

Looking through glass

If you are serious about a career in photography, the Light and Life Academy is the ideal training ground.

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REMEMBER the haunting blue-grey eyes of the young, Afghani

girl staring out of the cover of the *National Geographic* Magazine in the photograph taken by Steve McCurry in 1984? It generated so much response that McCurry returned to Afghanistan to look for her, nearly 18 years later. And Pablo Bartholomew's terrible photograph of a half-buried dead baby, taken after the Bhopal gas tragedy? Or the one of a naked girl child fleeing from the horrors of the napalm bomb in Vietnam in 1972? These are but a few images that have left lasting impressions on

millions of people who have seen them. They are photographs that have given rise to a wave of emotions without the help of a single word.

Perfect place for photographers

In a place called Light & Life Academy (LLA), in the Nilgiris, Iqbal K. Mohamed, an eminent alumnus of the Brooks Institute of Photography in California, is pouring his heart and soul into an institute that will, he hopes, produce more McCurrys and Bartholomews, Kasbekars and Rajadhyakshas. It seems the perfect place for photographers to learn and hone their art and skill. Four and a half acres amidst rolling hills and valleys and built in 14 levels, the academy looks as striking as the photographs that line its walls. They are the works of the students. It has state-of-the-art equipment and several studios, a green room, black and white lab, colour lab, digital studio, library and workshops.

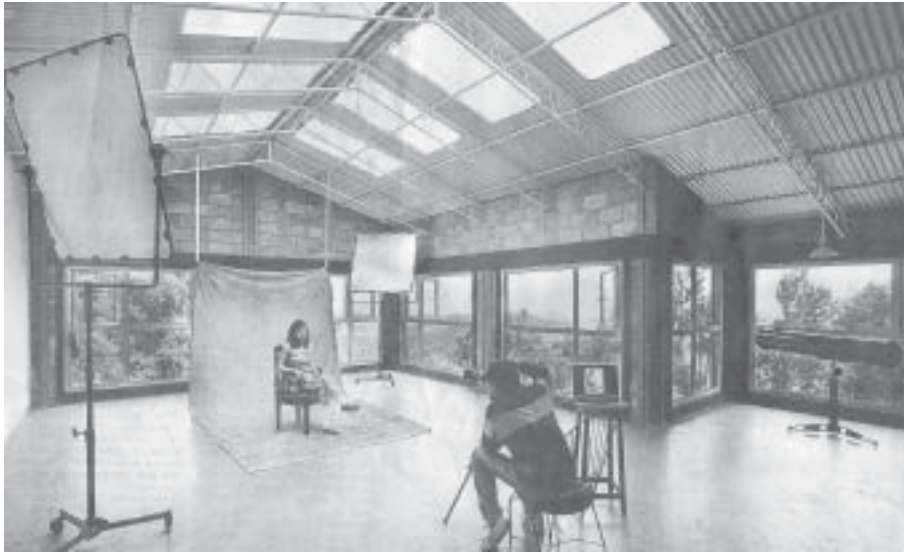
Iqbal knew in his mind his academy would have to be "a visually inspiring area". The daylight studio with two sides completely made up of glass presents a spectacular view to say the least and for budding photographers, the play of light and the change in its angles and colours is phenomenal. Even outside the building, every-where one turns there is something that would make a great subject matter for a photograph. Like the mysterious acacia lined ring of rocks enclosing empty space. It is a Toda buffalo pen! Iqbal disdains "class-room blah-blah" as he terms it. Seventy five per cent of the classes are practical, hands-on work while 25 per cent constitutes theory. "Otherwise it would be akin to learning swimming through correspondence," he says.

LLA is in its fifth year. It has students drawn from various backgrounds. Apart from students of Visual Communication, Mass Communication and Art schools (including the JJ School of Arts), there are architects, computer engineers and commerce graduates who have come here for a switch in career. At present the faculty includes three Australian instructors apart from Iqbal himself. Eminent filmmakers and photographers, including Alphonse Roy who made the documentary on Snakes for the Discovery Channel, Prabhuddha

Dasgupta and others, have been visiting faculty at the Academy where they have shown their own works, discussed the works of the students and shared professional tips.

Need for change in perception

Currently, the strength of the institute is 12, though the capacity is a



CONTROLLED LIGHT : *The Day light studio at LLA and Iqbal K. Mohamed*

lot more than that. "Most people still think of taking photographs as just aiming and shooting, and no big deal. And they are yet to accept photography as a viable career option," says Iqbal. But things are changing and hopefully the Academy should receive the recognition that is long due and have more students coming in. Efforts are on to get the institute affiliated to a University. But the process is painfully slow. The academy is supported by Kodak, Calumet, Lakshmi Machine Works, Megavision, Zentask & Epson, Gretag and Photo equip and managed by a non-profit education trust. But a lot more needs to be done.



As adman Prahalad Kakkar puts it, "If only people would put their money where their mouths are, LLA could become a premiere photographic institute in Asia. It has the potential to be as good as Brooks. No one has the kind of hands-on experience that Iqbal has. His idea to start the academy is a brilliant one."

Sharad Haksar, who started off his career helping Iqbal, says, "If I had to start over I would certainly go to an institute like LLA. I had to go to the U.S. for photographic courses and I know now that LLA provides the same quality training for a fraction of the cost. It is top of the line and one can learn the art from scratch. Iqbal has taught me whatever I have learnt about photography and he is a great teacher. Since photography is purely an art form, the environment here is the ideal one. But sadly while parents are willing to shell out Rs. 20 lakhs for a medical seat, they are not willing to look at photography as a serious profession."

Fashion photographer Atul Kasbekar has not

visited the academy but has seen the work done by the students of LLA and thinks it is "very promising". And he echoes his fellow photographers when he says that photography is a great career option like many others. "It is no longer about being a doctor or an engineer. I know of DJs who are making serious money." Kasbekar only has one nit to pick and that is the location. "Not everyone wants to photograph nature and LLA's only drawback is its location. It is in the boondocks and the school can't possibly provide all facilities. It should have been closer to some metro." He nevertheless agrees, "Having an institute of this kind is a great idea."

Variety of courses

LLA offers various courses tailored to suit specific needs. Their flagship course is a two-year postgraduate diploma in professional photography for those wanting to make photography their career. The course fee for this course is Rs. 6.30 lakhs. Apart from this, there are short-term courses for hobby photographers, nature photographers, Art school and Visual and Mass communication students in professional fashion photography, digital photography, portraiture and photojournalism. LLA also customises courses on any specific aspect of photography the students may want, provided there is a minimum of 15 students enrolling for the same.

For details, visit: www.LLAcademy.org

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