

Fazal Sheikh: A Sense of Common Ground

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The idea of communality is important to Fazal Sheikh and informs his approach to taking photographs. From his earliest pictures taken in Kenya and South Africa, and the first series of portraits he made in refugee camps on the Kenya–Sudan border in 1992, he realised the importance of a photograph being, as far as possible, an act of mutual engagement, rather than an unequal encounter between himself, as curious observer, and his subjects, as willing victims. The care with which Sheikh approaches his subjects, and the self-possession with which they stand before the camera, allow us to contemplate them as people who, despite differences of geography, religion, language, education and economics, are human beings similar to ourselves. Rather than a distancing device, Sheikh's photographs suggest that the subject and the viewer have more in common than divides them.

On his first visit to a refugee camp in February 1992, he saw how the photographers and journalists he had travelled with rushed in to grab the “story” they had come to cover, some of them staying less than a day before flying home. Later he wrote: “... I remembered watching them working, and feeling a sense of unease, an inability to follow along and take the expected photographs. As the days passed, the preconceptions that had been foisted on me in the initial briefing and the shock of the first encounter began to fade away, allowing a broader sense of the refugees and their situation to emerge. It was at this point that I began to ask the community elders and the refugees to collaborate with me in making the images.”

This was the approach he would repeat in other countries in the future, always seeking the permission of the people he wanted to photograph before taking a picture. He made a

clear “stage”—even if it was just a patch of open ground—on which his subjects presented themselves to the camera; so that they could be in no doubt as to their participation. He wanted the engagement between himself and them to be as intense as possible. “I didn’t like the *act* of photographing, in that it separated me from the other person at that moment. I would spend time getting a kind of calm, a familiarity with the people, and then I would make the photograph, and right away a barrier went up, which made it clear that once again I was an outsider. So I thought the best way was to make it a communal act.”

The portraits he took later that year at the transit camp in Lokichoggio—where the numbers of Sudanese would grow to 25,000 that summer—established a way of working that has remained fundamentally the same ever since: a simple, direct, respectful rendering of a person, or persons, in front of the camera. Later, when it came to making books, he would include other kinds of photographs—landscapes, still lifes, found portraits, as well as written elements—alongside personal testimonies and his own background narrative, each one adding to a complex layering that would reflect his experience among different communities; but the portraits remain the core of his work.

A portrait taken by Sheikh is a thing of beauty in itself. Just as he requires the act of photographing to be consensual, and undertaken as calmly as possible, so he believes the finished print—whether in a book or exhibition—should reflect the care and respect for the subject about whom it was made. Although his work over the past two decades has dealt almost exclusively with groups of people who are in some way disadvantaged or dispossessed, he does not require a suffering person to appear “heroic” in

his photographs, or to illustrate or dramatise their grief. Nor does he feel that a rapidly shot, or “gritty” image intensifies the meaning of a portrait, or the way it is understood. He has an innate delicacy that seems to bring out a sense of composure in his sitters, who sometimes look, despite their traumatic histories, as if they have been endowed with a mysterious sense of grace.

By the time he began working as a photographer in the late 1980s, the movement for humanitarian, or “concerned” photography was already well in decline. For more than half a century, documentary photographers in America and Europe had been engaged in social and economic reform, believing that, by publishing pictures which showed the conditions of the poor or the suffering, they could provoke the public to bring about change. But by the 1970s, in America and Europe, there was a shift away from a humanistic, narrative style. A generation of young photographers was turning the camera inwards, creating diaristic self-portraits or constructing elaborate sets on which actors dramatised small personal experiences from contemporary life. Though the shift was often discussed in terms of style, it also suggested a more fundamental disengagement with communal responsibility. Sated by pictures of desperate situations they or their donations appeared to do little to alleviate, audiences protested “compassion fatigue.” Magazines, accordingly, provided more distracting, less conscience-provoking pictures. Meanwhile, artist-photographers sought a place in fine art galleries and parity for their works with paintings in museums. A dwindling number of photojournalists still covered international disasters, but their role was increasingly being taken over by television news crews.

Sheikh, however, understood a clear distinction between documentary work and photojournalism. He had never wanted to make swift photo stories to sell to magazines. He wanted to document in the long term. His struggle was to define his subject, and, having identified it, to find the best way to engage with it.

When he began studying photography at Princeton in the mid-1980s, he was interested in self-portraiture. “At around nineteen or so, you’re much more concerned about how you fit into society, and a lot of my work was very introspective. Self-portraiture became the means by which to explore, and come to terms with, questions within myself. Soon afterwards, though, I began to realise that this period of self-examination had satisfied a therapeutic role. I still used photography as a kind of inquiry, but I turned my gaze outwards. The work became about other people, or the way I related to other people. It was about venturing out into communities. It was about looking outwards from some place.”

After graduating in 1987, he travelled overland across Africa, spending several months photographing in the South African homelands and in Kenya (pp. 47 fol.). Sheikh’s father was Kenyan and his mother American, and though he grew up and was educated in America, he had spent many of his summers in Nairobi with his aunts and uncles and cousins, so he was to a degree assimilated into Kenyan society. He speaks Swahili, which would help him later in the Kenyan camps, but in South Africa, neither his heritage, nor his linguistic skills, made any difference to the hostile reception he received. Growing up in New York, he realized he had probably been seen as “foreign” and “different,” but he had never really experienced prejudice first-hand. In South Africa,

however, it became very clear that racism was being levelled against him, and the experience made him think more deeply about his approach to his work. “I realised that the pictures I wanted to make were much more about *permission*. They could be very simple, non-declarative. But the point was that, somehow, I wanted to be aligned with the people in them.”

