

thearts



Kavita Ramdya

Marriage and Maharajas

From desolate palaces to street scenes, photo exhibition offer a glimpse of India in the 1960s and '70s

In the Rossi & Rossi black-and-white photo exhibition, "Stillness and Shadows: Vintage Photographs of India," the viewer is taken on an intimate journey exploring the nature of arranged marriages in the Indian household and the life of the maharaja and its court after its heyday. The exhibition features images from the collection of the late Bhupendra Karia and those taken by English photographer Derry Moore.

Karia's collection includes an assortment of images, including portraits of middle-aged couples, India's poverty and still lives whereas Moore's "Evening Ragas: A Photographer in India" is a "study of post-Raj India" where the photographer records the "rich, ornate interiors, revealing portraits and calm landscapes that sensitively record the charm, eccentricity and fading splendor of a post-colonial society."

The majority of the photographs were taken in the 1960s and 1970s, decades when Karia and Moore's American colleagues documented the Civil Rights Movement and free love; "Stillness and Shadows" could not be more different from the popular American subjects of that time. That said, both photographers differ from their own national contemporaries as well. At a time when Indian photographers were in the throes of discovering street photography, Karia was highly influenced by Japan's sense of handmade crafts. His was a rigorously honed and practiced craft as demonstrated in the strict sense of discipline in his images.

Having recently returned from the empty yet decadent maharaja residences in India's Rajasthan, Moore's photographs of the "majestic palaces and lavish homes and their inhabitants, elegantly rendering the charms, eccentricities and fading splendor that, in post-colonial society, already spoke of a bygone world" are timely.

The show begins with Moore's photographs of maharaja's palaces, spaces once filled with

friends, family, business associates and court staff and now empty save the ghosts from its past. Silent echoes bounce between solid columns, chandeliers are dull from layers of dust, and chairs achingly rest upside down on solid wooden tables meant to seat large parties.

Portraits of middle-aged couples who the viewer guesses once saw better days look away whereas their bodies face the camera as if the head and body are guided by separate motivations. One imagines that these marriages were the products of deliberations between families in terms of aligning fortunes and political motivations. However, in "Couple, Lucknow" (1977), Moore's subjects wear smiles as clear as the photograph itself; they wear the day-house clothes familiar to anyone with Indian grandparents, yet their smiles add a sense of mystery to the portrait.

In "Cut-out of Late Maharaja, City Palace, Udaipur" (1978), Moore playfully positions a life-size cutout of a maharaja figure that the photographer then captures in the soulless court which has long since seen its best days. The photo is a reminder of the maharajas' demise in India as well as the emptiness of such once-splendored places that, if lucky, are turned into hotels or otherwise relinquished to the state government.

As a frequent visitor of contemporary, modernist South Asian art exhibits, it was refreshing to read titled works in "Stillness and Shadows." A common lesson taught in art school is to leave works untitled so that they remain abstract for the viewer and open for interpretation rather than literal and figurative. Neither Karia nor Moore obeys this adage in their works. A birdcage is titled as such.

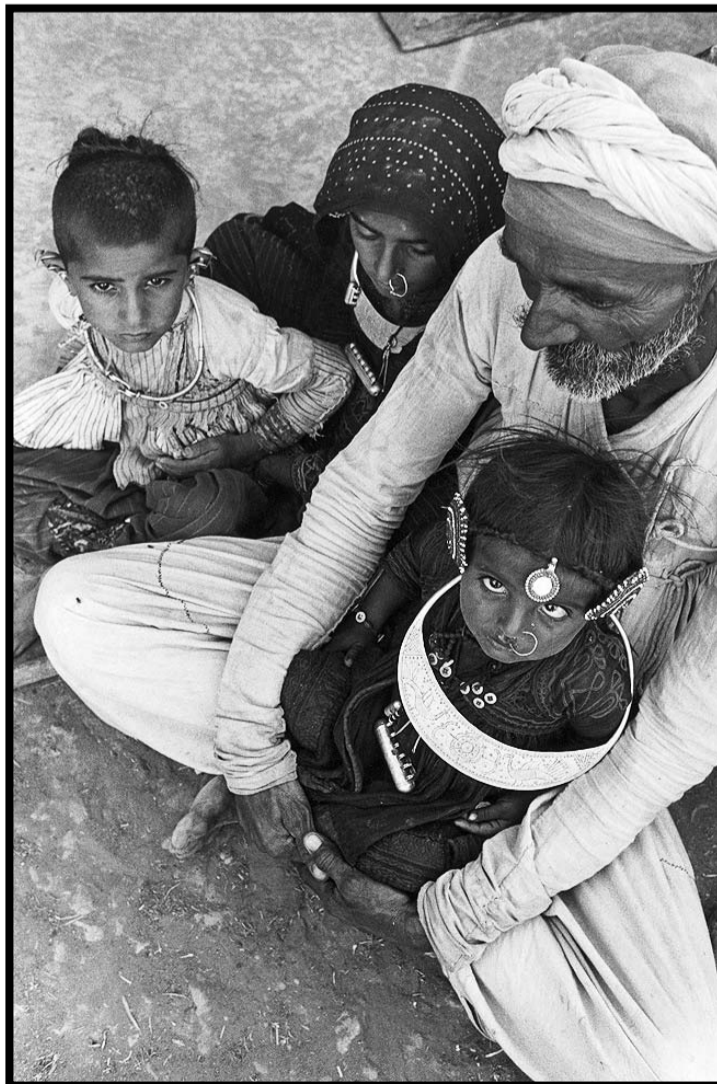
In Karia's "Old Woman with Hand to Face, Bhavnagar" (1969), the photographer takes a portrait of a woman clothed in dirty, tattered rags who shields her eyes from the sun or camera flash, a mystery gifted to the viewer. Both scenarios are ripe



Courtesy the artist and sepia EYE



Courtesy the artist and sepia EYE



Above, Bhupendra Karia, Cattle in Sabarmati, Ahmedabad, 1968. Left, Peasant's Foot on Cart, Bhuj, Kutch, 1968. Below left, Fathers and daughters looking up, Daneti, Kutch, 1970

for interpretation. In a collection of mostly still lifes, "Old Woman" is a refreshing portrait; her long, skinny fingers and square face give her an alien-like aesthetic.

"Abandoned Child on Road, Daneti, Kutch" (1968) is a snapshot of India at its worst: rather than lush and green, arid and dead; empty rather than teeming with people and produce. A lone boy, naked, sleeping and crying, curls up in a fetal position on the roadside, as if praying to be left alone. What happens to the young boy is anybody's guess.

"Fathers and Daughters Looking up, Daneti, Kutch" (1970) portrays a man well into his most senior years surrounded by three young daughters with a combined age of no more than 8 years. The portrait speaks to the expectations for large families and the lack of means for birth control in rural India at a time when families needed all the unpaid help they could spawn.

"Cattle in Sabarmati" (1968) is notable for its portrait of animals that are almost completely absent in the show. Cattle sunbathe and lounge in the Sabarmati like holidaymakers in a Jacuzzi: lazily. Their bodies half submerged in water and half absorbing the sun's rays, they resemble sea creatures, they're evolutionary predecessors. Notably, animals take up little space in "Stillness and Shadows" which focuses instead on the ghosts of India's past and the unsaid compromises made in an arranged marriage; the silences these photos exude are for the viewer to interpret.

Kavita Ramdya is author of "Bollywood Weddings: Dating, Engagement and Marriage in Hindu America" www.bollywood-weddings.com