

# ma

## A photographic exhibition to celebrate International Women's Week

by

### Sharmila Runa Green

Sharmila was born and raised in the UK, studied Fashion & Textiles at Manchester University and has lived and travelled extensively in India.



#### Foreword

'Ma' in many societies means mother. A mother gives the gift of life and nurtures her family with loving care. Ma is always the most solid and central person in one's life. 'Ma' is also frequently used as a term of endearment for any female member of a family, whether a mother or not.

In celebration of International Women's Week, this exhibition presents photographs of ordinary women going about their daily lives. It starts with mothers and their children – new beginnings. Many of these mothers also work outside the home in various activities. Some work on construction sites, some make clothes or jewellery. The middle section presents examples of adornments that these women wear everyday – whether at home or while working. The last section of the exhibition is of older women, who have life experiences to tell.

The photos were taken in 2003 when Sharmila had the privilege of living in the city of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, often referred to as 'The Heart of India'. Over the two years that she lived in Bhopal, she covered mile upon mile, in an aging three-wheeled auto rickshaw driven by Azhar.

The object was to capture women at that moment and not staged. A small digital camera with an internal lens was used which was discreet and non-intrusive. The photos capture the dignity and strength of these women showing a personal link that was created between the photographer and the subject.

Women's choice of clothes has fascinated Sharmila since first studying fashion and textiles in the UK. The diversity of dress styles in Madhya Pradesh is remarkable. The unique combination of colours, ornate tribal jewellery, striking tattoos and vibrant hues presented a unique opportunity to study a world that for many is so very ordinary, but for her was so very unusual.

Taking a photo was not the problem. She needed to develop a rapport with the people whom she met, whether it was on the street, in the market or by the highway. Communication was important in order to secure their consent. Her knowledge of the main local language Hindi may have been mediocre, but being of Indian origin helped.

As Sharmila looked back through the many photographs she had taken, she realized that the stories behind the portraits were as integral to the image as their subjects: narrow escapes, powerful narratives, plus advice and guidance from her auto-rickshaw driver, Azhar. The notes and anecdotes throughout this exhibition highlight the relationships that made this possible; from 10-15 minute interactions with some subjects, to two full days with others, all the while trying to understand their dress styles and culture.

After nearly a decade she is at last able to reveal the stories behind the photos which now seem unreal, as if part of another world.... from 'The Heart of India'.

Many of the photos displayed here have also been exhibited in New Delhi and Kathmandu and form an extract from her forthcoming book.