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Culture

Discovering Ganesh

An American photographer's life is transformed by an unexpected encounter with Hinduism's Lord of Dharma and her first visit to India

By Lavinia Melwani, New York

Lord ganesha can enter people's lives in mysterious ways. For photographer Shana Dressler, it was a chance encounter on a busy New York street, when she passed a bookstore in Manhattan featuring a beautiful book with Ganesha on the cover. He was shown being immersed in the water, splashed by a small army of men. Seized by the Lord of Obstacles' magnetic charisma, Shana booked a trip to Mumbai and would spend the next five years of her life photographing the Ganesha festival in Mumbai and throughout India.

Dressler had taken an entry level course in Hinduism at Columbia University in 1991, while studying comparative religion and anthropology, so she had seen the Elephant-faced God before. But why was He partly immersed in the ocean? She had to find out. The photographer eventually decided to travel to India to see the Ganesha Chaturthi festival firsthand. Her serendipitous encounter with an intriguing book cover was to trigger many adventures.

Visiting India was a powerful experience. "More than anything else, any monument or sacred place, what keeps bringing me back to India is the people," she says. "I have been to 50 countries on five continents and nowhere else have I felt such a pervasive and palpable sense of spirituality that is not tied to a particular religion, person or place."

Her quest took her in 2003 to Mumbai, where her Italian photojournalist friend Helen was living. There she was introduced to Sudharak Olwe, a photographer on the staff of the Times of India. Dressler and her friend from New York, Diana, had both come to Mumbai to attend the Ganesha Chaturthi festivities, which celebrate the birth of the God of Auspicious Beginnings. They followed Olwe around, since he had covered the festival for many years and knew exactly where to go.

"I began photographing the festival as an outsider, observing from my American lens," recalls Dressler. But as she got to know the people of Mumbai, her attitude changed. She says, "Instead of photographing Ganesha as an object, I shifted to photograph Him as everyone around me saw Him--as a Deity. This concept was radically different from my Judeo-Christian upbringing, where paintings and sculptures are just representations of God, not embodiments of God themselves."

Indeed, it was an eye-opener for Dressler, who knew little about Hinduism. After attending several pujas, she understood the powerful role faith plays in Indian life and tried to photograph the festival from the perspective of a devotee as best as she could. The challenge was to materialize in the photos the spirit of the festivities. On a technical level, this included using slower shutter speeds, film sensitive to low light, and a technique she had learned as a photography student years ago called "shake and bake."

"With this technique, you need to use a slow shutter speed along with a flash," she explains. "This creates an image where some of your subject matter is in sharp focus and the ambient scene around the main object creates a blur. The blur for me was a way to give a sense of spirit being present as opposed to merely matter."

Dressler had always been interested in visual arts as a means to learn about other cultures. She is the founder of Swimming Elephant (www.swimmingelephant.com), a multimedia company that produces photography exhibitions, book projects and video installations to celebrate the world's many cultures. These became the impetus for her new project, Discovering Ganesh, an artistic exhibit of video and photos which will one day become a book.

Back in New York, Dressler was on a roll with Ganesha at her side. His blessings began to manifest in tangible ways. The photos she had taken in India were sent to

Kodak for a film grant, which she won. After her second visit to the Chaturthi celebrations in Mumbai, she approached renowned art galleries and was invited to present a slideshow at the United Nations. She says, "I wanted to educate Americans about the cultural aspects of India, using Ganesha as the entry point."

Discovering Ganesh is still a work in progress, and over the years Dressler and her colleagues have joined several of the Ganesha festivities in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa and Tamil Nadu, videographing and shooting images for the upcoming book in which they plan to have images of Ganesha from around the world.

Dressler has now photographed the Chaturthi festival for four years and has seen thousands of murtis: "Each year I am so struck by the simultaneous seriousness and playfulness with which the people of Mumbai and India celebrate Ganesha. The artistic license of the artists who create the Deities is truly inspirational and refreshing." Indeed, in addition to the traditional representations of Ganesha, she's seen sculptures created out of spices, peacock feathers and even dried fruit. She has seen Ganesha sitting on the shoulder of King Kong and sharing the stage with Harry Potter.

"What's so moving is to see artistic representations of Ganesha that evoke a deep sense of devotion and love, whether they instill a sense of seriousness or evoke laughter, amusement or intrigue," she says. "In all the Deities I've seen, never once did I feel any sense of sacrilegious intent or disrespect. What greater freedom than to see and experience God with such a great variety of creative expression?"

Dressler points out that for the world's one billion Hindus, Ganesha is a powerful and majestic Deity, said to bring good fortune when one is launching new endeavors. He is also the patron of arts and the Lord of beginnings. She adds, "The iconography and history of Ganesha go far beyond his link with good fortune. The imagery offers a spiritual map of sorts, his every feature rich with meaning."

Dressler's journey of Discovering Ganesh has not been free of disappointment. Plans for a major exhibit at the Rubin Museum, which was slated to open in 2009, fell through when the curator of the show left. There had been many small difficulties, such as funding the project and finding sponsors, but this was the

biggest blow. But when the show was canceled, she decided not to get upset. She stayed on course, flying to Mumbai in accordance with the production timeline she had originally established.

In India, even as she worked every day on the project, Dressler had more mental space to think about the birthing pains her idea was having, and whether there was some divine design behind these obstacles. "I wondered what lessons I still need to learn, what was missing in my research. I realized that in producing this entire project I hadn't really been spending time looking at the sacred texts, taking the time to learn the mantras, talking to experts, pundits and devotees to get deeper insight into what would be most meaningful to share with a Western audience." She realized that the cancellation of the museum show had been a blessing in disguise, giving her the opportunity to take the project to a much deeper level, a spiritual depth that was missing before.

Dressler's journey became deeply spiritual as she tried to understand the deeper meaning of her quest. "What does Ganesha represent for me, my journey as an artist, an individual, a non-Hindu American who grew up in another faith? Having read through his 108 names, and then again through his 1,008 names, what I realized is that Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, inspired the deepest thought within me."

Dressler explains that she now understands that the obstacles--physical, mental, emotional, professional--were there for a reason. Many new people came into her life, and each brought new perspectives. She recalls the profound sense of hospitality and caring she encountered everywhere in this journey, and all the small miracles that happened along the way.

Dressler thinks this was the lesson she was meant to learn. She says, "I can trace back my interest in dedicating time and money to mentoring youth and helping those less fortunate than myself, to the beginning of this project."

She now has developed a charitable component to Discovering Ganesh. From Seshu Badrinath, the book's photo editor, she learned about the travails of working class people who have lost their sight. Seshu's parents are physicians who run an eye hospital in Chennai; he explained to her that when the breadwinner has lost his

eyesight, poverty often engulfs the entire family.

Along with raising funds for the book project, her goal now is to raise funds for a thousand eye operations--one for each of Ganesha's thousand names. Each eye operation costs just \$100, but is priceless in its ability to turn a family's fortunes around completely.

Dressler plans to travel again to India to shoot videos at the 2008 Ganesh Festival. She is also trying to raise funds for a journey to Southeast Asia, Africa, Dubai and the Caribbean to photograph the worship of Ganesha in those countries.

"For me, the more I free myself from my obstacles--real or imagined--I realize that what makes me the happiest is to inspire others to look within, to be less focused on myself and to really be of service to others," says Dressler. "I had to take the journey before I realized that the power to get to where I wanted to go had been with me all along. I just didn't know it. It took the journey, the struggle, the obstacles and ultimately the help of others to figure it all out." Piji

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