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# art dose

Showcasing photography, multi-media and allied endeavours.



On the cover —  
Survival on the Brink of Brine series  
by Arati Kumar Rao

In this issue

Narratives from Nature

*Arati Kumar Rao*<sup>6</sup>

*Dayanita Singh* on  
Re-curating the Photo Book<sup>7</sup>

*Sneha Khanwalkar* and the Porosity  
of Aural Boundaries<sup>8</sup>

*Peter Cat Recording Co.* A Portrait<sup>10</sup>

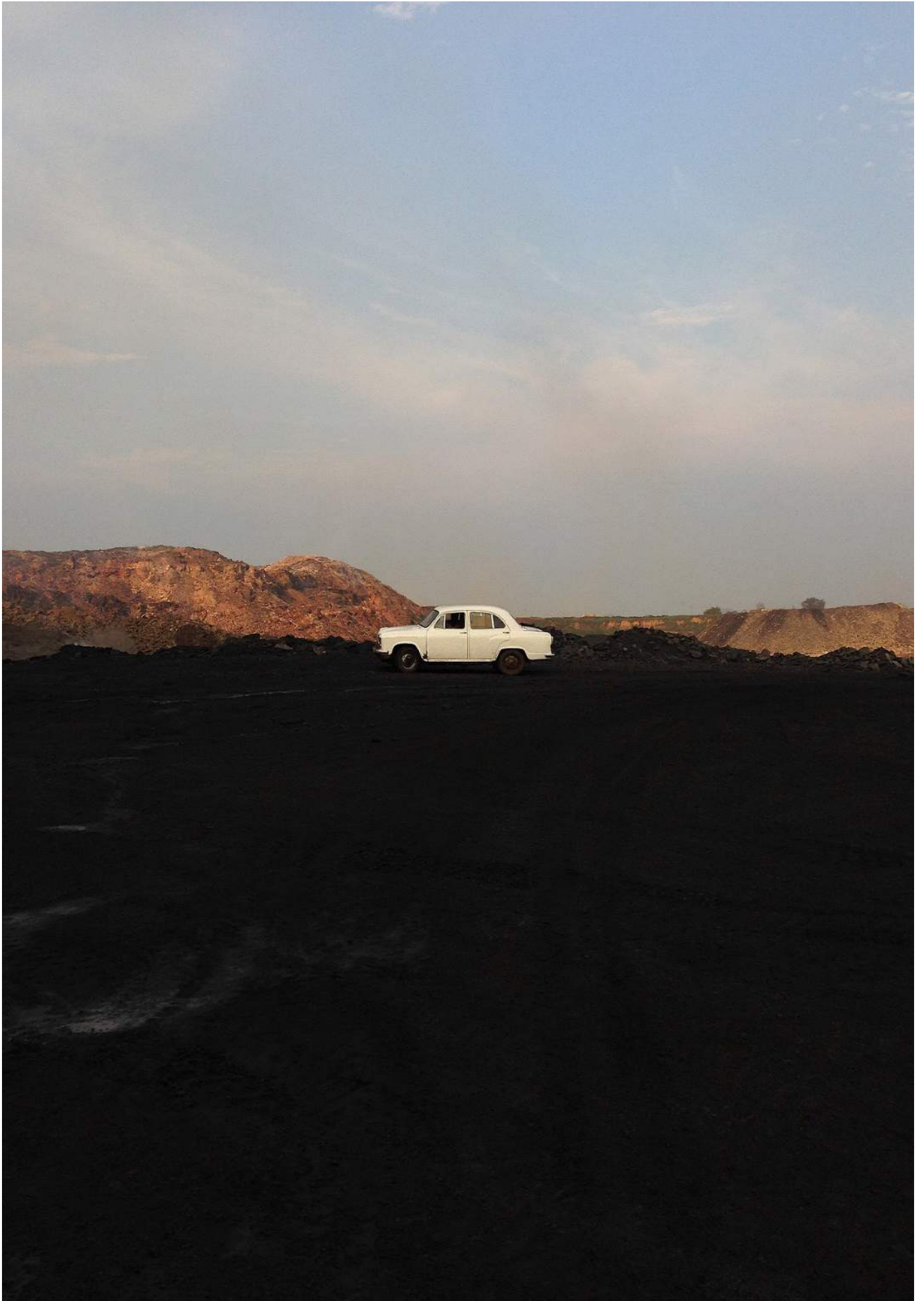
The Photograph as a Document  
*Anusha Yadav, Pushpamala N. &  
Claire Arni*<sup>15</sup>

*Raghu Rai's* Short Take on Modes of  
Photography<sup>17</sup>

Pastel Colours, Retro Dreams & Pop  
Music: A new aesthetics of Indie  
music-videos from Calcutta<sup>20</sup>

*Ronny Sen* Framing Narratives<sup>25</sup>

When is a Photograph Finished?  
*Sohrab Hura*<sup>29</sup>



# Ronny Sen

## Framing Narratives

Written by Shalmali Shetty

The name Jharkhand means the 'land of forests.' But Jharia, a small town in the vicinities of the Dhanbad district, is a story in multiple layers. For over a century now, it has had a subterranean coal fire burning out its resources and is likely to continue burning the landscape into an unrecognisable mass of wasteland. Jharia has been undergoing a number of problems, primarily because of the industrial and capitalistic exploitations meted out in order to illegally acquire its natural resources that are available in the form of coal deposits. Jharia has both underground and open-pit quarries from where tonnes of coal is extracted for industrial and unauthorised purposes. The disaster resulting in the intensification of the fire, is both natural and largely driven by human participation through unsafe and perilous methods of obtaining coal. Additionally, to increase production, mines are blasted, generating poisonous gases and further spreading the fire. The consequences of collapsing underground shafts, are very unstable surfaces above, putting entire settlements and lives at risk. Villages have been vanishing and displacement is rampant. The politics of extraction and ownership becomes a layered narrative and a story of failure.

