

Bombay that was...

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Photos: Pablo Bartholomew

Pablo Bartholomew's camera tries to capture the vanishing ethos of a vibrant city. His recent show "Chronicles of a Past Life: '70s & '80s In Bombay" is his special tribute.

"This is where I grew up," photographer Pablo Bartholomew says of Mumbai, the city he knew — and still does — as Bombay. "It is a real city, a hard, intense place." Bartholomew came to the city in his late teens and did a lot of his work on the urban landscape of the metropolis there. "This was a way of discovering a new city," he explains. He showcased his 'discoveries' recently with a show called "Chronicles of a Past Life: '70s & '80s In Bombay" at the Sakshi Gallery.

But much of what he saw then and viewers could see in his show is no longer real. The photographs are a mnemonic for those who remember the city in the 1970s and 1980s, but are unfamiliar vignettes with that otherworldly touch of the perhaps-known for those who came after. Bartholomew also did some modern-day exploration, "walking around, and found that some of the places are not there anymore... the building I shot my pictures from is not there, the scene I shot is no longer there. There are places that have closed down. This is a function of time and change; everything changes." These are passings and passages of time. Bombay (as he and so many others who know an older, less harried city call it) for me becomes a bit of a passage where I go back to some of the older places where I had breakfast or lunch or dinner and I continue to do that today because in some way it is reinforcing memories or feelings that I have of or for the city.

Housing many

But the draw was not the much-vaunted 'charm' of the metropolis. It was something more, something else, something that went beyond definition. Bartholomew does not think that "Bombay ever had charm. It had a vitality. It had a democratic way that it treated many people of different faith, colour, belief; outsiders were absorbed in as long as they had something to offer the city." But with all that, too, change has been inevitable. "I think that fabric to some degree has changed; there have been migration changes, so maybe there are many more North Indians here now. Earlier, the Parsis, the Goans, people from the South stood out much more than the Punjabis, but now I think maybe the equation has changed. There were always South Indians — Keralites, people from coastal Karnataka and Mangalore. That is what made the city so exciting and interesting! You had all this mixed with a healthy dose of Muslims added in." The people were the driving force, the momentum that has made Mumbai the commercial capital that it is today.

Bartholomew believes that with the positive has come a not-always-healthy downside. "I think the city still has that buzz and craziness of driving itself, but the infrastructure has defeated it." If you look at what is happening in North Bombay — Andheri West and beyond — it is totally chaotic and haphazard. Some things in the South may never change, until those buildings fall or some really strong builder lobby takes over, which they are always trying to do." And he is not against progress in any way, though he rues the shape it sometimes takes. "If there is a fire and a building comes down, there is always a chance that a new horrible structure will come up. But it is not as if they will rebuild it in historically the same manner, because there is really no value for that today. That is a matter of sadness." According to him, "The city fathers here never really bothered about the future, it seems, because they came from somewhere else probably, from rather dull and low education backgrounds which didn't allow for them to have concerns of a certain type. The concerns were probably of lining their own pockets instead, not necessarily in thinking of a greater, larger good for a city so that it could continue to live and breathe."

He articulates many of the concerns that dog today's Mumbaikar and are beginning to find expression in urban development now. "Take the suburban train services. They should have been revamped years ago so that the system could have a different kind of infrastructure and carry more people. The introduction of more different and innovative kinds of transportation — the development of waterways, for instance — would be hugely useful. But maybe those who could have done it did not think all this through well enough at the time." Things could have been done years ago," but are still only wishes in the minds of some who have to navigate Mumbai's bustle every day!

Bartholomew's camera also looks at change from the point of view of preservation, a kind of record of a not-too-distant past, one that is yielding perforce to a 'new and improved' cityscape not necessarily aesthetically better. Consider the mill areas, he suggests, they are "also being redone, but the whole thing is going bananas with the way in which these vertical structures are coming up! Are the buildings in tandem with the larger city? What does it all represent? Nobody cares, nobody thinks these things through. Frankly, it's all about money and politics." Bartholomew brings up the oft-made projection of Mumbai becoming like Shanghai, the fastest growing city in China and one that is often made an example of in discussions on development and progress. "Shanghai is like New York on steroids; a supercity with super infrastructure and the semblance of arriving into the new century, even though not everything is ideal there either. There is also ambition and drive, but not as much corruption, not to the degree that it stalls certain kinds of progress being made in a positive way."

Understanding its core

In the capturing of an ethos that is soon vanishing, down to the smallest architectural detail, Bartholomew has an intimate understanding of what a softer, gentler, mellower Bombay once was. And he feels that "You can still have the old stuff and do innovative things in other areas that are not offensive and in your face, but address space and the needs of a city. Nariman Point (the central business district, as it were) may have been the worst idea that the city developers had; it brought everybody down to the South end of a narrow island, making them need to travel down there every day to work and then back home. Did Bombay and its people need that sort of movement? Things could have been diffused to maybe the central part of the city (Bandra-Kurla), to meet a different dynamic need." The loss of a certain lifestyle, even a kind of habitat, as seen in his black and white images, was perhaps due to the fact that "When everything gets choked, people have to do something about it. In China, when they build a city out of nothing, they first put in the infrastructure and then invite in industry and people to live there. Here it is the other way around: you come and build and settle, and then you get water and electricity and transport and roads."

Some of his images are especially poignant, faces that show poverty, hunger, deprivation, but never a loss of spirit, that great spirit often mentioned whenever the city is hit by crisis, be it bomb blasts or terrorist attacks. There is the watchmaker in his tiny booth, the daily-wage labourer in his singlet, the dabbawalla, the trucker, the beggar, all living in a city that was and still is all about dreams. "The country was in some ways happier then," Bartholomew believes, "nobody was so rich or so poor, or it was less apparent. Now the divide is so great between the rich and the poor in the city. It is a miracle that we do not have levels and layers of violence like Brazil and some parts of America. The greater danger is now the rural-urban divide and the trouble caused by it, by the uprising of the most deprived and prejudice-laden. It could happen very fast to the city."

A dire note, but one that rings true. But for Bartholomew, the city is special enough, important enough for him to be as involved as he is about it. As he has said in his show, "Bombay offered me and thousands of others like me...the opportunity to be cradled and mentored professionally. It gave friendship, food and shelter and the chance to be discovered, the chance to become someone." Today, this photographer is 'someone' with a voice that speaks through images that are a true chronicle of a city that once was, that will always be.

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