

FREEDOM always comes at a price, fair or unfair. Almost eight per cent of India's population comprises the Adivasis and the constitution says these people cannot be robbed of their land. Incidentally they are clustered in regions high on important minerals, areas that are eyed by real estate giants. Then there are farmers who are being deprived of their lands and some of them owe enough money to lenders to commit suicide. What happens to their lot? When a foreigner (who's also a photographer) arrives in India, he or she is caught in two minds - whether to be floored by the beauty of the country and click photographs of monuments, people dressed colourfully, etc. or visit the countryside to write about poverty-stricken India!

Walking into Bose Pacia for an exhibition of photographs - India Shining, India Crying - one couldn't help but feel: "Another exhibition inspired by a blunder-riddled campaign of the BJP!" Adding to the frustration was the scene of the Kolkata educated rushing for the wine tray and buckets of fries. When each photograph is seen in isolation it seems like just another good shot. But once you see the sequence - from the gate towards a large wall with only one photograph - a story, of bitter truth, unfolds.

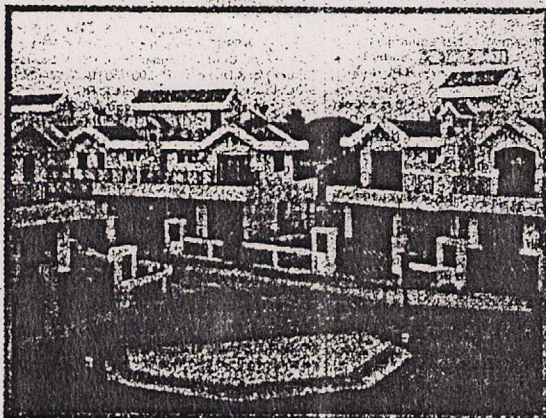
Johann Rousselot, associated with Oeff Public, a photo agency in Paris, is not quite the *avant garde* photographer from Paris busy taking shots of women (and sometimes men) in weird situations. He's a storyteller and he believes in the power of pictures. After speaking to him for a few minutes one realises the effort that went into the exhibition. He could have presented a "happy" picture. He hasn't. In fact, he goes on to say, "You might as well visit France, click photographs and host France Shining, France Crying. Problems similar to the one portrayed here exists in Paris. Only we don't talk about it." The philosophy perhaps makes this exhibition stand out.

Rousselot did not set out in 2004 with a fixed idea in mind. Being a photojournalist, he is always on the hunt for pictures that tell stories. During a trip to Gurgaon, pieces started falling in place. "What you see there is what you see in Thailand or China." He was taking the trip when BJP's India Shining campaign was being debated in the media. "And rightly so. Not every pocket in India was experiencing a boom. The situation was not perfect for everyone."

Rousselot's introduction to India, in 1992, was as a tourist



Johann Rousselot forgot the comforts of urban India during a trip to Gurgaon. He captures through photographs the gulf between rural and urban India



who was busy looking at familiar places and faces. "I was doing well as a photojournalist and was in search

of a new story. Water scarcity in India was an issue when I started work. Narmada dam, floods, famines, etc. were on

my mind. But the trip to Gurgaon changed my project." Added to this was his interest in the Adivasis.

Explaining the project, Rousselot says in the concept note: "Today the economic reforms, begun in 1991, are

clearly visible. But the instrument of progress is impatient and greedy. Like a steamroller, this unbridled development ignores the destructive consequences it delivers upon the poor. For some time I have been interested in the progress in the mining industry which affects the native population, the Adivasis. Meanwhile, farmers, whose situation declines with each passing year, are no longer a priority for the authorities who concentrated all their attention on the industrial and service sectors. For cotton farmers the 'steamroller' is the liberalisation of the agricultural markets... Two Indias. Rural and urban. Between which a gulf widens inexorably."

While one frame shows a building being broken, the next shows a road being constructed, followed by townships mushrooming, next comes Western food chains, all this makes India's urban youth happy, and businessmen a little more greedy. This is a cycle that is not being broken.

"I wanted to take photographs that would become a part of reference material. Since my subject is not a 'happy' one, most publications are not interested in it. Some papers have just published photographs of well-heeled women walking down the street laughing. Except for a couple of publications, who cares to publish both sides of the story. Newspapers and agencies across the world work in a similar fashion. Photographers are given a small section without proper infrastructure and are expected to work around clichéd themes. I am lucky to be a part of a small agency that works with such stories."

Returning to the issue of such themes and Western countries, he says, "Paris is not France and London is not England. We fail to understand this. The situation is similar in India."

The project is over but the issue remains close to Rousselot's heart. After Kolkata, he is visiting Orissa to understand the Posco issue better.

Once you reach the end of the series of photographs, a huge wall confronts you. On it hangs only one photograph, that of a cotton farmer who perhaps committed suicide. He has made the urban population "happy" but who cares about him. He represents the few million people we choose to ignore.

(Organised by the Embassy of France in India, the Alliance Francaise Network, Alliance Francaise du Bengale, India Shining, India Crying, a part of IPN '08, is on at Bose Pacia till 19 April)

■ Mathures Paul