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A MAN AMONG MANY

"India is not something you can just walk into and understand as an outsider," says **Raghu Rai**, the country's most celebrated photographer. He tells **Colin Pantall** why for him it's about joining the flow, using minimal equipment and making himself as inconspicuous as possible to become part of the crowd.

1 ***Chawri Bazaar*, Old Delhi, 1972.**

Raghu Rai came to photography by chance. "I was staying with my elder brother Paul, who was a photographer," he recalls. "We went to a village to take some pictures and, when the film got developed, my brother sent one of my images to *The Times* in London. It was a picture of a baby donkey in the fading sunset. The picture editor there was Norman Hall, who was also the editor of the *British Journal of Photography Annual*, and he published it as a half page in *The Times*.

"At the time, I was working in civil engineering, because that was what my parents wanted me to do – it was a government job, and everyone wanted a government job in India in the 1960s. But I hated it. So when this picture was published, it was like a revelation. I thought, 'That's it, I'm going to be a photographer'."

He became a professional photographer in 1965, working at *The Statesman* in Calcutta. "It had formerly been a British newspaper and still had a British editor called Ivan Charlton, who had a wonderful respect for photography. I used to get lots of space – half pages and photo features when something big happened."

Later, Rai worked for *India Today* (from 1982-1991), a weekly magazine that would give him 12-14 pages for a story, and leave him to choose the assignments that interested him. "That was the last job I did," he says. "It's better to be a free bird and do what I want."

It was a lucky start, but Rai soon proved his worth and, by 1977, Henri Cartier-Bresson had nominated him to join Magnum Photos. Over the years, he has shot some of the most important people in India, but he says he's most committed to everyday folk, the people whose daily lives make up "the soul of this country".

Man of the people

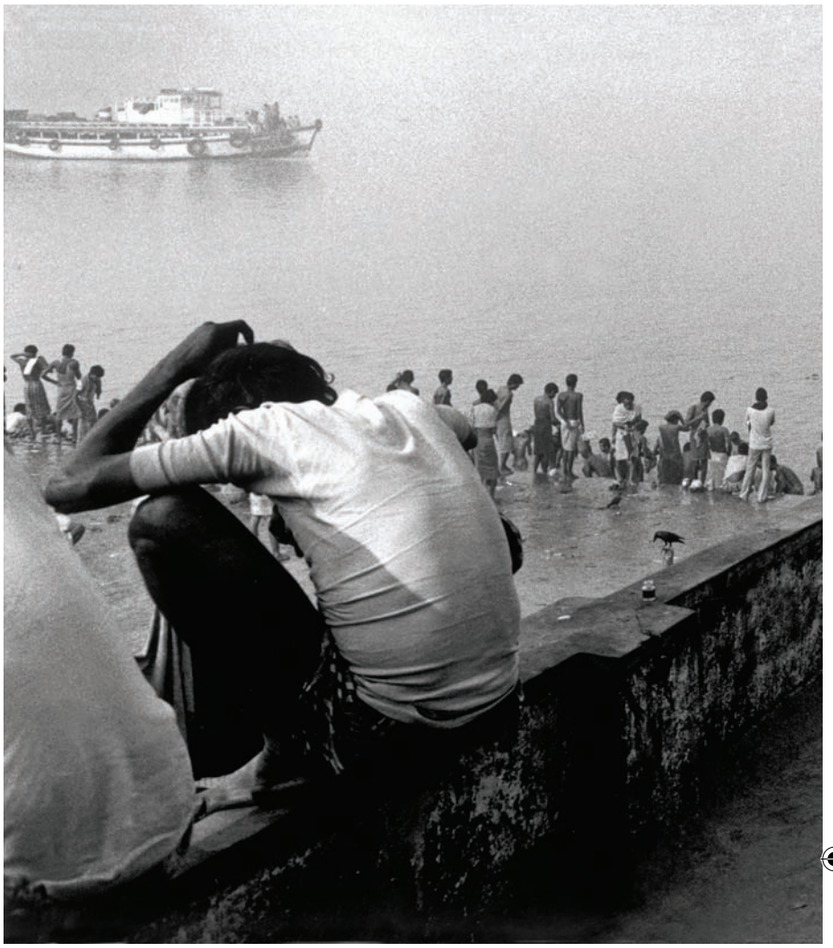
"A few years ago in Delhi there was a French-led symposium on street photography, and one of the speakers said it was dead," says Rai in an interview with him in early February. "I took him on and said the purpose of street photography, or any photography, is to document the times we live in now. This could be documenting the lives of famous people like Indira Gandhi or Mother Teresa but, for me, the real purpose is to photograph the lives of ordinary people."

