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# art dose

Showcasing photography, multi-media and allied endeavours.



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# Raghu Rai's Short Take on Modes of Photography

Written by Shalmali Shetty

Raghu Rai, one of India's most important photographers can be described as someone who advanced in parallel with the changing approaches to photography, leaving the past behind in order to willingly encounter the future. Over the decades, working on independent projects, as well as with various newspapers and magazines as director of photography, Raghu Rai has adhered inadvertently to photographing the Indian subcontinent, chronologically documenting major historical moments and the changing cultural, social and political landscape, in the process making an enormous contribution to the country. With a number of national and international awards, significant projects, publications and exhibitions to his name, his photographs and photo-essays have been published globally in some of the most renowned publications. He received the Padma Shree in 1971 and was the first Indian photographer to be nominated by Henri Cartier Bresson to join Magnum Photos in 1977 and has been associated with it since.

Through the decades, Raghu Rai has been an observer to the changing trends in photography, and has participated both in the analogue and digital systems of image production. Having used analogue film reel cameras for over thirty-five years, for him the coming of the digital technology only helped in enhancing his work and finding better articulation. With more technological efficiency, quality and speed in the production of his works, he readily embraced the digital camera and its output. "Digital photography compared to film photography, is far more quick and achievable", he says. He doesn't believe in getting nostalgic about a bygone era and its mediums. It is true, that a number of contemporary photographers are going back to experimenting with the analogue cameras and photographic processes for the antiquated and subtle aesthetics it produces. With these, one is transported to an imagined past, a fascination acquired by a contemporary generation that has grown up in a fast and easy digital era. But for Raghu Rai, the digital is a form of "freedom" that he is immensely satisfied with.

People have become smart in using technology. Very soon in about four or five years, at the speed of how things are advancing and with digital chips getting inserted in the eye, photography will then only be a blink away, he conjectures. To be witness to how advancing digital technology is affecting human relations perturbs him. Raghu Rai worries how life is large and nature even more, but one goes unawares when invested in their smartphones. "The world is becoming cold, dry and emotionless." With everything available for the eyes to see and relationships entrusted to mediating devices, what really is left for the emotions when one comes to physically encounter it? With social media becoming a by-product of these developments, communication, networking and sharing become crucial to achieving various ends, resulting in

parched associations. "These are chaotic times for photography that I hope shall change", he exclaims.

Dismayed by the garish, artificial colours photography uses today, he dismisses it as "rang-birang nonsense." The sequels to these patterns of photography are auto exposed, colourful, flawless repetitions with a few words of description and hashtags that show up on social media platforms like Instagram. "Social media has become a disease now, that one cannot escape." One is more concerned about how many likes and followers one has over more important concerns about photography itself. There doesn't seem to be any emotion left in making these photographs. Here is where the compassion goes missing. Responses are hardened at every instance with the search for a more physical knowledge lost. "Unless you invest the mind, the body and the soul, the image won't have the power." It only becomes a copy of the real world, sans meaning.

It is true that photography is becoming more inclusive of everybody, "but the more the merrier is what the state of photography has become today." Even experiments that are happening are not extraordinary, it is only being done with the aid of technological interventions. With automatic and convenient mediums of photography, primarily with the infiltration of smartphones, one stops experimenting and begins to use readymade formulas to arrive at similar results. Generally, everybody is trying to achieve the superficial notion of perfection, not realising that this also embraces a sense of kitsch aesthetics and technological simulation- thus, individual creativity is lost. "Creativity and art is not meant for everybody" he adds, "it is only for those who have the ability and the soulfulness to respond."

Nonetheless, he sees the digitisation of images as a favourable and constructive system that has greatly affected picture production. "The new digital techniques are good because it is giving a physical form to my photographs, I couldn't print them otherwise. With more technology, there is more quality." Raghu Rai speaks of the juncture when he transitioned from the analogue to the digital sometime between 2003-2004. The prestigious GEO magazine had invited Rai to do a story on Bombay for their publication. At that time, he had three cameras: two film cameras and a Nikon digital camera. Unlike today, the highest resolution of digital cameras then was about 6 megapixels. Shooting images in RAW meant waiting for at least two minutes after every picture or two for the camera to reassemble itself, before attempting to take another shot. Yet, he eagerly opted for the digital camera and saved the output in portable JPEG format. On sending the images to GEO, they selected a few, only to realise that they were unable to print these low-resolution images on double pages. "And there were six or seven such double pages to fill! So, I took the images to a printing shop to enhance them to a higher



Old Delhi, 1982  
Raghu Rai/Magnum Photos

quality.” And thus, the images were printed on double pages. With this project as a turning point in his career, Raghu Rai has stuck to digital photography ever since.

In late 2018, Raghu Rai published two photo-books — *A God in Exile: The Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Sadhguru*. Because he has known Dalai Lama since

1975, he clarifies that the images in the publication are distributed between the film and the digital, while the Sadhguru project was entirely done on a digital camera. His contentment lies in the use of digital technology.



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