

*Aperture*

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'Fazal Sheikh: Beloved Daughters'

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*Renuka, Bhajan Ashram, Vrindavan, India, 2005*

“A rose can come from a thorn, a thorn can come from a rose,” reads the Afghan proverb accompanying the portrait of a baby (also Afghan, and seated next to a rose) on the back cover of Fazal Sheikh’s booklet *When Two Bulls Fight, the Leg of the Calf is Broken*. This twenty-page work was put together immediately after 9/11 as an impassioned call for restraint in the prevailing climate of revenge. But the proverb, in all the complexity of its apparently simple message, could be applied as well to the entire corpus Sheikh has assembled, project by project, book by book, over the past fifteen years. *Moksha* (2005) and *Ladli* (2007) – the two companion pieces for which

he received the 2005 Henri Cartier-Bresson award, and which were featured last summer at the Fondation HCB in Paris – are no exception.

Weaving together photographs and texts, investigation and creation, these two works offer us a multifaceted look at the situation of women in India today. The point of departure was a brief news item Sheikh read many years ago about the holy city of Vrindavan, known for its four thousand Hindu temples and shrines, but also for some twenty thousand dispossessed widows who have taken refuge there in the hope that their devotion to Krishna will gain them entry to *moksha*, the state of eternal bliss. The widows came to mind, Sheikh explains, in the wake of his earlier companion pieces on Somali women refugees (*A Camel for the Son* and *Ramadan Moon*, both 2001), because of the concrete women's issues involved, but also the more intangible question of religiosity, which he had explored in terms of Islam with *Ramadan Moon*.

The force of *Moksha* lies precisely in the integration of these two apparently disparate dimensions into a rhythmic flow of images and texts alternating Sheikh's hypnotic photographs of Vrindavan, his stately portraits of the widows he met there, and their own accounts of earthly sufferings and hopes for a better life in *moksha*.

Far from orienting us to a neatly packaged reportage, Sheikh's "subjective camera" – panning shadowy voids and foggy landscapes, timeworn facades and deserted alleyways, sleeping dogs and birds in flight, not to mention the phantomlike white-shrouded widows chanting in the temples— thrusts us into the disorienting, paradoxical experience at hand. The widows' stories are painful, not simply because of their traditional exclusion from a society that considers them "inauspicious" but because of their material situations: cast out by their families, denied their inheritances and decent pensions, and, depending on their age, prey to sexual exploitation. But if Sheikh makes it clear in his epilogue that the keys to resolving this earthly plight are education and economic independence, he also recognizes that what was for him for him the "secret, impenetrable world" of Vrindavan offers the widows a haven and that their communion with Krishna gives meaning to their lives.

In *Ladli* ("beloved daughter" in Hindi), by contrast, he opts to delve more deeply into the here and now, to "discover from childbirth what women, the mother and her daughter, have to suffer." The result is at once a haunting portrait album of the girls and women he met in orphanages, shelters, and slums throughout India and a painful catalog of abuses ranging from feticide and infanticide to human trafficking and dowry deaths. Here, too, by highlighting the day-to-day efforts of local activists, he reminds us that "a rose can come from a thorn, a thorn can come from a rose." And true to his own "artist-activist" credo, Sheikh is adapting a series of some thirty or forty posters from *Moksha* and *Ladli* for display in a thousand venues throughout India.