



"I am appalled by the Supreme Court judgement [criminalising gay sex]. The judgement is intellectually shallow and ethically hollow. The constitution protects the liberties and rights of Indian citizens. It is not for the judges to confer rights or take them away." — Vikram Seth

Vikram Seth [b.1952] is an Indian novelist, poet, and travel writer, best known for his epic novel 'A Suitable Boy'. He has been in the field of writing for more than three decades and is regarded as one of the most influential writers of the modern era. Seth was also in the news for his protest against India's Supreme Court judgment upholding a law which criminalises gay sex. It was a ruling seen as a major blow to gay rights. Seth was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2001. Photo: © Rohit Chawla

ROHIT CHAWLA FROM ANOTHER LENS

In conversation with the editor

Editor: You are known for voicing statements with your photography. What is your statement in your series on activists.

Rohit Chawla: I voice statements to accompany pictures because otherwise they risk getting lost in today's surfeit of visual imagery. The so-called democratisation of photography propagated by the cellphone camera has created a certain banality of the visual and words have the possibility to rescue pictures from that banality. Today, documentation without a context is lazy photography. So about the series on activists: some of these images were a form of protest, for example, the Vikram Seth portrait was in response to the retrograde and draconian section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Other portraits in this series were editorial commissions for different magazines and my constant quest for capturing a quiet portrait that is revealing without trying too hard.

ED: You once said, "Politics is my drug..." and have photographed many politicians. Do you think an image can reflect the truth behind the politician's veneer?

RC: Political photographs that capture an inner something are my drug of choice these days. I mercifully outgrew fashion and the soul-sapping world of advertising at the not-so-tender age of forty. Since then I've been pursuing photos that tell a back story and it is these back stories, that makes political photo-shoots a challenge. Equally, the insecurities of the modern-day celebrity is entertaining and telling.

ED: How did the concept of shooting Ai Weiwei as the tragic Syrian refugee child Alan Kurdi emerge?

RC: I travelled all the way to Lesbos in Greece, to try and convince Ai Weiwei to help me re-enact the tragic Alan Kurdi image. My hope was that it would further focus world attention on what seemed to be a somewhat flagging refugee crisis and cause. Mercifully, Ai Weiwei agreed to my creative proposition and I photographed him on a rocky beach

in fading evening light for barely a minute, but it worked quite magically. The image went viral once it appeared in *India Today* and other mainstream media across the world. *Time Magazine*, *CNN*, *NYT*, *Washington Post* and scores of newspapers across the world chose to publish it. It once again highlighted the immensity of the refugee crisis and refocused world attention on the continuing dismal situation in the Mediterranean.

ED: How do you persuade activists [like Medha Patkar and Anna Hazare, for instance] to pose for you in a studio?

RC: In photographing a celebrity or an activist for that matter one is working with an interesting paradox. On one hand you are tapping into their vanity and vanity is the human constant, invariant for any portrait shoot. Obviously, subjects like Medha and Anna are somewhat self-effacing and a bit shy about letting their vanity come to the fore. As a photographer then, the playfulness of the moment is in inviting out that part of the subject who would be interested in the portrait. As a photographer, one is constantly asking someone for a glimpse into their world and permission to take a picture of it. More often than not the subjects also take a step into my inner sanctum in quirky and unpredictable ways. It's the quirk in these steps that gives the job of photographing them its heady rush.

ED: What is your personal view of the power of art and culture as forms of resistance?

RC: I worry that art and culture in India has essentially become the heady diet of the pontificating privileged. The political discourse and the media landscape displays a complete apathy to the seminal cultural issues that concern the vast majority of India. But I do feel hopeful about the liberal values resistance that is taking place; it resists a homogenised and misplaced sense of culture and religious identity that seems to be imposing itself in India. I do count several pieces of my own work as part of that resistance.

Rohit Chawla is a leading photographer, who of design and film production company. His solo exhibitions include *The Sequel*, *'Free da! The Homage'*, *'World of Weara-Creative Director for the India Today Group and Open 250 magazine covers. A culinary aesthete, he has com-*



'The Bangla Table from Chetti- ter two decades in advertising at JWT, started his own include *Wanderlust*, *'Tribute to Raja Ravi Verma'*, *'Klimt—ble art'*, *'Goa Style'* & *'The Inspired Frame'*. As Group magazine, he has conceptualised and photographed over pleted three coffee table books, *'The Accent Cook Book'*, *'nad'*. He lives & works between Delhi & Goa.



