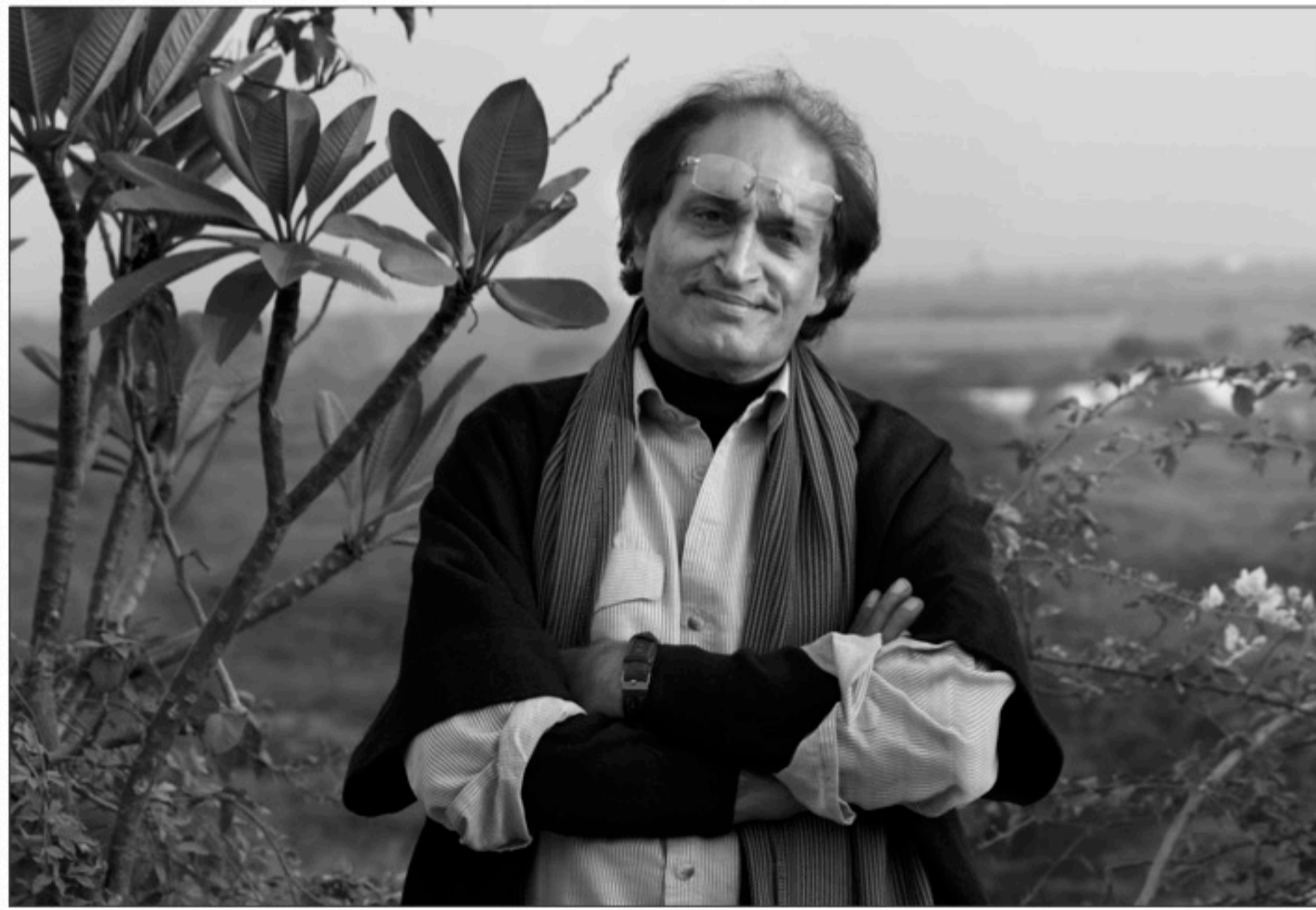


Calcutta is a horizontal experience

If India ever needed an eye to look at itself visually and viscerally, it would have its task cut out. But it just has to borrow RAGHU RAI'S lens, because no other lensman has so vividly captured the country's inexhaustive diversity and energy. The endearing Raghu Rai started as a photo-journalist with The Statesman in Calcutta in 1965 and has later been associated with Sunday and India Today as photo editor. In 1977, at the behest of none other than Henri Cartier-Bresson, Rai was nominated to join the elite Magnum Photos and has since been a part of the jury of World Press Photo thrice. He has ten books that have visually chronicled every bit of life in India as well some of the most colourful men and women who have made this country what it is. He is currently holding a quasi-retrospective of his images of his favourite city in the exhibition Calcutta, Kolkata: It Never Begins, It Never Ends. Rai talks to SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY about his philosophy of photography, his Magnum status, why Calcutta fascinates him and why he would love to be born again in India with a camera in hand.



