

FRIDAY REVIEW

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The viewfinder

CHAT Indore-based art photographer Ashish Dubey on what his pictures taught him.

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Ashish Dubey's pictures look at times like lyrical abstract paintings, at others like tribal art motifs. In reality they are untampered photographs. But is there an absolute reality? Is it not different for each individual, dependent on the viewer's keenness of observation, bent of mind, span of attention and myriad other details that colour our perspective? So it is that one day in 2008, Dubey, member of a group that works to save wetlands, took a photo of spent water lilies on Sirpur Lake in the morning light. Previewing the shot in his digital camera, he thought the camera "had gone wrong." Capturing it from the opposite angle, he came to the realisation that there were moments and images waiting quietly to be shot, if only someone cared to look.

"Both times the camera was functioning correctly. But my mind was not used to this shot," he explains. "What I got in my camera was my view, (but) there was no reference of any tree, boat, water. There was no reference of any sort." Consequently it appeared as an abstract design. The photo, which was published in National Geographic magazine's "Your Shot" column, set him on his unique photographic path.

"I think that picture manifested itself to me," says Dubey. "With that, the direction for my life got set. I don't have to look for any portraiture, I don't have to look for any landscaping... Today if I think I should also start doing adventure pho-

tography, it won't make sense. Because I think that's a decision someone made for me."

No wonder his website begins with the invitation, "Enjoy His art. I just shot it!" Exuding contentment, Dubey, a teacher of physics in an Indore college, feels his response to that decisive photo was also due to his readings. "I was reading a lot of Sufi poetry those days. And I was trying to grasp the idea of the beyond. Rumi talks of nothingness, a field beyond rightness and wrongness. So I was reading alongside and taking pictures."

Dubey says he has been taking photographs for about 25 years. "My father was also a photographer. He had a Rolliciflex — where you used to shoot from the belly — and a Kodak. And my grandfather also had a Kodak," he recalls. "Maybe at some time he (Ashish's father) told me not to touch the camera." This injunction, he smiles, must have made him respond with a determination to handle it!

Despite decades cultivating his art, Dubey held his first show only in 2009 (at The Mint, New Delhi), at the insistence of his Delhi-based brother-in-law who convinced him that with his work receiving recognition from a prestigious journal like National Geographic, he should exhibit. Dubey deems it an honour to have been included in the magazine's 2009 special issue featuring 101 Best Photos from Your Shot, and in 2010, making it to the first two hundred in the "Nature

category of its international photo contest. "Probably I would be the only person from India to be featured for three consecutive years on their website," he notes.

Encouragement apart, what is important to him is that it helps him gauge the quality of his work. He regrets a general absence of peer reviewing in the art field in India today. It is not enough to create something new, he feels. "If I have a new concept, (it is important to know) who has reviewed it. And if it has been reviewed, what level of reviewing has been done," he states. This concept is followed in science, he points out, where a paper written by one scientist is put past others knowledgeable in the field and later published, so that on reading it, the public knows if is of a certain standard. "But I don't know what is happening in art," he remarks. "People say that would kill our creativity."

Having held a number of exhibitions in India as well as Australia, Dubey avoids naming his photographs. "If you give names you are trying to orient the viewers. I need attestation from my viewer." He doesn't want to "misguide" his viewer. "If you give a name, immediately you are giving some kind of bias," says photographer who feels the most important part of shooting is seeing.

He believes human nature is made for a search beyond the tangible, and therefore, "until we see, we won't be able to fathom what our mind's eye wants to see."



HIS OWN LENS Ashish Dubey and (below) two of his works
PHOTO: S. SUBRAMANIAM

