



INDIA Pining

Every time we turned the page on the farmers, their debts and death, in the morning newspaper, we took a step closer to sheer complacency. Photographer Johann Rousselot wouldn't say so, but his frames will

PIYASREE DASGUPTA

Gurgaon and the year 2004 remains a bad memory for all the clichés, biases and oriental jargons that India had accumulated over the years. The same year, Johann Rousselot from France found it difficult to associate the scrubbed, high-waist stretch denim affected-India of the 1990s with the brand infested mall-acious Gurgaon. Just when he had started smiling at the sleek makeover of Brand India wondering if the India Shining campaign had really spelt magic, his travels across the country confirmed him in the otherwise. A reality he froze in frames that are on display in the city.

A collection of 26 photographs interspersed with two text blocks, conveying facts about the condition of Indian farmers especially in the tribal-rich areas, completes Rousselot's *India Shining India Crying*, his interpretation of the hyped eco-

nomic boom evident in the audacious irony of the title itself. "I am a journalist before an artist. And during the time BJP was riding high on the India Shining campaign I was biking across the country discovering the all that was wrong with it," says Rousselot.

And from the ostentatiously metaphorical to the cruelly direct, his photographs document the paradoxes of an economy that counts its profit in the mall-multiplex-tech hubs, the glare of which hides all the darker losses. The opening photograph of Rousselot's collection is a stark, almost stylized version of the doom-struck lives of the debt-ridden farmers pushed nearer to death every second day especially in the tribal belts across Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand etc. It's a blow up of a crude hunting arrow pointed against the chest of a farmer from the Dantewada district of Bastar region in Chhattisgarh.



we gather from the caption. While the series is dominated by stark profiles of soot covered construction workers, skeletons of structures that would be turned into swanky buildings, mourning relatives, and corpses of farmers driven to suicide, it is broken into by breezy pictures of the glossy, happy faces, luxurious drive ways and bowling alleys that we know our India by.

"I never understood the relevance of a campaign that sounded like a corporate communication

trope in the face of the reality," explains Rousselot. The photographer chanced upon information about the Adivasis in newspaper articles. "When I finally met them, I was surprised by their warmth, by their silent, suffering existence. And the fact that so many of them were driven to suicides pointed that there was a serious crisis in there, and we were seeing just the tip of the iceberg," says Rousselot. The difficulties of marginal farmers suddenly hit by a global crisis, is not typical to just India. In fact, Rousselot views it as a metaphor for a 'wild, liberal, global development' where big money has eclipsed several graver socio-economic concerns. A difficulty he wanted to throw light on by taking his exhibition to unlikely places like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Then does his juxtaposition of a light photograph of a group of smiling, chatty executives who have become unofficial brand ambassadors for 'development' with a hitting, deliberately messy shot of wet red earth embossed with criss-crossing tyre marks and footprints, takes a jibe at the complacency of the former? "It would be hypocritical of me to point fingers at anyone, what with the clever capitalist manipulation of the West, but we have to accept that there is something wrong somewhere," counters Rousselot. While there's nothing to complain about escalating luxury quotient of Brand India, it's not always right to close your eyes to its consequences. "The liberalization of the agricultural market, entry of American and Chinese players into the commodity market, has left the likes of the cotton farmers at their wits' end," says Rousselot. And we thought it hardly made sense to those averse to spending nights over biz-books. There lies the problem, thinks Rousselot.

The exhibition will be on at Bose Pata, Stephen's Court till April 19