In 1992 he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to photograph among the Swahili communities on the Kenyan coast, but when he arrived in Nairobi he found the government trying to deal with the influx of half a million refugees who were fleeing the fighting in three different African war zones—Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Fearing the damage this would do to their tourist economy, the government had directed the flood of people to a series of camps that had been hastily set up across northeast Kenya. It was here, with the help of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), that Sheikh began to photograph within the refugee communities, and over the next three years he travelled between the different camps in Kenya, to the Mozambican refugees in Malawi, and to camps in Tanzania where hundreds of thousands of people had fled to escape the genocide in Rwanda.

In these pictures the refugees present themselves to the camera singly, in couples, sometimes in large groups. Not all of them look comfortable with the experience, though their expressions, in such cases, are of watchfulness rather than fear. All of them are identified by name. One of Sheikh’s innate strengths is his ability to bring out the tenderness of personal relationships, and when his portraits contain two or three people, they are often connected by touch, by the slightest gesture, a hand on an arm, or resting protectively, like a blessing, on a child’s head.

Among the statistics that had lodged in Sheikh's head from his first UNHCR briefing were the estimated 12,000 "unaccompanied minors" who had arrived from southern Sudan. These were boys between eight and eighteen who had been abducted from their homes in Sudan and taken to Ethiopia, where they were trained to fight in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) against the Islamic-governed northern Sudan. After the Ethiopian government fell in 1991, the boys had returned to Sudan, where the SPLA was later defeated, and they had made their way across the border into Kenya on foot. Now the boys were being moved on from the camp because the SPLA had been kidnapping older boys under cover of darkness and taking them back across the border into the war zone, where they would be forced to fight.

In Lokichoggio one morning, Sheikh photographed a group of about two hundred unaccompanied minors before they continued their journey south (see page 74). They ranged from children under ten to late adolescents, standing in tiers, most of them barefoot, all facing the camera as if posing for a school photograph. As with a school photograph, the natural response is to pore over the ranks of boys, looking into their faces, but it is impossible to read their expressions accurately. For the most part they stare curiously at the camera, some frowning, one or two smiling, many looking devastated or blank. One boy stands in front of the rest, in the centre. He is holding out a toy aeroplane to the camera as if offering a symbol of the means of escape—or the lack of it. In this army of child soldiers-turned-refugees, what is resonant is what they lack: there are no mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters or wives. Everything that constitutes a normal childhood has been destroyed.

Their presence stands in marked contrast to a series of photographs taken the same year at a feeding centre for underweight children run by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Mendera camp, further north. Here, Sheikh made individual portraits of Somali mothers with their babies. Each young woman sits with her child sheltered within her robe, or at her breast, or cradled on her lap, proving the iconic pose of Madonna and child to be most natural expression of motherhood.

The photographs from these three years in the camps made up Sheikh's first book, *A Sense of Common Ground*, published in 1996. He divided it into five chapters, each with a brief introduction giving the background to the different conflicts that had driven the refugees from their countries. But the emotional voice of the book comes from two letters, painstakingly written out in English by the elders of two camps. The first letter, from the elders of the Borana tribe, who were escaping the civil war in Ethiopia, begged for international help to protect them and allow them to return home. The second came from the Somali elders living at the UNHCR camp at Liboi, protesting the decision to close the camp and transfer them to two other camps further north. This would be, they write, "like the way of death." In Liboi they had "everything which is essential for human life (security, health, water etc)," but in the camps they were being sent to there were reports of bandits and rapists. "We request again and again to leave us as we are now..."

Given this perspective, it becomes easier to see what is important for them, as it would be for us: they have survived and are trying to carve out some kind of future for themselves. Sheikh is not interested in reducing them merely to their "role" as refugees, or reducing their context solely to

one of displacement. “I don’t think it’s a question of displacement. I think it’s a question of people who are not in their homes and yet are finding a way to cope, or to begin again, or even to grow within their circumstances. Sometimes what has happened to them has carved out who they are now, for better or worse. Not only for worse.”

When the refugee portraits were exhibited in New York, the American critic Vince Aletti wrote that they were “like no other pictures coming out of the camps, which had already been picked over by photojournalists airlifted in to grab shots of bloated children and skeletal mothers before the horror got too old.” Sheikh’s pictures were “... not just sympathetic but loving, as if he were recording not just strangers in distress, but an extended family pulling together for comfort and support.”

The Kenyan photographs brought Sheikh critical success, the support of a publisher, Scalo, and a New York art gallery, Pace/MacGill. This was the beginning of a way of working that involved long periods spent photographing among different groups, followed by a period of editing the work down in to a book, accompanied by a number of exhibitions. It was also a method that brought the support of institutions and charitable organizations which allowed him to fund the work without recourse to magazines or other commercial work. In 1996, without perhaps being fully aware of it, Sheikh’s working pattern had been set. What was important was to find a subject that allowed him to engage with others, and also, where possible, to engage some facet of himself.

