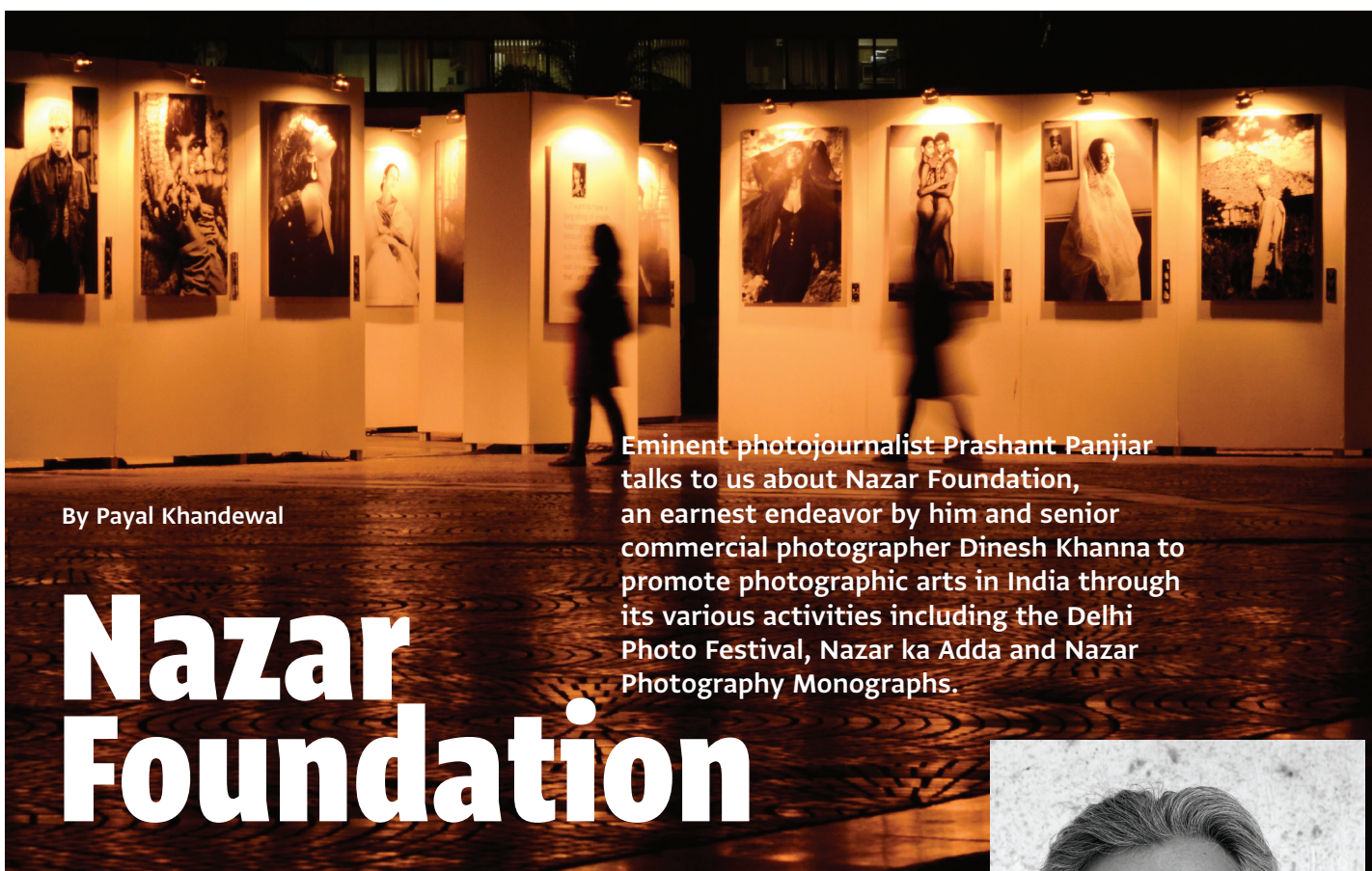




By Payal Khandewal

Nazar Foundation

Eminent photojournalist Prashant Panjiar talks to us about Nazar Foundation, an earnest endeavor by him and senior commercial photographer Dinesh Khanna to promote photographic arts in India through its various activities including the Delhi Photo Festival, Nazar ka Adda and Nazar Photography Monographs.



Prashant Panjiar

Nazar Foundation is located somewhere in the heart of Prashant Panjiar's home in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi. "It saves the rent," says Panjiar as a joke with serious intent when we meet him at his home, the official address of the foundation which he co-founded along with Dinesh Khanna to support and promote photographic arts in India.

