

HOMI KHARAS : PHOTOGRAPHER



ART HERITAGE

HOMI KHARAS

Brief Encounters

by E. Alkazi

Though there is a strong element of chance in photography, the lensman's skill lies in seizing the moment within a fraction of a second, to transform the casual and fortuitous encounter into a memorable image of measured skill and enduring beauty. But even beyond that, between the click of the camera shutter and the dripping print as it emerges out of its bath, are scores of decisions that the photographer makes that put to the test his technical ability and artistic discernment.

Patience, but in a state of perpetual alertness, the antennae poised quiveringly in anticipation, waiting for the precise moment when an action sparkles into revelation, with the confluence of attendant circumstances, or surrounding elements, giving the event its full meaning—this is what is required of the photographer. This is true not only of "action" photography, but even of the still subject, where the flicker of emotion on a face or a gleam in the eye is enough to exalt the most prosaic of situations into an epiphany.

There is an aggressive wariness in some photographers, like that of jungle creatures on the prowl, stalking their prey, with light and soundless steps, ears cocked for the slightest crackle, eyes sharp and alert, before the predator-cameraman actually strikes.

Another type of photographer adopts a far more subdued approach. He waits stoically in wind, rain, or blazing sun, for a pattern in nature, or in action, human or otherwise, to emerge—ripples on a lake's surface; birds, trees and clouds in a silent

poetic dialogue, or the geometry of human movement revealing itself with startling vividness.

As a man of the outdoors, Homi Kharas has learnt how much more rewarding it is to listen than to hold forth; to absorb than to assert. An unhurried calm informs his works, like that of a man taking a leisurely stroll in the countryside, gazing in wrapt wonder at everything around him on earth and in the sky, and slowly adjusting his pulse to that quiet subtle rhythm which seems to pervade all things. Even in the frenzied bustle of city streets, he seeks out the play of rhythmic forms, fragile patterns of shadows cast by the sinking sun, islands of order in the midst of chaos.

Moments of heightened drama do suddenly erupt. Perched precariously on a steep slope in the Western Ghats, appropriately called "Danger Point", he chances on a rhesus monkey high up on a tree. There is a tense atmosphere of confrontation. Watcher and quarry eye each other suspiciously, each anticipating the other's next move. For the monkey, whose only route of escape is where the photographer has stationed himself, the stakes are high indeed: it is a matter of survival, and of providing for a family. The watcher, on the other hand, waits for that desperate leap over his head which the monkey is bound to make sooner or later, and give him the opportunity for a superb shot of the creature, caught in mid-aid, limbs outstretched.

But his position on the edge of the precipice is so unsteady that the slightest move would result in a loss of balance, sending him hurtling headlong down the

mountainside to certain death. The situation is fraught with equal danger for man and animal: to both it seems a matter of life or death.

Finally, when the monkey does make his leap, the chance for a one-in-a-million shot is lost by the photographer in a brief moment of panic. Freedom for the creature spells failure and defeat for the artist. He curses himself for his sheer bad luck and for his presence of mind forsaking him for that crucial split second. Encounters such as these, though not invested with as much risk, are grist to the cameraman's mill.

For the photographer everything depends on that momentary decision which makes or mars a picture. That is why one frequently sees him shooting away at his subject for all he is worth, submitting it to an endless barrage of shots, in the fervent hope that one of the few score will hit the bull's eye (as it were), and prove to be an artistic triumph.

Kharas, however, is far more economical in his approach. Leaving nothing to chance or accident, he waits unhurriedly for the moment to reveal itself. As a woman trudges laboriously up a slope beyond a row of fencing he sees in her movement a metaphor for life's weary journey. The stark simplicity of *Pilgrim's Progress* is what raises this image of Kharas to the level of allegory.

Another woman is seen ascending a flight of damp, weed-infested steps, into the mists of time past. She seems to be strangely drawn by the mouldering walls covered with lichen of an ancient dwelling sunk in brooding loneliness. An arched entrance beckons. The viewer is left to



devise his own sequel to the enigmatic action set out before him.

It is the imagination of a poet that makes four men in a boat (in *Urban Tranquilliser*) go sailing up the faceless, lifeless facade of a skyscraper, congealed in its rigid geometry. The broken surface of the boat's reflection provides a salty tang and freshness, and a sense of liberation, from the prison-like monotony of the building's exterior.

The same quality of sensitivity in Kharas makes him seize upon the gawkins of an adolescent girl caught in action under the outline of a venerable temple-bell. The idea of innocence and inexperience at play in a hoary, sequestered space is deftly suggested. (*Temple Quoits*).

On the Art Deco frontage of a Bombay movie-house, the elegant silhouette of a young film star proclaims her dominion over her "new empire". A quick eye and a nimble wit bring together such associations.

In *Circus*, three young girl acrobats precariously balance their way to the uppermost regions of the Big Top. Glamour, youth and skill are threatened by the make-shift fragility of the canvas heavens, and the thought of what appear to be mere children risking their lives day after day to provide thrills to a jaded, uncaring public strikes the viewer with a chilling stab of conscience.

