

Pablo Bartholomew

Photographer

'My cynicism has been my spiritual path'

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Pablo Bartholomew is a photographer.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is such a misused and misunderstood word! I was not brought up in any kind of religious background. My parents were socialist, intellectual, artistic. At home we never had icons or statues or photographs with any religious meaning.

Only my grand-mother was closer to something of the sort, as she was a follower of the Brama Samaj. But it didn't influence me in any way.

In the last sixties, my father [Richard Bartholomew] worked in Delhi's Tibet house and set up its museum for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. So as a child, I was exposed to some elements of Tibetan Buddhism. People were always nice, funny, smiling. It felt light, accessible, without dictate. So I was drawn to it and still am, because of that lightness and non dogmatic approach.

On the other hand, I cannot stand going inside most Hindu temples with their stench and smell which erases any potential spiritual appeal to me.

So spirituality for me is nature – the sky, the sun, water, animals, trees. In a way I feel closest to an animistic view of things. When you look at a great sky whether dark and cloudy or blue, both have

their strength and essence, and it lifts you. That's spirituality – whatever lifts you. Unlike when going into a temple and encountering all those smells, dirt and the go-between of someone insisting that they can "take you through that passage".

Did you have shamanic experiences, since you mentioned an animistic sensibility?

I worked for many years in the Naga hills, where people are now mostly Christian, American Baptist. But there were animistic pockets in very remote areas next to the Burmese border. And for sure I could sense a very high connection to nature in most tribes, a natural way of living life where everything you do goes back to the soil.

I photographed gurus, like Rajnish, Mukhtanand and many others. But none was for me. Instead, I think you can find spirituality in very simple things.

Like what?

Like great food, and not necessarily a lavish meal. Let's say like gathering some wild berries and enjoying their fresh taste and texture. It takes you to another level.

But really, I haven't thought much about spirituality and all those questions. I didn't grow up in that way. And later on, I guess I was not drawn to it. I didn't feel the need.

When you look at your life, do you see it as all random?

Some accidents happened when I was young and formed me. For instance some accident got me to be in photography. And over time I came to the conclusion that it really is the thing for me, where I want to remain because that's where I am most comfortable and happy. It doesn't bring me vast amounts of money, but obviously that never was my main goal.

When you were a kid, what did you want to do?

A fireman because I played with those toys ! Then I wanted to become a biochemist. But it didn't work as I was not good in math, my interest in physics was not great and so on.

Through your photography, you can sensitize people to all sorts of realities – do you see it as part of your life purpose? Do we all have a life purpose?

I don't think so. I went into reportage as a need to find work and recognition. But at no point did I feel that I was there to be a "crusader of truth". There are many truths and media plays many kinds of role in it. And I am so frustrated with the media. Because I am not sure it is a vehicle of change it could be. For instance I am known for this one image from Bhopal. And in a way it is a responsibility I don't want to have. Because the gap between what that image represents and what actually happened to the people makes me feel very sad. If I could have really been a conduit, then things would have changed. So somewhere there is a heaviness I carry. Especially recently when the story all reemerged. There is so much talk. But I don't think anything will really happen. More money may be spent but how much will really benefit the people? I tend to be very cynical. My cynicism right from my teenage time has actually been my savior. In a way, it has been my spiritual path!

But for instance when you did all those reports on the Nagas – you brought those worlds to us who haven't been there?

Yes, I document and record things which are important to me. Most of my large projects have some resonance with my family. Being from a mixed background – my father was Burmese, my mother from Lahore - there is always this existentialist quest about one's identity – who am I, where am I, where am I going and so on. My father, left Burma and came to India through those Naga tribes, which is why I was so interested in them. I resonated with them which made my work possible. I worked there for ten years. Like on a spiritual quest. Photography is a way of finding – of finding some feeling, a place, people, a culture.

I am the residue of all those experiences I have gone through, some good, some really bad.

So during really difficult experiences, like very difficult stories, where do you find your anchor and energy?

Within what I do. It's like a mission. You go in to do something. You may fail sometimes badly. And then you come back.

There were years when I didn't have time to think or reflect on any of it. Today it affects me more than at the time, when one's energy, mind, sexuality are all so strong that you don't think. You are just trying to prove something to yourself. You go from one thing to the other to the other. And you don't ponder about it. Now I have more distance. And I do less the kind of difficult work I did in Bhopal for instance. Among others because it doesn't have that much of an impact. So why bother. There are much deeper things I need to work with – like all that has to do with my family. And my own creative work. I was more creative before I joined the media, which is like a factory. I was much more in touch with myself, with my creativity, my feelings. But I wouldn't be recognized for it.

So I was frustrated, and joined the media, in order to get that recognition. Once you are saturated with recognition and success, you look at the sum total of it. And it's definitely not very deep. Before, you had a certain freshness, a certain way of looking at things and you had to put them away because the factory didn't want it. It was too subtle, too layered, too complex. The factory only wants bold, striking images with an easy to understand message.

Three decades ago, I took many photographs of a certain society in India. It is a documentation on a period, a way people lived and behaved, how they were influenced by certain things. That kind of thing has much more importance for me. And that is what I now want to focus on.

Is there any such thing as God for you?

I believe there is a force, in the form of nature. I am an inconsequential fragment of it who can try and contribute. You feel it when it rains, when there is great light, a little bit of breeze, fragrances, when it drizzles and the earth smells. That for me is very powerful and at the end of the day, God is a presence that makes something happen within you. And nature does it.

If there were such a thing as God, and you could ask a question, what would it be?

How can I transcend time and space? Not to be eternal though. There are cycles of birth and death, we must respect them. I don't think the earth will live forever. It will die and be reborn in a different way.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

As a human being, as there are so many unfinished things to complete. But with the knowledge of this life, as I wouldn't want to start the same crap all over again.

Do you agree with Buddhism when it says that all life is suffering?

95% of life is drudgery. The other 5% make the excitement. But you have to go through those 95 to get to the 5%.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a sense of wellbeing. Of being able to do what you want to do and do it well. I wouldn't say I am happy or unhappy. There are many things I could do to improve myself. But I think I am fairly content. If I look at myself and many of my contemporaries,

I find that they may have greater wealth, they may have arrived in many more ways, but somewhere I can feel their discontent. So often they tell me how lucky I am because I never got married and I am free. Or how managing wealth in itself can create a whole set of worries. So I think I'm ok and that's what matters.