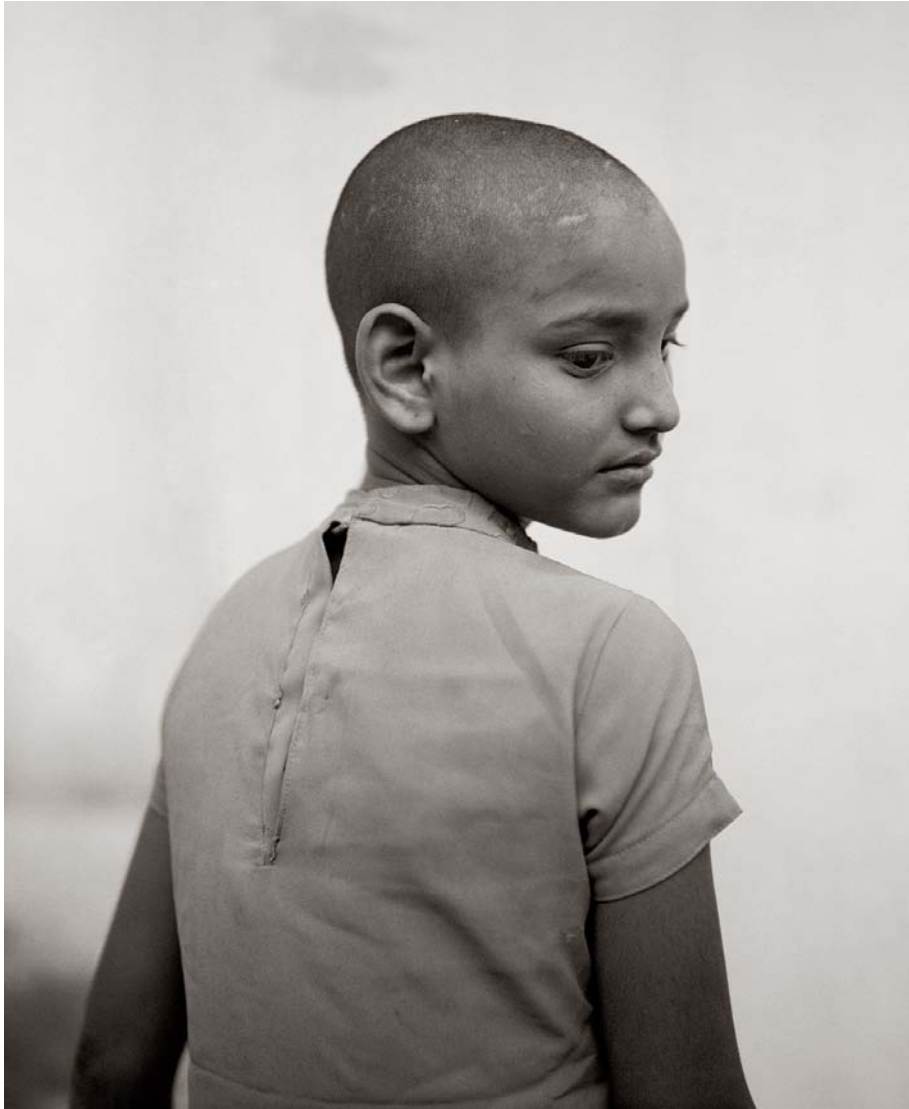


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'Survival Tactics: The Work of Fazal Sheikh'  
Mary Warner Marien



*Simran, homeless shelter, Delhi, 2008*

Fazal Sheikh's talent for quiet pictorial invention has been evident from the first. His early photographs in Africa confounded the popular expectation that pictures of African refugees ought to show the bodily effects of famine, drought, and conflict. His first book *A Sense of Common Ground* (1996) depicts refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda who escaped ethnic hatred by fleeing to camps in Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi. Fluent in Swahili, Sheikh visited

these camps on and off for two years and came to know the refugees' individual life histories. Familiarity with individuals precluded his portraying acquaintances as symbols of African hardship or as victims of circumstance. Although sympathetic to the plight of these displaced people, Sheikh did not highlight their suffering. He encouraged his sitters to choose their own poses, and he moderated traces of physical trauma through composition. At the same time, Sheikh did not isolate the sitters. In the background of Sheikh's early images, one sees other residents of the camps, sometimes watching and sometimes engaging in other activities. The images' pallor subtly suggests the refugees' anxious idleness - waiting through long days and tempering expectations for the future.

During his time in Africa, Sheikh refined his capacity to transform the environment into a visual vernacular unique to a place. This sensibility was heightened in *The Victor Weeps* (1998). Though published only two years after his African pictures, *The Victor Weeps* - a study of Afghani refugees living in northern Pakistan - is a marked development in Sheikh's outlook, both visually and conceptually. As he had in Africa, he made repeated trips for two years to the area, developing relationships with the many refugees who had fled the Soviet invasion or the Taliban rule.