One of Rai's earliest and best-known works demonstrates this affection for the ordinary. Showing a street scene at Chowri Bazaar, Old Delhi [1], the image is criss-crossed with energy, as rickshaws, trolleys, carriages and bikes vie with horses, cows, labourers and schoolchildren for possession of the road. Down the middle of the picture, carriage tracks have left trails through what looks like frost. Barefooted labourers push pipes down the roadway, while, across the top of the picture, a stream of horse-drawn carriages carry passengers to their place of work.

It is a shot that could only have been taken in India but, as Rai says, photography is a Western invention, and Indian photographers are equally inspired by people such as Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész and Robert Frank as

2 ***Bodybuilders and wrestlers on the ghats,*** Kolkata, 1990.

3 ***Dust storm,*** Rajasthan, 1975.



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4 *The day before...* [Hindu militants razed the Babri mosque], Ayodhya, 06 December 1972.

5 *Visitors at Kanyakumari,* 2006.

6 *Traffic constable and horse "bagghie",* Kolkata, 2004.

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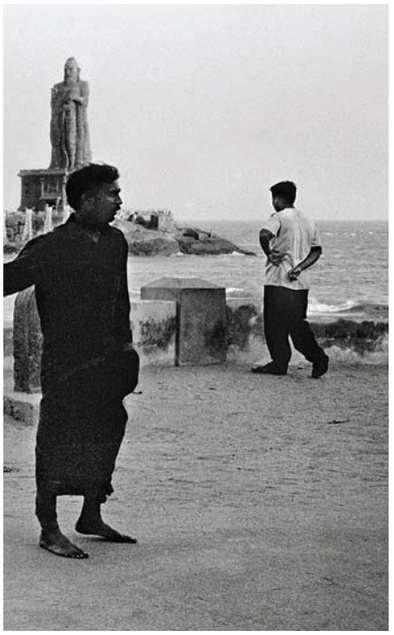