Panjiar is a well-known photojournalist who has worked in India Today and Outlook Group and has been an independent photographer since 2001. He has done a project based on peasant movements in India and a self financed book on banditry in the Chambal region in Central India, among other works. Khanna, on the other hand, has been one of the most sought after advertising and commercial photographers. His personal body of work, spanning various genres, has been exhibited around the world. "Independently, we had been doing our own thing and had also been mentoring a lot of young photographers. And somewhere along the way, we met and decided to do an exhibition together and that's how we started collaborating. Interestingly, around the same time (in 2007), we started talking about the idea of a community for photographers in India. We knew that the time was right to get people who want to talk about photography together," says Panjiar.

A macroscopic reason that led to this idea coincides with the advent of digital photography which, as we all know, completely changed the landscape of photography as an art form and as

a profession. Earlier, the main practitioners of photography were working full-time in either advertising/commercial jobs or in media publications. However, around the digital age, a lot of photographers crossed over and became independent which helped break the fetters of genres and definitions but also had its repercussions. "While I was working in Outlook, for example, I would actually be in an office in the company of editors, photographers and other colleagues and would engage in conversations and get inspired. So the creative stimulus that you get when you have conversations with colleagues was out of reach for people who were talented, hardworking and passionate about photography but were working independently. And this led to a feeling of isolation," says Panjiar.



So after a lot of “beer and *gupshup*” and coaxing by a bunch of young photographers, Panjiar and Khanna decided that there indeed was a huge need for a platform where photographers could come together, exchange ideas and give constructive feedback on each other’s work. And on this simple thought, they laid the solid groundwork of Nazar Foundation and the stage for photographers is being relentlessly built upon it ever since.

Panjiar also feels that it was personally worthwhile to create the organisation because they both have gained a lot from photography and it was time to give back. “Therefore the idea of not profit and we were very clear about it right from the beginning. We are both practicing photographers and we didn’t want to become curators and earn money from this. We continue to do our own individual work.” Nazar Foundation is a promoters based organization in which both Khanna and Panjiar put a small corpus (around Rs.1 or 2 lakh each) and then raise funds on a project to project basis. They do not have any official staff. Panjiar does all the clerical work from his house and Khanna doesn’t mind packing and dispatching books when required.

Nazar Foundation currently organizes the biennale Delhi Photo Festival whose first and second edition took place in 2011 and 2013 respectively, and the third will happen in 2015. It regularly hosts Nazar ka Adda where a small group of photographers comes together to manifest the thought on which the foundation was created. The third leg of the foundation is the Nazar Photography Monographs which is based on the idea that “important photographic works must be seen as books whether they are commercially viable or not.” Two books have been published so far including Vicky Roy’s *Home. Street. Home* and Adil Hasan’s *When Abba was ill*.



Delhi Photo Festival

Nazar Foundation collaborates with the India Habitat Centre for the biennale Delhi Photo Festival which comprises of print and digital exhibitions, workshops, seminars, panel discussions, gallery tours and portfolio reviews. During its first edition, all the exhibitions which were the core of the festival were held at the India Habitat Centre and in 2013, the exhibitions were extended to various partner galleries. And Panjiar hopes that in 2015, the number of partner galleries will increase.

“But the core will still remain the same. I actually don’t know what it means to make it bigger. 2013 was a bad year because of the economy and we just managed to scrape through the skin of our teeth. But if we were to get better sponsorship next year, we could expand the activities in terms of asking more people to come. We will be able to pay for their flights etc. We already pay honorarium to various photographers who volunteer for the festival but that’s miniscule, so we want to be able to pay them more since they take time off work to help us. And that’s the only way I see it getting bigger. I don’t think extending it to multiple venues etc. is required,” says Panjiar. He also hopes that there should be better participation in the next edition and instead of just photographers, anyone who loves photography should be able to join in.

Nazar Ka Adda

The monthly meetings of photographers or anyone interested in photography goes by ‘Nazar ka Adda’ and are held in various cafés across Delhi. Says Panjiar, “At Nazar ka Adda, people come and show their ongoing projects to get feedback in an informal and interactive way. And in that process, other participants learn something from it. This also becomes a point of discussion through which various other issues in photography are also raised. And organizing *addas* doesn’t cost us any money.”



