terms of strengthening the infrastructure and impart modern techniques and knowhow to the weavers under able supervision with a vision of upgrading their skills. However it must be said much of these promises have remained unfulfilled and the grievances of the weavers against the respective governments are certainly not ill found. In the face of such dire and grave



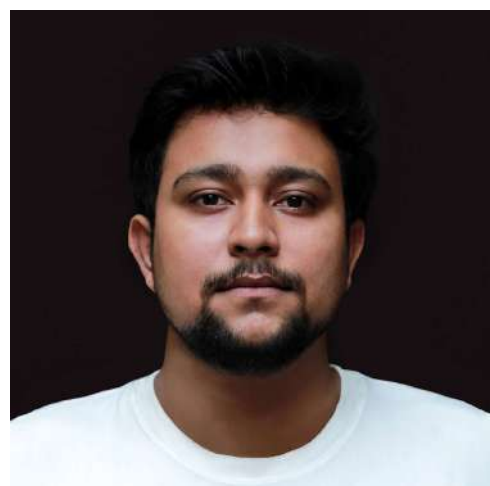
Banarasi sarees are more than exquisite items of clothing, these 6 yards of fabric have imprinted on them the culture and heritage of the region, they are reflective of the rich history of the region and above everything else these are canvasses upholding the finest artistry and hours even months of dedication, creativity and skills of the artisans.

circumstances it is imperative on part of the government and the local authorities to address the needs of the weavers at the earliest if we are to preserve an exquisite chapter from the rich and diverse history of our country. These elegant six yards, gorgeous in their appearances and regal in their stature are the threads that bind us to our past and are finest specimens of the supreme craftsmanship that the nation can boast of, it would be nothing short of an ignominy to allow this industry to fade into oblivion.

If such a development takes place in the years to come, we will not only lose a significant chapter from the rich and diverse tradition of the country, it will also jeopardise the livelihoods of thousands of people dealing a major blow to the economy.



The coronavirus induced lockdown was particularly brutal towards the unorganised sector and the cottage industries across the country with millions of people losing their livelihoods and slipping back into the grasp of poverty. The silk industry of Varanasi suffered similar fate. There was an acute shortage of raw materials since raw silk could not be imported from China. In the middle of the lockdown and the pandemic which severely crippled the global economy there was a steep fall in the demand. The guidelines of lockdown resulted in absolutely no activity in the handlooms which resulted in zero net revenue while the expenses kept on mounting forcing many handloom owners to permanently shut shop.



Arpan UZIR

Arpan Uzir is an Indian travel, documentary and landscape photographer from Guwahati, Assam. Working as a full-time photographer, his pursuit for unique awe-inspiring moments has led him to capture stories from different corners of the country. He enjoys the experience that photography offers, which is to capture the Earth's beautiful and magical moments, travelling to different places, meeting new people and documenting their stories. He has a National Geographic 'Your Shot' Daily Dozen selection and multiple Editor Favourites under his belt. He has also assisted the DOP in 'Awesome Assam with Sarah Todd', a travel show under Halcyon Media Pvt Ltd. for National Geographic Channel and FOX Life India. He has achieved Bronze Awards in The EPSON International Pano Awards 2020, Shatto Gallery International Photography Awards 2020, Honorable Mentions in International Photography Awards 2020, International Photography Awards 2020, Budapest International Foto Awards 2020, Tokyo International Foto Awards 2020, Monochrome Photography Awards 2020, Neutral Density Photography Awards 2020, Chromatic Color Photography Awards 2020 to name a few. His photographs have been published and exhibited in India, USA, Germany, Scotland and several national & international magazines and websites including National Geographic, 1x.com, F-Stop Magazine, Docu Magazine, Chiiz Magazine. More of his work is available at - Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/arpanuzir/> 500px: <https://500px.com/p/arpanuzir> and Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/arpan.uzir/>



BROWN BEARS

THE UNDISPUTED KINGS OF THE FINNISH WILDERNESS.

STEEPED IN ANCIENT MYTHS AND FOLKLORES, THE BROWN BEAR IS A FORMIDABLE SUBJECT OF THE NATURAL WORLD AND ROAM PROUD IN THE BOREAL FORESTS OF FINLAND, ONE OF THE MAJOR STRONGHOLDS OF THE SPECIES IN EUROPE.

by Govindh Rajkumar

Ancient Finnish myths and folklores refer to the brown bear – the national animal of Finland as a creature of heavenly origin and responsible for the birth of all of humankind.

Severe winters during which temperatures drop well below the freezing level and a short period conducive for growth do not contribute towards a suitable environment for life to flourish. Defying these odds and overcoming these severe handicaps the boreal forests have not only thrived, they represent the world's largest biome today. Boreal forests or taiga, are the earth's northernmost forest covers covering vast swathes of land across Canada, Alaska in the west, Sweden and Finland in northern Europe and Russia, and parts of Japan in the far east. The nature of the forest cover and the season of growth are largely influenced by the location of the boreal forest, although primarily a boreal forest cover comprises of conifers in the forms of pine, fir, birch, spruce and other coniferous tree and plant species. Boreal forests are invaluable carbon sinks and vital fresh water reserves apart from being homes to hundreds and thousands of species. In Europe, Finland boasts of being the country with the largest forest cover, with well over 70% of the landscape being dominated by boreal forests. This tremendous achievement on part of the authorities and the country in general can be attributed to the effective management of forests and their natural resources and the favourable climate which Finland is blessed with. Geographically Finland is situated well within the cold realms of the Arctic Circle. A significant bulk of Finland's landmass extends all the way to

the north of the Arctic Circle. Otherwise this would not have served as a favourable environment for large tracts of vegetation to flourish had it not been for the warm waters of the Gulf Stream which is responsible for shaping much of the ecology of Finland and Scandinavia in the northern reaches of Europe. Compared to other places on the planet along the same latitude, namely parts of Russia and North America, Finland experiences a more mild winter and temperate summers. These favourable climate patterns for trees and plants ensured even the northernmost reaches of Finland are thriving with a healthy forest cover. Although the summers are brief, the abundance of natural light during the long summer days enables a period of intensive growth during which new trees and plants spurt out from every forest corner.

