

## The Remains of the Day

Bharat Sikka tries to capture the story of Kashmir through everyday objects, faces and landscapes, states **Kamayani Sharma**.

I first encountered photographs from Bharat Sikka's series *Where The Flowers Still Grow* at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale this year, mounted inside Anand Warehouse. Their curation in the cavernous chambers of a coastal godown was disorienting and yet oddly stirring, the enigmatic vistas of wintry Kashmir presenting a stark contrast to the sunny weather at the other end of the country. Seeing these images displayed at Nature Morte, New Delhi, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April to the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, was a wholly different experience. In a white cube in the national capital, the works lost some of their atmospheric charge, becoming almost mawkish. Against a backdrop of recent events such as JNU students being imprisoned for supporting Kashmiri independence and the second arrest of the Delhi University lecturer Dr. S.A.R. Geelani, these delicate pictures, though taken from 2013 to 2015 and predating these occurrences, buckled under the weight of overdetermined semiotics and self-consciousness.

The book titled *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed that inspired the exhibition lends its metaphorical weight to it – Kamila Shamsie, in her review, points out that the isolation of the book's protagonist is a parallel to the plight of Kashmir. That Sikka is not a Kashmiri complicates the matter of representation, doubly so because conflict zones are particularly fraught sites of identitarian politics. The act of recording areas troubled by state violence and riven by a regime of everyday oppression throws up questions about agency and power replicated in aesthetic practices. Some of the portraits have an ethnographic quality that can be discomfiting, the young man reduced to a symbolic cipher. This is not to say, obviously, that only the interpretations of 'insiders' are acceptable. Rather, the larger question at stake is regarding what has been called the problem of "representing the unrepresentable". Objects, faces and landscapes become traces of trauma endured, indexing the horrors of a long-drawn unrest. The 'portrait' of the old man obscured behind trees is memorable and poignant, especially if encountered after the wide shots of young men riding horses and standing dwarfed by their remote and stunning surroundings. There is an atemporal, folkloric quality to some of these images of youth, as if they exist outside of history, striking faux-heroic poses. Sikka's work, including his 2012 show at the same gallery, *Matter*, has long focused on the marks of historical change that contemporary India bears. In this exhibition, this was somewhat undermined because the scars wrought on the world on view cannot be truly exposed.

The recently released book titled *Witness Kashmir 1986-2016/Nine Photographers* edited by the filmmaker Sanjay Kak is a good reference



**Bharat Sikka.** *Untitled* from the series *Where the Flowers Still Grow*. Giclée print. 101.6 cms x 127 cms unframed. Edition of 6. 2014-15.  
Image courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi.

point for this discussion. Comprising the works of nine Kashmiri photographers over thirty years, the book can be juxtaposed with Sikka's series as an emic counterpoint. The predicament of seeing and telling has long been part of the discourse on art based on historical memory; Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness And The Archive*, asserts that even the survivor's testimony is incomplete because it falls short of conveying the final moment of what was survived. This sentiment was somewhat echoed by the photographers in various interviews during the book's release. Some of the images in the book, such as Showkat Nanda's portraits bear mentioning in relation to Sikka's works. Can a visitor become fluent in the language of the suffering in order to articulate the blend of banality and tragedy that permeates their lives? Indeed, it is possible to argue that Kashmir shouldn't always be depicted as a place of bloodshed and drama. But this returns us to the issue of what it means to be a witness – a daily chronicler of an intimate world or a guest observing the reality at some remove?

Close-ups abounded of everyday things like telephones, kettles and stoves coldly illuminated, and shots of interiors, doorways, furniture and fixtures bathed in a diffused glow of natural light. The idea of home and neighbourhood, indicating stability and sociality, endangered by destruction, looms large. A picture of the horn used to announce the *azaan*, a half-made bed, a newspaper bearing bad news sliced by a sun-ray and images of ramshackle thresholds hinting at exoduses and eliminations acquire poignancy because of the lost ordinariness they suggest. American photographer Carolyn Drake's *Two Rivers* series comes to mind, her pictures of Central Asian terrains and people similar in their palette and use of light. Though her images aren't haunted by ominous undertones of death lurking just out of sight, there is a spooky quality to them that is shared with Sikka's works. This is heightened perhaps by the similarity in colours, tones and iconography common to the regions because of a shared cultural imaginary.

The conspicuous absence of women has been noted and Sikka's response has not been very satisfactory – he considers the work an extension of his 'Indian Men' series. Of course, the merits of the works cannot be evaluated according to these terms but at one level it is frustrating to confront the reality reinforced even in artistic interpretations. In a context in which women routinely get ignored by both the people in power and their own communities, their invisibility galls. It also alerts one to the difficulty of making apparent the hidden debris buried beneath the havoc wreaked by insurgency and military abuse in lands without peace – there are many tales that no single story about Kashmir will be able to tell, such as the still relatively little-narrated accounts of the flight of the Pandits. In looking at pictures from conflicted areas it is most important to remember what they do not quite show. /

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