

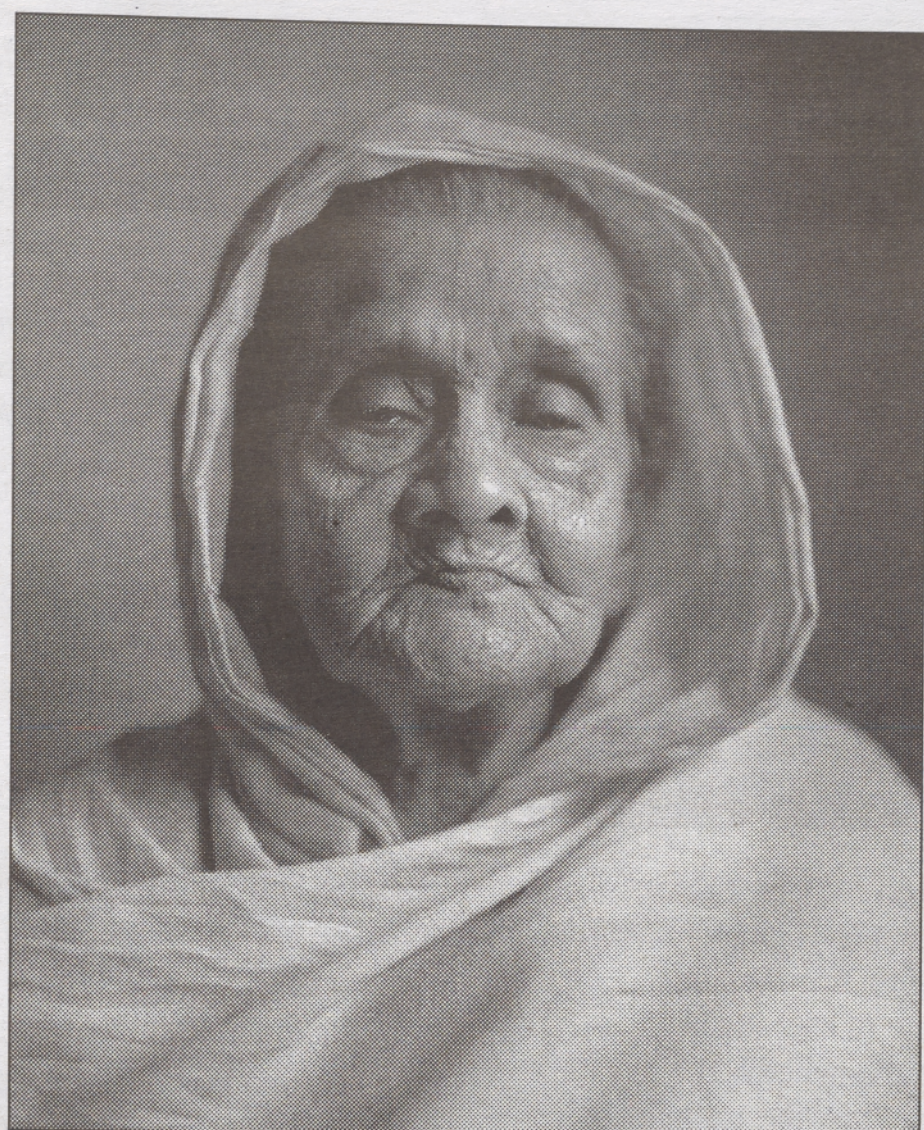


PHOTO BY FAZAL SHEIKH

This photo of Abala Dasi was taken in 2003 when she was 80 years old, for the series "Moksha." Fazal Sheikh took it during his first trip to Vrindavan, India, a community of widows and other women who've been evicted from their families. Dasi was married to a man 20 years her senior, and when he died, she still had a child to support. She moved to Vrindavan to beg, but instead survived by chanting at the ashram for money and food. She believes a monkey that visits her every day is her daughter, reincarnated.

