

MITCH EPSTEIN
PIC BY/NINA SUBIN

In his introduction to *In India*, Epstein writes about how his own position as an insider and outsider in the country became clear as he photographed a group of fully clothed Indians watching bikini-clad white women sitting on top the wall of a hotel at Juhu Beach in Bombay. "It was, for me, a moment of both detachment and identification," he writes. "I was neither a western tourist nor an Indian, I was none of the people I was photographing; yet, I could somewhat identify with them all." **PICS BY MITCH EPSTEIN/COURTESY OF STEIDL VERLAG**

In India, again

American photographer Mitch Epstein revisits his images of India from the '80s for a new book that captures his immersion into the country's experiences and subcultures with a new sense of detachment

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

BETWEEN 1978 and 1989, American photographer Mitch Epstein made eight trips to India capturing its sights and experiences through thousands of photographs while collaborating with then-wife Mira Nair, shooting her documentary films and working closely on her iconic works *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masala*. Epstein hasn't returned to India since 1990, but the distance from that time and its heady experiences has granted him an opportunity for introspective reflection and detachment. "Over the last decade, I have been revisiting work, seeing it in fresh ways and trying to understand its relevance today. I have remastered a lot of my images from the 1980s in India and also discovered a lot of work that I hadn't given priority or due attention to when I was in the midst of what was a very intense and full period," Epstein, who has been a photographer for almost 50 years with work going back to the early '70s, tells us over a Zoom

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call from New York. The result is *In India*, a book made with printer and publisher Gerhard Steidl, who Epstein calls a master bookmaker. In 1987, Epstein had published some of his photographs from this time in *In Pursuit of India* (Aperture) which, as he points out, suggests in its very title a more romanticised view of the country. "For all artists, time can be a great beneficiary. It encourages us to relinquish our attachments, infatuations and romanticism without relinquishing what I appreciated in terms of the beauty of India," he shares. Even though he was married into an Indian family, it was the first time he was in the position of an outsider, an experience that he says served him well as a picture maker. "India turned my life upside down in good ways because it was destabilising," he observes, the time giving him an understanding of the framework of Indian society and its stratifications of caste, class and religion, while allowing him to move unselfconsciously in



The last image in Epstein's book is of a woman with a child sitting next to her at Churchgate station in Bombay as commuters rush by. "The opportunities that I had to go deeply into some of these micro worlds working with Mira [Nair] changed the game in terms of my own practice because I came from a tradition of being withheld somewhat behind the camera and I slowly began to have a more open view of the exchange. I became less beholden to a documentary truth, making pictures that spoke to the experience in a more personal, authentic way," says Epstein

the world that he inhabited. He recalls traversing the various visually compelling subcultures and communities he encountered in India, including its colonial relics like Mumbai's Royal Bombay Yacht Club as well as its crowded bazaars and beaches. "It was a time in India when it was possible for me as an outsider to navigate through sacred ceremonies and events like the Ganpati festival in 1981," he says. People showed warmth and curiosity and were charmed by having their pictures taken, he remembers.

"If anything, that was a problem sometimes," he laughs. "I didn't want 50 kids smiling because that wasn't going to be interesting to me photographically even though I appreciated their desire for attention and that kind of interaction." The '80s, however, says Epstein, recalling the days immediately following Indira Gandhi's assassination, also marked the beginning of a shift in India, when religion became more politicised.

While colour has always been intrinsic to his work, Epstein was

also working with tools and material that was not common at the time—a medium-format custom-made camera, that he says enabled him to work fluidly with handheld and yet have a tonal subtlety and resolution more in keeping with a large format negative camera. While there was a strong ethnographic precedent established by the magazine world, he was on to something different, he says, more interested in whether

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The long and short of it

After journalists, it's celebrated fiction writers who are joining newsletter platforms like Substack. Entrants weigh in on discovering a new community, benefits over traditional publishing and planned serialisation of longer work

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

THROUGH a Substack e-newsletter called *Salman's Sea of Stories*, author Salman Rushdie will be releasing sections of his new novella, *The Seventh Wave* approximately once a week over the course of a year. He says the newsletter will also feature short stories, literary gossip and writing on books and film. His entry into the platform along with those of other fiction writers like Patti Smith has sparked discussions around a return to serialisation of novels—the way works by Charles Dickens were originally published for instance, replete with cliffhanger endings—albeit in a new digital context. "I think that new technology always makes possible new art forms, and I think literature has not found its new form in this digital age," Rushdie told *The Guardian*, while reflecting on a recently-felt need to try new things, and whether readers' feedback to the periodically-published sections would accordingly influence his writing. "People have been talking about the death of the novel... but the actual, old fashioned thing, the hardcopy book, is incredibly, mutinously alive. And here I am having another go, I guess, at killing it."

The American platform, founded in 2017 by Chris Best, Jairaj Sethi and Hamish McKenzie and headquartered in San Francisco, allows writers to sign up for free and publish writing which readers can then subscribe to, and has been attracting a steady stream of journalists and bloggers. Kathmandu-based travel writer and climate change journalist Neelima Vallangi started

a newsletter called *Climate Matters* on Substack to directly reach out to her audience. She had been looking for avenues to explore topics which perhaps were not newsworthy enough to be published in a mainstream publication, but nonetheless important and missing from discussions in the public sphere. "I was already writing about climate change and its effects on Instagram, but there, with just 2,200 characters in the caption, you are constrained by space. Even if I fill it up completely, it's not like people will always read the entire thing," she says. While applauding the platform's easy integration with social media platforms like Twitter and the presence of a webpage, both of which allow the seamless sharing of posts with one's network, she admits that it is difficult to build an audience on Substack as it is not a social media platform as such. "If someone wants to grow their Substack subscriber base, they need to have a follower base somewhere else which they can convert to Substack subscribers," shares Vallangi while pointing out that having email addresses of readers is beneficial because of unpredictability of social media. "You don't know which platform might suddenly go bust."