Dominating the taigas in Finland are the magnificent chestnut bears or brown bears, the national animal of Finland. The bear, often referred to as "karhu" in the local language finds repeated mentions in Finnish folklores and mythologies and has been hailed as the "king of the forest" by indigenous communities centuries ago, who used to live in close proximity to these gigantic animals. Karhun kansa – a community in Finland became the first neopagan community following ancient Finnish spiritual tradition, to be recognised officially by the Finnish state. Karhun kansa stands for "People of the Bear" and anecdotes from Finnish mythology allude

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to the animal being the most sacred being and the mythical ancestor to the whole of humankind. Following the same practices, the members of this community consider the bear to be of heavenly origin and the one animal responsible for the origin of the human race. Such revered sentiments for the bear, which have been propagated through generations among Finnish people ensured the animal enjoyed safeguard from hunting. In ancient times the bear used to be the symbol of a number of Finnish indigenous tribes and was looked upon as a sacred creature. Some of the most ancient Finnish myths refer to a marriage of the bear and a woman who was viewed as the mother to all of humankind. These rituals were later followed in some of the ancient festivals in the 16th century which involved a feast after a successful bear hunt. During this feast a symbolic wedding was held between a chosen couple from the village. The most important aspect of this feast was the bear meat which was served alongside freshly brewed ale as a sacred meal. The skin of the bear and the skull occupied a special place at the table were the feast was spread out. The skull of the bear was then taken out in a procession and was fixed atop a sacred pine tree. The bones were buried underneath the tree and

these activities were accompanied by chants from the villagers which in their mind served as a conversation between the spirit of the bear and the ancient mother of humankind. Henceforth the skull of the bear fixed atop the pine tree would serve as a totem for the entire community and the villagers would take the utmost care to conserve this sacred artefact.

About 2500 brown bears roam freely in the vast boreal forests of Finland today. The brown bears in the forests of Finland are giants of the natural world with adult males reaching average weights of 300kg or more while females have been recorded to attain an average bodyweight in excess of 250kg. The fur as the name suggests is brown or chestnut in colour with varying degrees of darker and lighter shades. A wide skull with powerful jaws equipped with 42 teeth which include powerful canines and large paws with claws which can grow up to 10 cm in length, the brown bear is a formidable creature and adults of this species face little or no threat from other creatures with which they share their domains. These massive proportions coupled with an average height of 3-5 feet at the shoulders further accentuate the enormous reputation, quite literally, of this ancient bear species. The brown bear is



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an omnivorous creature. In ancient times when the fate of the species was not threatened by the scourge of depleting habitat, raw meat accounted for the major proportion of their diet. However as their habitats kept shrinking drastically over the last few centuries the species was forced to incorporate more plant based food item into their diet as shrinking habitat also led to a rapidly depleting prey base. Today fruits, berries, acorns, roots, tubers and other plant products account for almost 70-80% of a brown bears diet while meat accounts for the remaining 20%. Equipped with large and powerful paws which are armed with sharp claws and bone crushing teeth, brown bears are effective killing machines and during the winter months when the forest floor remains covered in a thick carpet of snow would occasionally bring down moose, roe, elk or other deer species. Their big burly frame and bold approach also allow these bears to intimidate a relatively smaller pack of wolves and steal their hard earned prey. Being opportunist feeders, the brown bears often scavenge upon carrions or remains from a previous kill made by a pack of wolves. The harsh winters regularly pose an immense challenge to the brown bears during which they prefer to stay cooped in their dens or take refuge inside the hollow trunk of a fallen tree. Leading up to the winter months, when the bitter cold and the shortage of food make life difficult for most animals in the boreal forests of Finland, the bears need to consume enough

calorie to be stored as excess fat which sees them through during the lean winter. During an average winter season an individual may lose up to 25% of their bodyweight.

Brown bears lead a solitary existence. They attain sexual maturity between 3-5 years of age. Adults come in close proximity during the mating season which usually coincides with the months of April to June. After a gestation period of 6-9 months young cubs are born in litters of 2-4. On the odd occasion the females have been documented giving birth to a solitary cub. The young cubs are entirely dependent on their mother during the initial few months of their lives. They stay close to their mother and the female maintains a safe distance from roving males or wandering bears which might have intruded her territory. Although rare, if one such individual ventures too close to her litter, the female will stand her ground and display aggression to ward off the intruder and keep her litter safe. Such encounters rarely result in violent encounters although when it happens quite understandably it is a bloody affair with fatal consequences on the very rare occasion. Males take no part in raising the young ones and during the initial years the cubs are entirely dependent on their mother. The young cubs stay close to their mother for about 18-24 months before venturing out on their own. They follow their mother and observe her closely. Such observations are extremely crucial for their



During their time with their mother the young bears need to learn a multitude of skills and techniques ranging from foraging for the right and nutritious food to picking the ideal spot for a den. The young bears observe their mother closely on a daily basis as she goes about her life and in a way inherits these techniques and practice these skills

long snout and sharp claws serve them well in sniffing out and digging up underground roots and tubers which form a large part of their diet. Although not an active predator, the bears don't pass off an opportunity to feed on smaller mammals and rodents if the opportunity presents itself. Brown bears are territorial and prefer to establish their own territories far removed from other individuals to minimize the chances of any conflict due to intrusion. Yet conflict breaks out on the odd occasion either over the claim of a fresh territory or in lean seasons when food is not plentiful and the scarcity of food brings individuals in close range of one another. More often than not such confrontations are settled over snarling and growling which are accompanied by myriad displays of threat in the form of muzzle twisting, showing off canines, standing upright on their hind legs. However when such methods fail to bring

In Europe, Finland boasts of being the country with the largest forest cover, with well over 70% of the landscape being dominated by boreal forests providing the perfect habitat for the massive brown bears.

survival as in doing so they learn the necessary skills which eventually would equip them with the expertise for a future life on their own. During their time with their mother the young bears need to learn a multitude of skills and techniques ranging

from foraging for the right and nutritious food to picking the ideal spot for a den. The young bears observe their mother closely on a daily basis as she goes about her life and in a way inherits these techniques and practice these skills by

imitating their mother. While foraging these animals heavily rely upon their keen sense of smell. They are quick to sniff out carrion from great distances and would often zero in on the partial remains of a previous kill made by other animals. The



