

# Images of Fortitude

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

American photographer Taisie Berkeley captures the daily struggle of Indian women to achieve economic and social equality.

The struggle to make a better life is a challenge that women all over the world face every day. American photographer Taisie Berkeley, who was in India from October 2005 to March 2006 working on her project, “Women Helping Women to Economic Justice,” captured the daily grind of Indian women. “There is something dramatic and inspiring about India, with its 90 million working women, most of them unorganized, often working for only a few rupees a day, yet determined to challenge centuries of tradition,” she says. Berkeley was in India on a Fulbright scholarship, an exchange program for educators, students, artists and researchers between the United States and other countries.

Some of Berkeley’s images were displayed at an exhibition at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, in February. The evocative photos of women working in the fields, at construction sites and running a food business from a tiny kitchen in a slum depict their “resilience and struggle to make things better for subsequent generations of women,” she says.

In India, Berkeley worked through three organizations



HEMANT BHATNAGAR

that are actively involved in the women’s rights movement. At Pune she spent her time with the Lila Poonawalla Foundation that provides work opportunities and scholarships to poor women. In New Delhi she worked through the Slums of Delhi Project that promotes adult and child literacy and health services. In Ahmedabad, her mentor was the SEWA Bank, which is part of the Self Employed Women’s Association. It is wholly owned and operated by poor women and specializes in micro-loans. “In India I have focused on going through the NGOs,” says Berkeley. Without a referral from someone

trusted by the people she photographed, she felt it would have been very difficult to do the project.

Spending time with these women helped Berkeley understand the economics of their situation. Speaking about her photography of construction workers in a village near Ahmedabad, she says, “SEWA has documented that 98 percent of women construction workers are unskilled. And 90 percent of them earn meager daily wages without any other benefits. I can’t help but think of the fragility of their financial condition. One accident or illness for many of these women can throw them

and their families into a catastrophic situation.”

Yet she saw a will to overcome the odds. The theme of her project reflects that after centuries of discrimination, Indian women are today fighting for social and economic equality—and helping one another. Some of the women she met are sole providers for their families and they are doing it with dignity and grace. “The overall impression that I will return with is that the women I have interviewed and spent hours photographing are fighters. They have an amazing determination to keep going despite obstacles,” says



*Above: Kiranben, 24, runs a food business from a riverbank slum in Ahmedabad and is her family's sole support.*

*Left: Taisie Berkeley at the New Delhi exhibition of her photographs.*

*Right: The gnarled and wrinkled hands of Parvatiben, an agricultural laborer in her thirties from a village near Ahmedabad.*

Berkeley. When she asked the women what motivated them to keep going, the most common answer was: “my children.” Berkeley adds that being a single parent of two sons helps her empathize more with women’s economic struggles.

Based on her work in India, Berkeley has put together a collection of photographs she hopes to exhibit in many countries. It will comprise 50 photos with quotations from the subjects to explain the context. Berkeley is also exploring the possibility of a book based on her photos and

experiences in India. “I have met with a designer and publisher and am fleshing out ideas for its concept,” she says.

Berkeley’s interest in India began in 2001 when she was a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland and was urged by her adviser to go to India and develop her theme of “Women Helping Women Shape their Life Choices.” She further refined her concept during a trip to India in March 2003 when The Holton-Arms School of Bethesda, Maryland, where she teaches photography, sent her to take photographs for an exhibit at the school and to develop a curriculum for teaching students about India.

She says her India project was “an opportunity to continue to grow as an artist and as a person.” Her journey of personal growth began in the mid-1980s when she left her job with the U.S. House of Representatives to pursue a



Photographs by TAISIE BERKELEY

career in photography. Berkeley’s photographic career was launched as a student at Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C., when she began a study of a 5-year-old girl who was born blind. The photo essay appeared in *Washingtonian* magazine in 1986 and 10 years later Berkeley followed it up with a second report. “Knowing her taught me an important lesson early in my career that those we feel sorry for don’t necessarily feel sorry for

themselves,” she says.

Berkeley has a master of fine arts degree in photography from the University of Delaware and a master of arts in writing from Johns Hopkins University. She has done assignments for the *Washington Post*, the *Washingtonian*, the *New Republic* and the National Geographic Society. Berkeley has had solo exhibitions in Maryland and been part of group exhibitions in Washington, D.C., Delaware and Bethesda. □