“Those who live for themselves die, those who die for the society live.”—Anna Hazare

Anna Hazare [b. 1937] is an Indian social activist who led movements to promote rural development, increase government transparency, and investigate and punish corruption in public life. While organising and encouraging grassroots movements, Hazare frequently conducted hunger strikes to further his causes — reminiscent to many, of M.K. Gandhi. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan — the third-highest civilian award — by the Government of India in 1992 for his efforts in establishing a model village. Foreign Policy magazine named him among top 100 global thinkers in 2011. He has faced criticism for his authoritarian views on justice, including death as punishment for corrupt public officials and his alleged support for forced vasectomies as a method of family planning. Photo: © Rohit Chawla



*“To choose to writes is to reject silence.”
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie [b. 1977] is a Nigerian-born feminist and writer of novels, short stories and nonfiction. Author of three novels, ‘Purple Hibiscus’, 2003 [a narrative of violence, crises and resistance], ‘Half of a Yellow Sun’, 2006, ‘Americanah’, 2013, and a short story collection, ‘The Thing around Your Neck’, 2009, she has received several prestigious awards including the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction, 2007, and the MacArthur Genius Grant in 2008. Adichie was elected into the 237th class of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, one of the highest honours for intellectuals in the U.S., 2017. Her book, ‘Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions’, 2017, has just been published. Photo: © Rohit Chawla



“Music is what I must do, business is what I need to do and politics is what I have to do.”—Bob Geldof

Bob Geldof [b. 1951], is an Irish singer-songwriter, actor, author and widely recognised for his activism, especially anti-poverty efforts concerning Africa. Geldof with Scottish musician Midge Ure, co-founded the charity supergroup Band Aid in 1984, to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia. Geldof currently serves as an adviser to the ONE Campaign, founded by fellow Irishman-musician, Bono, and is a member of the Africa Progress Panel, a group of ten distinguished individuals who advocate at the highest levels for equitable and sustainable development in Africa. A single father, Geldof has also been outspoken for the fathers’ rights movement. Geldof was appointed an honorary knight by Queen Elizabeth II and is a recipient of the Man of Peace title among numerous other awards and nominations. Photo: © Rohit Chawla



“There is a huge difference between being tolerant and tolerating intolerance.”—Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali [b.1969] is a Somali-born Dutch-American activist. A childhood victim of genital mutilation, she is also an escapee from an arranged marriage and a one-time refugee who turned apostate publicly breaking with Islam, the religion of her birth, in 2002. She turned atheist and has been a former Dutch politician, an award-winning author and women’s rights campaigner. She received international attention as a critic of Islam and advocate for the rights and self-determination of Muslim women, actively opposing forced marriage, honour violence child marriage and female genital mutilation. She has founded the AHA Foundation for the defense of women’s rights. Ayaan Hirsi Ali was listed as one of 100 most influential women by Time Magazine in 2005. Photo: © Rohit Chawla



"I don't consider our work as that revolutionary because otherwise the conditions in the country would have changed long back." — Medha Patkar

Medha Patkar [b. 1954] is an Indian social activist working on various crucial political and economical issues raised by adivasis, Dalits, farmers, labourers and women facing injustice in India. Patkar is the founder member of the 32 years old people's movement *Narmada Bachao Andolan* which has been engaged in a struggle for justice for the people affected by the dam projects, especially those whose homes will be submerged, but have not been rehabilitated. She was arrested again on August 7, 2017, for her agitation on the displaced people of Dhar. Medha Patkar is a significant member of several movements working for justice. Photo courtesy: © Rohit Chawla



“Dream your destiny as your birthright. A high seat awaits you there”—Irom Sharmila

Irom Chanu Sharmila [b. 1972] is an Indian activist and poet from the north-east state of Manipur. She is also known as the “Iron Lady” who has resisted the army’s overbearing presence in the region. It was after the ‘Malom Massacre’ [in which 10 civilians were killed in indiscriminate firing by the Assam Rifles men] that Irom began a hunger strike in protest and demand for peace. After the hunger strike of 16 years [2000-2016] Irom has been named “the world’s longest hunger striker”. On International Women’s Day, 2014 she was voted the top woman icon of India by MSN Poll. Amnesty International has declared her as a prisoner of conscience. Photo courtesy: © Rohit Chawla