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'Deutsche Börse Photography Prize: India's forgotten daughters'

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*Malikh is a child of the Dehli slums*

In the first of a four-week series on the artists shortlisted for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008, Drusilla Beyfus looks at the nominated work of the American artist Fazal Sheikh

London as a centre of creative photography takes a step forward with the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008, presented by the Photographers' Gallery. Now in its third successive year, the venture acts like a magnet, drawing worldwide talent to the capital. Other related developments are also encouraging: the gallery is due to relocate to a new £15.5 million architect-designed, purpose-built address in Soho in 2010 and the Deutsche Börse Prize is scheduled to continue next year in a program of off-site exhibitions.

Supported by The Daily Telegraph since Deutsche Börse became the sponsors, the award is characterised by a refreshingly unparochial, wide-ranging approach. This year's nominees are strong on concerned social observation. As Brett Rogers, the director of the gallery, puts it, 'Each of the photographers addresses subjects of critical importance and highlights the crucial

role that photography plays in our understanding of the 21st century.' The pages of the Telegraph Magazine further enlarge our awareness by making available insights that might otherwise be limited to relatively few gallery-goers.

The prime mover in the story is Deutsche Börse, which is the world's largest exchange organisation, and is an example of money putting its faith in the medium of contemporary photography. It is well known for its collection by leading international photo-graphers at its headquarters in Frankfurt. Reto Francioni, CEO of the Deutsche Börse Group, explains why the company clicks with photo-graphy: 'Artists shown in our buildings still manage to surprise us with their extraordinary perspectives on today's world. They make us perceive our surroundings in a different way... this helps us to remain open to new perspectives and in our business as well, to "think out of the box" and remain innovative.'

The core facts of the prize are as follows: a shortlist of four photographers is drawn up. The winner receives £30,000 (currently the largest bounty for photography in the UK) and the three runners-up are awarded £3,000 each in a presentation at the Photographers' Gallery. The condition for entry is that each of the photographers has had a show or a publication during the previous year. An important aspect for interested outsiders is that the shortlist is decided by a jury that considers only the work for which the artist has been selected.

The jury of five is international in composition and this year includes Jem Southam, a distinguished British photographer, and Thomas Weski, the chief curator of the influential Haus der Kunst in Munich. Last year, the show was visited by 140,000 people before it travelled to Frankfurt and Berlin. The 2007 winner, the conceptualist Walid Raad, also exhibited his nominated work in New York and Lisbon in a year that he won another accolade, the Alpert Award in the Arts, with a prize of \$75,000.

The international character of the players involved is reflected in this year's shortlist: Jacob Holdt (born 1947, Denmark), Esko Männikkö (born 1959, Finland), John Davies (born 1949, UK), and Fazal Sheikh (born 1965, USA). It is a factor that gratifies Alexandra Hachmeister, who is in charge of Corporate Responsibility for Deutsche Börse, and stresses that the prize is about being 'international and contemporary'.

Sheikh is the first of the nominated photographers to be reproduced in our coverage. Described as an artist-activist, he is known for creating sustained studies of communities around the world. Realistic black-and-white portraits are Sheikh's fire power and his primary evidence. The frame is filled with close-ups that capture the emotion of the sitter - those dark eyes speak volumes. In some shots, a head is shown turned away from the camera's lens, for reasons that become apparent in the accompanying testimony.

Sheikh's nominated work is *Ladli* (which in Hindi means beloved daughter). The book (published by Steidl) may be known in vague outline to many, but it is his synthesis of photography and written testimonies, exposing the injustice encountered by girls and women among the poor and dispossessed in India, that concentrates the mind acutely. 'In India a girl child is a burden,' the photographer observes. 'The cultural preference for boy children has led to hundreds of girls being abandoned or killed at birth, or with the advent of ultrasound scanning, aborted.' A study in 2006, conducted by Canadian and Indian researchers, found that 500,000 girls are aborted every year in India.

Among the girls pictured on these pages is Labhuben, who will probably be a victim of a situation that has come about through the long-term effects of this selective abortion. Namely, a shortage of brides of marriageable age and the institution of a barter system: 'I'll marry your sister if you'll marry mine.' Sheikh implies that girls like Labhuben risk ending up in the town of Mewat, 30 miles outside of Delhi, where 'what amounts to a modern slave trade operates a bride

bazaar'. There, Sheikh writes, 'Women are offered for sale at a variety of prices. The price is determined by factors such as age, virginity, skin colour (the lighter the better) and the number of times a woman has been sold before.'

Incidents in the lives of Sheikh's subjects are thus spelt out. Thirteen-year-old Rekha is from Madhya Pradesh, where her family work in the fields. Her father sent her, along with 100 rupees for the journey, to live with her uncle. According to the written account, she was waylaid by a man who took her to his house for the night and then put her on a train. She was eventually handed over to the police who in turn handed her over to a refuge. Her unkempt hair and sewn-together sweater suggest a state of deprivation. 'I have been in this shelter for a month,' she tells Sheikh.

All we see of Sonali are her work-worn hands, gracefully folded on her lap. She is a 14-year-old from Bihar in eastern India. Sheikh's account describes how she was found wandering in a village near Karnal, her clothes soaked in blood after she had been raped. The experience affected her mentally. When her parents were tracked down they denied all knowledge that they had such a daughter. When Fazal photographed Sonali, she had been living in a shelter for three months.

Sanjeeta, a baby abandoned at Palna orphanage, which is run by the Delhi Council for Child Welfare, demonstrates an alarming demographic. Sheikh quotes the orphanage's director Aruna Kumar as saying that a more accurate description would be a home for abandoned children, as many of the children in care have parents. 'As I read in the media how India is heralded for its miraculous entry on to the world's economic stage, I wonder what the prospects of women might be,' he comments. Alongside a picture of Malikh, a child of the Delhi slums that are a by-product of the city's new prosperity, Sheikh writes, 'The responsibility for looking after the home falls to a daughter, who is left alone during the day as soon as she is old enough to cope. There is little chance for these girls to go to school. Eventually they will be sent out, like their mother before them, to work as a domestic servant.'

In attempting to demonstrate that females are the victims of entrenched cultural and religious codes, Sheikh doesn't ignore the fact that many well-intentioned individuals and agencies are trying to bring about reforms and equally comments on the frustrations that often await them. He explains that according to the Indian constitution, the state must provide free and compulsory education for every child between the ages of six and 14. Agencies such as Bal Vikas Dhara, a grassroots organisation set up to defend the rights of the slum dwellers, is pushing for the government to enforce that right for the children in the slums, but, as Sheikh argues, 'It is extremely difficult to convince parents already below the poverty line to keep girls at school after the age of nine.'

Credit is also given in the text to other organisations, such as Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA), that are trying to improve the lot of such children. Set up in Delhi by the inter-national anti-poverty agency ActionAid, AAA is supported by the Indian government. One of its successes has been the right to allow 42 children to enrol in school, as they can give the shelter as a verifiable address. His beat is one in which small reforms are victories.

Sheikh has previously won the International Henri Cartier-Bresson Grand Prize 2005, has exhibited at Tate Britain and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Moscow. His pictures are in MoMA's permanent collection and he has received a fellowship from the Fulbright Foundation.