AFGHANISTAN

To Sheikh Fazal Ilahi, the grandfather I never met, but for whom I am named. Although you died in 1955, I have witnessed the greatness of your legacy in the gentle and kind demeanour of your son, my father, Abdul Majied Sheikh.

In 1996 Sheikh made a trip to Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, to visit the part of the world where his grandfather had been born. Fazal Ilahi had been born at the end of the 19th century in what was then northern India and is now Pakistan. In 1912 he moved with his family to Kenya, which was a British colony, and settled in Nairobi, where he became a wealthy landowner and businessman setting up philanthropic trusts for the poor. He was a devout Muslim and made the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. In later life, he bought a house in the nearby city of Medina, where he was buried after his death in 1955.

Although Sheikh had been told stories about his grandfather as a boy, he had never been to his birthplace. When he reached the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, he found that the land had been settled by over a million Afghan refugees, in villages that had been set up after the Soviet invasion of their country in 1979.

By this time, the Afghans had been living on the border for almost twenty years. They had seen their children grow up in exile while their own country was occupied and fought over by foreign powers. They had seen their young men go off to fight and die in the “holy war.” When Sheikh approached the village elders to ask permission to photograph among their people, they were not openly hostile, but they were curious about him and they wanted to talk. Physically, they could see he was not American, but he spoke with an American accent,

and he came from the West. When he explained his family history, they were not sure how to respond. "I could see they wanted to invite me as a fellow Muslim, but they could see I was American, so in a way I was expected to be an apologist for US policy." The old men wanted to know what had happened with the Americans. When the Soviets had arrived, the Americans had been on the side of the Afghans. Then, when the Soviets left, the Americans had pulled out, too. The Afghans were tired of other countries interfering in their affairs. Now the Taliban had taken power in Kabul and they were once again unsure as to whether it would be safe to return.

Sheikh was deeply affected by the sense of history and tradition that bound the refugees together and he sensed the longing for home, even in young children whose idea of their native country came only from the stories told to them by their parents and grandparents. In this, on some level, Sheikh shared a similar need: to reclaim a sense of the land of his ancestors on which the refugees had settled. His history shadowed theirs in a way that intensified his commitment to documenting their lives.

This empathy is evident in the photographs he made over the next two years. Many of the Afghan portraits are extreme close-ups and reflect the growing confidence with which Sheikh approached his subjects. It is not too fanciful to suggest that, in his respectful portraits of the Afghan elders—their eyes raised as if in silent prayer—is a shadow of the grandfather he had lost, whilst among the children he photographed in the refugee villages are boys whose faces are reminiscent of his own.

One night he was staying in the village of Miram Shah, where he and his interpreter had spent the evening talking

with the Afghans. When they left, he went to sleep. He dreamed he was walking along a passageway and meeting another person, who, he came to realise, was himself. He had the sensation of embracing someone at the same time as he himself was embraced. On waking, he realised the person he was embracing and who had been embracing him, was his mother, who had committed suicide in America several years before. This led him to reflect on the people around him, who, he became aware, must also dream of those they had lost. Working with an interpreter, he began to ask the Afghans about their dreams. The invitation opened up a huge archive of memories and emotions. The manner and the frequency with which the dead returned to the living expressed the human cost of exile in a way that no other form of testimony could.

The intimacy of these exchanges is suggested in some of the portraits he made of the Afghans, particularly the women. The face of Qurban Gul (page 131) seems to contain the sorrow and stoicism of her loss as she describes her premonition of the death of her youngest son, Mula Awaz, who was fighting with the Mujahedin against the Soviets when he was killed in 1986 at the age of eighteen:

Before the news of his death reached us, I dreamed that my son's body was being prepared for burial. When he had been washed and wrapped in white cloth, he was carried to the graveyard. They laid the body on the ground and turned his head towards Mecca. Then his body was covered with earth. After that I did not dream of him again for several years. [Some years later, she was ill in hospital and near to death.] I was lying in my bed and I could hear the door to my hospital room opening. Mula Awaz appeared in the doorway and walked

towards my bed. He had a scarf draped about his shoulders. As he approached, he took the cloth from my neck and offered it to me. He told me to wrap it about myself. Then, without another word, he turned away and disappeared into the corridor. I covered myself with the scarf and a sensation of warmth moved throughout my body. In the coming days the illness left me and I was able to return home. I never dreamed of him again.

Abdul Aziz (page 95) had lost his brother in an attack on the communist administration office in his home village.

My brother and his group of Mujahedin surrounded the office. They captured the area and killed the communists. One of those captured was a teacher who pleaded for his life saying he was a fellow Muslim. My brother set him free. Several weeks later, the communists retook the area. That same teacher joined them and pointed out those who had been responsible for the attack. He identified my brother. He was captured and taken to the office. His body was never returned. In my dreams he sits beside a pool, silently washing.

As other people came forward to tell their stories, they described their lives before the Soviet invasion; how their villages had been bombed; how they had fled across the border but seen their children return to be “martyred by a bullet.” Along with their stories they brought him photographs, snapshots of dead relatives, portraits of men in their glory days toting Kalashnikovs, tattered mementoes of brothers and fathers, uncles and sons. Sheikh found himself making photographs of photographs and adding them to his store.