IIM Calcutta alumnus, author and journalist Sonya Dutta Choudhury started a book subscription service called Sonya's Book Box and monthly newsletter Sonya's Read to Lead on Substack during the pandemic to build a book community and nudge readers to return to a reading habit. As a journalist hemmed in by structure, angle and word count, she says, she has long envied the more freer, conver-

sational tone and language at the disposal of bloggers. There is a need to stay invisible within this hardened format of traditional journalism, while more and more people were interested to know the person behind the writing. A newsletter enabling creative freedom and quirky, anecdotal writing, she says, "felt very liberating because suddenly I didn't have a house style which I had to conform to. I could just think about who my readers were, how I could talk to them, and what would be interesting for them." The software also provides swift analytics to tell writers how many users opened their mail, clicked on links or shared it with their network, the relationship with the reader becoming more immediate. Author Rohini Chowdhury who currently writes the newsletter *The Story Birds* on Substack with friend and writer Shaiontoni Bose, which brings out original fiction, retold or reinterpreted myths and folktales every week with accompanying illustrations, agrees. "I love the direct reader engagement," she says. "For me as a writer, hearing back from my readers is the greatest motivation to keep writing and writing better. On Substack, I know within hours how many subscribers have read my work, and the feedback from readers begins coming in within a day. That never happened with traditional publishing—there we have to wait till the book is done, and on the shelves, and the first statement with sales

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it would be possible for him as an American to make pictures that would have any meaning to others. Back then, his work in the US gravitated towards photographing people at leisure, a theme that continued in these works. "While walking in the streets and parks, I was taking pleasure in the act of photographing, but also recognising, celebrating, investigating people taking pleasure," he explains, referring to a picture taken in Lodhi Gardens in Delhi in 1983, which showed two men in repose, listening sleepily to a radio between them. His interest was in the photographic tableau, he says, building layered pictures with a focal point that was part of a larger interplay, while weaving



Author Salman Rushdie recently made a deal to publish his next work of fiction, *The Seventh Wave*, as a serialised novella on newsletter platform Substack. He says it will be a digital experiment in serialising fiction with new sections coming out approximately once a week over the course of a year. **PIC/GETTY IMAGES**

information comes in months later from the publisher. Reader interaction is also delayed till readings are organised, or a literature fest happens somewhere," says the UK-based writer for whom geography has limited this kind of traditional interaction. "I find Substack gives me an international audience with great ease. Not so with traditional publishing, despite the fact that almost all my books are on Amazon." The newsletter has also helped Dutta Choudhury connect to a vibrant and talented newsletter creator community. "As soon as you sign up, you are pulled into this world where you are directed to little packages, areas, conversations and other newsletters where you can look, learn and have a cross-fertilisation of ideas."

For Rohini Chowdhury who had been looking to break out of "the tyranny of traditional publishing," Substack offered a no-strings-attached model. "My work remains mine as do all rights. So I am free to present my writing the way I want

it—I can turn it into audio or video if I want, I can upload it or take it down, I can charge for a story or not—the freedom is amazing. That is completely missing with traditional publishing, where the publisher, since it holds publishing rights, calls all the shots." Moreover, as Substack does not charge till the writer starts earning, there is space for experimentation, allowing her to slowly build readership.

"Most writers usually have a body of work which traditional publishers do not want or cannot publish—they may be limited by their list, or a piece of writing just doesn't sit well with the editor looking at it. There are no such constraints on Substack, and it is the reader who decides whether a piece of writing is good or not. And while this self-publishing often lets substandard work get 'out there', it also holds a writer accountable for what they write," says Chowdhury, while admitting that the views of an experienced editor is the one thing she misses about this new format. Chowdhury also plans to compile *The Story Birds'* published stories into a book in the future along with serialising a novel on Substack.

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Honeymoon couple at Nishat Gardens in Srinagar, Kashmir in 1981. "While walking in the streets and parks, I was taking pleasure in the act of photographing, but also recognising people taking pleasure," says Epstein

elements which he had limited control over, a fact that made the process more thrilling. "I wanted to get at the richness of life on the streets, and build pictures that were layered with subtle juxtapositions, but not so layered that they would be chaotic and overwhelming."

Mumbai, then Bombay, occupies a prominent place in Epstein's book, presented through glimpses of its striptease cabarets, Bollywood movie sets and Zaveri Bazaar. "I loved Bombay," says Epstein, who grew up in a small town in Massachusetts and moved to New York in 1972 where he studied photography. "One of the things I love about New York is that I always felt that I had a certain anonymity out in the city and I felt something similar in Bombay—that I could be myself

more freely. Bombay was also this city that like New York never slept." Moreover, port cities, he says, have always fascinated him for being cultural meeting grounds.

The decade Epstein spent in India, he says, taught him to be honest, generous and "to listen with my eyes", explaining how his process is one not of assertion but of opening himself to receive experiences. "Those lessons I still carry with me," he says. "Right now, in the world which is so deeply divided in political and religious ways, the courage and importance of crossing borders is essential. In India, I worked at what it meant to cross those borders and not be inhibited by them."

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