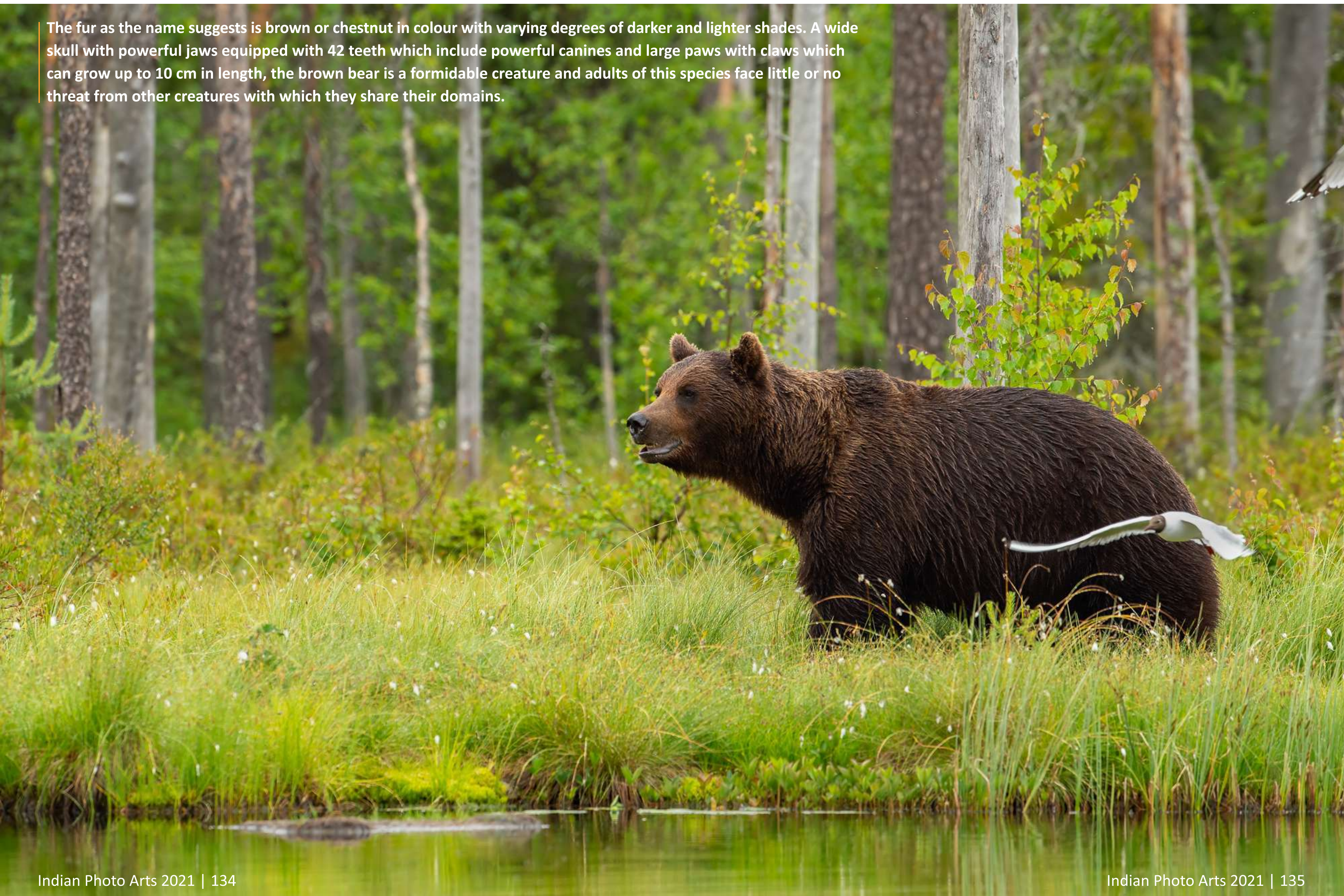
about any closure and no party is willing to back down an inch a violent encounter becomes inevitable. Not for the faint hearted, such gruesome duels involving fervent lashes of the sharp claws and bites to the head or the back often result in fatal

consequences or the sustained injuries condemn the individuals to a crippled existence for the rest of their time. In spite of their enormous proportions these animals are reclusive and shy and tend to avoid any confrontation with humans or

other animals. In the highlands of Finland, Sweden and Romania bear attack is truly a remarkably rare phenomenon.

A brown bear in its typical habitat in the boreal forests of Kumho in Finland along the Russian border.

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In Finland the brown bear is a protected species and the current population has been designated as stable. Once dwindling, with the increase in the forest cover and

the conservation measures set into motion by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry the population of bears has increased steadily and the animals have staged an

impressive comeback. The current population which is estimated between 2000-2500 individuals has been deemed steady and is aimed at maintaining in such

a manner which will ensure Finland continues to be a brown bear stronghold while minimising human animal conflicts. The bear management program divides Finland into four main zones in terms of bear population management - the reindeer herding area, the area of established population, the area of spreading population and the area of developing population. As per the bear population management plan approved by the ministry in 2007 the population of brown bears in the reindeer herding area and the area of established population will be maintained at their current levels. Emphasis would be given on a steady increase in numbers in the area of spreading population so that eventually the increasing numbers would steadily rejuvenate the figures in the area of developing population. While effecting an increase in bear numbers the region's human population density and other anthropological activities would also be taken into account in setting the upper limit to which the bear population will be allowed to increase. In other words the program aims at a sustainable development which would achieve a healthy and thriving bear population at the same time minimising the collateral damages resulting out of human animal conflict. It must be said such an approach has worked well for the Finnish authorities and the brown bears in Finland since today, the boreal forests of Finland are considered as one of the major strongholds of brown bear in Europe.

Brown bears are territorial and prefer to establish their own territories far removed from other individuals to minimize the chances of any conflict due to intrusion.



The boreal forests account for almost 30% of the planet's wilderness. Also the boreal forest ecosystems happen to be the most threatened by climate change with temperatures in the arctic and boreal domains warming at rates as high as 0.5°C per decade, with a potential future warming of 6 to 11°C by the turn of this century due to climate change.

In spite of the program and no imminent threat to the future of brown bears in the Finnish wilderness there remains the threat of climate change looming large in the horizon. The changing climate and the scourge of global warming are exacting heavy tolls from every ecosystem on this planet and the boreal forests in the wilderness of Finland are no exception. The fate of the forest is intertwined with the fate of the bear. The boreal forests in the northern hemisphere in close proximity to the Arctic Circle are relatively young wilderness on this planet. During its brief history the boreal forests have encountered numerous changes and fluctuations in their climatic patterns. In the northern latitudes of our planet the effects of climate change are more rapid and more pronounced and the shockwaves of such changes reverberate across all the major ecosystems at an unprecedented rate across the Arctic. The boreal forests account for almost 30%



Brown bears like most bear species are shy creatures and avoid venturing out in broad daylight. They tend to be most active during dusk and after nightfall.

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ways and effects in these natural setting which often lead to prolonged and frequent wildfires, melting of the snow cover at an unprecedented rate, erratic seasonal change patterns, changes in the growth and flowering of trees and plants, the emergence and contamination of previously dormant pathogens among

others. Essentially these forests developed under cold climate and are meant to thrive in a cold environment. With a steady increase in the global average temperature with each passing year and an amplified effect of it in the Arctic Circle, the boreal forests in the northern reaches of the northern hemisphere are facing at an



alarming future which threatens of deadly consequences. Yet to be fully understood, there can be no denying any such change, no matter how casual or insignificant they appear at a first glance, is a deviation from the natural course, the consequences of which can potentially upstage the much required balance upon which every ecosystem thrives and obliterate the most redoubtable creatures such as the brown bear.