First things first. Raghu Rai on Calcutta is a subject that is always attractive, always productive. And this time your exhibition has this very meaningful, pregnant name. You seem to keep coming back to this city.

How can one ever escape Calcutta? Its energy, its vivacity, its humanity is so palpable, so tangible. It's a photographer's delight. The title of the exhibition tries to capture the same. You see, those who knew Calcutta inside out, like me, may or may not like its new name. Calcutta is known globally as Calcutta, whatever logic those who renamed it may have had. But does a new name take away from Calcutta its iconic power to stun people? No! So the city may have a new name, but it's the same city and in that sense it never begins, it never ends. In fact you can call Calcutta like creativity itself, because creativity is like a cycle, a zero whose beginning and end is not discernible.

How easy or difficult is it to capture Calcutta?

Immensely easy and immensely difficult. See, the masters of photography

would insist that photography is capturing a 'moment in space'. Anywhere else it may work but try doing that in Calcutta! It's so overwhelming, so overcrowded, so full of animation and character that Calcutta never allows you that moment. There are many moments in one space and many spaces in one moment. Moreover its teeming, pulsating humanity never lets you take it easy. Calcutta is breathtaking and a completely horizontal experience. A moment means nothing in Calcutta.

The pictures are being put together in a book— your second on Calcutta.

My last book on Calcutta was in 1990 and since then, Calcutta has changed in leaps and bounds and yet has not changed much at all. The new book is neither a totally new collection nor a new edition of the old one. It's a book that retains some pictures from the old book and adds a lot more. I have retained only those pictures which are still relevant, still poignant, still pregnant with the meanings that make

Raghu Rai
Calcutta, Kolkata— *It Never Ends, It Never Begins*
Harrington Street Arts Centre, 8 Ho Chi Minh Sarani, Calcutta 700071
November 13, 2-8 pm

Calcutta what it is. Also, every third picture is panoramic, because Calcutta is best captured in a panorama, it's a grand theatre out there and only a wide lense can capture Calcutta potently.

You have also done and received great acclaim for your work on Bhopal and human management of the wildlife.

Yes, see for me there is only one way of looking at the world. It's the human way. Bhopal was obvious. But the other project did not try any wildlife photography but wanted to show why and how even animals are essentially human.

Actually, there are much like us — very human, very touchy and sensitive and they should be looked at only as humans in another form.

You have also photographed two towering women of your time — Indira Gandhi and Mother Teresa

Yes, they were the most powerful women of their time. We know this about Mrs Gandhi, but Mother is not one with whom you associate power. But she was actually the one who could get any world leader, on any side of the law or politics, at the other end of her phone if she had to. That was her power. She was the mother incarnate, the caregiver, the kindred spirit. She was just what all mothers are to their children. And she was the mother to all. That's why she was so simple and yet so extraordinary at the same time. And Mrs Gandhi had her own incomparable charm. See, photography for me is to record the time I am living in. And Mrs Gandhi and Mother defined, in their own ways, the times I was living in. And their empathy

and charm seeped into my canvas. **Is it that simple? Is photography a record of the time and nothing else?**

Nothing, believe me. People do fine art photography, conceptual photography, artistic photography etc. They are fine, but only up to an age. Photography is that vision that helps to locate the god in small details and finds beauty even in the mundane. Because photography is about that human contact, that human eye, that human vision. And comes after years and years of experience. It is because of this effort to see the great in the small what brings me to Calcutta, what took me to Mrs Gandhi or to Mother. You will see my photos of Mrs Gandhi as a human and not as a political figure because that would be to twist and turn her into something which she is not. Remember, the human eye is the shortest distance from your object of sight. So fundamentally that is what photography is for me. It's the human eye. See the early photographers who came to India captured the Rajas and maharajas and other eminent people. If you look at a painting from the past, you admire the painter. If you look at a portrait from the past you admire the look of the man, the model. You say, 'wow, is that what he looked like.' That is what photography is. It is history; and history cannot be rewritten. So it cannot be twisted and turned to suit one's taste. **You have been a Magnum photographer. How has been your experience.**

