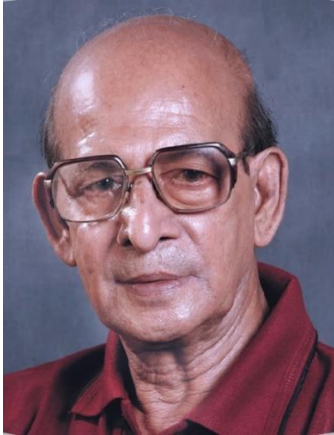


## My Mejda - Benu Sen: A Legend in Photography

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Photographic Association of Dum Dum, INDIA



Benu Sen

I really feel privileged to witness how Benu Sen became a legendary pictorialist from an Aviation Engineering trainee. Fate probably had a role to determine the legend he became, but he would never have reached the zenith of his greatness without the sheer brilliance he possessed and the relentless effort he put into his art. It is difficult to chronicle the brilliance of such a maestro in few words, and I really do not know where to start. However, I shall try to recount in brief his contributions towards promotion of photography, achievements, honors, the various positions he held and a few personal anecdotes. Even though he explored all the genres in Photography but I have dwelled upon his creativity only in few fields and especially in Spirituality and Women's psychology.

Benu Sen, whom we fondly referred to as 'Mejda' (*second eldest brother in our joint family*), popularly known as Benuda or Sir, the eldest son of Monindranath Sengupta and Prabhavati Devi, was born on May 26, 1932, at his uncle's house in Bagbazar. Apart from being a master photographer, he also was an ace craftsman. He made a camera, an enlarger which we still use in PAD, light stands, tripods, filters etc. The craftsmanship was not limited within the domain of photography. He could stitch cloths and leather articles. He was an excellent swimmer, a cricketer and above all a dare devil person.

In 1957, Mr. Benu Sen founded the Photographic Association of Dumdum (PAD) with a few like-minded friends, now PAD is a world renowned Photographic Institution having nurtured many internationally acclaimed photo artists. Mejda induced all our family members in the realm of photography, all of whom served or are serving PAD in different capacities in different point in times.



1.Paradise Lost

Mejda’s remarkable contributions in photography are, ‘BS4’ – an extra ordinary fine grain developer for tropical countries, ‘Tonorama - a technique to obtain Tone-separation using Solarisation (Photo1) and Macro-pictography. He introduced colour photogram (Photo2) and colour separation from Black & White Negatives (Photo3) in India.

I think the introduction of the ‘Free Systematic Photographic Course, which incidentally was my idea, is one of the most significant contributions of PAD and it could not have been possible without his guidance and active involvement. Since the introduction of the course in 1968, he taught at PAD till his last days. As a result, PAD became a full-fledged photography education center free of cost.

Mejda had great leadership quality. Under his leadership PAD organized nine International Photographic Conferences, twelve all India Seminars, fifty three international Salons and several local exhibitions to promote and propagate photography. He organized a number of Solo Exhibitions and Group Shows, presented numerous



2.Colour Photogram 4



3.Tanushre

papers and published a number of articles, delivered T.V. & Radio talks on photography. He authored the book ‘Art of Photography’ and co-authored two important books "Experimental Photography" and "Learn Photography". He served as jury in many International and All India salons and competitions in India and abroad. He was simultaneously a teacher, researcher, administrator and preacher. He has produced numerous internationally renowned photo artists and taught several thousand students. I, being his younger brother, was fortunate to receive his love, affection and guidance for about 50 years and learned many things about photography. People used to say that I am his ‘Lakshman’ brother.

Benu Sen is considered a legend in the world of pictorial photography. His contribution to the development of world photography is unsurpassed to that of any other Indian photographer. Under his supervision, a state-of-the-art photography department was set up in the Indian Museum in 1973, which he headed till retirement in 1990. In 2000, he was awarded the National Award by the Government of India for his contributions in Photography; needless to say a rare fit for any photographer.