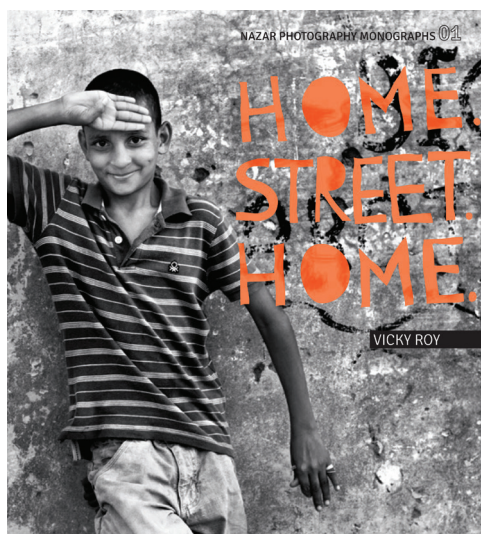
He specifies that this is a regular feature and it helps build the community. In fact, a lot of volunteers that work on the Delhi Photo Festival come from the *addas*. They also invite filmmakers to showcase their work once in a while.

Nazar Photography Monographs

Out with two photo books now, when asked about the process behind the publishing arm of the foundation, Panjiar says, “We don’t have a process in choosing work as of now. We started doing Nazar Photography Monographs because again that’s an area where we felt a need-gap and I feel very strongly about this.” While they had some other project in mind to set off this venture, when they stumbled upon photographer Vicky Roy’s exhibition, they shelved their original idea and decided to do a book based on his work. This resulted in the first publication *Home. Street. Home* based on Roy’s tender and moving photography of children living in the streets (We have profiled Roy in the Photography Showcase in *Kyoorius Magazine* #14). For this book, they wrote personal e-mails to all senior photographers to support the project financially by contributing Rs 5000 each. “Believe me, within ten days, we had commitments from 60 people right away and the cheques started landing in my house one after the other.” Then they expanded the “crowdfunding” process to other friends, writers, people associated with Salaam Balak Trust etc. and finally got a funding of about Rs 5 lakh. The book’s total cost is Rs. 7.5 lakh which they recovered through sales and had enough money to publish the next book.

The next book *When Abba was ill* by Adil Hasan is based on the photographs clicked over a period of six months when Hasan’s late father was grappling with cancer. Panjiar says, “Adil is someone who had worked under the Delhi Photo Festival and he left when his father was ill and then came back with these photographs. Sanjeev Saith, who is the series editor and is very integral to Nazar, saw his work and decided that there’s a book in it. And that’s how this book was born.”

For the third and fourth one, they have already shortlisted 2-3 works with photographers. Panjiar admits though that as they go along, they will have to start a proper process of people submitting their work. “To be honest, photographers often don’t give their work because they are hoping to get published by either foreign or a big Indian publisher, which is fine. Our aim is to do works that our important. We do need to set up a process to shortlist work, but I am not sure what that process would be.” They are now raising money for the third book and this time they are in talks with a few corporates for funds. “We first decide on what the book is and then go to a corporate/person whose interest would sync with that book and they could use it for corporate gifting etc. So we give them one page for their message and some space to put their logo etc. And if we manage



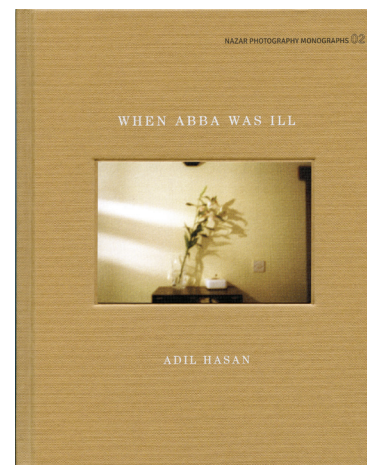
to sell the third one, we can produce another book for which we wouldn’t need any funding. And that’s how it will go on,” he says.

Currently, they are publishing about 1000 copies for each book. Panjiar says that they dare not compromise on the production quality and thus they go to Pragati Offset which is much more expensive. They don’t want to raise the price tags of the books too much since they do not intend to make any money from it but just have enough money to publish the next one. “So for example, just the printing cost of this book (referring to *When Abba was ill*) is Rs 560 but we sell it only for Rs.1000. Logically, for any book, you have to go to a distributor who would take about 55%, but if we do that, we would lose a lot of money.” Right now the books are available on Nazar Foundation’s website and are being sold through word of mouth, writing individually to people etc. But at the same time, Panjiar feels that it’s important that the books are available in some public space and thus they have recently tied up with Oxford Bookstore to have the books available in all Oxford outlets across the country.

