

My Journey from Silence to Storytelling.

- Shubhodeep Roy

Where Stories First Found Me.

My name is Shubhodeep Roy, and I am a documentary photographer from the bustling, chaotic heart of Kolkata, India.

From the earliest whispers of my childhood, I've been drawn to the world through the quiet magic of stories and images. I remember being in middle school, surrounded by the vibrant noise of my city—the honking of rickshaws, the chatter of street vendors, the distant call of the Hooghly River—but finding my true escape in books and photographs.

Those pages weren't just paper; they were portals to unseen lives, frozen moments that captured emotions, struggles, and triumphs in a single frame. I loved them deeply, more than I could express at the time. Slowly and steadily, that innocent interest grew into something profound—a dream that took root in my soul and blossomed into a passion. And over time, that passion transformed into my reality, shaping who I am today.

Learning to Hold a Camera, Learning to Hold On

But the path wasn't easy. Hobbies like mine aren't for everyone, especially in a place where resources are scarce and dreams must often bend to practicality. Photography, in particular, demands more than just creativity; it relies on a device called a camera, something that felt like an unattainable luxury in my early days. I had to endure so much to get my hands on my first one—saving every rupee, making sacrifices that tested my resolve. Holding that old, worn camera for the first time was a revelation. It taught me resilience, the kind that builds character through hardship.

More than that, it showed me the profound importance of small things—the quiet happiness that comes from valuing what you've fought for, the simple joy of creation in a world that often overlooks such pursuits. My education pulled me in one direction, toward stable careers and conventional paths, but my passion tugged me elsewhere. I bridged the gap by using that old camera to document the world around me: fleeting moments in crowded markets, serene places hidden in the urban sprawl, and the diverse faces of people going about their lives. Each click was a step toward understanding, a way to preserve the ephemeral.

The Silence That Changed Everything

The first real turning point—the blow that reshaped everything—came during the pandemic. In 2020, as COVID-19 swept across the globe, everything stopped. Life came to a sudden, eerie halt. I was in college then, full of youthful ambition, but suddenly the world outside my window was silent.

The routines I took for granted vanished. The man who delivered the newspaper every morning, rain or shine, was nowhere to be seen. The sweeper who kept our streets clean disappeared into the uncertainty. In that enforced stillness, I noticed something profound: the people who had always been there, living among us, staying among us, but hailing from different states, different corners of India. They were part of an "India within India," a hidden layer of our society that I had barely glimpsed before.

The India Within India

This "other India" isn't some poetic idea for me—it's a lived reality, a geography etched in struggle and survival. It's the river islands that flood and erode with each monsoon, the forest edges where ancient ways cling to life, the subsiding villages swallowed by time and neglect, the borderlands where maps lose their meaning and identities blur. It's the small tribal hamlets whose names never make it onto census sheets, places where lives are measured not in headlines or viral stories, but in the rhythm of harvests, in rains that come too late or too fiercely, in traditions carried forward through generations in the quiet pores of memory.

This is an India that endures without demanding attention, surviving in the shadows—and that's exactly why I feel compelled to seek it out, to look deeper, to bring its stories into the light.

As the lockdown deepened, news began to trickle in: thousands of people walking back home, trekking hundreds of miles on foot, their belongings slung over shoulders, their hopes frayed. It stirred something deep within me—a profound empathy for these individuals who had lived among us, making our cities function, yet lacking the basic facilities to weather such a storm. What were they to do? They were trapped, far from home, without support. While the rest of us hunkered down, saving ourselves from the virus or grappling with the economic fallout, what about them? The daily wage laborers, the migrant workers of India—the blue-collar heroes who had come from distant places just to make our lives easier.

They built our homes, cleaned our streets, delivered our goods, yet in that moment of crisis, they were abandoned. It changed me fundamentally. I couldn't stay idle. I set out on a quest to

find these people, to listen to their stories, to document their realities. If I could erase even a single layer of ignorance, if I could raise awareness in any way to help them, it would be worth it. I've known from my own childhood the value of small things—the quiet victories that build a life—and I felt their pain in my bones. That's how, almost unknowingly, my first-ever documentary project began: *The Migrant Workers of India*. I sought out 15 migrant workers, sat with them, heard their tales of hardship and hope. I told their stories through my lens, capturing the raw humanity in their eyes, the weariness in their steps.

And I didn't stop when the pandemic eased; I continued, realizing that for them, little had changed. They still left their families behind, pushed ever backward by unending struggles—poverty, displacement, systemic indifference. My goal became clear: to share their stories with the world, to raise awareness and perhaps even aid for that "other India," the one we so often ignore in our privileged bubbles. I come from a place where dreaming quietly is often safer than dreaming aloud.

Growing up in a middle-class household in Kolkata, I learned early on that stability was prized above imagination, and responsibility always trumped desire.

Photography was never an obvious choice—it was expensive, uncertain, and frequently questioned by those around me. "Why chase shadows when you could build a secure future?" they'd ask.

Yet, even as circumstances nudged me toward a different profession, the urge to observe, to witness, to understand the world through images never faded. It lingered like a quiet flame, refusing to be extinguished.

I photograph because it allows me to slow down in a world that insists on constant motion. It teaches me to pay attention—to people in their most vulnerable states, to the depths of faith that sustain them, to the dignity in labor, to the profound power of silence amid chaos.

