

The Chai Project

I enjoy my cup of tea and have a cupboard full of various teas from Jasmine to Darjeeling, Nilgiri, Assam, Herbal teas, Japanese Sencha and Genmaicha and I also enjoy a cup of good old desi masala chai. All of them have a different texture or leaf. The Jasmine leaves uncurl their sly tendrils under the influence of hot water, looking suspiciously serpent like. Remnants of various condiments of a rich masala chai, stain the cup with lines so evocative that I have spent the better part of two years, recording them. Photographing marks left in the cup, half drunk or emptied of all the liquid content. In the process I have also studied dimensions of the cups and mugs that I have drunk from.

I pondered on these images for a long time, wondering how to translate them into something I could share and decided to have them digitally printed onto fabric. I then worked with layered images, using the 'stains' to reflect a state of mind. These marks became evocative of guilt, shame and blame, the kind of thoughts we carry around us that come up under self-reflection or introspection; of thoughts mulling over a cup of tea.

There have been many instances in my life, where I think of what it would have been like had I done things differently. The list is endless and the marks in the tea-cups thereon, allowed me to go back in memory, delve deep into my psyche revealing familial histories and national influences; making me realise I could not have done any different. Life played herself out such that this is what it was meant to be. I have never really accepted the concept of destiny but started realizing that the only choice one ever has is the attitude with which we accept what occurs in life.

This exploration was not necessarily comforting and dealing with various feelings and thoughts, I would tear the fabric, pull it into different directions, distorting the weave, creating bunches and bulges which the running stitch that I have chosen to work with, often exaggerated or quelled, depending upon the mood I wanted to portray. I discovered the wonders of the running stitch through an article I read three decades ago, on the Sujni's of Bihar. I liked the idea of taking the old and making something useful from what has been, fashioning it into something new. It allowed me the grace to pick up old memories, wounds and issues, deal with them through the process of tearing, layering and stitching to lend another perspective to things, renewing the spirit, taking control of the past towards deeper realizations which empowered through the process of looking.

These meditations on tea, tea leaves, tea cups and the process of drinking became a fascination; you could even call it a kind of obsession. Each day there seemed to be yet another nuance that I absolutely must have in my photographed collection. I didn't want to make this into an elaborate project extraneous to my life and surroundings so I stopped at various points on my route from Gurgaon to Delhi and looked at things around me more keenly. A lot of what I did record is what we know well and stopping, observing and recording these images, opened up a whole new dimension that I would otherwise miss as I blinked in the car or walked past, too preoccupied to notice.

I did engage with everyone that I photographed. Some were shy; some got angry, some did not even notice. I became engrossed in the people and now am unable to ignore them like before. I began noticing little things: the way they sat, the way they dressed, the way they treated me, talked to me. Gradually, a dialogue ensued that compelled me explore the national psyche which I believe mirrors my own. And thus looking, at the dregs in my tea-cup and the world around it that creates the illusions of 'stains' in the mind, I found myself change.

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