A compendium of memories and apocalypse, Sheikh's dangerous journey from northern Pakistan to Kabul is rendered in a series of images showing survivors overshadowed by the extensive ruins of bombed-out buildings. The bleached brightness of the African pictures has given way to evening and the theatrical illumination of gaslights on stalwart faces. Where the African project contains short description of when and how various ethnic groups came to be refugees, *The Victor Weeps* is long on maps, social data, and political analysis. Personal histories of Sheikh's subjects accompany each portrait. The compilation also contains photographs of correspondence, and in an approach that Sheikh used extensively in this book, hands present photographs of dead and missing relatives. While the photographs show people at one moment of time, the text tells their history, recollections, and beliefs. Also, Sheikh acknowledges the role of his sitters in completing the project, and a note at the end of the book informs readers that profits are being directed to communities in northern Pakistan.

*Moksha* (2002) was photographed in the northern Indian city of Vrindavan, where widows from every social background find a safe haven. Some women have been forcibly displaced while others have chosen the holy city for its spirituality and tranquility. Their lives in Vrindavan may be bleak or blessed, depending on where they find lodging and if they have a private income. Sheikh's images are often liquid and dreamlike, in keeping with the notion of *moksha*, that is, transcendence from the world's cares. As he did in *The Victor Weeps*, Sheikh features portraits of individuals, accompanied by texts describing the reasons why they have come to Vrindavan. His critical observations on the condition of widows in India end the book.

*A Sense of Common Ground* and *The Victor Weeps* were prompted by Sheikh's family ties. As a child he spent summers with his father's kin in Nairobi; his trip to northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, where *The Victor Weeps* was photographed, originated in his initial visit to the region where his grandfather was born in 1900. Although *Moksha* and Sheikh's most recent book, *Ladli* (2007) set aside family ties, they are rich in their portrayal of community.

In *Ladli*, Sheikh not only expanded his story-telling proficiency but also united it with the kind of close-up portraiture found in *The Victor Weeps* and *Moksha*. *Ladli* ranges beyond the model of calm observation and reflection that Sheikh drew on for many of his early photographs. It begins with a disturbing overview of women's rights in India, and ends with grisly photographs, taken by

activists and managers of women's shelters, showing women who have been killed or disfigured by members of their families. In this book, Sheikh clearly announces his political point of view. He believes that laws protecting women's rights and children's entitlement to education are ineffective because there is little government interest in enforcing regulations that run counter to cultural values. Even though it is outlawed, the use of ultrasound scans to detect a fetus's gender and early-term abortion of female fetuses are widespread. As a consequence, some regions in India have a ratio of females to males of 7:10.

*Ladli* opens with full-page plates featuring photographs of abandoned newborns, toddlers, and young school children, who are cared for in orphanages that Sheikh visited. They have been renounced because of birth defects or simply because they are female. To protect them from further abuse, Sheikh has altered their names. Another segment of the book features short first-person essays by grim-faced midwives who describe the pressures of their work, including requests to kill newborn females. One harsh theme runs through their accounts, as well as through the stories told by women who have not born male heirs, and women born into households without a male heir. Social status, as well as psychological and economic wellbeing, can be abruptly forfeited simply for being female.

Sheikh points out that while most married women are subject to some derision if they do not bear male offspring, poor families are especially powerless to deal with the outcomes of this situation. They may sell a young daughter into marriage or send her to a city at a young age to find work. These girls are particularly subject to physical and mental abuse, as well as to the dangers of the sex trade. The Indian Constitution, signed in 1950, stated that "the State shall endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years." Nevertheless, this provision is overlooked in several Indian provinces. Similarly ignored is the 1986 ruling that outlawed child labor in dangerous and unhealthful jobs. Many children continue to work as weavers, cigarette rollers, and in other trades where their participation has been banned.

The central section of *Ladli* features portraits of somber young female workers. Unlike the American photographer, Lewis Hine (1874-1940), whose clandestine photographs of child labor helped to create protective national legislation in the early years of the twentieth century, Sheikh's photographs do not show children at work. Still, Sheikh's images share with Hine's an attitude toward the picturing of youthful laborers. In Hine's photographs and in Sheikh's, the children seem to possess an unruffled solemnity and a maturity beyond their years. They are not victims, but survivors.

In Hindi, *Ladli*, translates as "beloved daughter", a phrase whose human warmth dwindles into chilly irony in the last section of the book. Here women who have been abducted, beaten, or raped, along with those who work as under-aged prostitutes or who are the children of sex workers sit with their backs to the camera. Their pose simultaneously indicates the need to shield their identity and their loss of social legitimacy. Stark first-person testimony supplements many of the photographs.

The book concludes with the ghastly statistic that "in India's main cities, every six hours, a young married woman is burned to death." In addition, "two-thirds of Indian women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine have been beaten, raped, or forced to provide sex." The last few photographs, gathered by the organizations that shelter endangered women, show the bodies of

mained and murdered women. The pictures are accompanied by text describing the circumstances that led to the women's deaths.

Sheikh offers hope that coalitions of Indian activists from different backgrounds will be able to protect women through an expanding network of shelters, and that ultimately pressure groups will persuade officials to protect women. He includes a list of organizations that already pursue these goals, and to whom some of the proceeds of the book will be given.

In little more than a decade, Fazal Sheikh has transformed his practice from that of image-maker to social-change maker. He has become increasingly concerned with interrelating text and image, while refining his role as interpreter of human affliction. In Africa and Afghanistan, he was an activist-artist. In India, Sheikh became an artist-activist.

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