



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED

**BEFORE  
FUTURE  
ALWAYS**

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# Back Story

Anusha Yadav's Indian Memory Project is testament to the power of stories, where the image and the words that make up its memory are potent creators of our identities as a collective

## PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

A photograph is like a palimpsest of time, the layers shifting with the subtlety of old colour on canvas and the meanings inherent in the limitless historicity of its context. Nowhere do the layers unravel with as much quiet grace as they do in the Indian Memory Project (IMP), a visual archive of personal narratives from the Indian subcontinent that photographer Anusha Yadav set up six years ago. 'We are all hard-wired to understand the world in stories. As a child that is how I understood my family's world – through photo albums, slide projections on the wall and juicy storytelling by at least three people at the same time, in the

living room. Eventually, I found myself always looking for stories in images. For the IMP to fulfil its quest it needed both – the power of the image combined with the power of storytelling. Together, I was certain that we will learn more about ourselves and our land than ever before,' she says.

At the Publishing Next conference in Goa in 2013 was when I first came across IMP. Anusha, unassuming and slightly nervous before her presentation, began with minimal fuss; some of us hadn't realised that the presentation had indeed begun. But the minute the photographs were up on the screen – the

yellowed patches, the crinkles and creases – and Anusha walked us through the stories – of love, defiance, courage, faith and hope – we were all riveted, awash in the collective knowledge that what we were witnessing in that room weren't fragmented photographs from disparate family albums, but stories that make up our past, that have shaped our boundaries, and that have defined our identities. It was a deeply touching experience and one to be savoured in this inchoate world of digits and pixels, unobtrusively changing the way we view individual histories and collective destinies.



*The Wild Parties of JJ School of Art & Architecture. Dance Party. 'Saawan' Architecture festival, C.J. Hall, Colaba, Bombay, Maharashtra. September 25, 1980. Image and text contributed by Charu Walikhanna, New Delhi.*

### Excerpts from the interview

*What do you think makes a photograph so inherently timeless despite its dependent nature? What I mean here is, without a narrative to go with it or a family album that comes with its own narrative of collective memories, a photograph can easily be rendered devoid of meaning.*

No photograph to me is devoid of meaning. At least 99 per cent of the images we see were photographed with the intention of creating an image, to unravel a subject, a time or the photographer her/himself. So someone did give it a meaning, even if momentarily. Having said that, an image that has stood the test of time, that doesn't depend on a topic to be relevant and is accepted by succeeding generations is what makes a photograph timeless. That the

image can provoke a conversation for that long, and offers itself to be narrativised and analysed over and over again, is what we as human beings are hard wired to do – to create and recreate stories. What keeps it relevant is a conversation about it, the desire to belong to it, to the things and the people in it, to protect it from destruction, lest we lose ourselves with it. In a way it's a quest to belong to something, to fixate on something beautiful, for it may teach us more about us, than anything else.

*It is interesting that you ask for images on your website before 1991, before the digital era, so to speak. But history is constantly growing and evolving – so what is the significance of this timeline?*

It really depends on how far or near you feel 'history' begins for you. I have lived through the

1990s and in 2010 it was still too recent for me to miss it, or be curious about it. That is not to say that images after 1991 are not important. But the idea that I had a whole century of unknown lives and photographs to discover and share was far more appealing, beautiful and exciting. It was a time, and a rather large subcontinent I didn't know much about (neither did many others) apart from what I read in history books or had heard about through stories. I needed to put a deadline to be able to focus on what the current generations were forgetting or had forgotten or never even knew. Collective Memory, unless documented, blurs and disappears in time and collective amnesia is why we have big problems in the world today.

*Which brings me to how we view ideas of 'memory' and 'identity' today.*

*Memory is a quickly forgotten image on Facebook or Instagram, to be replaced in quick succession with other images, and here is the irony of it – we forget the image, safe in the knowledge that we can retrieve it when we please. In that context, where do you think the IMP draws its meaning from? Is it the fragility of the images (and therefore history itself) or the tenacity of the memory it carries?*

As far as the word ‘memory’ goes, I think we are using it quite loosely these days. I don’t think the democratic ability to take pictures and post it on social media is the same as capturing a memory anymore. And many decades will have to pass before these images even begin making any substantial collective sense at all. The intention to photograph

an image in today’s world is far more varied and layered, and it is certainly not only for picture of remembrance. If it were, we’d design their retrieval easily. People assume they will retrieve things for later, but retrieval of these images is a perceived need. They don’t. It’s not very different from a hoarding disorder, except that it’s on devices that will die sooner than later. Ninety per cent of the images we photograph and upload will never get printed or be passed on as heritage to another generation. I think what most people on social media remember is perhaps the validation they have received for it, and that too I am convinced is fleeting.

The IMP draws its power from the fact that is an archive – and an

archive, like any library is designed for reference, cross reference, relaxed reading and ease of use. It contains images that have aged, that have had time to ferment, and that have the unsaid to reveal. Unlike social media, IMP is not in a hurry to collect and produce the stories by the hour. We run the project at a slower pace. We take the time to ruminate and research a photograph and check facts on whatever we can. Once the post is published and distributed, in a way, it feels like learning about the world, along with the rest of the world.

