



Art

Graphic detail Marcus Leatherdale

He's photographed Madonna, built a Shiva temple, got drunk with adivasis and currently divides his time between Jharkhand and Lisbon

How did you become interested in India? By accident. It was the seventies, my parents pushed me out of the house to travel and I landed in Greece at a time when civil war broke out there. The first border to open up was to Turkey and I ran into a bus of Dutch hippies who told me to come with them to India because it was warmer and cheaper than Europe. So I did! After spending some time, I went back to my Western life but I knew I had to come back. I came back in the 1980s as a tourist and then again in the 1990s, when I set up my studio in Varanasi, on the roof of a haveli. After that I got interested in adivasis and moved to Jharkhand.

There's a problematic tradition of colonial photographs of adivasis. Was that something that you kept in mind? I'm a portrait photographer. The backdrop, black and white and sepia tones, it's how I shot as a celebrity photographer in New York as well. I'm interested in the person, how they choose to present themselves. Their actual surrounding is irrelevant. In case of the adivasis, I'm photographing them as they are. There's an innocence and purity to them. In 50 years, they'll probably be wearing baseball caps and these photographs are homage to who they are. I really hope it doesn't come out as pictures of "the quaint native".

How do you take your photographs? In most cases, I would have them in front of a backdrop but in case of the adivasis, that's a long process. I have to research, get permission from elders. Then there's the occupational hazard of getting drunk with them and dancing around without your clothes. I don't drink otherwise so their country liquor gives me a smashing headache. Then there's organising them to come for the shoot, giving them a day's wages and all sorts of logistics. It's taken years to get savvy at all this.

Do you think India is really like what you show in your photographs? I'm not depicting modern India. My vision of India is poetic and timeless. In the rural areas, the idea of being modern is to be Western and I find this very saddening. Essentially I'm a traditionalist, I think. In Canada, I live in a log cabin without electricity. In New York, I lived in a loft by the river. In Lisbon, I live in a thirteenth-century Moorish place. In India, I virtually live in a forest.

By Deepanjana Pal on January 21 2010 6.30pm