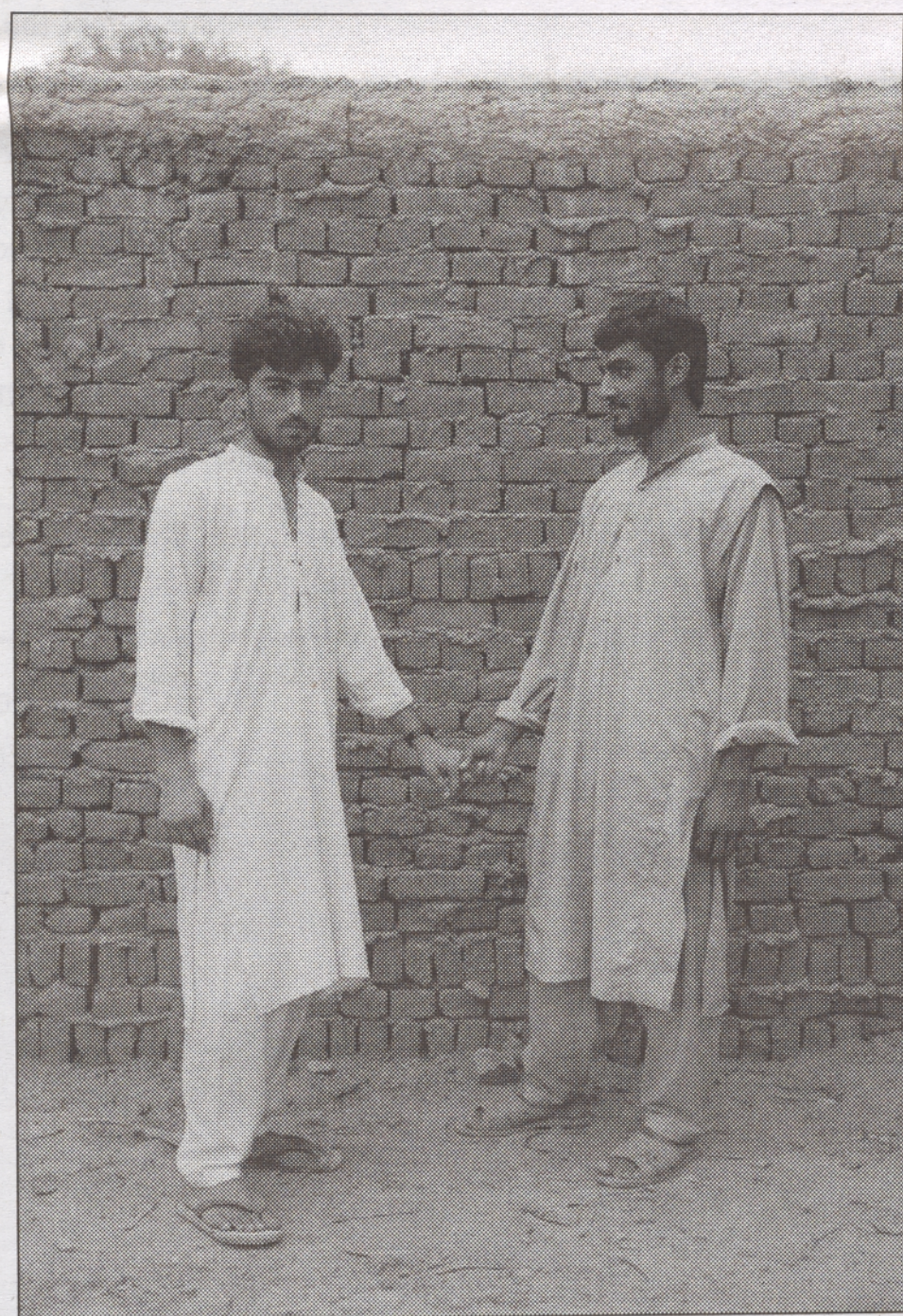


PHOTO BY FAZAL SHEIKH

The son of a doctor and his friend at an Afghan refugee village in Pakistan in 1997. This photo is from "The Victor Weeps" series was taken when Fazal Sheikh traveled to his grandfather's birthplace in northern India, which is now Pakistan. He found hundreds of thousands of refugees who had been living in the camps since the Soviet invasion, 20 years earlier.

SHEIKH, from page 4

very quickly to take cliché photos of unnamed faces in distress.

"I didn't feel comfortable beginning to work in the midst of a community when I didn't really understand the magnitude of their exile," Sheikh said. "For me, the most appropriate thing to do was to wait until a moment when they themselves would feel comfortable with the notion of collaborating with me."

For this reason, he would spend long periods of time in the area around his subjects, getting to know community elders and gaining their permission before shooting collaborative photos within the camps.