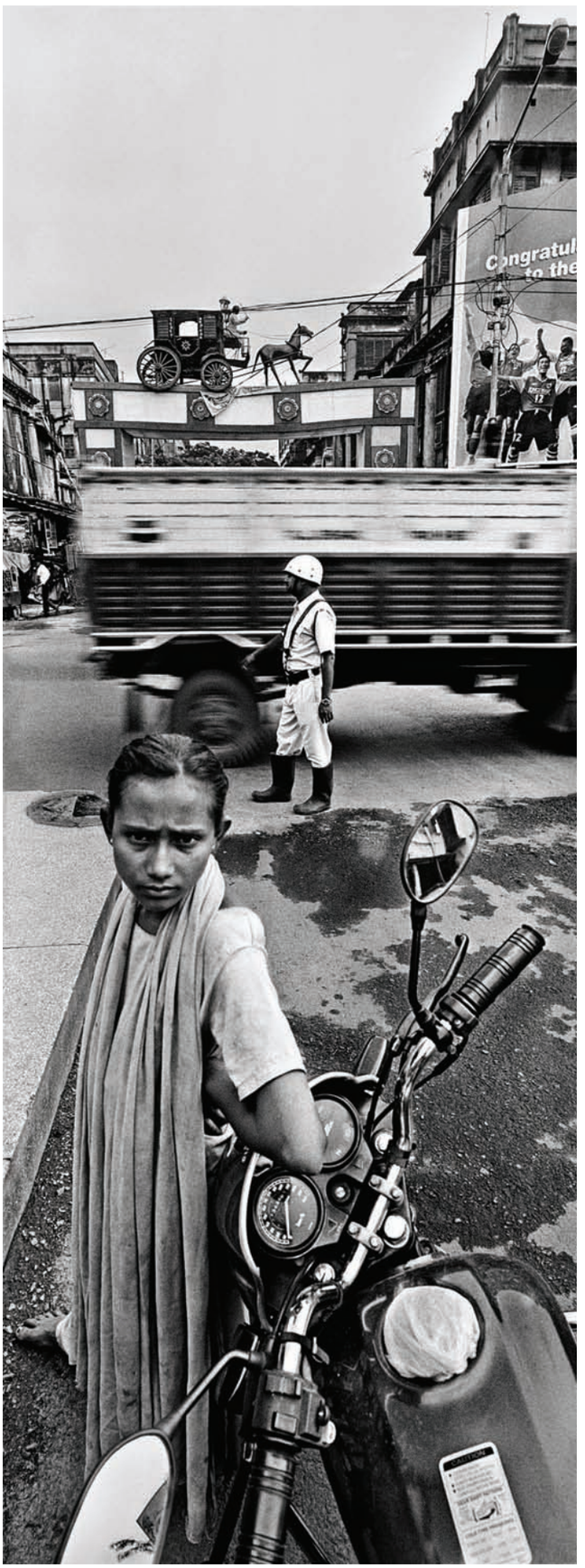

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anyone else. The difference is they have to capture a huge amount of detail in one image to represent the world around them. "India has [so many] different environments, religions and people; there is so much going on that your picture needs to take in," he says. "It has to be multi-layered to capture the complexity of India. It need not be one decisive moment, but several decisive moments. That's what I try to capture in my photographs. You have to remember India is not one country or one culture or one time. You look at that picture of Delhi and it could have been taken 200 years ago."

Rai recently took up shooting panoramics to try to capture all this detail, but says it takes an insider to get under the surface of things. "India is my own world," he says. "It takes all of you mentally, physically and spiritually. Almost every photographer in the world comes to India at some point because, on the surface, India is a very easy country to photograph. But India is not something you can just walk into and understand as an outsider. I can walk around and sniff around and my photography is life itself. It's not a style; it's a way of being. My context and connectivity is with a larger space and a larger experience."

Photographing Indian street life also requires its own distinctive approach, one sensitive to its overwhelming atmosphere. New York earned the in-your-face style of William Klein or Bruce Gilden, Tokyo the strange anonymity of Daido Moriyama or Shomei Tomatsu, and Paris the nostalgic romance of Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau and Brassaï. For Rai, photographing in India is about joining the flow. Using minimal equipment and making himself as inconspicuous as possible, he's a part of the crowd, not an outsider looking in.

Death's toll

He's also covered some of India's most traumatic recent historical events, most notably Bhopal in 1984. The name is now synonymous with a gas leak at the US-owned Union Carbide plant, which took just a few days to kill thousands of people. Many more have died and suffered since, and the disaster has become a namesake for corporate criminality and evasion of responsibility.

Rai arrived in Bhopal the day after the leak, and took an iconic picture of the world's worst industrial disaster. It shows a child being buried in a rough mix of soil and stone, his body wrapped in some kind of shroud but his face uncovered. A hand brushes the child's forehead in a gesture of comfort, but his eyes are empty and clouded, and his mouth open in an expression of exhaustion and terror. Nobody knows who the child was because his body was never claimed.

He returned to Bhopal after his first report, working on the unfolding and still-continuing story with Greenpeace. In the end, though, he found the tragedy too much to bear. "It's a never-ending story because people are still dying there," he says. "I made a book and an exhibition and it did make a difference at one