In spite of the success of the population management program and no imminent threat to the future of brown bears in the Finnish wilderness there remains the threat of climate change looming large in the horizon. The changing climate and the scourge of global warming are exacting heavy tolls from every ecosystem on this planet and the boreal forests in the wilderness of Finland are no exception.

Govindh **RAJKUMAR**

Born into a family of shikaris and wildlife enthusiasts, **Govindh** has always been in and around nature and wildlife sanctuaries his entire life. As a child, he spent many of his weekends at his grandparents farm in the foothills of Anaimalai which fuelled his passion for wildlife photography.

He has travelled extensively across India and around the world capturing the myriad wildlife, diverse cultures, and stunning landscapes. He is an engineer and management consultant by trade but spends his spare time traversing the globe to experience its flora and fauna.



ALL PAIN AND NO GAIN

The frightful ordeal of India's migrant workers and daily wagers during lockdown...

by **Shubhodeep Roy**

A fruit seller who had migrated from Bihar a few years back, remains stranded at Esplanade bus terminus at the heart of Kolkata hoping to find a place on the buses which would ferry him closer to his hometown.

Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in China and an important cog in the politics, administration and economy of China, in spite of its significance to the Chinese people, was a largely unknown entity for millions across the globe. All of that started changing towards the fag end of 2019. Intermittent reports of a previously unknown viral outbreak started emerging from the streets of Wuhan and other neighbouring cities. For the very first time the world was initiated to the now infamous severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2, responsible for causing coronavirus disease 19 which led to its popular nomenclature COVID-19 virus. As the number of cases in Wuhan and the adjoining cities and towns kept mounting along with the death toll, China imposed a strict lockdown in Wuhan and other cities of Hubei Province on 23rd January 2020 in order to contain the spread of this viral outbreak. The rest of the world was undecided at how to analyse these alarming developments in China. In most countries including India, despite the lockdown in China life went about as usual and the widely accepted notion was the disease was yet to reach our shores, a sentiment which at that point in time was widely echoed by a number of countries across the globe. The first alarm calls were sounded by the World Health Organization or WHO when on the 30th of January 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak a

Public Health Emergency of International Concern and warned all countries to prepare. It was fairly evident the virus had reached the shores far beyond the confines of Wuhan and Hubei Province in China. Countries across the globe were reporting outbreaks of similar nature. On the 11th of March the WHO announced the outbreak had already assumed the proportion of a pandemic considering the number of new emerging cases across the world and suggested an estimated one tenth of the global population had already been infected with the virus. Such revelations send the world into a fit of frenzy and quite understandably so. Efforts were being put into place to seal the international borders, overseas flights were being grounded and the countries all over the world were bracing for a long drawn war against a rather unknown entity. Following suit, noticing the rising outbreaks in some of the states notably the southern state of Kerala, the Government of India on the evening of 24th March 2020 imposed a strict nationwide lockdown beginning from the 25th of May for the next 21 days bringing the entire populace to a screeching halt. Deemed by many as one of the most severe lockdowns imposed, the move was aimed at curbing the spread of the virus by reducing human to human contact to bare minimum and providing the health sector with a fighting chance to prepare for severe outbreaks in the days to come by utilising this relative period of lull.

For Indians along with the rest of the world, these were unprecedented times. There was little to no doubt in anybody's mind that a nationwide strict lockdown was the only way to stem the flow of this virus and the horrific images of death and despair emerging out of countries like Italy, France and Germany unveiled the true potential of this deadly virus. As the offices, workplaces, business organisations shut down people were confined to their homes, fleets of buses, trains and other modes of public transport came to a standstill, the cacophony of the

Amidst such situation, the worst hit in India was the unorganised sector. The bulwark of the Indian economy is comprised of the unorganised or the informal sector.

marketplaces made way for an eerie calm with a handful of shops peddling essential items remaining open during the stipulated time. As the days went by in a stupor, the cases continued to creep upwards, so did the death toll and it became evident to everyone the lockdown was going to be extended with no clear respite in the horizon. Millions were faced with an uncertain future in the country, employees were faced with pay cuts, even the very real possibility of losing their livelihoods, small and medium scale business owners were scouring through their last resources to make ends meet, suddenly the economic downturn was emerging as a greater evil than the deadly coronavirus. Amidst such situation, the worst hit in India was the unorganised sector. The bulwark of the

Indian economy is comprised of the unorganised or the informal sector. A significant majority, in the high 90%, of India's workforce is employed in the unorganised sector of which a majority is in the agricultural sector while others belong to the real estate construction sector and other small and medium scale industries and cottage industries across the country. As it had been the case over the previous few months with the term COVID-19, the nation got introduced to yet another disturbing emergence – the migrant workers and their plight. The

unorganised sector employs tens of millions of people, who mostly belong to the rural impoverished parts of the country and in search of a livelihood are often forced to migrate to the bigger cities and towns across the country often hundreds of kilometres away from their homes. The bigger cities and towns promise the scopes for employment or other means of earning a livelihood. Almost all of them survive on daily wages with no fixed income or other related benefits. As the lockdown of 2020 brought the entire country to a standstill, overnight the migrant workers and labourers were left without a job and most importantly without a daily source of income.

This elderly man's son, who used to work as a daily labourer lost his job during the lockdown imposed by the government in 2020 at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The family had migrated to Kolkata from Bihar in search of better opportunities.



Hearth breaking images of migrant workers with their families and belongings in tow trudging along the finely paved highways of the country started emerging in the media

Most of this workforce previously used to barely make ends meet on a meagre daily income, which meant they never had the safety net of a saving's account.

Out of job and with business owners reluctant to provide for them in the wake of standstill business operations, the informal workforce was left to fend for itself. Faced with severe financial constraints millions of migrant workers were left with a single choice – return home. Quite a straightforward decision it might seem, yet returning to the relatively safer confines of their homes proved to be the biggest obstacle. With fleets of buses and trains grounded, the only way for them to reach their beloved front yards was to cover distances of hundreds and thousands of kilometres on foot. The respective state governments and the central government in an attempt to provide some respite organised special buses and trains to ferry the migrant workers home, however such arrangements were far and few in between and lacked the muscle to pull off an operation at such a humongous scale. Heart breaking images of migrant workers with their families and belongings in tow trudging along the finely paved highways of the country started emerging in the media and news outlets and once again substantiated the enormous contrast that exists within the urban India

that aspires to be a modern nation and its fledgling rural counterpart.