Benu Sen is the third person in the world to receive the coveted honor of 'Master of Photography' (MFIAP) from the Federation International de la Art Photographique. The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain conferred him fellowship (FRPS) in 1975. He obtained EFIAP in 1970 and ESFIAP in 1982. He was awarded numerous honorary titles such as Hon. FJIAP (Japan), Hon. FNPAS (Sri Lanka), Hon. FPBS. (Bangladesh), Hon. FPAD (India), Hon. FCOS (Romania), Hon.PAB, Hon. SOP etc. He was crowned with the most prestigious honour Hon. EFIAP in 2006.

Mejda was the third president of the Photographic Association of Dumdum (PAD), the third president of the Federation of Indian Photography. He was also Vice President of the India International Photographic Council as well as Calcutta Photo Club Coordination Center and Head of The Photography Department of the Indian Museum.

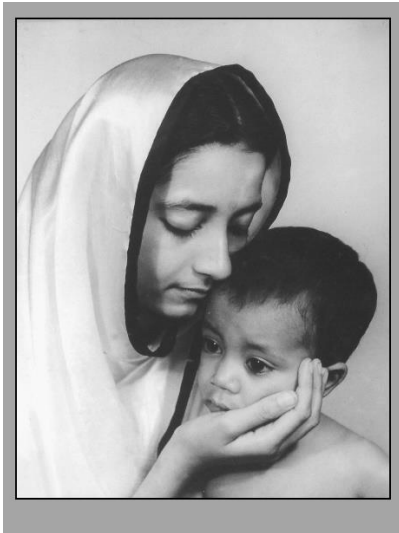
There are very few people in this world who are blessed with the quality of remaining humble despite glorious achievements. Mejda was one such fine example. His presence used to make everyone around him feel very cordial, comfortable and courageous. Despite such stupendous achievements in photography, he remained a humble man, easily approachable by all and sundry. His ability to make people feel special was remarkable. This is a quality by which a true teacher transcends himself to greatness. He left a long-lasting impression on others.

Through his camera, he brings out the unfamiliar and unseen context of the known world that acquires a new look, a new meaning and above all a beauty that has so long remained unnoticed. The commonplace becomes uncommon as it is painted in a new hue. And that's where we meet the artist's, mystical human heart.

He traversed through and explored various branches of photography. What distinguishes this renowned photographer is his sensitive soul evident from his subject selection, use of darkroom techniques and ultimate transformation of the mundane to something creative and ethereal. His still life, travel photographs and experimental photographs all bear his insignia and are easily recognized amidst the chaos of thousands of photographs.

In his artistic pursuit Benu Sen proves his excellence through his pictures. His pictures are proof of not only his great mastery over technique, but also reveals his sensitive mind. His perception of colour harmony, tonal balance, composition and capability of using the right technique to bring out the essence of the theme and aesthetics are unmatched.

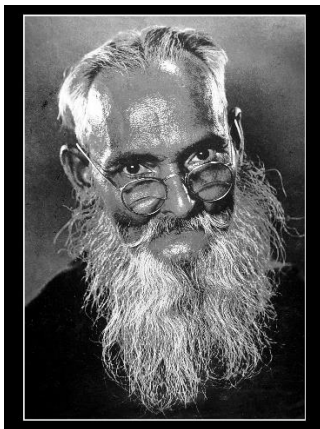
A true artist like Benu Sen can freely wander in different genres of art. However, I feel that his pictures relating to women's psychology and 'age study' are matchless in the world. Most of these pictures were created using artificial lighting and Benu Sen was a master in studio lighting. The following paragraphs will provide a flavor of his creation:



4.Mother

Mother and Child- is one of the most common subjects in Art. God cannot be everywhere, so He created mother. Both in Oriental and Occidental Art, images of 'Mother' play a pivotal role in the accepted hierarchy of genres. The eternal relationship of 'Mother and Child' has been depicted in the field of photography by many photo artists. Mejdha created his masterpiece, 'Mother' in 1957. It is a high key portrait of a mother and child that employs Raphael style composition. It received applause and awards from different parts of the world. It is the first Indian picture published in British Almanac in 1960. About sixty five years have elapsed, but I am yet to see such a pleasing picture like 'Mother', though many pictures are presented on that theme every year in different Salons. (Photo4)

