



Stephen's Collection, University of Pennsylvania
TRADITIONAL AMERICAN INDIAN MOTHER AND CHILD



Matthew Collection, Rhode Island
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN AMERICAN MOTHER & STEPCHILD

Cultural Affinity : Two panels from 'An Indian From India' series

COURTESY: FOSS-GANDITASVEER

Knowing Me, Knowing You

ANNU Matthew uses photography skills and digital imaging to preserve her Indianness in a faraway land with a different culture



THE celebrated portrait of a 12-year-old Afghan girl on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine in 1985 did not require words to encapsulate the tragedy of Afghanistan. Years later they identified the girl as Sharbat Gula. That image left a mark in every memory. And it was taken by a now old-fashioned film camera. Today, however, digital art in photography is a framework to knit the social theme with imagination and make it a means of communication. The enhanced (call them 'doctored' if you will) images give a scope

for a mini-story to shape in the mind of the viewer.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's recent exhibition of photographs at the Foss-Gandi Art Gallery in Mumbai leaves you with mixed feelings. A professor in art (photography) at the University of Rhode Island in the US, 43-year-old Annu has been preserving her 'Indianness' in a foreign land. In her words, "All my bodies of work fall under the continual idea of living between cultures with India being the primary influence."

‘An Indian From India’, Annu’s photography series was triggered after often being subjected to the question of her Indian roots. The images appear as a clarification given by her of being an Indian from India and not an American Indian. “I live in the US and have an unrecognisable accent (English/Indian) that people often want to clarify where I am from. Answering this question by saying I am an Indian highlighted this confusion and was the initial impetus for this project,” she reveals.

“Being born in Britain, raised in India and now living in America, my mixed or ‘masala’ background continually shapes my photographs. My images are participatory interpretations of my life as an Asian-Indian woman living in a diaspora. Through my work I explore the enigma of my cultural heritage and try to embrace the American culture that I’ve chosen to make my future in,” is how Annu defines her journey.

Annu maintains herself through self-portraits as the “Indian” by digitally reworking the photographs of Native Americans (the so-called Red Indians) and innovatively attempts to show, rather emphasise, not only the marked differences but also the similarities between two peoples on the opposite sides of the globe. She makes her presence felt so that she can metaphorically and literally turn the lens on herself thus shifting the power structure between the photographer and the subject.

According to her the idea was “reversing the gaze thus asking the viewer to rethink the photographs that have perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes.” The concept of changing phases from the 19th century to the present and her acclimatisation is also traceable. The concept of the images turns meaningful with the humorous yet satirical titles “as they often highlight some of the stereotyping, labelling or assumptions.” For sure, one will not fail to notice the

ANNU’S images are participatory interpretations of her life as an Asian-Indian woman living in a diaspora



Flashback : Two images from ‘Memories Of India’ series



signature images titled ‘Christopher Columbus And Me, Geographically Challenged’. The man who set off to find India ended up discovering the New World. Thinking that he had found the Indies, Columbus named the people collectively as Indians and since then there has been a great deal of confusion.

The portfolio ‘An Indian From India’ is more conceptual while ‘Memories Of India’ is more intuitive. Here Annu tries to trace her “roots” and “home”. The photographs appear like a child’s fond memories. “In ‘Memories Of India’ I use a \$20 plastic toy camera called a Holga which has only one shutter and two f-stops (focal ratio), so it has very few controls. The plastic lens distorts the edges and vignettes the image creating an image that looks more like a memory,” she explains. The series of photography is aptly her poetic journey as a photographer. ◀