It is prestigious yes and if anyone from abroad is coming to me through them, they know what kind of work I do and can do. I do little commissioned work. I work only on subjects that excite me, that drive and push me. In any case I am not a greedy guy. I don't like to compete with anyone for money or for fame. I am happy with my photography, my strapped camera and my place on the streets or in the parlour as long as I can mingle with the surroundings.

And what excites you?

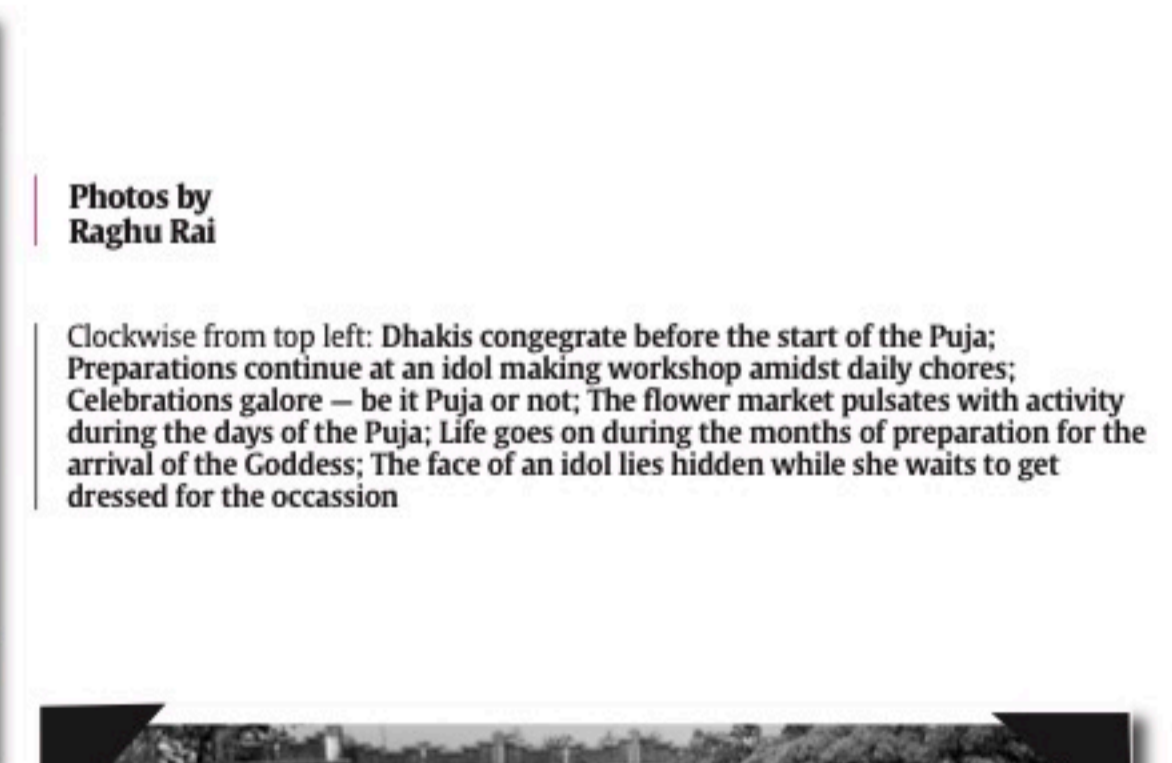
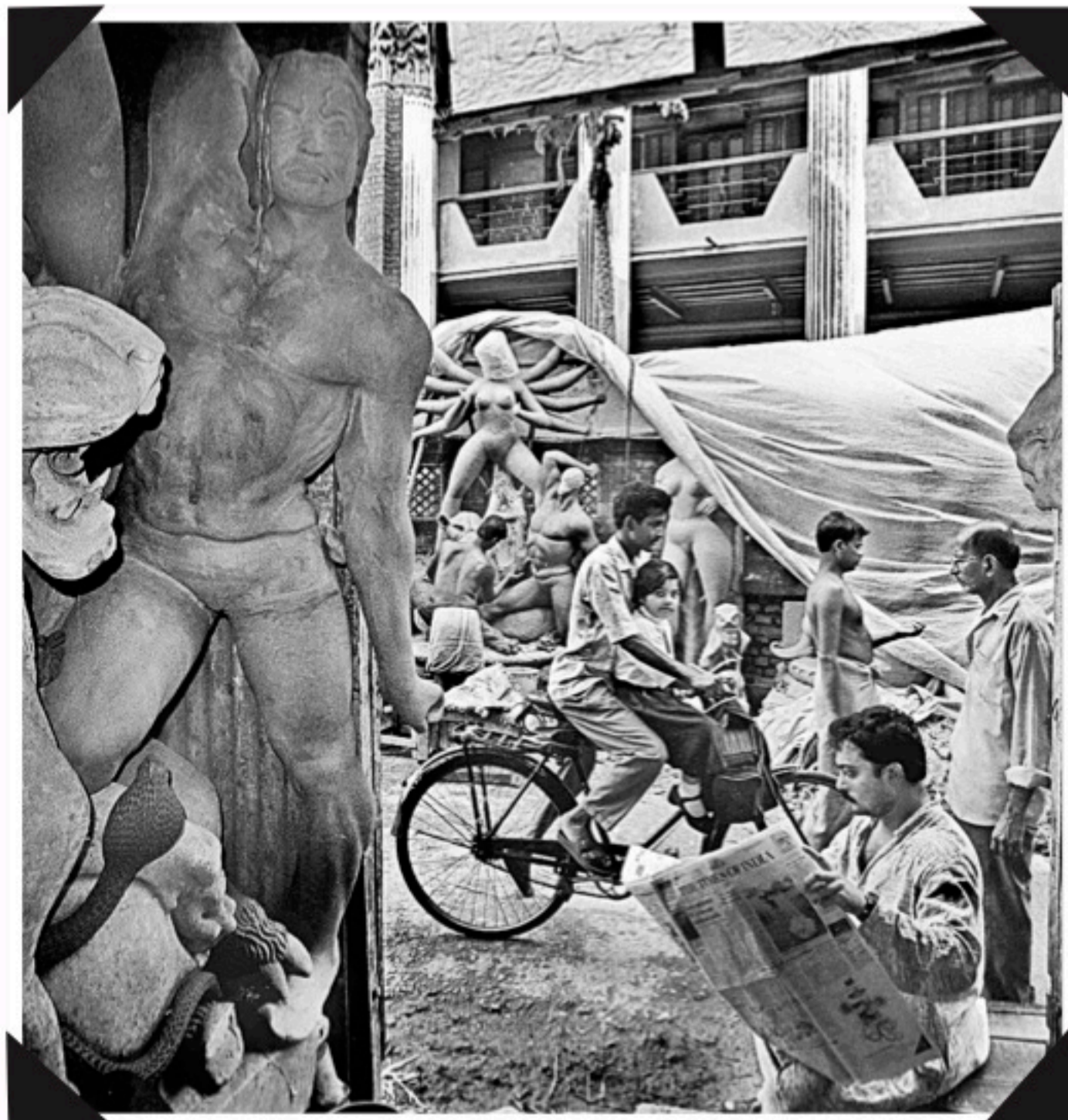
India. India. India. Its colours, its vitality, India is my world, my everything. If I were ever to be born again, I want to be in India once more and want to shoot it as long as I can.

After looking at, capturing and chronicling India for decades now, do you look at it differently?

No, photography is my dharma. And not karma anymore. I feel god in photography. And India is my muse. I will never tire of India.

interview

Montage



Photos by Raghu Rai

Clockwise from top left: Dhakis congregate before the start of the Puja; Preparations continue at an idol making workshop amidst daily chores; Celebrations galore — be it Puja or not; The flower market pulsates with activity during the days of the Puja; Life goes on during the months of preparation for the arrival of the Goddess; The face of an idol lies hidden while she waits to get dressed for the occasion