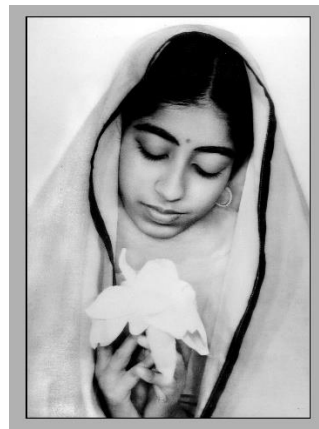
Portraiture- Portraits are one of the most fascinating genres in all forms of art and Benu Sen was a doyen of Portrait Photography. He produced number of masterpieces in women's portraits. He created classic characteristic portraits, beautiful creative portraits as well as experimental portraits in colour. His portraits employ both low key and high key tonal ranges as well as midtones and were shot, both indoor and outdoor. He was a great master in Portraiture lighting. Some of his creations are included in this article. (Photo5,6,7,8)



5.Wise Man of The East



6.Modern Monalisa



7.Lotus



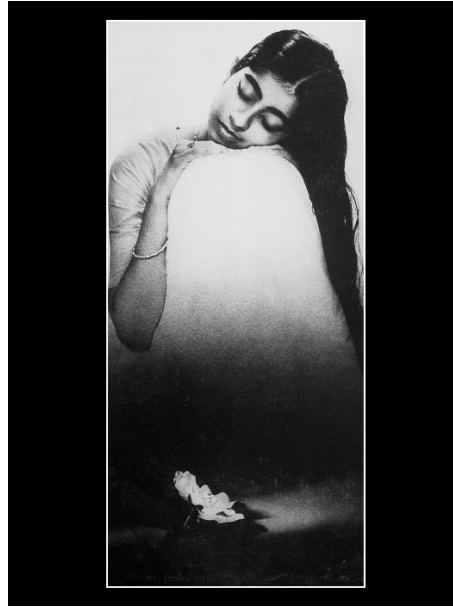
8.Sublime

Spirit of Indian-ness (based on Indian Philosophy & Women's psychology) - Benu Sen photographed myriad dimensions of Indian life, society and philosophy. In his endeavor, he was mostly influenced by the Indian artistic tradition, which evolved with an emphasis on inducing special spiritual or philosophical states in the audience and with their symbolic representation. The philosophy guiding the Indian artist has been "Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram" – leading him to the

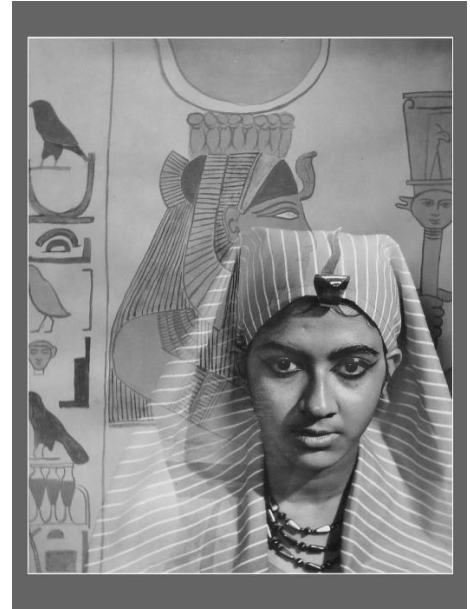
everlasting quest for truth, goodness and beauty. Benu Sen's FRPS & MFIAP Honors were on this theme. Few examples are :



9.Evening Glory



10.Beau Ideal



11.Egyptian

EVENING GLORY is a beautiful creative portrait depicting a Bengali woman offering her evening prayer. It not only symbolizes the cultural activity and spiritual outlook but also conveys serene and sublime beauty. (Photo9)

BEAU IDEAL is an example where women's psychology and inner feeling are more dominating. The flower symbolises the beauty of nature. (Photo10)

