

Prashant Panjiar's *King Commoner Citizen* is a collection of photographs that blends the somewhat incongruous contemporary lives of erstwhile Indian princes with the incredibly diverse, layered, euphoric, despairing, paradoxical existence of the common Indian.

Panjiar's study is careful; he accords to king and commoner alike a quiet space and dignity. He achieves this by rejecting the intrusively newsy or overtly stylistic image, choosing a wider, inclusive form of portraiture instead. Through these portraits, the viewer gains access to the odd contiguity of ease and despair in the lives of the protagonists. Contrasts abound, though the shadows do not always fall predictably. Eventually, the terms King and Commoner prove to be just bait. We are invited to examine the distinction, only to find it deliberately obfuscated, the boundaries between the two increasingly blurred. Royalty decays, the regal reduced to artifice; the commoner finds moments of uncrowned rule in the airy abandon of his daily round. There is a deep melancholy in the eyes of the ageing nawab; the rustic smiles, man and monkey sleep the mythical sleep of kings. Panjiar's viewfinder, for a fleeting moment, erases a difference.

Panjiar doesn't strip the emperor's clothes; his soft eyes merely gesture at the translucence. He restrains himself from crowning the commoner, granting him but a transient elevation. There is a discipline in this vision that has been acquired through decades of honest, open sensitivity to the human condition. Somewhere in the course of the viewing one senses the evocation of a subaltern view of the photographer's times. All too quietly, without the single image itself consciously presuming to judge, the collection gains the credibility of a comment on the Citizen, perhaps on a nation. All too quietly, the watermark of the photographer reveals itself.

To fully access each of these images the viewer needs to be one who is informed. To grasp the wider sweep of the camera's observation, the viewer has to possess the objectivity to step back from the single image. Panjiar has located his work in a zone that is as demanding of the viewer as it has been of the photographer.

– **Sanjeev Saith**, editor and curator of the book and exhibition *King, Commoner, Citizen*.