Ram Das a migrant worker from a small town in Bihar recalled the horrific ordeal he had to endure during the lockdown. He had shifted to Kolkata with his family lured by the promise of a better life and had opened up a small fruit stall in one of the markets in the city. The promise of a better life seemed to be taking shape bit by bit until the raging pandemic hit the city. He was one among the thousands who had gathered around the city's one of the busiest bus terminuses awaiting their turn to board a bus which would get them closer to their hometowns.

Those unable to return to their homes had to resort to other means to eke out a livelihood. With the factories, mills, marketplaces closed in a desperate attempt they had to step out of their accommodations braving the scourge of coronavirus in order to make ends meet. One such individual, who chose to remain unnamed, who in normal times would enthral kids with his toy parrots, was roving in the empty streets of Kolkata pinning all his hopes on the appeal of his colourful stuffed birds. Possibly nothing could have encompassed the resilience and the hope for a brighter tomorrow better than the vibrant feathers of his stuffed birds.

Others such as the street vendor selling balloons in Esplanade bus terminus, the largest and the busiest bus terminus in the heart of Kolkata, unable to come up with any alternatives, stuck to his daily routine of roaming about in the empty bus terminus with his stock of brightly coloured balloons. He fondly recalled how during normal times kids would make a beeline for his balloons and pester their parents to buy them one until they relented. The lockdown had dealt a crippling blow to him and his family and now he and his family are stranded all alone, penniless in the concrete jungle of Kolkata far removed from his home.

These anecdotes are representatives of the millions who underwent similar fate during the strict lockdown which remained in effect for a total of 75 days following which the government opted for phased reopening of certain activities thereby easing the restrictions which had held the nation in a firm iron grip for over two months. In the following days as the nation and its economy tried to limp back to its former self, the horrors of the coronavirus induced lockdown started emerging. The economy had taken a nosedive and millions had slipped into the dark and uncertain realms of poverty. For the informal sector this was too crippling a blow to deal with and unable to cope up with the losses many small and medium scale businesses had to close down permanently rendering millions of daily wagers unemployed. The fortunate few

were able to return to their previous workplaces although months of unemployment had exacted severe tolls on them and their families. While it is true India and the world in general could not have prepared for a pandemic of such nature and scale and quite understandably every country had to pay a steep price in terms of their economy in trying to deal with this viral outbreak, there could be no denying in India the plight of the migrant workers could have been dealt with more sensitivity and pragmatism which unfortunately were in short supply from the central as well as the respective state governments. While the nation braced for the harshest lockdown at the shortest possible notice of few hours, there was no contingency plan which was put in effect neither by the central government nor by the state governments to address the plight of the migrant workers or the daily wagers. The migrant workers were forced to embark upon arduous journeys back to their homes which resulted in scores of deaths precisely because the governments of our country failed to put an embracing arm around them and take the responsibility of catering to their basic needs such as food and housing. The precious few arrangements which were made to send them back to their homes were carried out in haphazard manner and failed to instill much faith among the workers. Moreover the lack of adequate infrastructure failed to properly screen or quarantine the workers returning to the



India is home to about 120 million smallholder farmers who contribute over 40% of the country's grain production and over half of its fruits, vegetables, oilseeds, and other crops. But due to lockdown the whole industry has suffered a huge setback, affecting many farmers. This farmer (right) in the outskirts of Kolkata narrated the harrowing experiences which he had to endure during the lockdown. The brick kiln worker's (left) predicaments were similar in nature with the kilns abruptly shutting down rendering thousands of labours without any source of income or even accommodation.

rural parts of India, as a result of which the secluded rural countryside which previously had largely remained unaffected by the virus now fell prey to this outbreak, brought about by the returning workers. As the phased unlocking process started, the governments despite their earlier lofty claims failed to provide adequate compensation packages to the daily wagers or the allotted funds never reached the beneficiaries courtesy the corruption in the system. The partial withdrawal of the restrictions in May resulted in a revival in employment in May, however due to

shrinking demands the wages remained much less and for self-employed wagers such as vendors, shop owners incomes remained much lower than before. The coronavirus pandemic laid bare the huge gulf that exists between India's middle class and the economically marginalised section of the society. The fact that even today millions of workers hail from rural parts of India, particularly states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, parts of West Bengal among others highlights the apathetical treatment rural India has been traditionally subjected to. The

coronavirus outbreak unleashed unmitigated disaster upon this estimated 45 million strong workforce. The governments, state and central alike, kept rolling out bloated figures suggesting how various schemes of the government have come to the aid of the migrant workforce during these testing times, however the ground reality certainly does not paint such an encouraging picture. On May 12, the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, announced a special economic package of rupees 20 lakh crore touted as the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Package (equivalent

to 10% of India's GDP) with the aim of reducing the country's dependency on the global supply chain and provide much needed relief to the poor, labourers and migrant workers who had been severely affected by the economic downturn resulting out the coronavirus pandemic. Following this announcement, the Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, through five press conferences, announced the detailed measures under the economic package. The details of the package aimed at assisting the corporates, MSMEs, banks and other financial institution and the poor

and economically marginalised section of the society. However it must be noted, a meagre 0.175% which was later toned down to 0.155% of the total package was reserved for the migrant workers belonging to the informal sector, who at the outbreak of the pandemic and during subsequent developments were the worst hit. On the 20th of May, a little over two months after the lockdown was imposed a cabinet of the central government approved the proposal to distribute free wheat and rice to 8 crore migrant workers. While noble in its purpose, it must be noted only a small percentage of this workforce falls within the ambit of such schemes, since the unorganised sector as the name suggests still remains largely unorganised with little or no comprehensive employment and other relevant data available to the government in terms of its workforce and other employment related benefits. The present BJP led central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi within a few weeks of assuming office back in 2014 in the first term had announced the Labour Ministry was planning to conduct a detailed census of the workers in the unorganised sector and issue each of them a unique identity, with a view of imparting all the government welfare scheme related benefits including old age pension and health insurance to them in a timely and organised manner. Quite clearly, the scheme promised much yet delivered little, as it became evident from the thousands



A worker inside a dingy workshop which churns out small items toils away for long hours struggling to make up for the lost time.

of migrant workers stranded in bus terminuses and railway stations as an uncertain future awaited them. Had such a scheme been implemented properly and such identities been issued the crisis faced by the migrant workforce could have either been averted or its severity would have been relatively less.