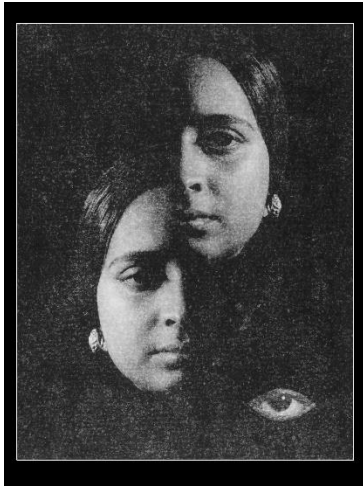
EGYPTIAN aptly captures the grandeurs of a young lady depicting that every woman is a queen at heart. (Photo11)



12.Shyness

SHYNESS is a portrait of the hands of a young lady. This picture is characterized by exceptional lighting and tonal qualities as well expression of hands which are so tender and adoring. (Photo12)

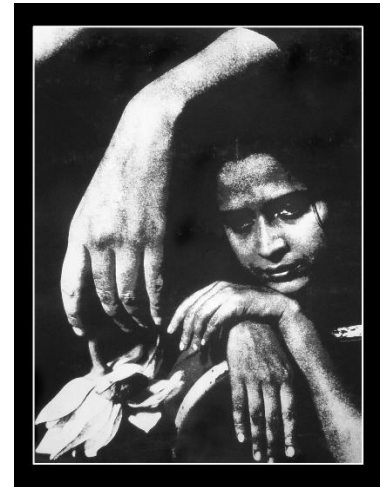
Other notable pictures in this genre are Third Eye, Memorial, Forbidden Flower, Lost Horizon, Ivy, etc. (Photo13,14,15,16,17)