When it came to editing the material into a book, he felt a pressing need to print the words and the pictures together. “It seemed to me almost impossible to sever one from the other—and wholly inappropriate. I came to believe that the photographs did something very well, but working with the issues I was engaged with, I found it important to flesh out what the photographs *didn't* do. They were not getting to the depths of what I needed, so I used the people's voices. I realised in this second book that I was weaving together something much more complicated, not just because of the found pictures, or the testimonials, but also because of my own relationship to the place. How do you make all those things come together? If you can complete the book in some harmonious way, then you have succeeded. The difficulty with that book was trying to find a balance.”

The Victor Weeps, his book about Afghanistan, was published in 1998. He had been itinerant for almost a decade, living between friends in Europe and America. In 2000, he leased an apartment in Zurich, Switzerland. It offered him a base from which to consolidate his work so far, and plan what direction it should take next.

SOMALIA

In April 2000, he went back to Nairobi to visit his family. From Nairobi he flew to Dadaab, in northeast Kenya. Over the previous five years, hundreds of thousands of refugees had been returned to their home countries, and many of the camps had been closed. But around 120,000 Somalis were still living in three remaining camps around Dadaab—Ifo, Hagadera and Dagahaley—and here Sheikh began to

address an unfinished piece of work he had begun almost a decade earlier.

When he had first visited the Somali camps in 1992, he had heard reports of women being attacked and raped when they had gone outside the camp to search for firewood. Their attackers were said to be either Kenyan policemen, members of tribal gangs, or men from their own communities. At first the women had been afraid to speak out about what had happened to them: Somalis practise circumcision, and a woman who is sexually violated is seen as having disgraced her entire family, and is stigmatized as unclean. But by 1993, the attacks had become so frequent that the UNHCR had set up an official enquiry and hired a Somali woman, Fauzia Musse to take down the women's stories. Between 1993 and 1999, the UNHCR received 794 reports of rape, but the real number was believed to be ten times that.

Sheikh had accompanied Fauzia Musse on her rounds, photographed some of the women and recorded some of their stories, but he had been unsure how to use them in his first book and had opted to leave them out. Now he realized he must find a way to publish them. He decided to compile a small book that would concentrate on the Somali women's experiences, beginning in 1992, when he had first visited their camps, and following them through to the present.

On this latest trip he met Zeinab Ahmed, the Officer for Vulnerable Women and Children working with CARE (Christian Action for Research and Education) at the Somali camps. The evidence from the earlier UNHCR reports had been used to lobby for foreign aid, and since Sheikh's last visit, some of the women had been moved away from the camp and resettled in other countries. Within the camps, social service programmes had been set up and women had

formed themselves into groups; since 1995, a number of men had been arrested and a serial rapist, a member of the security police, had been charged and prosecuted.

This did not mean the attacks had stopped. But at least there was now a system in place: if a woman reported an attack to the police she would be examined by an MSF doctor and Zeinab would be called to fill out a report. In this way the number of assaults was monitored, and the men responsible could sometimes be identified and charged. Zeinab took Sheikh with her on her rounds and with the women's permission he took down some of their stories. The victims ranged from women in their eighties to teenagers and even children as young as five. Not every case was prosecuted, and Sheikh could see that Zeinab had to fight to retain her authority. Nevertheless, the women had at least won a degree of power within the camp.

Sheikh had brought with him a copy of *A Sense of Common Ground*. He knew there was a possibility some of the people he had photographed nearly a decade ago would still be living in the camps. With Zeinab's introduction, he showed the photographs to a group of camp leaders and eventually a woman was brought to see him. She was a memorable figure—almost six feet tall—whose name was Fehan Noor Mohammed. In the photograph he had taken of her in 1992, at the MSF feeding centre for underweight children at Mandera camp, she had held her tiny daughter, Rhesh in one long thin hand (page 159). Fehan Noor remembered Sheikh, but when he asked about her daughter, she told him that when the little girl was four, she had been playing among the tree stumps that littered the camp and had slipped and fallen, and broken her neck. Sheikh could hardly believe that, after all she had survived, the child should die like this.

In the portrait he made of Fehan Noor that day she looks, shrouded in her long grey blanket, like a pillar of sorrow.

The following day, Zeinab took Sheikh to a community meeting at Dagahaley camp, where she introduced him to the crowd and asked if anybody present had been in Liboi or at the feeding centre at Mandera. Several Somali families came forward.

Mohammed Hassan had been a toddler when Sheikh had photographed him with his sister, Alima, in 1992. Now he was nearly ten years old. When he sat for a second portrait, this time with his grandmother, he perched uncomfortably on her knee, which he had obviously outgrown (page 162).

Mohammed was one of a whole generation of boys who had grown up in the camps and were now nearing the age where, traditionally, they would undergo the rituals of adolescence and become men. The prospect of a generation emasculated by their refugee status threatened the stability of the Somali communities. The camps had already destroyed the traditional balance of power. The men were idle, their authority removed, they were unable to work or tend their flocks, and to Sheikh their frustration and anger was palpable.

Before he left, Sheikh was given a letter by Abshiro Aden Mohammed, the Women's Leader of Dagahaley camp (page 170), which had been written out by her ten-year-old son. It began:

In our culture men and women are not the same. When a mother gives birth to a boy, there will be the gift of a camel for the son in the expectation that when he is a man, that one camel will have sired a whole herd and his birthright will start him out in the world... When the newborn child is a girl, there is nothing for her ...

