

फोटो खींचिए ASCETICS WITH CAMERAS - THE RUMOR THAT STARTED IT ALL...

ON MARCH 12TH 2004, MY 29TH BIRTHDAY, WHILE EXPLORING THE VILLAGE ON THE YUMUNA SIDE OF THE SANGAM (CONFLUENCE OF THREE RIVERS: GANGA, YUMUNA AND SARASWATI, IN ALLAHABAD, UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA), I FELL OFF A BIKE INTO A DITCH AND TORE ALL THE MAJOR LIGAMENTS IN MY LEFT KNEE, LEAVING MY LEG IN A BRACE AND ME LIMPING AROUND WITH A BAMBOO STICK.

FAST FORWARD TO OUR FIRST DAY IN UJJAIN, MADHYA PRADESH. . .

AFTER TAKING OUR MORNING BATHS IN THE HOLY SHIPRA RIVER, SAUGAT (A LONG TIME FRIEND AND CREATIVE PARTNER OF MINE FROM NEW DELHI) AND I TOOK A SEAT ON THE STEPS, FINDING SHADE FROM THE 110 DEGREE SUN, UNDER A TREE AND NEXT TO A GROUP OF (MOSTLY NAKED & ASH COVERED) NAGA SADHUS, FROM JUNA AKHARA (THE LARGEST AND OLDEST ORGANIZATION OF ASCETICS WHO WORSHIP SHIVA). MY LIMPING UP THE STEPS AND STRUGGLING TO SIT WITH MY LEFT LEG IN A BRACE WAS PLENTY TO WARRANT ATTENTION. ALMOST IMMEDIATELY SEVERAL SADHUS WERE EDGING CLOSER TO US, ASKING WHAT HAPPENED AND WHO WE WERE? SAUGAT WAS CARRYING THE BAG OF EQUIPMENT (DIGITAL STILL CAMERA, DIGITAL VIDEO CAMERA, 35MM STILL CAMERA, MINI DISC RECORDER, MICROPHONE, HEADPHONES, DV TAPES, FILM AND MINI DISCS). ASSUMING I KNEW LESS HINDI THAN I DID, THE SADHUS BEGAN TO ASK SAUGAT WHO HE WAS IN RELATION TO ME. "ARE YOU HER GUIDE OR HER BODYGUARD?" WE JOKED AND SAID WE WERE BROTHER AND SISTER; NATURALLY NO ONE BELIEVED US, AS WE LOOK NOTHING ALIKE. FINALLY SICK OF BEING QUESTIONED, SAUGAT BEGAN TO PULL FROM THE BAG SOME OF THE GEAR TO SHOW THEM AND EXPLAIN IN WORDS TO WHICH THEY COULD RELATE, "SHE IS MY GURU." THOUGH I HAD INVITED HIM TO TRAVEL WITH ME AS MY ASSISTANT, I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY EARS. "SHE IS TEACHING ME PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEOGRAPHY AND SOUND RECORDING," HE CONTINUED. I NEVER IMAGINED THEY WOULD BELIEVE HIM, MUCH LESS HOW FAR THIS SLIGHTLY RIDICULOUS RUMOR WOULD GO.

PERHAPS IT WAS ONLY TWO DAYS LATER, I WAS LIMPING THROUGH THE AKHARA CAMPS, DOWN THE MAIN ROAD RUNNING ALONG SIDE THE SHIPRA RIVER, WHEN ONE NAGA CALLED OUT TO ME TO COME JOIN HIM BY HIS DHUNA (SACRED FIRE). HIS PERSISTENCE WON OVER MY RELUCTANCE, AND I SAT TO JOIN HIM. "I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT YOU AND HAVE BEEN WAITING TO MEET YOU! SUCH AN HONOR THIS IS!" HE SAID, PULLING OUT A 4x6 PHOTO ALBUM FROM HIS SMALL BABA BAG. EAGERLY HE FLIPPED THROUGH THE PAGES TO SHOW ME HIS PHOTOS AND ASKED TO MY UTTER ASTONISHMENT, "AM I GOOD ENOUGH TO BE YOUR STUDENT?"

AT THAT MOMENT I HAD CROSSED OVER THE LINE. I WAS NO LONGER A PRETREKAR (A JOURNALIST), NO LONGER JUST A PHOTOGRAPHER OR FILMMAKER LIKE ALL THE OTHER WHITE KIDS WITH CAMERAS. IN THAT INSTANCE I HAD BECOME, NOT QUITE ONE OF THEIR OWN, BUT (IN ALL MY ATTEMPTS TO DOCUMENT THEM) CLOSER TO THEM THAN I IMAGINED I EVER WOULD. BY THE FIRST PROCESSION (A PARADE OF ASCETICS AND DISCIPLES FOLLOWING THEIR GURUS, RIDING ON CHARIOTS) THROUGH THE TOWN OF UJJAIN, I HAD A CREW OF SEVERAL NAGA SADHUS, AUDITIONING THEIR ALBUMS, COMING TO ME FOR ROLLS OF FILM, USING MY DIGITAL EQUIPMENT AND EVENTUALLY (AS OUR ROLES SLOWLY REVERSED) GETTING THEIR OWN PHOTOS OF ME PUBLISHED IN LOCAL NEWSPAPERS.

THEY REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR RECORDED HISTORY. I REALIZED HOW ANY FOREIGNER POINTING A CAMERA AT THEM CHANGES THEIR ENTIRE NATURAL PRESENCE, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY HOW SO MANY OTHER JOURNALISTS BEFORE ME HAVE EXPLOITED THEIR SENSATIONALISM. THE ONLY WAY TO NEGOTIATE THIS DILEMMA IS TO PROVIDE THEM THE MEANS TO DOCUMENT FOR THEMSELVES.