

# Digital Decade

Sadanand Menon

In answer to the question, 'What has distinguished itself in the field of Indian photography over the past decade?', the answer will categorically have to be, 'the manifestations of digital technology'.

With this, the central factor of the primacy of analog photography - the photography of films and darkrooms - has passed.

Photography can be said to have had three principal historic periods since its accidental initiation in 1839. Photographer Paul Cohen, who teaches at the School of Art Institute, Chicago, even suggests that it must therefore be treated as three different media.

The first period of recording of still life, landscapes and people lasted some forty-five years, till the mid-1880s. These were significant years of image making which created unfiltered histories of places and people.

Then, in almost a hundred year innings from mid-1880s to mid-1980s, photography played many momentous roles, from being an ally of the imperialist project, to providing visual endorsements to colonial anthropology, to remaking visions of the corporeal - from body gesture in wars, dance and sport to expansions of the atmosphere by thermonuclear detonations. These were translated into 'time' through a shutter speed that allowed film exposure to be compressed into a millionth of a second. Here, photography offered a visual mapping of time that was both logical and problematically 'unreal' - a modernist vision that simultaneously defined scientific as well as artistic truth.

The last period, post-1990, can be said to belong entirely to the digital, turning the analog practice on its head and paving the way for unfettered and, often, undetectable visual fabrication. This has also helped convert amateurs and lay persons into image-makers with dramatic consequences. The tools of the trade too have diversified. From bulky cameras with screw-mount lenses to the present-day ubiquitous play of freeze-frame video cameras and multi-tasking mobiles all of which offer the possibility of camera-to-computer-to-image on-line printing. These are now images that have the advantage of 'instant' click and 'instant' transfer into the media field.

No doubt, photography and photo practice have changed, as even a single issue of 'Better Photography' magazine can so well illustrate. The range of things people are doing with the camera is simply phenomenal. But how does it all add up?

In the Indian context, nothing overly dramatic has happened in the field of photography over the past decade. Of course exhibitions have happened, books have been published, the quantum of photo-practitioners has exploded in geometric proportion, B&W photography has all but died out (along with some outstanding photographers like Raghubir Singh and M.Krishnan), events ranging from tsunamis, earthquakes, riots and mass murders have happened to feed the hunger of the 'image mill' and an explosion of illustrated journals (with at least four on photography itself) has kept the picture dense and crowded. It is appropriate that this is the tenth anniversary issue of BP.

For me, personally, the most promising shift in photographic practice has been its re-appropriation by visual artists. The manner in which the photo-

graph has centrally entered the works of leading Indian art makers like Vivan Sundaram, Atul Dodiya, Nalini Malani, N.Pushpamala, Ayisha Abraham, Sheba Chacchi, and others has returned a crucial debate and interrogation to the form and practice of photography.

Another crucial moment has been the setting up, last year, of the Ebrahim Alkazi archives in New Delhi, which is a treasure trove of photographic works in India of the past one hundred years, including the works of Felice Beato and Seymour Bourne, not to speak of several royal 'collections'. Also significant in a similar vein, is the setting up of the finest state-of-the-art archive of the photos of Sri Ramana Maharshi at his ashram in Thiruvannamalai. Spearheaded by a team of young enthusiasts and devotees, this has emerged as the finest center for restoration and archiving in Asia and a role model for anyone wanting to preserve photographic material.

The decade, however, is signified for me by two stunning 'visual' events. One was the aerial attack on the World Trade Towers, New York, in 2001 and the other was the leaked digital visuals of the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in the high security prisons at Abu Ghraib. In both instances, it was the amateur, available, on-the-spot photography and videography that relayed the first visuals to the world. There was no fetish of the 'good photograph' or of photographic virtuosity or fetish of equipment or technique involved. These were simply images from the 'frontiers' in an era when the 'frontier' is no longer distant but has become proximate. Daily life is a war and everyone else is the 'other'. In a sense, the photograph in the era of the digital, is like an apotropaic device managing and taming fearsome experience and numbing shock. One of the ways to do this, as Susan Sontag suggested in her essay 'In Plato's Cave', is through the acquisitive mode of 'collecting the world' through 'collecting photographs'.

Without a doubt, any general audit will reveal that the largest sales in the past decade must have been of albums for storing pictures. Through the fragmented, digital mode, reality has been re-stated. Today the whole world is re-imagined as an album of images.