As a result of many such organisational and administrative failures the migrant workers in 2020 were left to fend for themselves and gut wrenching images and narratives clearly pointed out many, in fact thousands perished in doing so. It is nothing less than infuriating to witness the backbone of our economy, upon which

more than half of our economy firmly rests, being treated with such apathy and disdain. Their plights were further compounded by the brief yet another crippling lockdown which came into effect in different parts of India amidst the surging second wave of the pandemic in April-May of 2021. Every government



made lofty promises to these people, yet every government has traditionally failed them. For those of us, blessed with the safety net which comes with our privileged background and upbringing and often chose to remain oblivious to the plight of those upon whom we are so dependent, ranging from our domestic helps to the plumber or the electrician who have on many occasions saved the day for us, the time is ripe to take note of the plight of these people and make our voices collectively heard on their behalf. The political bickering and blame game aside, there can be no denying, as a society we have collectively failed these hardworking human beings, we have failed to provide them the minimum dignity and respect which another fellow human being deserves.

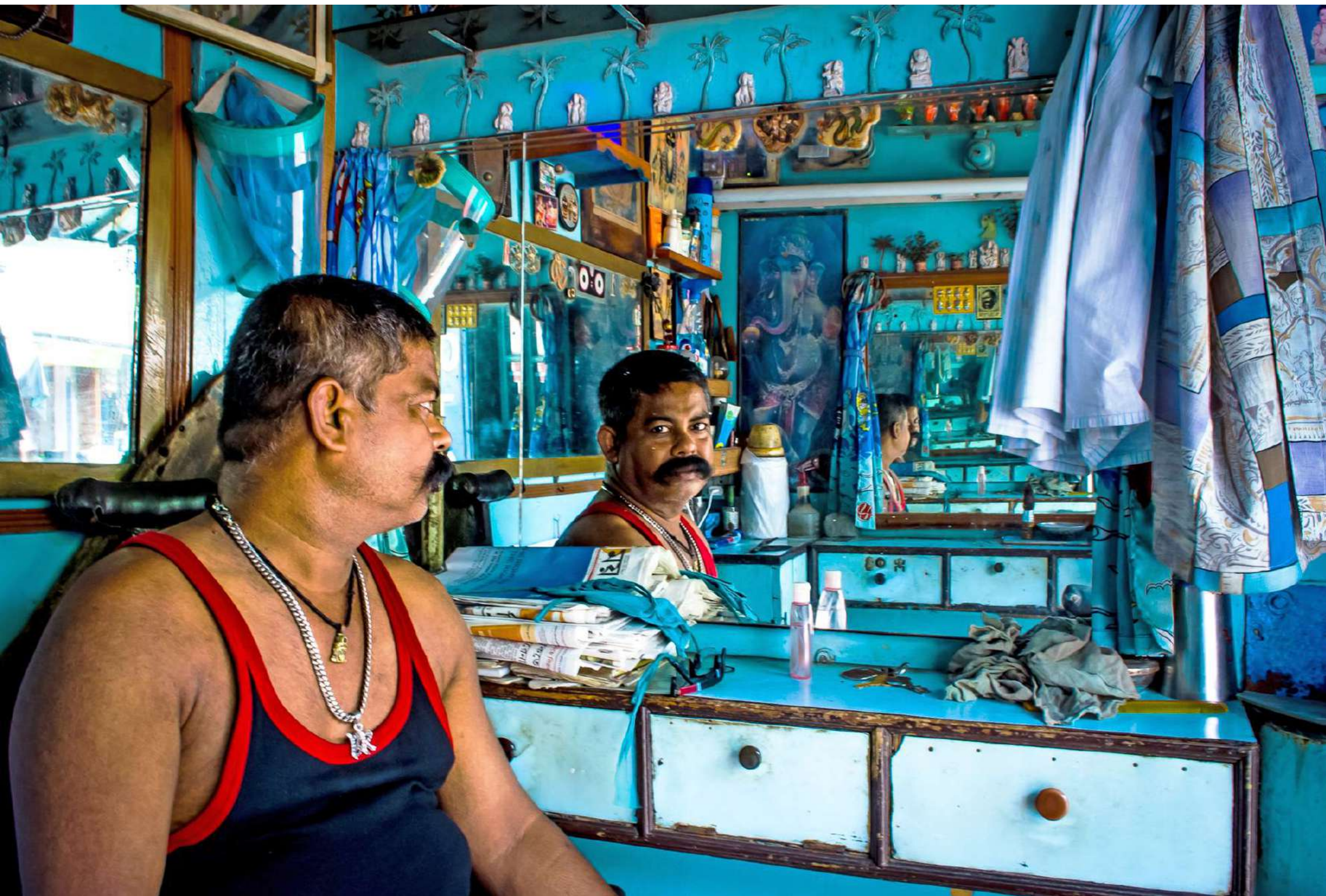
Those unable to return to their homes had to resort to other means to eke out a livelihood. With the factories, mills, marketplaces closed in a desperate attempt they had to step out of their accommodations braving the scourge of coronavirus in order to make ends meet. One such individual, who in normal times would enthrall kids with his toy parrots, was roaming the empty streets of Kolkata pinning all his hopes on the appeal his colourful stuffed birds. Possibly nothing could have encompassed the resilience and the hope for a brighter tomorrow better than the vibrant feathers of his stuffed birds and the disarming smile on his face.

This young man who used to be a construction worker found himself out of work days into the lockdown of 2020. With no mode of transport available to him he was forced to remain cooped in dingy accommodation in Kolkata and take up odd jobs to make ends meet. Here he can be seen unloading bamboo poles - a much resembled fixture in any election rally in some of the familiar settings of Kolkata in the lead up to the elections.





This middle aged man, who makes a living by selling balloons at one of Kolkata's busiest bus terminuses fondly recalled how during normal times kids would make a beeline for his balloons and pester their parents to buy them one until they relented. The lockdown had dealt a crippling blow to him and his family with no immediate respite in sight.



This unassuming old fashioned barber shop had just opened up after a long dry spell brought about by the lockdown. The owner of the shops, who also doubles up as the barber, mentioned how the lockdown bled him dry financially and how even after the restrictions were eased business is nowhere close to being what it used to be. These anecdotes are representatives of the millions who underwent similar fate during the strict lockdown which remained in effect for a total of 75 days following which the government opted for phased reopening of certain activities thereby easing the restrictions which had held the nation in a firm iron grip for over two months.



Shubhodeep ROY

Shubhodeep Roy is a 20-year-old award winning photographer based in Kolkata, India. He is pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Commerce from the University Of Calcutta. Photography is his hobby and he was initiated into it from a very young age when he borrowed his uncle's camera – a Nikon D60 for the first time. For him, photography is all about living in the present moment, the candidness. He loves to try and explore various genres of this beautiful art.