In the years since, Sheikh's work has continued to bring worldwide human rights issues to light through his documentary-based photography.

"Common Ground" will run through May 20, and Sheikh will be at the Portland Art Museum at 2 p.m. March 11 to talk about the exhibit, as well as a new project he's working on relating to the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments and the impact of environmental racism on Native American communities in southern Utah.

As an extension of Sheikh's exhibit, the museum has scheduled several events and programs March 9-11 aimed at elevating the voices of refugees and spreading cultural awareness.

On March 10, admission to the museum is free. Visit portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/common-ground for more information and a schedule of events.

Sheikh, who continues to divide his time among New York, Europe and Kenya, spoke with Street Roots from Switzerland in advance of his Portland visit.

Emily Green: In 2015, a photograph of a 3-year-old Syrian refugee boy whose corpse washed up on the Turkish coast raised worldwide awareness and empathy for the Syrian refugee crisis. Do you feel as though a portrait has the same potential for raising awareness as a photograph of violence or death?

Fazal Sheikh: I've never felt comfortable with the realm of photojournalism, with the idea of provocation. I understand, perhaps, in some instances, that those kinds of images may garner a degree of support for various issues, but I also am not really comfortable with the idea of trespass upon an individual. So if you think about communities that have largely been vilified, as have many of the refugee communities, or indeed in America as you would think of marginalized communities – people outcast, people homeless – that for me the most essential thing to do is to step back and to ask permission, to collaborate and to, in a way, be a conduit, the one through whom a voice or presentation can come to a viewer or a reader.

That's the only way that I feel comfortable working. I'm not very comfortable with insinuating myself into a situation, and I very much know the moment when it's appropriate

to photograph and other moments when, at least for me personally, it's not appropriate to make an image. I think all of us have to, somehow, begin to gauge for ourselves where that border lies. What are we thinking of our image making, what do we intend with it and when, on the human level, is it too much of a trespass to photograph or to trample another person's dignity or privacy.

E.G.: For the series "Ether," you explored the streets of Varanasi, a sacred city in India where people often go to die, and while there, you witnessed many people sleeping outdoors, covered in blankets. It's similar to what we see here at Street Roots. We are located in a neighborhood where there are lots of homeless services, and every morning we see dozens of people sleeping on the sidewalks. It seems to me that these people have many things in common with your photography subjects. Often the victims of domestic violence and abuse, evicted from their homes in some way to try to survive in the elements. Do you see the same similarities, and have you ever thought about photographing people living in America's homeless communities?

F.S.: I think that that project, "Ether," is born of a wish to explore the nature of sleep, dream, birth and death. Varanasi itself is the city to which Hindus wish to travel, either on the verge of death or to be cremated after they pass away. So for me, there's this mingling of the sense that I had of being with my own family members during their extended illnesses and as they passed away – of witnessing and being part of, in a way, their passings, and so to have as a subtext, this kind of invitation to the viewer to contemplate the fluency

between life and death. In the Third World, and particular in India, death is very much part of life. For me, that was a big part of that piece.

Thinking about the notion of refugee work, I think there's also this importance of gauging for oneself where a trespass lies and what is appropriate as a rendering. Is it OK to photograph another in the street? Is it something that one can do with a degree of reverence for them, even though they are in a public space? And I hope that work is about that. Though I've never considered that in the states, I think that would be a very interesting notion – the possibility of working with communities such as the homeless community in Portland, to think about the way in which we consider those groups and to try and create a body of work that counters or broadens our preconceptions.

It's very much as we imagine the refugee communities, we're freighted with these preconceptions about what those people's lives are, and certainly, I imagine that must be the case as well in the homeless community in Portland. That somehow a connection on a very personal, intimate level may create a rendering that breaks down your preconceptions about what their lives mean. But I've not often seen representations or longer projects done with the homeless communities, but that's sort of

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Common Ground" by Fazal Sheikh

WHERE: Portland Art Museum, 1219 SW Park Ave.

WHEN: Through May 20

COST: Visit portlandartmuseum.org for museum admission prices; admission is free March 10

Fazal Sheikh at Portland Art Museum

2 p.m. March 11: Sheikh will talk about "Common Ground" and an upcoming project

Additional events

March 9-11: See the schedule at portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/common-ground/