Abshiro had been among the first group of Somalis to arrive in Kenya in 1992 when her son was only two. She had watched him grow up in the camp and seen the traditional values of her society violently overturned:

During my time in the Kenyan refugee camps, I have seen a woman who was caught in the bush by several men. They tied her legs to two trees while she was standing. They raped her many times and before leaving they also put stones in her vagina. I have seen old women raped by children and babies defiled by adults. Three times I have seen newborn babies left lying on the ground. In all of the cases the babies later died; they had been abandoned by mothers who were afraid of having an illegal pregnancy. I have seen our men sitting and playing beneath the shade of the trees while their families sat at home, hungry and penniless. I have seen a man selling his wife's clothes to get money for *miraa* [drugs]. I have seen men divorcing their wives in the morning out of anger and returning in the afternoon calling her "wife." In the Somalia of the past where I was raised, I have experienced privilege, peace, and tranquillity. The ability of people to listen to one another has been lost, or these events would never happen. Today in Somalia, killing has become a normal value. The Koran says that women must be honoured and not mistreated, disturbed and frustrated. If a person does not fear and respect Allah, how can he respect a human being?

When Sheikh returned to Zurich he laid out the series of portraits of mothers and babies he had taken at the feeding centre at Mandera in 1992. He added other portraits he had made of women who had been attacked. Against them he set the recent portraits of the adolescent boys. Using the

testimonies from both visits, he put together a small book and, using a line from Abshiro Aden's letter, he called it *A Camel for the Son*.

Aware of the limitations of commercial publishing, which would mean the book was too expensive for the people he wanted to reach, he decided to publish the book himself. He set up an imprint, the International Human Rights Series (IHRS), raised money from the Volkart Foundation in Switzerland, organised distribution through various international art institutions and made the book available, free of charge, over the Internet via his own website, www.fazalsheikh.org. He published *A Camel for the Son* in 2001, and with it a companion volume, *Ramadan Moon*, made at the request of the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam, to draw attention to the thousands of Somali refugees in the Netherlands, and to the restrictive laws the Dutch government was passing against them.

Ramadan Moon treats the story of Somali refugees in a very different way from the documentary narrative of *A Camel for the Son*. It takes the form of a meditation on the life of one Somali woman, Seynab Azir Wardeere, who has travelled to Amsterdam with her small son, from Mogadishu, where her family was attacked and her father killed. As she survives the season of Ramadan, under threat of eviction in a Dutch asylum seekers' centre, thousands of miles from home, she stands in the moonlight and dreams of the country and the people she has left behind. Sheikh sets up a counterpoint between the portraits and quotes from the Koran which evokes the emotional intensity of her loneliness, and forces us to recognize the tension between her longing for the country of her birth and her fear of being forcibly returned to it. This was a more abstract

representation of the subject of displacement, and it represented a shift in Sheikh's work, towards a purely visual, empathetic response.

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During the late 1990s, as Sheikh's work became more widely recognized, he was invited to contribute to a number of group exhibitions and publications, working in different parts of the world. In Mexico, as part of America's National Millennium Survey Project, he photographed and recorded the stories of some of the thousands of Mexicans who cross the border illegally to find work in the United States. As part of the Nature Conservancy's anthology, *In Response to Place*, he photographed the migrant workers of the Grand Sertão in Brazil (pp. 197 fol.). Rather than using testimonies to accompany his portraits, Sheikh chose *simpatias*, the little sayings—part folklore, part religion—that the workers use for guidance in their lives:

—Don't wish evil on others, the evilness returns to he who asks and it may affect someone you really like.

—Never eat rooster or chicken feet; they delay your life.

—Never get out of bed with your left foot.

—Never light candles for the souls inside your house, but only for the angels or light spirits. For Saints you may light candles, in that there is no harm. Never light an even number of candles, always an odd number. Put a glass of water next to the candle to establish equilibrium and fulfil the four elements of fire, water, earth and air.

—Never sweep your house at night; it brings bad luck.

—Never start a job on the day of the new moon; the job will not last. If you want the job to finish soon, start on that day.

—When you find a cross on the ground in your path, step on it while saying: "All my enemies will be dominated."

In October 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan—the first round of the Bush/Blair War on Terror—led Sheikh to react quickly to what he, like so many others, viewed as yet another pointless war fought in Afghanistan between two foreign forces in which thousands more innocent Afghans would lose their lives. On October 8, the day on which America began its bombing campaign on Afghanistan, Sheikh published a pamphlet, *When two bulls fight, the leg of the calf is broken* (the title comes from an Afghan proverb), in which he protested against America's use of force. Seventy thousands copies were printed and distributed through humanitarian organizations, cultural institutions and the media. It was a personal protest—the least he could do—to counter the atmosphere of aggression towards the Afghans, who had treated him with such respect.

INDIA: MOKSHA

I came to Vrindavan with nothing five years ago. At first I wanted to kill myself, but then I realized that Lord Krishna would look after me. There are many other people with grief in their hearts and I know I am not alone. I have no wish to return to Bengal. I will not speak to my children again. It is because of Lord Krishna and the company of these women that I still have my sanity. You have two eyes. If you want to see paradise, you will find it here in Vrindavan.

