

Highly lens-itive

Photography can be a glamorous profession, but ace photographer, Pablo Bartholomew's pictures mirror his off-the-fringe personality.

**Text: Saroni Roy
Photo: Amit Chakravarty**

If you want to capture a moment forever, nothing can be better than a fine photograph. "I love taking pictures for myself. That's what I enjoy the most," says Pablo Bartholomew, who won the World Press Award: Best Picture Story, 1976, Morphine Addicts in India, Picture of the Year, 1985, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, the Kala Vibushan and innumerable other awards to his credit, since 1975. "Awards are punctuations of one's work and career. They work as stimuli, a realisation of what you are doing".

Son of a well-known art critic in Delhi, Pablo grew up in the midst of artistes like Ram Kumar, Jai Ram Patel, MF Husain. "I had a dark room at home which I could always use, so photography was something that I learnt at home by watching and reading. I never took any formal training." When he was seven, Pablo got his first camera. "I took up photography professionally as early as at the age of 16, when I was thrown out of high school. So that was a gamble. Initially I photographed my

friends and my family because they were the people who were close to me and around me."

In 1980, Pablo had a show at the Jehangir Art Gallery and even after 35 years he wants to show the same epoch of work but this time around, it's like his personal diary – his friends and family. "I always had a fascination with things around me." Be it people around him or events that took place across geographical boundaries. He continues, "I have no fascination for celebrities. I am more interested in the very ordinary person."

Pablo has seen a transition in the media industry. "I became a part of the media in 1983. I was a sort of a documenter of the country's era from 1983 to 2000. I photographed current events, disasters in places including South Asia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka." Visuals of the Bhopal gas tragedy and the bringing down of the Babri Masjid, are some of Pablo's documentations that leave him unnerved. "When you are in the media you are dictated by the events that happen. If you have a free rein of a territory you vent the inertia of the system. Today, the media is restricted unlike earlier when I had the whole rein of the South Asian continent. Now there are many photographers and it's cheaper for news agencies to have stringers across the continent. So you get the full picture rather than one person doing it but of course, the picture quality suffers."

Social photography has always been a major part of Pablo's portfolio, apart from journalism, fashion, corporate photography and movie stills.

"Because of my past experiences of being thrown out of High School and being sort of a social taboo, I felt being an outsider I translated in my works. I was always interested in the other people; not the rich and the famous. My body of work is about people living off-the-fringe, the outsiders – eunuchs, prostitutes, drug addicts, opium dens, film extras." The George Eastman House, Rochester, New York shelves his Bhopal gas tragedy pictures. "It's an institution which recharged documentary and photojournalism. I am happy that my collection is a part of it."

Pablo spent more than fifteen years in Mumbai and it's his favourite city. He can dig into a plate of *kheema pao* at any hour of the day. "This city is always on the move. It is where people can come and make their way. I made my way here. There is no fear – a very important feeling. It is the most vibrant city but it needs to reinvent itself in terms of infrastructure." □

Pablo Bartholomew

