

Memorialising Ganesh Pyne



Writer and critic John Berger had once remarked that photographs are nothing but a record—important tools of identification and evidence. But photographs can be much more than visual records shot at a particular point of time, in a particular space. Invested with an ineffable quality, photographs become keepers of our personal memories, as well as the cultural memories of a community of people.

The emotional charge that photographs generate by evoking the past is especially relevant to portrait photographs. Portrait photographs of eminent personalities stir up a complex set of feelings. For one, they exude a hint of sadness because they recall a person

who is irretrievably lost. Susan Sontag, in her seminal essay “In Plato’s Cave”, describes portrait photography as an elegiac art. Notwithstanding the air of melancholy associated with portrait photographs, there is also a feeling of joyous recognition that the image of a well-loved, well-admired person is permanently frozen in time.

These thoughts struck me as I saw the corpus of photographs of Ganesh Pyne (1937–2013), the outstanding artist of the post-sixties generation, shot by artist Veena Bhargava over the decades since 1984. Bhargava insists that she is not a photographer, nor even a chronicler. Her foray into photographing Pyne was merely a matter of chance. Nonetheless, she has collated a valuable archive of exceptional quality. These portrait photographs and photo collages will go

a long way to bolster up the cultural memory of a people. During his lifetime, Pyne had already entered the popular culture of the city. In the early 1990s, the Bengali urban folk singer Kabir Suman sang “*Ganesh Pyne shudhu amaderi janya ...* (Ganesh Pyne is only for us ...)”. Pyne’s name appeared in the fiction published in the (Durga) Puja numbers of mass-circulating Bengali magazines. On a more selective level, this collection of photographs of a great artist will add freshness to his memory.

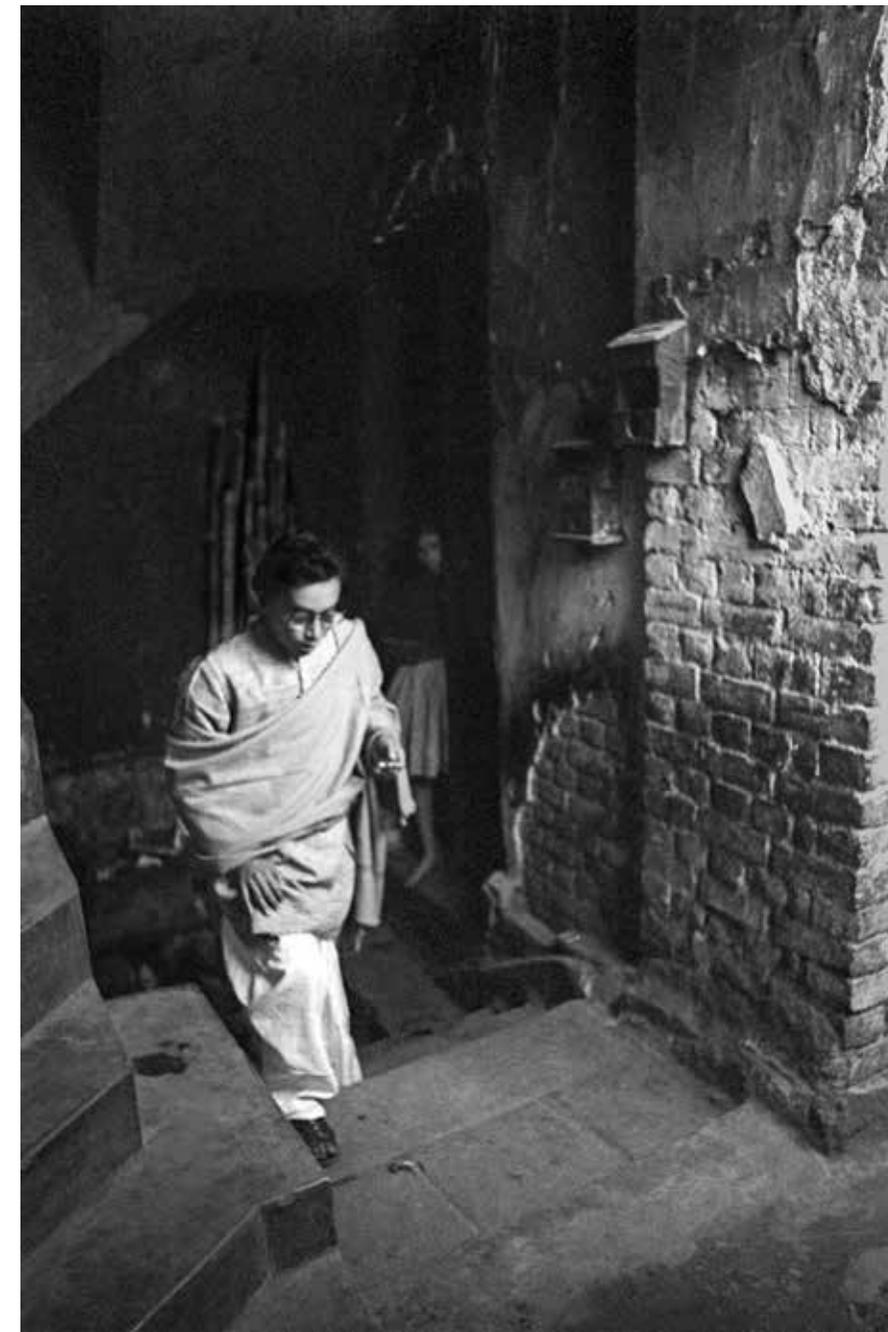
Why do I call Ganesh Pyne “great”? Why does he excite the Bengali imagination so? There are many reasons embedded in his persona and his visual language. For one, his Modernist experiments did not reject the past entirely. He always acknowledged that Abanindranath Tagore was a source of inspiration. At the same time, he made radical experiments with figuration (the way he used skeletal elements in his forms), texturization, use of shadows and a subtle use of colours. His imagery offered an exciting experience. He could evoke with his skilled drawing intimations of vulnerability, danger and death. The mysterious shadows, the areas of crepuscular light in his picture space offered a moving experience.

Then, of course, there was his persona. Known to be a shy recluse, he could be seen occasionally at the College Street Coffee House in the eighties, and more often at the evening *adda* at Basanta Cabin, where a number of writers, poets and theatre persons met regularly. The fifties and the sixties of the last century, when Pyne was evolving as an artist, Calcutta (now Kolkata) was abuzz with creative experiments. Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen were experimenting with a new cinematic language. In theatre, Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt and a number of others were exploring the possibilities of a proscenium stage, and others such as Badal Sircar were rejecting its illusion of reality and the physical constraints the space imposes. Tapas Sen was showing his wizardry with stage lights. A new generation of writers and poets—Mahasweta Devi, Samaresh Bose, Sunil Ganguli, Sakti Chattopadhyay—was stretching the limits of Bengali language and literature.





*At the entrance to Mandar Mallick's studio
at the decrepit mansion on Cornwallis Street,
used by Pyne as a working space.*



“Of particular interest in this set [of photographs] are those that capture the wall drawings made by the artist in the small studio in his apartment. ... This is a rare suite of photos, which gives a glimpse of Pyne’s private hideout.”

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Wall drawings in Ganesh Pyne’s studio.