(Shanti Karuna)

In 2003, Sheikh made his first visit to Vrindavan, in northern India, the city dedicated to the Hindu god Krishna. According to the Hindu scriptures, Krishna is said to have spent his youth on the banks of the river Yamuna, which flows through Vrindavan, playing with his handmaids, the *gopis*, and making love to his consort, Radha. Today Vrindavan is known throughout India as a sanctuary for thousands of Hindu widows who arrive there every year, and most of them remain there until they die.

Under Hindu tradition, when a woman loses her husband, she loses all her social and economic rights and, unless she has sons or brothers willing to defend her, is dependent upon her son-in-law's family for support. In many cases she is considered a burden, and is cast out from the family, or she becomes so isolated and abused that she leaves of her own accord. In Vrindavan, she will find some kind of shelter, and though many women sleep in the streets, others are given a place in the city's ashrams or government-run homes. From there they can earn a few rupees a day in return for chanting sessions in the ashrams or temples dedicated to Krishna, which are visited by the pilgrims who flock to the city every year.

As Sheikh learned more about the widows, he wanted to find a way to document them and to bring attention to the repressive system that ruled their lives. He was not naïve enough to think that by publishing a book he was going to change a culture that was centuries old. All he could hope was that by making more people aware of what they suffered, he would be adding to the already vocal lobby inside and outside India, calling for a more enlightened attitude towards women.

He returned to Vrindavan in 2004 and was fortunate in being accepted by one of Vrindavan's most powerful women,

Kusum Singh, the manager of several of the government-run widows' homes. She suggested her daughter, Amrita, as his guide, and with her help Sheikh gained access to the ashrams and the homes where some of the widows agreed to talk to him.

Most of the testimonies Sheikh records are dependent upon the skill of the translator, and the language is sometimes limited. But even allowing for this, the widows' stories were harrowing. They described arranged marriages, sometimes as young as three, to husbands ten times their age. They told him how they had been beaten or abandoned for not producing children. The most violent stories involved being raped, or burned, or thrown out of their homes. Some of the women were still young, but once widowed, under Hindu tradition they had little chance of remarrying or having a family. Instead they were left vulnerable to sexual attack, or driven to taking money for sex. Some women had led happy married lives, but once widowed, had left their families voluntarily, in preparation for a simple death. What bound them all together was their faith in Krishna. They worshipped at shrines dedicated to him, and in their care for their tiny icons of the boy god, they emulated the *gopis*, treating him as an object of love. Their ultimate dream was to escape the cycle of death and rebirth, and to attain a state of bliss they call *moksha*, where they will live with Krishna forever.

In Sheikh's portraits, some of the widows, shrouded in their traditional white robes, their faces concealed, appear as little more than phantoms, already partly removed from their earthly existence. Others look directly into the camera, and though their faces betray lives of hardship, there is often a sense of benign acceptance in their expressions, a calm

that comes from having already resigned themselves to death.

Abala Dasi (page 237) was married to a man who was twenty years older than her. Their marriage had been a success. They had had four children, and when her husband died, she was left with the youngest daughter.

As a single woman with a child, I faced many problems. One day I was told about Vrindavan. We came here thinking we would be able to beg for a living, but soon I started to chant at the ashram for money and food. Two years later, a local man came to ask for my daughter and I agreed. They were married and she moved into his home. They had one son together but then they found that my daughter had cancer. She died nine years ago. I am eighty now and every day I am visited by a monkey who calls me "Ma". I know this monkey is calling me in just the same way my daughter did. It is the reincarnation of my girl. My grandson, her son, lives nearby and on the days that he visits me we wait for the monkey to come. No one else will take care of me now, but Krishna will come. He is the one who called us here. My dreams are only of him.

Jamuna Sarkar (page 241) lived with her son's family in Vrindavan before she was forced out, and now lives in the one of the old people's homes run by the government.

My daughter-in-law sometimes comes to visit me when my son is working at his tea stall, but those visits are rare. My only hope in life is that my son will be happy with his family. For myself, I no longer have need of a family. Krishna is father, mother, son and daughter. He is husband to me. But, she adds: "If my son called for me, I would go back to them."

The husband of Kalyani Ghosh (page 248) committed suicide when she was twenty-three and pregnant with their fifth child, a boy. In the years that followed, her two daughters died and her mother-in-law looked after her sons.

But we never liked each other. She always blamed me for her son's death. It was because of her that I eventually came to Vrindavan. I am seventy-eight now and I have been here for nearly forty-five years. My nephews sometimes contact me, but my sons never ask about me. Suffering so much in life has taken away my taste for it. What else can I hope for? I would like to die, but it is not my wishes that decide what happens to me, it is God's will.

What distinguishes this work in Vrindavan from Sheikh's earlier projects is that, alongside the portraits and testimonies of the women, he creates a detailed and moving portrait of the city itself. There is an almost cinematic sweep to his treatment of the narrow alleys and barely-lit streets, and the respect he accords to the prostrate body of a stray dog or crouching monkey. Animals and humans alike inhabit the darkest corners of the city, lodged in its fabric, barely visible. A flock of birds rises in the early morning sky like souls on their way to heaven. The morning mist or the grey light of dusk suggest the half-life the widows inhabit, poised between this world and the next.

