

Lullaby of the Dark Goddess

by Sahastrarashmi



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Commentary

Several issues come to mind with this photograph, the first of which is that we see no faces. This is an incredibly important component in this photograph. If Sahastrarashmi had used a slightly wider lens or backed up a couple of feet, it would have been easy for him to include at least two faces, possibly a third. But this would've changed the the *subject* of this photograph from the clay pots to the people themselves. As such, I don't think it would be a very successful photograph; all we would see is the backs of their heads — not a very interesting portrayal of a person. By cropping as he did, it pulls our attention entirely to these clay pots.

And this brings me to the second issue about this photograph that is so crucial: Removed from the context of the project, this image offers very little explanation about what we see. Even in the context of this project — a story about cremation of the dead and the handling of the remaining ashes in India — we still see very little in this image that tells us why Sahastrarashmi thought it was such an important photograph to include in the story. To me, this is a classic example of the fallacy that photography should always be independent of any form of verbiage.

The text included with this image is very short, concentrated, to the point. A total of 22 words are all that were necessary for this photograph to make a significant contribution to the project. Sometimes photographers shy away from the use of text

because they are intimidated by the assumption that they need to write lengthy passages. In fact, a lengthy passage that accompanies a photograph is less likely to be read. I favor short text — just a sentence or two, certainly no more than a paragraph.

My advice has always been to approach the use of text the same way we approach framing in our visual images. We all learned in our very first attempts at photography that the most fundamental task of composition is deciding *what to leave out*. Just as the camera has a tendency to want to take it all in, too often photographers are seduced into wanting to say it all with their text. Instead, the rule should be ruthless editing, hacking until all that is left are the most crucial and indispensable words. As a photographer, I tend to think the photograph is the most important thing — and the text is a sort of supplement. As such, the role of the text is to present the *conceptual ideas* that either aren't or cannot be included visually.

In this example, there is no visual evidence that these clay pots are urns for ashes; there is no way to visually communicate that these are for sale to pilgrims; and there is no way to know the fellow carrying them is the potter. Nonetheless, the addition of these three important bits of information



A potter distributes his clay urns for the ashes of the dead.
The shops will sell them to the pilgrims in turn.

make this photograph an important element in the overall story. Indeed, the overall story it would be diminished without this photograph and our understanding that the text makes possible.

Clearly not every photograph needs text, but when it is needed, we shouldn't shy away from it. We should, however, use it judiciously and deftly with the same skill and care we use in the creation of our images. Crafting text to accompany our images is,

in my way of thinking, just as important a skill to develop as any of the strictly photographic crafts we work so hard to master. Used wisely and sparingly, a sentence or two of well-crafted text keeps an image like this from the reject pile on the contact sheet. Think of text as a way to tap an image for its potential beyond the visual. Is this an "award winning" image? Probably not, but it would be a shame to leave it out and lose its important contribution to a fascinating story.