The immutability of fate, the transience of life, the illusory nature of reality—these, after all, are among the perceptions offered by great art. Even as Homi Kharas's works give us insights into such grave concerns of life, they provide repeated instances of that coalescence of intuition and imagination which indicate his intellectual and artistic maturity.

For this, and much more, we are grateful to him.

Photographs illustrated in this Catalogue

Tree Tracery, 1984
Temple Quoits, 1970
The Plateau
Walkeshwar Beach, 1991
Circus
Uttam Beach, 1976
Prelude to Sunset, 1959
Urban Tranquilliser, 1986

The Photographer's Background

Although the work of Homi Kharas has figured prominently in salons in India and abroad, this is the first occasion on which a representative selection of his works is being presented in Delhi as a one-man show.

Kharas owes his interest and skill in photography to his mother, Shirin Kharas, who herself had started taking lessons in the medium from a veteran artist as early as 1923. After classes, she would return home laden with exposed glass plates. Roll films were to come to India later. In her darkroom Kharas used to lend a hand with formulating the stock chemicals and developing the plates. All this before he ever handled a camera. A couple of years later he was presented a Kodak box-camera, and his excitement may be imagined when one of the pictures taken with it won him an award in the *Times of India Illustrated Weekly*, as the magazine was then known.

From his early schooldays Kharas has been a lover of the outdoors and has been fascinated by nature in her countless aspects and moods. This led him to be the Founder Secretary of the Bombay Hikers, which is now in its fifty-third year.

Having attained a high standard of photographic skill, Kharas decided to promote pictorial photography among enthusiastic amateurs.

With a view to helping the beginner in photography improve in technique and develop the "seeing eye", Agfa India Limited brought out a compact magazine called *Agfa Photo Gallery*.

Homi Kharas was appointed its Editor in May 1955. The response from amateur as well as professional photographers from all over India was overwhelming.

To enable every reader to gauge his progress, a regular monthly competition was introduced with Cash Prizes. The doyen of photography in India, J.N. Unwala, was appointed to judge the entries. After his demise, the distinguished photographer R.K. Bharadwaj took over and continued the laudable work. A prestigious National Contest was introduced, with thousands of rupees as prizes.

In addition, a Course in Photography was started, each issue of *Agfa Photo Gallery* carrying, subject-wise, a lesson in pictorial photography. The winning pictures were analysed for the guidance of amateurs.

There was no price tag on *Agfa Photo Gallery*. It was available free of charge at over a thousand Agfa photo dealers all over India, apart from the copies delivered by post.

The magazine was edited throughout and published by Homi Kharas, right up to October 1983 when it gracefully bowed out.

Kharas was also Editor of India's first full-colour magazine, *Photography Today*. In recognition of his valuable contribution to this field, Kharas was awarded in 1991 the Honorary Associateship of the India International Photographic Council.





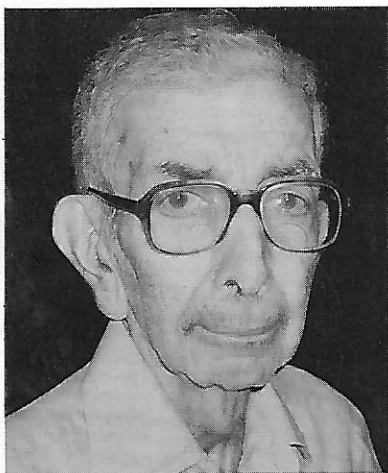


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2. Betty, 1936
3. Fog on the Line, 1936
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8. Fagged Out, 1940
9. Hollyhocks, 1940
10. The Haunted House, 1942
11. At Daybreak, 1942
12. Water Ballet, 1942
13. Pilgrim's Progress, 1943
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19. High and Dry, 1950
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42. Pattern of Progress, 1984
43. Tree Tracery, Godhbandar, 1984
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45. Urban Tranquiliser, 1986
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Uttam Beach, 1976





- Nov. 1913 Born in Bombay
resides at Land's End, Bandra
receives primary education at
home
and lessons in gardening
a Mehtaji teaches him Gujarati
in the afternoons
- 1924 attends St Xavier's High
School
then Bharda New High School
for his matriculation
after which he is admitted to
the Elphinstone College
attends Davar's College of
Commerce & Economics
in the evenings
weekends spent developing
photographic
plates for his mother, a skilled
photographer
- 1930 receives a Portrait Brownie
Box Camera
- 1931 gets his first award in the
Illustrated Weekly Snapshots
Competition
during his career wins a string
of prizes from Indian and
foreign magazines
- 1936 takes up a Correspondence
Course in Advertising from a
British College;
also starts doing free-lance
copywriting for two advertis-
ing stalwarts, T.M. Wadia and
R.V. Leyden
- 1937 lands his first job as Advertis-
ing Copywriter in the *Times of
India* office; there he takes the
opportunity to learn the
rudiments of printing, process
engraving, page make-up, etc;

this enables him to fit into any
branch of editing, printing,
and public relations photogra-
phy

- 1946 starts out as Founder-Director
of Everest Advertising Ltd
under the guidance of A.M.
Patel, Chief Representative of
the *Times of India* Group
- 1961 switches to Clarion-McCann
Advertising Ltd
- 1977 retires

Prelude to Nightfall, 1959