Sheikh is clearly respectful of spirituality and the ways in which it functions. He exhibits an instinctive reverence for the comfort that a deeply held belief can bring. His portraits of the Indian widows are reminiscent of the portraits of grieving mothers he took in Afghanistan: the spirit of Qurban Gul lives on in their faces. This is not to say, however, that

Sheikh fails to recognise the conundrum of the Indian widows' faith: "A cynic would say that their faith is the very mechanism that keeps them from liberating themselves. Faith may keep people in their place, but without it they would be completely devastated. I'm certainly not condemning of their faith. I'm more inclined to see it as a source of their solace."

In *Moksha*, his book about Vrindavan, which was published in 2005, Sheikh presents the widows' portraits simply and directly on the page. In *A Sense of Common Ground* he had retained the distressed black borders of the Polaroid negatives and used a deep honey-coloured duotone with heavy blacks in a bid to enhance the portraits' effect. Now he acknowledges this kind of artifice as the result of uncertainty: a concern that the image itself would not be enough. In fact, the reverse is true: the more the image is left to reveal itself, the stronger, and more alive it becomes. The result is a portrait that invites and repays contemplation, and which should be studied in the full awareness of the situation in which it is made.

INDIA: LADLI

*Off you go to heaven, spinning there, and send us
back your brothers.*

If the portraits in *Moksha* project an almost transcendent calm, it is because they are portraits of reconciliation and acceptance, taken at a time when, in a material sense, the women's lives were over. But it was the facts of their earlier lives that revealed to Sheikh so much of what he had not known. There still exists what amounts to a prejudice against

women in Indian society, and statistics clearly show that large sections of Indian women are still disadvantaged from birth. They cannot inherit the family's wealth, but must be protected, and require a dowry before they can marry. A married woman becomes the property of her in-laws, and her principal role is to provide her husband with an heir, so that his wealth remains within the family. Girl babies in India are routinely aborted or abandoned; girl children are sold into prostitution, sold into marriage, and, once married, are often mistreated if they fail to produce a male heir. In the most extreme cases, women who cannot provide a sufficient dowry are burned or beaten to death. In 2005, the year Fazal Sheikh returned to India, over six thousand cases were recorded of women who had been murdered, either by their husbands, or their husbands' families, over disputes concerning their dowries. For a man in his mid-thirties, educated in New York and Princeton, with little prior understanding of the religious and social codes by which the majority of Indian women live—despite their country's much publicised leap into a First World economy—these stories were a revelation. They forced him to accept that if he was to have any real understanding of this subject, he had to return to India to find out more.

With the help of Human Rights and International Aid agencies, as well as the smaller grassroots organisations, often founded by women who had suffered the problems they were set up to defeat, he was given access to cases of abuse. He worked principally in northern India, in Gujarat, Punjab and the centre and suburbs of Delhi. He visited women in hospitals and orphanages, shelters and charitable institutions, brothels, inner-city slums and the newly settled shantytowns to which poor families had been moved on the

outskirts of the city. He met women who had been trafficked and forced into prostitution; girls who had been sold into marriage, beaten by their husbands and barely escaped death; he talked to little girls of eight or nine who worked as domestic servants, or, if not, were sent out at dawn to pick “rags,” that is, to scavenge through the mountains of rubbish deposited daily at the city refuse dumps, sorting and selling their daily hoard of plastic bottles, bits of metal or glass for a pittance.

He met women of every age group, but he began with the youngest, with new-born babies who had been abandoned at birth, and he heard stories about those who had not survived it, since infanticide, the killing of baby girls was practised in India for generations. In the past, midwives would be paid extra to smother or choke a newly born girl to death. With the introduction of ultrasound scanning, the gender, as well as the health of the foetus could be identified, and an unwanted female foetus could be aborted. In some parts of India this has now resulted in such a low ratio of girls to boys that brides have to be “imported” from other areas, or sold at a bazaar to the highest bidder. In some regions the practice of *sata lagna*—a pact usually made when the children are small—ensures that the son from one family will marry the daughter from another, only if her brother agrees to marry his sister—in short: “I’ll marry your sister if you’ll marry mine.”

Unwanted girl babies who make it into the world are often abandoned at birth, left, if they are lucky, at the gates of an orphanage, such as the one at Palna, run by the Delhi Council for Child Welfare, which Fazal Sheikh visited. If they are not, they are left by the roadside, thrown into a dumpster, buried or cast down a well. From the orphanage, older children progress to schools run by charitable or religious

organizations until they are of marriageable age. Though some girls are now being adopted, the majority are treated as orphans, even though their parents may both still be alive.

In traditional Indian families, daughters are kept at home before they are married, but poor families are driven to send their daughters out to look for work. India's main cities are both a lure and a trap for girls who arrive in the belief that they will find employment as domestic servants, earn enough to send money back to their families then return home when they are old enough to marry. On the streets of Delhi, Sheikh met girls barely in their early teens, with little sisters in tow, who had arrived from the country to find domestic work in the city. One group had found domestic work and earned enough to rent a shack to live in. Another performed as gymnasts and acrobats, begging for money from passers-by. Another bought bunches of roses, dividing them up and selling them for a tiny profit. The dangers of this kind of existence for small children, particularly girls, are obvious. Domestic workers run the risk of physical mistreatment and exploitation; street children risk not only injury and disease but abduction and a life of prostitution.

