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'Fazal Sheikh's photos focus attention on forgotten girls and women of India'

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Photographer Fazal Sheikh's two most recent projects tell of indignity but show only beauty. It's an unusual combination for a photographer drawn to populations under duress. Throughout the history of the medium, socially concerned photographers have tended instead to advocate for justice by showing its absence, by illustrating injustice. Think of Jacob Riis' turn-of-the-20th-century pictures of New York's dank and dirty tenements, Lewis Hine's images of child laborers, or Dorothea Lange's Depression-era chronicle of need, hunger, want.

Sheikh's work delivers no less bitter truths. "Beloved Daughters," his deeply affecting exhibition at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, addresses the devastating effect of traditional social mores on women in India. Sheikh documents a life cycle of inequities: from abandonment in infancy and limited or nonexistent educational opportunity, to spousal and familial abuse, and back again to abandonment in widowhood.

For all the pain inflicted upon his subjects by virtue of their being born female, however, Sheikh never depicts them as victims but always as dignified, whole human beings, compromised by circumstance, not by nature. Explanatory wall texts and individual testimonies tell us in words of extraordinary depersonalization; the images re-personalize, restoring the basic humanity that social conditions have stripped away.

"*Moksha*," the earlier of the two projects, was prompted by a 1998 New York Times article about the community of Vrindavan, a holy city in northern India that has harbored widows (an estimated 20,000 at present) for 500 years. A portion of them settle there by choice, attracted to the tranquility of a life devoted to Krishna, but the majority seek refuge in the town after having suffered the "social death" of widowhood, which leaves them alone and impoverished. In Vrindavan, the women beg or receive a small pension in exchange for their chanting. Permanently stigmatized by the death of their husbands -- a blot on their own karmic balance sheet -- they pray to reach *moksha* (heaven), where they can stay for eternity, released from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Sheikh's study of the city and its residents oscillates between document and sense impression. In contrast-rich black and white, he shows a family of monkeys huddled in a corner; a wall of well-used water bottles hanging above a clutter of humble pots and pans; an ashram astir with praying widows in traditional white shrouds; a gridded perch full of pigeons; a dark empty alley; a tangle of light hovering in the blackness.

His portraits are sculptural in their attention to textures of skin and fabric, light and shadow. Some are accompanied by excerpts from the sitters' accounts of their lives and their journeys to Vrindavan. Dreams of Krishna and their lost husbands often enter into the stories, and Sheikh's pictures (some taken from the front, some from behind, eyes open or occasionally closed) poetically invoke lives in which the remembered and wished-for are as vividly real as the women's present surroundings.

In one tender grouping of seated portraits, Sheikh isolates and frames each sitter's hands. One woman cradles a copy of the sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita. Another holds two pet white rats in her lap. In one simple but breathtaking image, Sheikh focuses tightly on a woman's hands resting on her knees, the skin like carved, burnished wood, worn smooth by endurance.

Sheikh published a tremendous book on the "*Moksha*" project in 2005. That year, the New York-born photographer received a MacArthur Foundation fellowship as well as the Henri Cartier-Bresson International Award for his work addressing the displacement and exile of populations around the world. He returned to India to explore more fully the situation of women in traditional society. The project, "*Ladli*" (beloved daughter, in Hindi), embraces a wide span of female experience, from infancy to old age, almost entirely through head-and-shoulder portraits, some shot from behind.

Across this continuum of beautifully earnest faces, Sheikh concentrates his attention and sharpest focus on the eyes. They are each picture's soulful and exacting epicenter. The focus starts to soften almost immediately beyond the eyes, and is slightly blurred already at a sitter's cheek. The intensity of these gazes, these encounters, is matched by the blunt facts laid out in the accompanying texts, starting with the tragedy that the birth of a girl represents, both for the baby, dismissed as a burden, and for the mother, rejected as a disappointment. Sheikh describes lives consumed by basic survival and tenuous dependencies on others. The complexity of their fate, as rendered in words, is complemented poignantly by the simple, visual evidence of their humanity.

The 70 photographs in the show, organized by curator Joel Smith of the Princeton University Art Museum, are divided fairly evenly between the two projects. "*Ladli*" was published in book form in 2007.

Sheikh is not only sensitive as a photographer but savvy as a social reformer, recognizing that images alone cannot contain all the ingredients necessary for change -- an understanding of causes and conditions as well as a path toward solutions. He identifies several agencies addressing the challenges faced by the female population in India, and he distributes his work broadly and free of charge through human rights organizations.

Stunningly beautiful and also viscerally disturbing, Sheikh's work attests to the notion that art exists -- to paraphrase the director Andrei Tarkovsky -- because the world is not perfect.

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