"What I saw in Jharia was human greed and greed is what changes landscapes," exclaimed Ronny Sen, who recently showcased his series of photographs on Jharia titled *Fire Continuum* at Tarq, Mumbai in September 2018. Using the medium of still photography, his small formats of captured instances delineates a parallel narrative of a perpetual situation that seems to have no beginning or end.

In 2014, Ronny visited Jharia on a project with two French filmmakers. With no initial plans of photographing the site, the process of doing so developed through a daily observation of the space. With nothing but his phone camera, he began to document the landscape every day for three months, making the vertical format a stylistic decision. The vertical organization of photographs introduces the viewer to the clinical method of looking deep into the distance. Additionally, the expansive contrasts between the fore, the middle and the background, also brings one to look at a linear landscape in more detailed segments. In the process of piecing the narrative using concise shots, he is able to pick details out and evade revealing, through a horizontal sequencing, the full length of the story all at once.

Ronny's photographs are generally in black and white. He describes how black and white photography works according to its own rules. Using colour photography through the coal mine project becomes a subject of analysis. Looking at the colours of Jharia was a complex and surreal process for him. Monochromatic in nature, the colours were many, with the striated landscape forming and changing in varying tones of brown making up the ground, the sky, the air and the dust, and occasionally breaking into patches of other colours. The politics of colour is then played out with the imposing white Ambassador in focus against a black coal ground.

"Every choice of aesthetic has its own embedded politics; it becomes a politics of portrayal. Everyone says the same story, but how it is represented is what becomes important." The primary concern for Ronny is the politics of portrayal and how one photographs and interacts with a given subject, over any form of aesthetics. The mediums of expression may vary between art forms, but what is of crucial significance is how one deals with the representation of their subjects. For Ronny, finding a sequence made all the more difference. Sequencing and editing through the abundance of images took Ronny about four years. He explains how image-making becomes only 0.01% of photography while 99% work goes into the sequencing and structuring of a narrative.

In relation to his larger practice that focuses on primarily photographing in black and white, he maintains a hazy, grainy aesthetic through his productions, very similar to the *Are-Bure-Boke*, a style popular in Japan in the 1970s – 1980s, and also prevalent across America. "It is true that our generation has borrowed from the Japanese, but this is only in the case of the aesthetic; they are not limited to the Japanese visual." Japanese photographers showcased their pictures in books, developing the practice of photo-book making with a more contemporary outlook for a commercial market. This convention of photo-books was derived in India much later, with the trend developing only in the last decade or so.

"Photography hasn't seen much of an evolution in India per se when compared to the other forms of art. There is no Indian way of photographing." Being a technology borrowed from the West, it is no doubt evolving to find new means of articulation in India, yet it maintains a standard, universal method of looking that one cannot easily dismiss. Moreover, today, photography doesn't remain to be the exclusive and expensive form that it used to be. With point-and-shoot cameras now finding expression through the more convenient technology of smartphones, the everyday exercise of image-making has become an integral part of everyone's affair globally. The contemporary generation invested in these digital mediums display a unique set of skills through personal interventions, even if not pertaining to professional photography. Yet, how many of them are really aware of the underlying implications? It then becomes important that one is able to understand what politics goes into the visual narration of a story.

To substantiate this, I choose to observe one of Ronny's images, where he captures the white Ambassador: once a symbol of modernity and bureaucracy in India, it is now a symbol of fear in Jharia- a villainous protagonist on whose arrival the locals abscond. Recounting an anecdote, Ronny narrates how he interviewed a power figure in Jharia with regard to what he thinks as a member of an (illegally) beneficiary family, who has been in the business of acquiring coal through the past three decades. Were they at ease to do so because the mines were in the custody of the

government? What if the power shifted to private companies? "He said, 'with this government, everybody has been stealing and earning. With private companies, we (the beneficiaries) will go back to being like the British- when they came no one else was allowed to do mining.'" In retrospect, indeed how different are these few controlling beneficiaries and private players from the British? The entire city of Dhanbad has been running on this for decades now, with the power structures in the process destroying the livelihoods and homelands of its local inhabitants. With a politically motivated conspiracy in place, the locals themselves are not allowed to reap the fruits and the resources from their own lands, without getting targeted for 'smuggling'. Thus, the Sarkari Babu has maintained his power symbol to continue with his business of extraction. "But what is to happen after all the natural resources are extracted?", he laughs.

Failing the Nehruvian dream, the government and government-funded institutions have not been able to protect or sustain this town. With corruption persistently vitalising the raging subterranean inferno, it has become a dystopia in the making. The pyre has been set: how long before the fire engulfs these civilisations and it's (un)anticipating inhabitants, to transform them into blankets of ash? How long before a massive necropolis procures it all?



All images from the series Fire Continuum, 2014  
Image — Ronny Sen/Tarq

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