13.Third Eye



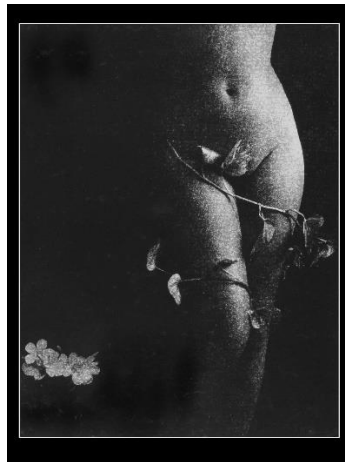
14.Memorial



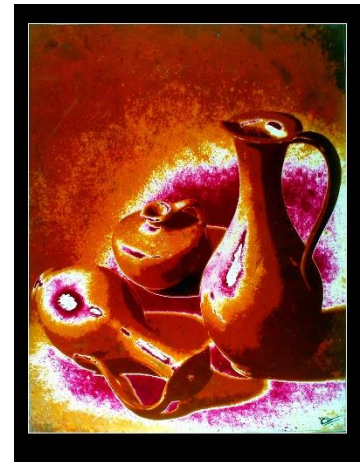
15.Forbidden Flower



16.Lost Horizon



17.Ivy



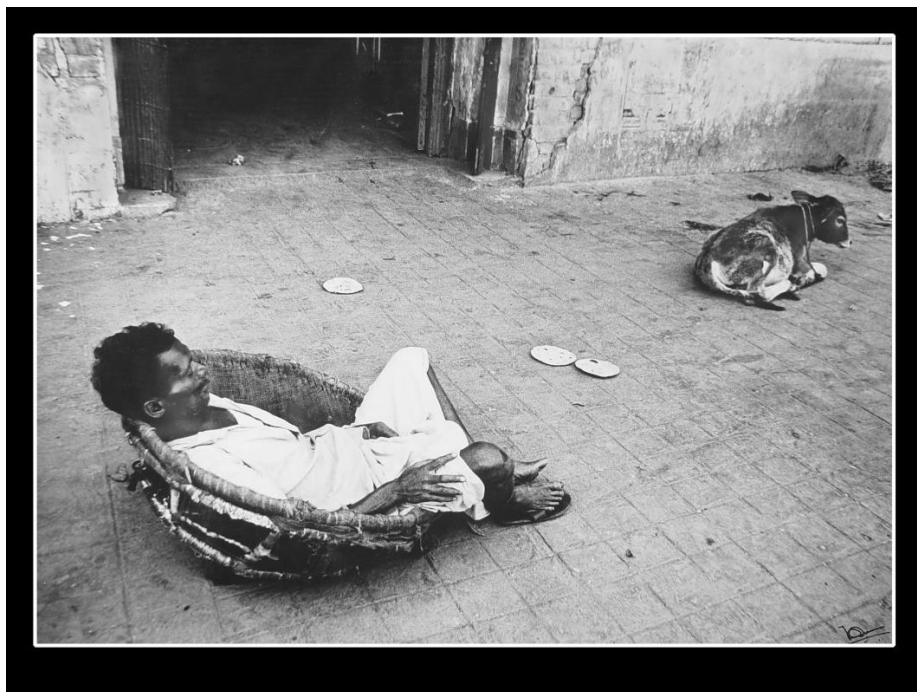
18.StillLife

Still-life is a particular genre of visual art, where the artist creates the whole set up by himself with the help of some inanimate objects according to his choice and imagination. Benu Sen was often at his creative best in this genre. (Photo18)

Humanity- I don't think it would be irrelevant to try to highlight his humanity in today's global turmoil. We see that the seat of humanity is not in 'Aishwarya' (wealth), but in compassion and love.

CO-EEXISTENCE: Bible says "Man shall not live by bread alone". Indian philosophy also similarly says ---Man is not happy by possessing wealth only. Like food for physical health. He needs nutrition for mental health also. This is true for everybody, a daily worker also. Mere food can not

satisfy all his needs. How many people can think of it and how many have really endeavored to establish this through their vision and creations. Only a sensitive soul can realize that and Benu Sen had that quality of mind, which is reflected through this picture. (Photo19)



19.Co Existance



20. Requiem

'REQUIEM" is a candid photograph, where he tried to establish the fact that one happens to be a ruler so long he has the power, wealth and followers. But power of wealth, society and youth are all transitory and pride for those things is mere foolishness. Time can grasp all these in a moment and this is a bare reality. Once the power is gone even the weaker dominates over you. The visionary power and modesty of the soul of the author are apparent from this photograph. A common day to day event is transformed into a highly philosophical theme by the magical visionary power and modesty of mind of the author. (Photo20)

He was an institution by himself; he had infinite knowledge in photography and never hesitated to impart his knowledge patiently. He never refused anyone who came to him to learn something .That's why the following shloka of Isopanishad is very applicable to him:

Om Purnamadah Purnamidang Purnat Purnamudachyate.

Purnasya Purnamadaya Purnamebabashisyate.

Oh Shantih Shantih Shantih ..

( *"That is full, It is full. It has grown from full to full.*

*By accepting the fullness of the whole, the whole remains."*)

In fact, even being a family member he was almost a saint. He dreamt in the language of photography and meditated in it. Photography was his first love, photography was his life, and PAD was his blood, till the last day of his life (17th May 2011). He continued his efforts of promotion and propagation of photographic art and sciences till his last days.

We know art plays a very significant role in elevating man's mind and soul. It gives birth to innovative ideas, aesthetic awareness and creative pursuit. Photography is one such avenue for creative satisfaction. The whole life of Benu Sen was a living testimony of this idea.

Ten years have elapsed since Benu Sen, our former President, the great master and a legendary Photo-Artist has passed away. But we always feel his presence; it seems that he is around us. There are stars in the sky, which are dead millions of years ago; but we still get the light of those stars because of their eternal distance in space and they will continue to glow further for unknown years to come. Such is the case with my Mejda, your Benuda, who though absent is very much with us, and we are fortunate enough to be inspired and encouraged to proceed to reach our goal and to carry on our duty for promotion and propagation of photographic art through our regular activities as guidance set down by our predecessors and revised time to time as and when required.

*Let the creative genius of Benu Sen continue to motivate the photo artists of the coming ages. Let his sensitivity, vision, artistry and brilliance inspire us all to reach new zeniths of artistic excellence.*