Contest

StreetEye Collective Monthly Theme Based Contest

Theme: **Layers**



StreetEye Collective (<https://www.instagram.com/streeteyecollective/>) was brought into existence to create a platform to promote street photography by sharing knowledge and engaging photographers from across the globe.

Breaking the barriers of geographical limitations they came together for this wonderful photography journey. Each member has a distinct way of seeing and presenting street photography and that makes them unique in their approach. This collective is focusing on street photography projects for its members and also trying to encourage young talents through theme based challenges, assignments and workshops. StreetEye Collective has kept the photographers busy during this pandemic, through its monthly competitions. This time it was about challenging the photographers about the most complex yet the most favourite style i.e. Layers in street photography. The response was overwhelming and these are the top 10 images in no particular order.



Photograph by *Hitesh Makwana*

#SEC_Layers |

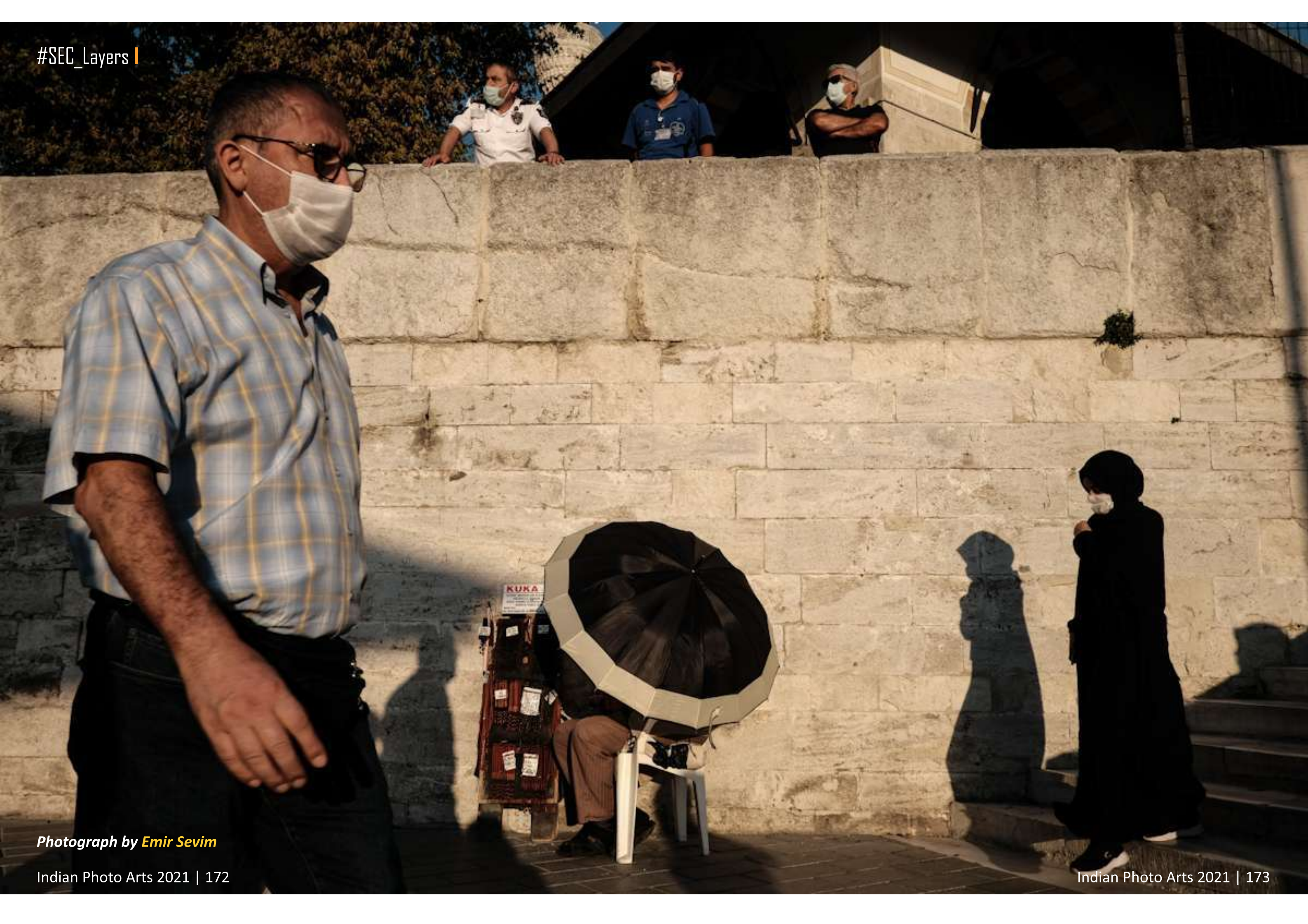


Photograph by *Seikh Sabidul Islam*



#SEC_Layers |

Photograph by **Dhruv Makwana**



Photograph by Emir Sevim



Photograph by *Santanu Dey*

#SEC_Layers |

Photograph by *Manish Jaisi*



Photograph by *Chi Cuong Tran*

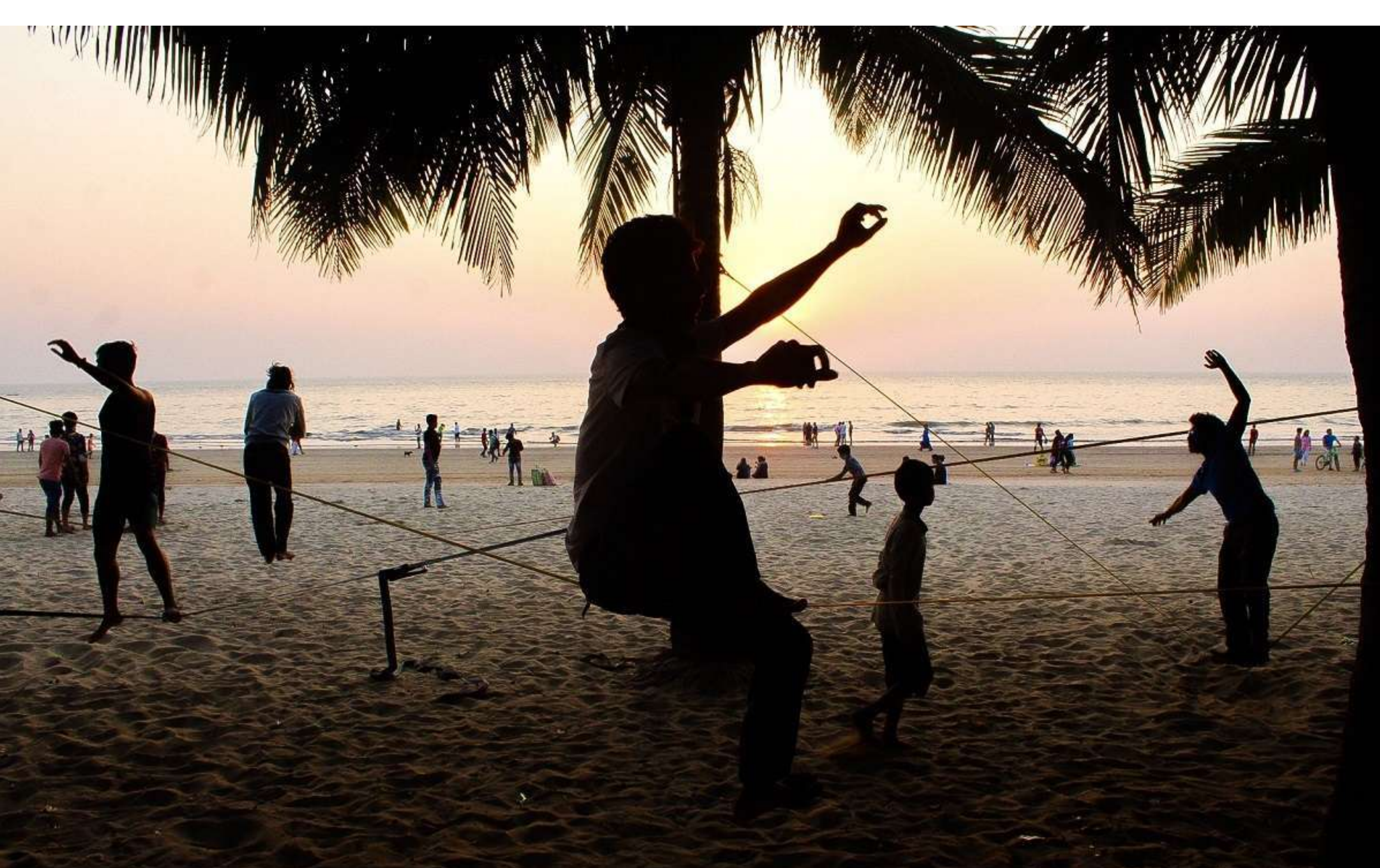


#SEC_Layers |

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#SEC_Layers |



Photograph by **Subhasish Bodhak**

Spotlight

FEATURING THE WORK OF ANIRUDDHA DAS - A CELEBRATED FASHION PHOTOGRAPHER WHO JUGGLES HIS PASSION AND PROFESSION EFFORTLESSLY WHILE DELIVERING HIGH QUALITY PHOTOGRAPHS TIME AND AGAIN.



Aniruddha Das is a passionate photographer from Kolkata and an Inspector of Kolkata Police by profession. He has completed the basic and advanced photography course from The Frame Institution, Kolkata under the guidance of renowned photographer Arghya Chatterjee. His photographs have been published in various newspapers and magazines along with finding places at various exhibition halls across Kolkata.

Courtesy the guidance of celebrated photographer - Dipankar Dasgupta he has more than 300 accolades to his credit with prestigious achievements such as “AFIP” Distinction in 2019 and “EFIP” Distinction in 2020 from Federation of Indian Photography (FIP) India along with “AFIAP” International Distinction in 2020 from Fe'de'ration Internationale de l'Art Photographique (FIAP), France. In addition to these he has been awarded with distinctions such as HON.PESGSPC, and GPA. PESGSPC from the country of Cyprus and also awarded with the highest APG Title “Honorary Fellowship” of Association of Photographers of Georgia HON.FAPG from the country of Georgia and HON.CPE from Romania.











