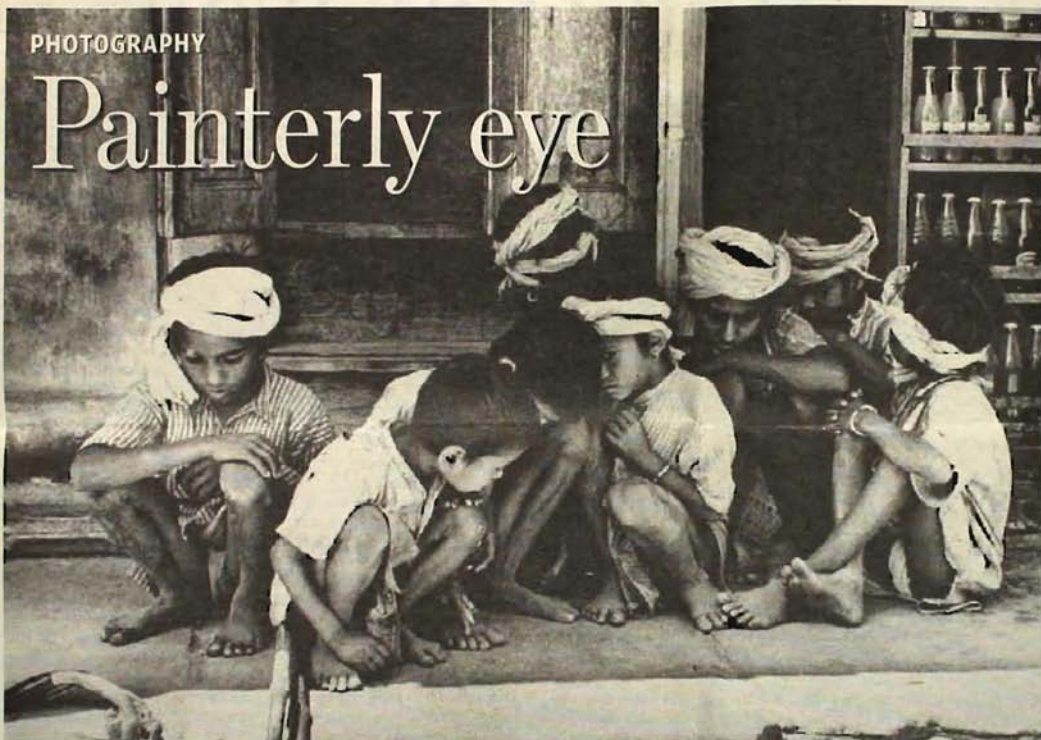


## Culture

LOUNGE

PHOTOGRAPHY

## Painterly eye



**Jyoti Bhatt's rural photographs, which travel to New Delhi this month, capture a vanishing world**

BY SOMAK GHOSHAL & POOJA SINGH

Jyoti Bhatt's journey as a photographer began almost half a century ago, when he decided to travel to the interiors of Gujarat in the summer of 1967 to document the region's "folk art" for a seminar in Mumbai.

"During the trip, I noticed that most of the traditional forms of expression I had seen in the pre-independence days no longer remained the same," says the 80-year-old, speaking on the phone from his home in Vadodara, Gujarat. Over the years, Bhatt would travel to other parts of the country—West Bengal, Rajas-

than, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar and Odisha—to chronicle the transformation of traditional motifs into forms that are rich and strange, touched by a post-colonial grace. Forty-seven of those photographs, from the 1960s-1990s, reproduced in silver gelatin prints, are being shown by the Bangalore-based Tasveer Art Gallery across India. After travelling to Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Bangalore and Mumbai, the exhibition opens at the Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi's Defence Colony today.

To look at Bhatt's work is to become conscious of the coming together of various artistic forms and disciplines in photography—in his case, of painting, in which he trained from 1950-56, printmaking, and ethnography. While objective fidelity is one of the key concerns in Bhatt's photography, there is enough scope for a robust interplay between his archivist and imaginative instincts as well. If initially Bhatt wielded the camera as a substitute for the sketchbook, he did not want to keep using it as a mechanical device. "This exhibition reflects his formal art educa-

tion, especially in painting," says Nathaniel Gaskell, the curator of the show. "Strong influences from other Indian art forms such as Rajput miniature paintings are apparent in his treatment and interpretation of space."

What do these black and white photographs show? A good deal of them, if you simply glance over, may seem like standard-issue ethnographic records. Women huddled on porches of mud huts, children playing in courtyards decorated with indig-

enous patterns, cattle staring emptily—familiar scenes from small towns and villages across India. But there is evidence of change that only the more keenly perceptive eyes will register.

For instance, the fact that the religious *mithora* paintings, by certain tribes in Gujarat, used to be made with Indian red and chalk powder. "They now use hardware paints," says Bhatt. *Rangoli*, once used to decorate courtyards, is not as popular any longer. "Instead of labouring over these elaborate patterns, people prefer to buy stickers from temples nowadays," Bhatt adds.

While such nuances may not be apparent to most people, Bhatt's framing and compositional skills will strike the eye powerfully. Suddenly, in a series of images of walls, floors and living spaces adorned with patterns, we encounter a woman whose heavily tattooed body is a counterpoint to what we have just seen. Folk art, Bhatt seems to suggest, is not just an extraneous presence in the lives of its creators blindly imitating tradition, but rather, a vital part of their consciousness, worn as much on

their skin, which covers their bodies, as on the walls, which protect their homes. "The concentration in my work is not just on the art forms, but also on capturing the integrated relationship between art and people—how the two are interwoven in the act of daily living," he explains.

If there are a few images bordering on stereotypes—elderly women smiling into the camera, young girls posing self-consciously—there is just enough drama, even a narrative energy, to some of the others. In one photograph, a calf stands cowering on the landing of a hut. The wall behind shows a painting of a tiger in the act of leaping on its prey, its mouth open in a fierce roar. Bhatt frames the composition expertly to suggest the end of a chase, in which the weaker creature has given up and succumbed to the might of the more powerful. In reality, there is but a radiant, if mischievous, humour to the ensemble.

The occasional hint of vegetation, the glimpse of a slice of the overcast sky, or the aura of summer heat in the air—such moments of reprieve from the

**Living history:** Scenes from rural India captured by Jyoti Bhatt over the years.

thrall of materiality bring us closer to Bhatt's artistic intentions. We see the painter in him struggling to hold the effect of a certain light, or the sadness behind a smile, before it slips away from the moment of its capture. As an archivist, he remains pragmatic, knowing well that traditional art cannot be preserved in a pristine form. "But audiovisual documentation, as well as extensive interviews, should be made before it is too late," says the man, much of whose life has been spent in places and among people that may not exist for a new generation of Indians.

Jyoti Bhatt—Photographs From Rural India opens today at 6pm at Vadehra Art Gallery, D-53, Defence Colony, New Delhi (46103550), and is on till 14 May, 11am-7pm (Sundays closed). The prices of prints range from ₹40,000-65,000.

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**Bhatt's work tries to capture the relationship between art and people, how the two are interwoven in daily life**