On GB Road, Delhi's red light district, thousands of women (the official figures suggest between three and five thousand) work as prostitutes; about thirty per cent of them are under the age of eighteen. They include young girls from rural villages who have been drawn to the city by the promise of a lucrative job, only to be sold into sex work. At times it may have been a family friend who deceived them; sometimes a retired prostitute-turned-pimp will return to her village with stories of her glamorous lifestyle in the city and return with girls to whom she has promised the same wealth and success.

But before a girl can work as a prostitute, she has to be "broken in." Poli was from a poor family in Bengal. In her early teens, a family friend told her he could find her work in a local factory earning four hundred rupees (about \$9) a week. He said he would take her there, and there was no need to tell her parents since she would be home by the evening.

This man took me on a train and gave me tea. I thought we would only be going two or three stops ... When I started to get nervous and complained, he threatened to throw me off the train. I started to cry. Eventually we arrived in Delhi and he took me to a tiny enclosed room where there was an old man. He told me to go with the old man and slapped me when I refused. He threatened to kill me if I didn't co-operate. He took my bag and all I had with me. He had sold me to the old man who beat me for two days and kept me locked in the small room. When I told him I needed to go to the bathroom, I got the chance to run away. I met someone on the road who took me to the police station and they called the shelter.

Poli was lucky. The police contacted her father and gave him money to come and collect her. But Sonali, a young girl from Bihar, in eastern India, suffered a far worse fate. She was found wandering in a village miles away from home, her clothes soaked in blood. She had been abducted and raped so violently that her mind was affected. She was helped to recover in a shelter for trafficked girls, and her parents were traced and contacted. Once they found out what had happened to her, they denied she was their daughter. Sonali had no documents to prove her relationship to her parents, and without them her claim was almost impossible to prove.

The lack of any future for these abandoned, unmarried women, without official papers or status, is one of the tragic aspects of a country where marriage, for women, is still the principal aim. Yet marriage is clearly not the solution it is made out to be. Two of the most impressive women Sheikh met in Delhi were Satyarani Chaddha, a Hindu, and Shahjahan Apa, a Muslim, the founders of Shakti Shalini, an organization which helps women who have suffered dowry-related abuse. They met at a public demonstration in the 1980s, and discovered each had a daughter who had been murdered in a dispute over dowry. They decided to set up an organisation to help families in similar situations to theirs, and since then have worked on thousands of cases. In that time, however, they have seen little change in the incidence of crimes, only in the methods. As an autopsy can now reveal whether a body has been doused with petrol before burning, the methods are becoming more subtle: they reported an increase in cases of smothering, falling from a high building, hanging and poisoning. And even when evidence of a crime might be available, the authorities are slow to act.

“Even if parents are able to muster some support and determination in the early days after the death, when the case begins,” Shahjahan Apa explained, “the system eventually wears them out. Parents often feel that no matter what they do for a daughter as she is growing up, she is condemned. They think, ‘First we have to pay the dowry, then we have to pay to try and pursue a police case against those who have murdered her.’”

During the course of his work in India, Sheikh was given the case histories of women who had been violently beaten by their husbands and shown photographs of the bodies of

women who had been burned to death. In a woman’s shelter in Gujarat, he talked to women who had fled their homes and were living in fear of their lives. One heavily bandaged woman was still recovering from the injuries inflicted by her husband, who had beaten her, and then disappeared with their three daughters. She later discovered that he had drowned them.

It is hard to comprehend a society in which such acts of barbarism are routinely reported in the local press, and where the instigators often escape without charge. When, in 2007, Sheikh published his second book on India, *Ladli*—which means “beloved daughter” in Hindi—it made grim reading. The portraits of children and young women were hard to look at: they were defiant, hardened, vulnerable, defeated. They represented a problem so intractable, it was hard to know how it might be resolved.

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After two decades, Fazal Sheikh’s work occupies a rare position within contemporary photography. The combining of aesthetically formal images in an overtly political context blurs the current distinctions within the art world, which tends to relegate socially concerned documentary photography to journalism, excluding it from the realm of art. Sheikh’s work claims both sides of this divide. He believes it is possible to produce work of aesthetic value, even beauty, which also draws attention to suffering and political injustice. “I think those things aren’t mutually exclusive. I see no impropriety in making a compelling, or a beautiful, or an empowering image. If the image is strong—if it is aesthetically strong—then I see that as being of benefit to the subject.”

The most important thing for him is that the work is seen. All of his published work is available online, but as a means of presenting his work, the book remains his ideal form. It is “the best possible, the most complicated, the most accessible, the most engaging way of working because it doesn’t have the limitations of something like an exhibition. An exhibition has a restricted number of viewers. Books are much longer lasting. And for me, personally, books are a means of growing. One informs the next.”

He gives the impression now that work—the *process*—is what sustains him: identifying a subject, struggling to find a way to address it, balance it, resolve it, present it and articulate what he wants to say. In twenty years he has found a way of working that is also a way of life. When I asked whether he ever looked to the example of other photographers any more, he replied: “I don’t look to the work. But I look to certain people’s lives as a model— Lewis Hine or maybe Atget or Sander— just in that dedication to something outside of themselves. They were certainly working at a time when their work held its own in both spheres—the social and the political arena, and the formal, aesthetic space as well. So I don’t model my images after them, but I take their example of a life spent documenting.”