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Omar Khan in conversation

Meeta Chaitanya Bhatnagar
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Omar A Khan, whose award winning website, Harappa.com has devout fans from across the globe has released a hugely fascinating book on the photographs of Burke and Baker 1860-1900 called *From Kashmir to Kabul The Photographs of Burke and Baker 1860-1900*. The book, as publisher Bipan Shah says has received enthusiastic response from audiences from France and other European countries. As Omar readies for a Paris release, he seems very positive about the book and the entire range of photographs he has been working on. He talks to HT.com, in an exclusive web interview about the book and much more...

Tell us a little about yourself, and why you decided on Harappa.com

I am half Dutch, half Pakistani. I grew up in Pakistan. Then I went on for college to America. I studied philosophy at Columbia. Thereafter I went on to Stanford and took up employment in the software industry.

Harappa is the first ancient Indus urban center being researched with modern scientific and multi-disciplinary tools. What to you is the single most fascinating pull for this exploration?

I have always been interested in History. I feel the subject is very fascinating. Harappa had not been studied very well in Pakistan. When I went to Pakistan for the second time in early nineties, I started collecting images and pictures of the civilization. My work benefited from this. A lot of factors led to the making of Harappa.com. Harappa.com because my grand uncle lived very close to the place. I used to visit the place as a kid, and it occurred to me that it would be good to get some more information about the place and collate it. I constructed the

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website in November 1995, and was overwhelmed with the response to the site. At the time I had a few images of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. We publish works of scholars who are actually doing work on the actual site.

Is it an interactive process where anyone can put up a picture?

Not yet. As of now we select and process images and then we publish it. But sometime in the near future we hope to make it more interactive, with surfers' contributions. We want to reach out to as many people as possible.

A journey in pictures, a glimpse of history through photography. Is that more successful than treatises and essays on the subject?

The book focuses on not just Harappa but the Raj period. Especially the early forties. I have concentrated on putting together the photography of Burke and Baker in order to recreate for interested audiences the whole magic of that period in photographs. The book is not for students of history alone. It is meant for people who are interested in photography and history, but do not have the patience for biographical accounts. Pictures are a nice way of studying history.

Much of the media is outside the subcontinent today. Most of it (especially archival film) has already been lost, you say. Do you intend to expand further and move onto films, TV etc?

Sure. I would love to make a documentary or a film based on the subject of the book, especially John Burke's photography. From the very beginning I have thought of that aspect. I might work on it in the near future.

What kind of research went into the Baker and Burke story? What was the process like?

Well I just stumbled upon their works. There was in fact very little known or written about their photography. Since I have been closely associated with Burke, I thought it would be a good idea to explore their photography and bring it to an avid audience. Between them they have covered wonderfully the entire period between 1860 to 1900. It needed to be brought out of the studio. So I decided to do this biographical work, a little differently, in pictures. Burke for instance has done a lot of wonderful portrait photography of the entire Punjab region. This, among other things I have attempted to bring to a wider canvass.

What do you have to say about the power of Internet?

The Internet in 1995 was the cheapest way to get to the widest possible audience. Rolling out a book implies much investment. The interactivity inherent in the medium is another very big draw. In due course of time I hope to be able to create an interactive database of Raj photographers. Through emails, for instance, I could gather information from people, about my hobby in a more direct way. It is a very powerful medium.

To know more about the author/book write to meetac@hindustantimes.com



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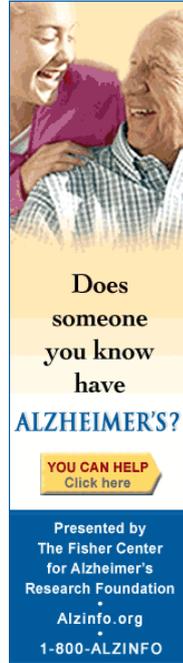
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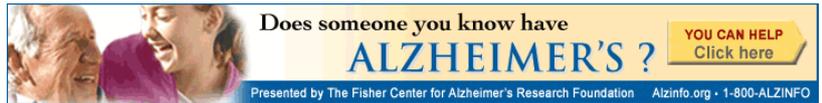
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