

A tribute to India's 'real' women through the eyes of Lesley Saunders

British photographer Lesley Saunders showcased her exhibition, 'The Real Women of India', on the International Women's Day in Delhi recently. The event was held in support of the Roko Cancer, a breast cancer awareness charity. A host of luminaries, including Maharaja Kamal Singh of Suket and the Ambassador from the Sultanate of Oman, HE Humaid Ali Al-Maani and his wife were present for the event.

Lesley's 'The Real Women of India' captures, what she describes, as the unique essence that is prevalent in Indian womanhood. The exhibition was well received and attracted a lot of media attention with the next show planned in Mumbai in June. Lesley was, till some time ago, a globetrotting software professional working with a firm in the UK. But once she came to India, she stayed here.

So, in January 2009, she left the company, took up her digital camera and the rest, as they say, is a history in clicking. She has also started her own business venture.

"I actually came to India a year ago and was struck by what I would class as the real women of India, regardless of whether in a corporate environment or on the street as a vendor," said Lesley.

She was extremely impressed with the strength and resilience of these women. This is when she started taking

photographs of them. Lesley likes to travel inland wherever she goes in the world and gets involved with the culture. And in India, one of the things she quickly took up was to see the real country by travelling around in villages.

"What I'm actually showing is the strength and the emotions of these women. On my way to Pondicherry for example there are some salt flats and there were about 150 women working there. Some of them were carrying really heavy loads, yet they were working, smiling, laughing and proud in the way they dressed. I was very impressed by that," remarked Lesley.

What strikes her most is the simple and dignified bearing of these people, who unlike most in the West, do not have even the basic necessities, leave alone the luxuries of life. "When I look at the situation and then think of people even like myself, I realise we're actually quite spoilt with all the luxuries that we have. In these women, it's an inner strength that you actually see and I find that quite unique."

And yet, among Indian women, she sees a common strand stretching across the economic divide. She looks at women vendors and the way they're working to feed their families, and she sees the same heroic effort by women in the corporate world who shoulder the pressure of taking care of families in so many ways.

"It's that same inner strength and that

healthy pride. When you look at women in the West, in the UK for example, they also work very hard. But still, they come home to a lot of luxuries," said Lesley.

The photographer has worked all over the world but the one thing which stands out in India is the emotions you get from people even in photographs, she points out. "India's such a paradox. The people have time for you and the minute they see a camera, they want to oblige and want to communicate."

Her biggest challenge is capturing the emotion that she's seeing and to capture it before the subject becomes aware of the camera. "The minute they see you they break into a smile and that emotion's gone," Lesley said.

Most of her subjects have so far been from the south and also Rajasthan and areas around Delhi. "My next focus will be to take more photographs in the north."

She now wants to take the exhibition around the world about the real India, its women and also the efforts of Roko Cancer, which is largely involved in reaching out to the rural women in India and educating them about breast cancer.

"This is a show that we're looking to take pan-India and then on to London, Paris and New York," said Lesley. No doubt, for the rest of the world, it's time to see what the 'real' women of India are all about.

Amitabh Joshi

Book highlights positive impact of IT in rural India

Writer Arundhathi released her book titled Transformative Impact of ICT—Change Stories from Rural India recently. This book covers stories of the positive impact of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) on the lives of twelve people from among the hundreds in rural India. To work on this book, the writer travelled to more than 30 villages every day for almost a month interviewing villagers and studying their lives. The major part of her work in this book was writing eight stories out of the total 12



The rest four were written, two each by Suchit Nanda and Professor Arunachalam. "It was exciting designing it and to see it gradually take its shape," she says. The book was released by Dr. Bruce M. Alberts, Editor-in-Chief of Science (AAAS) and Prof. M. S. Swaminathan of MSSRF, during the 6th Convocation of Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) Fellows organised by MS Swaminathan Research Foundation. This book will be available free for download in PDF soon and in print from MSSRF, Chennai.