My work has taken me to places shaped by hardship: the displaced lives of migrant workers navigating endless uncertainty, the timeless flow of lives unfolding along the Ganges, the intimate confrontations with death and continuity in Varanasi. These aren't stories I choose for their drama or shock value; I seek them for their humanity, for the quiet truths they reveal. I'm drawn to moments where dignity persists without fanfare, where resilience doesn't shout but simply exists, woven into the fabric of everyday survival.

There have been so many times when continuing this path felt impractical, even irresponsible. Old equipment would fail at the worst moments, time and resources would run dry, and doubt would creep in louder than any belief I held. "Is this worth it?" I'd wonder in the dead of night. But I stayed with photography because it offers me something essential: a way to remain present in the midst of turmoil, to hold the world's complexities without rushing to resolve or simplify them. It's a lens through which I see people not as mere symbols of suffering, but as whole beings—capable of profound pain, unwavering faith, tender vulnerability, and unyielding hope, all intertwined.

Over time, I've come to realize that photography isn't just how I tell stories—it's how I survive them. It reminds me that renewal often arrives quietly, in the most ordinary of moments: a brief pause after hours of backbreaking labor, a shared glance between strangers that speaks volumes, light falling unexpectedly on a face weathered by time. This way of seeing is what keeps me returning to the camera—not as an escape from the world, but as a deeper engagement with it, more honest and unflinching.

My journey has led me to capture so much more: the vibrant festivals where faith and human connection intertwine in bursts of color and ritual; the coastal cities grappling with the relentless advance of rising tides, where communities adapt with a quiet defiance that inspires; the harrowing tales of Afghan people who, in a single day, became refugees when the Taliban captured Kabul.

They were suddenly homeless—or rather, countryless—adrift in a world that had upended overnight. I documented their lives in my series *In a Distant Land*, letting the images express the pain, the humanity, the unspoken questions about belonging. It shook me to my core, reinforcing that photography is my way of processing and expressing such profound suffering, of thinking deeply about other people's lives and the threads that connect us all.

The Second Revelation — Varanasi Changed Me Forever

My second great revelation, the one that fully transformed my world and my sense of self, came when I visited Varanasi. I went there as a young photographer, just 20 years old, full of life and energy after the pandemic's grip had loosened. But I returned as a pilgrim—a completely different person, humbled and awakened. In that sacred city, I encountered yet another layer of the "other India": a group of people who work as corpse burners, generation after generation performing the same harrowing job at the cremation ghats. It's a role steeped

in ritual and uncertainty, tied to ancient customs that persist in ways both weird and wondrous. I documented it all, but I didn't stop at observation—I stayed there, lived among them, ate with them, became one of them for a time. My role shifted; I was no longer just a photographer. I became an advocate, determined to break the stereotypes that surround such work, to bring real change to society, to the people of my land.

Any work in the world is not inherently bad, especially when done with honesty—someone has to step up and do it. But there must be respect, dignity, safety measures, and proper regulations. These individuals risk their lives daily, inhaling smoke and facing the heat of pyres, all to guide others toward paths of liberation in death. I captured Varanasi in its fullness—the cremations, the rituals—with nuance, dignity, and deep empathy.

I tried to raise a voice on their behalf, to spread awareness and even happiness among them, to remind everyone that this is our world, and it's our collective duty to honor all who sustain it. I even sought to document what I believe are among the oldest enclosed inhabited cities in the world—their customs, their daily lives, their everything—preserving the essence of places where time seems to fold in on itself.

Through it all, photography has taught me one enduring truth: hope. It's a beautiful thing, the backbone of human civilization—it's everything. Hope keeps a person alive, fueling us through the darkest times. These words echo constantly in my heart, and platforms like Seeing Happy have illuminated, empowered, and inspired me in ways I never anticipated. While my images may not single-handedly change the harsh realities of the world—the inequalities, the displacements, the silent sufferings—they offer something far more precious: hope. And hope, as I've learned and as Seeing Happy so beautifully demonstrates, is a powerful force. It sparks optimism in the face of despair, builds resilience where fragility threatens to break us, and kindles everyday happiness in the midst of struggle.

One of my cherished projects, Life Along the River, captures the vibrant pulse of Kolkata's riverbanks, where the Ganges isn't just water—it's the lifeblood of our city. It sustains livelihoods through fishing and trade, hosts rituals that bind communities in faith, and provides quiet moments of reflection amid the urban frenzy. Through this work, I've sought to highlight the resilience and beauty woven into everyday existence along its banks—the laughter of children playing in the shallows, the solemn prayers at dawn, the unbreakable positivity that defines my home.

Why SeeingHappy Matters — Choosing Hope Without Denial

What started as a simple hobby in my childhood has turned into a burning passion, and now, a profound social responsibility: to understand and convey human pain, struggle, emotions, and lives in all their complexity.

Seeing Happy's values resonate so deeply with my own—they emphasize fostering genuine connections through stories and images, sparking everyday happiness even in hardship, building empathy across divides, and illuminating hope as a force for good.

They remind us that optimism isn't naive; it's a deliberate choice, a resilience-builder that empowers individuals and communities alike. In a world often overshadowed by negativity, Seeing Happy stands as a beacon, encouraging us to seek out the light in others' stories, to celebrate the quiet joys that sustain us. It's through such platforms that my work finds a broader audience, inspiring others to look closer, to feel more deeply, and to act with compassion.

They have empowered me to keep going, to believe that my lens can indeed kindle change, one image at a time.