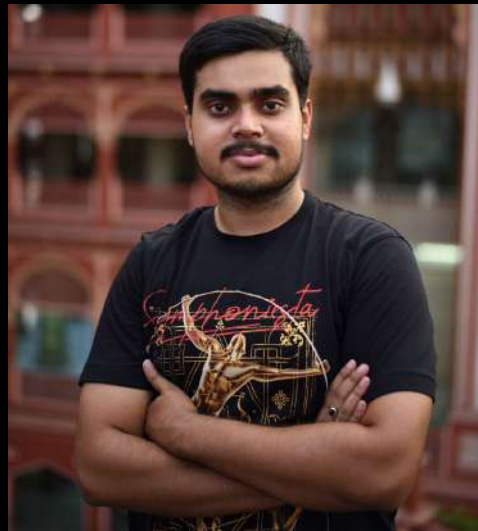






Spotlight

FEATURING A PHOTO ALBUM BY DIPANJAN CHAKRABORTY - A STREET AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER FROM KOLKATA WHO FEELS A SPECIAL CONNECT WITH THE STREETS, ALLEYS AND THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM.



Dipanjan Chakraborty is a 23 year old Kolkata based street and documentary photographer. He has been documenting the streets and alleys of Kolkata for the last four years.

As a street photographer his perspective remains rooted in people and the subtle differences in their ways of life. From a young age he has been fascinated by these aspects of the human society around him and now with the camera in his hands he endeavours to document every bit of it – the daily lives of people around him, the moments in their lives, and the beautiful fleeting moments on the streets. Dipanjan endeavours to become a visual story teller and aspires to tell a story with each and every frame which he composes. His work has been published in a number of publications across the globe.







সব কিছুই
তার
নিজের মতো
তুমিই তাকে
সুন্দর বা
কুৎসিত আখ্যা
দাও।

শ্রী শ্রী রবিশংকর
দ্য আর্ট লভিৎ











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Photograph by Soumya N Ghosh

Editor's note: The brilliant hue of the green and the dark of the water create a stark contrast in this frame which receives an added depth with the inclusion of the Intha fisherman.



Photograph by Jignesh Chavda

Editor's note: A stunning frame and a masterful piece of composition. The positioning of the full moon, the brilliant hues and their gradients in the evening sky and the huge flock of returning birds - everything works in perfect synergy to create this magical frame.



Photograph by Susmita Chatterjee

Editor's note: The close approach which fills up the frame makes the ongoing affair of shaving of the head a much more intimate one and adds depth and layers to this frame.



Photograph by Payel Banerjee

Editor's note: An outstanding moment of comedy from the streets and kudos to the photographer for being there at the right time and framing it such an opportune manner.



Photograph by Navin Paul

Editor's note: The photographer has done a wonderful job at capturing the details in the rock formations in great details and waiting for the right time for the clouds to add some drama in the distant sky, which effortlessly draws the eyes from the foreground to the distant horizon.