



All images from *Matrimania* © Mahesh Shantaram

Mahesh Shantaram

“Everything that’s great about India, and everything that’s wrong with India, can be seen in a single wedding,” writes Mahesh Shantaram, while on a night train from Jaisalmer to Delhi.

Born in Bangalore, India’s third-largest city, Shantaram spent his childhood in Kuwait before his parents fled Saddam Hussein’s invasion. He worked desk jobs - in Mumbai, then Washington DC - until in 2005 he quit, left for Paris, and pursued a diploma in photography. He returned

to the city of his birth to try to make it as a freelancer but found himself relying on that very available, and not often creative, speciality to get by - taking pictures at weddings.

At first he was too embarrassed to admit it, convinced he had to “do justice to my photography diploma by somehow creating art”, he says. “That was what my first pictures were trying to be, forced as they were.”

But slowly he began to realise he could say something about his people and his culture through this myriad of once-in-a-lifetime celebrations, so he started to take images not





destined to be given to the newly betrothed. Eventually, he showed an edit to photographers Anders Petersen and Mark Power, and with their help realised that “the answers to just about any socioeconomic question can be explained as a cause or effect of wedding culture”.

He explains: “Anders taught me that earning an invitation into someone’s private space can change the game. Without that piece of enlightenment, I might have been gatecrashing weddings for the sake of my personal project.”

Power, meanwhile, showed him that what he wanted to capture was right there – “it was just a

matter of taking two steps back”. Shantaram has photographed more than one hundred weddings, and the images in his personal collection span from Chennai to Chattisgarh, Kolhapur to Kolkata, to create “a sort of national portrait”.

Matrimony is still a defining purpose in contemporary India, and it shows. “Young men and women assume the roles of prince and princess in a Bollywood fantasy,” he writes of the ceremonies he photographs in *Matrimania*. “On the periphery, a multitude of workers facilitate the creation of Disneyland-like sets; they rig the lights and play music to

entertain thousands of guests, for a celebration that can keep going for days.”

His images show huge toadstools and head-high flowers that line the paths the brides walk down, stacks of presents, ushers in shiny suits, and young workers waiting in servile formation. The result is a hyper-real “theatre of society”, he says – “images that take the viewer to a nether space, hanging between horror and celebration, a strange world carved out from a familiar space, a dark narrative to the great ‘coming together’, and what is left behind in its wake”. *BJP*

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