*I am curious to know what appeals to you first – the image itself or the story that accompanies the image. How do you pick your stories?*

There is no rule about that. A rule of choosing one over the other will only cause us to lose out on valuable information. Sometimes the image is incredible, sometimes the story is and sometimes both are. Either way, one will usually make the other special and worth noting. I pick stories based on a criteria and value system I have established for the project – the terms and conditions on the site mention it, but overall the information must be thoroughly checked, permissions should be in place and the gaps in stories be filled. And, of course, the project cannot outstep the ethics of running a respectable public archive.

*Somehow, even though this is the ‘memory project’, as time gone by, the fact that it exists in the here and now gives it surreal quality. For you, as the founder and a photographer, how significant is this dialogue between the past and the present? To be more*



**Mary Jane shoes with a nine yards saree.** My Paati and Thatha, Lokanayaki and RR Hariharan. My mother’s parents from Ravanamudram, Thirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu. Circa 1920. Image and text contributed by Vani Subramanian, New Delhi.



**The Last Great Silk Route trader of India.** My great grandfather Munshi Aziz Bhat with his two sons, Munshi Habibullah and Munshi Abdul Rehman. Kargil, Ladakh. 1945. Image and Text contributed by Muzammil Hussain Munshi, Kargil, Ladakh.

*specific, between a frozen past that somehow attains fluidity in the present?*

No one can exist without a narrative of the past, especially your own; and if the dialogue were not significant, there wouldn’t be a project. It is significant because we cannot understand anything in the present without our past standing as a corroborator of our lives. Without it, who are we? In the project, it is the value we see in the image that today, decades later promises to tell us secrets and revelations to even our ordinary day-to-day lives and

circumstances. How did we get here? What were the joys, experiences and crimes of humanity that make us who we are? As our identities merge, renew or revise themselves, these are generational and existential questions, which are being wondered about a lot more than ever before.

*Do you think that by changing the way we view history, because the memory project has most definitely done that, we are also changing the way we view time? That it isn’t an inert entity ticking away but one that is throbbing and pulsating with life?*

In some ways yes, but not necessarily in ways of throbbing and pulsating with life, although IMP has varying impressions on people. If at all, time that has passed is more understandable. Time is also more accountable. We know more about what was happening, when it was happening and why it was happening than ever before.

*Having been involved with the project for six years now, do you think your craft as a photographer has changed?*

Yes it has. Over time I have found that portraits are what I most love to photograph and I do enjoy photographing portrait sittings in my studio. I used to only love photographing in the genre of documentary and candid pictures, but over time I seem to have lost interest in that and now prefer to create images in a studio and be more deliberate and slower about my ideas.

*How important do you think it is for photographers to keep in mind the ‘vision’ of time – of where the photograph is taken, of how it will be viewed and the possibility of how that could change with time?*

What I have understood of photography so far is that it is a voice, a personal point of view. What we photograph, how we colour correct, how much time it took, is irrelevant. So is the vision of time. Its interpretations will always be understood or misunderstood, articulated and paraphrased over and over by newer audiences and over time. I don’t believe it is the responsibility of the photographer to care about time or how our images

may be appropriated decades later; all that matters is that we are true and experience authenticity when we get the final image, whatsoever it is and howsoever it was made. After all, we only sense our own vision of time in retrospect. I have photographed many pictures and I have loved so many of them at one time, but now they stand deleted or thrown away. They didn't stand the test of my own time and life. Once we are dead and gone, if, how and when our photographs will be presented and seen is a completely unknown matter. It all depends on the context of that particular time, and culture. My most amusing observation, for instance, in portrait photographs is that when older people look at their portraits from 15–20 years ago, no one sees themselves as fat, or ugly, or boring (as they once most likely did). They only note that they were once young. That's context and time at play for you.

*Do you think 'time' and 'memory', with their very subjective and personal definitions, become united in a photograph that immediately puts distance between the photograph and the viewer? And yet, the memory project does the exact opposite – it reduces distance, somehow! What do you think changes between the photograph taken and the photograph archived?*

What changes is that we can find a connection from the photograph and the stories to our lives, and then to the history of our land.



**A beauty icon, she later became Governor to two states of India.** My mother's classmate, Sharda Pandit (later Mukherjee), Bombay, Maharashtra. 1935. Image and text contributed by Mrudula Prabhuram Joshi, Bombay.

In theory we are all told, and we nod, that we are connected but until there is a way to show it, it isn't real. The IMP makes it possible for us to see a connection between us, and our families to our lands, cultures, and circumstances. The micro versions of our lives are indeed a part of the larger histories.

All images courtesy of Anusha Yadav and the Indian Memory Project.  
www.indianmemoryproject.com



**The last photograph of a Kashmiri Pandit family together.** The only and last photograph of a Kashmiri Pandit Family together. Vicharnag, Kashmir. Circa 1915. Image and text contributed by Anil Dhar, Mumbai.

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