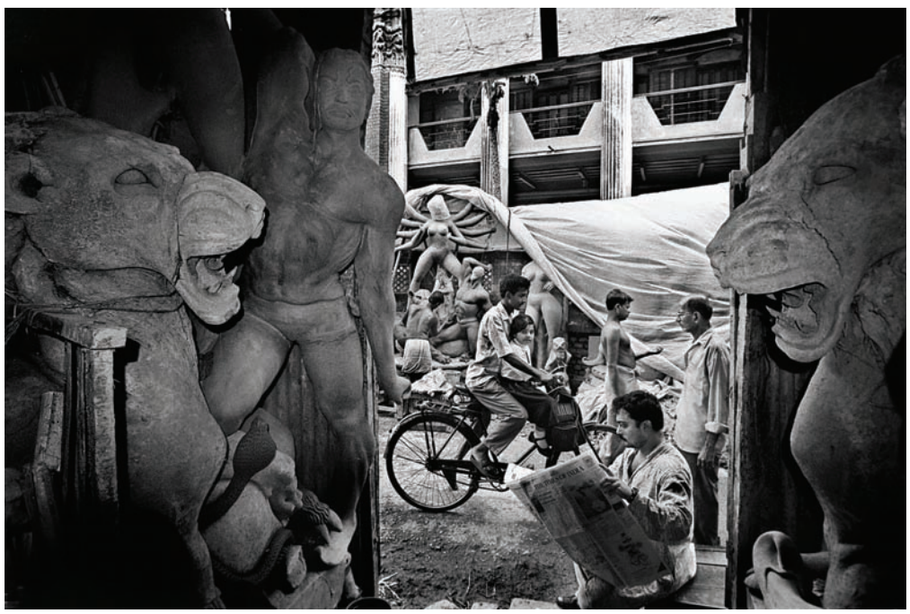
On view

Raghu Rai's **Invocation to India** *is on show at the New Art Exchange, Nottingham until 30 April as part of* **Format International Photography Festival**, *which will also show a selection of his work in the* **Right Here, Right Now** *survey of contemporary street photography at the Quad Gallery in Derby.*

www.formatfestival.com
www.thenewartexchange.org.uk

7 *Men watching in different directions, Manikarnika Ghat – where Hindus burn their dead,* Varanasi, 2005.

8 *Preparing for Dugra Pooja,* Kolkata, 1999.



time, but when you go into tragic situations like that, it takes a toll on you. I was there from the start and, in the first three days, the gas was still there in people's bodies, seeping out. Seeing so much death was terrible, and going back was also painful because you see all this suffering and you truly can't change people's lives. You need healing after that."

For Rai, that healing comes with the camera. "The moment you put a camera on your eye, your focus becomes clearer and you start learning about where you come from," he says. "When I take pictures, I am exploring the people around me, the streets around me, the world around me."

He is constantly drawn to the holy city of Varanasi, the place where many Hindus come to burn their dead. Cremation here means instant liberation from the burden of life, a release from the endless cycles of reincarnation and suffering, and the holiest cremation site in Varanasi is Manikarnika Ghat. Rai's best-known photograph from there [7] shows a line of men standing and sitting across the image, echoing his belief that his pictures represent a "horizontal experience"

of India with life stretching out in all directions beyond the frame. "There is no exact story I'm telling here," he says. "The body language and expressions capture the spirit and energy of the place. My wife gets very angry when she sees this picture because of the man on the right is holding his thing. She sees this and says to me, 'You Indian men are stupid!'"

Out of style

Most of Rai's work is in black-and-white, but he started shooting in colour when foreign magazines began needing it. For him, it depends on the subject matter. "Different subjects require different responses," he explains. "Sometimes the colours won't gel – they can dig a hole in the space of the picture. Black-and-white puts a filter on the situation. It silences the noises of the colours, because colours have an emotional and physical response. India is a very colourful country but it doesn't work for all subjects. I couldn't have done my work on Mother Teresa in colour. My training was in black-and-white and because, of that, it makes more sense to me."

India has changed radically in the five decades Rai has been photographing, however, and he says that's affected the way the country is photographed. "Now everyone has a cell phone and they take a few pictures, then they think, 'Oh, that looks interesting', buy a camera and start taking photographs," he says. "The tragic thing is we all have computers so we see thousands and thousands of pictures – pictures from all over the world. For example, people see work by Lee Friedlander and they try to copy him. But when Friedlander does something, it's new. When somebody else sees Friedlander's work and tries to do the same, they are just making an inferior copy. Very little original work gets done.

"I am against style. If style emerges from your personal life, your experiences and your need to photograph, then I understand it. But too often style is just copied, and you end up with rubbish. As an example, a few years ago a very direct, hard flash was popular and we ended up with lots of pictures of people looking startled and stupid. You need to be responsive and sensitive, to receive something and not just grab it."

Globalisation has made a rapid impact on India, but some photographers aren't sensitive enough to let it change their work, although they will inevitably record it. For Rai, that's all wrong. "The poet Khalil Gibran said, 'These children are not my children or your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you'. I want my image to be 'the Life's longing for itself'.

"If people can connect with my pictures and enjoy them, that is enough for me. It's like you are walking down the street and you smile at someone and they smile back. There is nothing given and nothing taken. It is just like a little nudge; a recognition of humanity and life. That's what photography means to me. It is my profession, it is my religion, it is my karma – it is my life."

Raghu Rai is represented by Magnum Photos and the Aicon Gallery.
www.magnumphotos.com
www.aicongallery.com