Panjiar, however, wants to be realistic about the niche that these books belong to. “There is a limitation to the audience as well. Most people walking into a bookstore will not pick these books up. And moreover, people in India are not very used to the idea of photo books and they associate photo books with big and very expensive coffee table books. What we, and some other people like Devika Daulet-Singh of Photo Ink, are trying to do is to produce less expensive and smaller photo books.” He feels that if enough people start publishing smaller photo books through various means including self-publishing, the market might increase. And pricing between say Rs 500-1000 is still affordable for readers who are interested in photography art.

A Representative Body

When asked if Nazar Foundation would ever look at representing freelance photographers as an agency, Panjiar assertively says no since the foundation does not intend to get into any commercial activity ever. “I think that photographers’ collective is a good idea but I am not





sure whether it can work as a business and we particularly will not get into it." But at the same time, the foundation would want to represent photographers at the level of what's right and what's wrong in terms of policies, issues etc.

We ask him for his advice for freelancers to operate in today's business environment and he says that the most important issue today is undercutting, especially in editorial where photographers are being asked to give their work for free. Panjiar categorically asks photographers to stop doing assignments for free even though it might get them publicity. "The second advice is that once you have decided on a fixed rate, you should stick to that. You are going to get knocked around a little bit as a photographer as you might not get assignments regularly but if you start undercutting yourself, then you are in big trouble. So find your level and start working from there."

Another thing, he says, that's happening especially in documentary and editorial is that the number of clients per project has increased. Earlier, photographers used to have one client, so if someone is doing an assignment for *TIME* magazine, the client will only be *TIME*. But this has changed now as a photographer might be working for a publication, but the client might be someone else and the access could be through a third person. Therefore, it has become important for photographers to strategise their work and approach different kinds of clients. And the last piece of advice is to branch out in terms of the work itself. "Keep your style, but diversify. Don't get stuck doing just one thing. So if you have a certain documentary style, and are also doing wedding, journalism and not profit work, there is nothing contradictory about it. Photographers need to have multi-skills in today's market."

Photojournalism In India

While talking to Panjiar, who has done some absolutely phenomenal work in the field of photojournalism, we couldn't resist asking who does he blame for a sharp decline in the quality of photojournalism in the country — the media or the photographers? Both, he says. "And I will blame the photographers later, but first the media. When I was working in India Today, within one year of joining, I was getting a 12-page B&W photo essay to do. Raghu Rai, for example, was doing a 16-page photo essay on musicians at that time. That space has now shrunk in media because of all kinds of reasons. At some stage, newspapers and magazines started seeing themselves as products. This coincided with a lot of business people taking over and becoming subservient to advertising. I agree that it was always a business, no doubt about that, but the journalistic part of it was very strong. And somewhere along the way, this changed."

He also feels that around this time the era of ideologies was over too. While in the 60s-70s-80s, people wanted to know what was happening around the world, there were ideologies and people movement, it all changed gradually and the middle class ruled all across the world and more so in India. And the new middle class was more interested in their own lives and in things that appealed to their own lives. And this matched with the business interests of newspapers and magazines and thus the focus shifted to lifestyle.

Also, the budgets shrank and photographers did not have the luxury to do their stories anymore.

He also feels that these days photographers get to work on piecemeal stuff and not on any long term projects. And he blames the photographers as they are not motivated enough to push the envelope. So all this has resulted in a sorry state of photojournalism in India.

Nazar's Future

While one can only hope that the issues at media's end get less sticky, Nazar Foundation is already working towards softening the other end of the spectrum by motivating photographers to continue doing great work even in the face of adversities. To work towards the cause of promoting photography in India through every level, Panjiar hopes to get more people onboard as part of the Nazar team itself. They would also like to expand their activities by doing some smaller projects where photographers come together to create a body of work. "We want to create work that's artistically or socially important. We also hope to have more interactions by expanding Nazar ka Adda to other cities." They also do not invite people from abroad as tutors for workshops etc. as they want people who are non-curators to become curators and teachers.

He hopes to get a completely new set of creative directors for the Delhi Photo Festival in a couple of years as they want young photographers to take the lead. They did that last year when they were approached by CRY (Child Rights and You) to organize an exhibition. Instead of him and Khanna doing it, they handed over the reins to Mansi Midha and three other young people from the Delhi Photo Festival.

"So we hope to do more of such things and in the process create interesting bodies of work. But to be honest, we don't have any fixed plans. And we definitely don't have any business plans since we are very bad in business," says Panjiar.

nazarfoundation.org