

# MEDIUMFORMAT

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**INTERVIEW:**  
FELICIA PERRETTI



PAUL WAKEFIELD

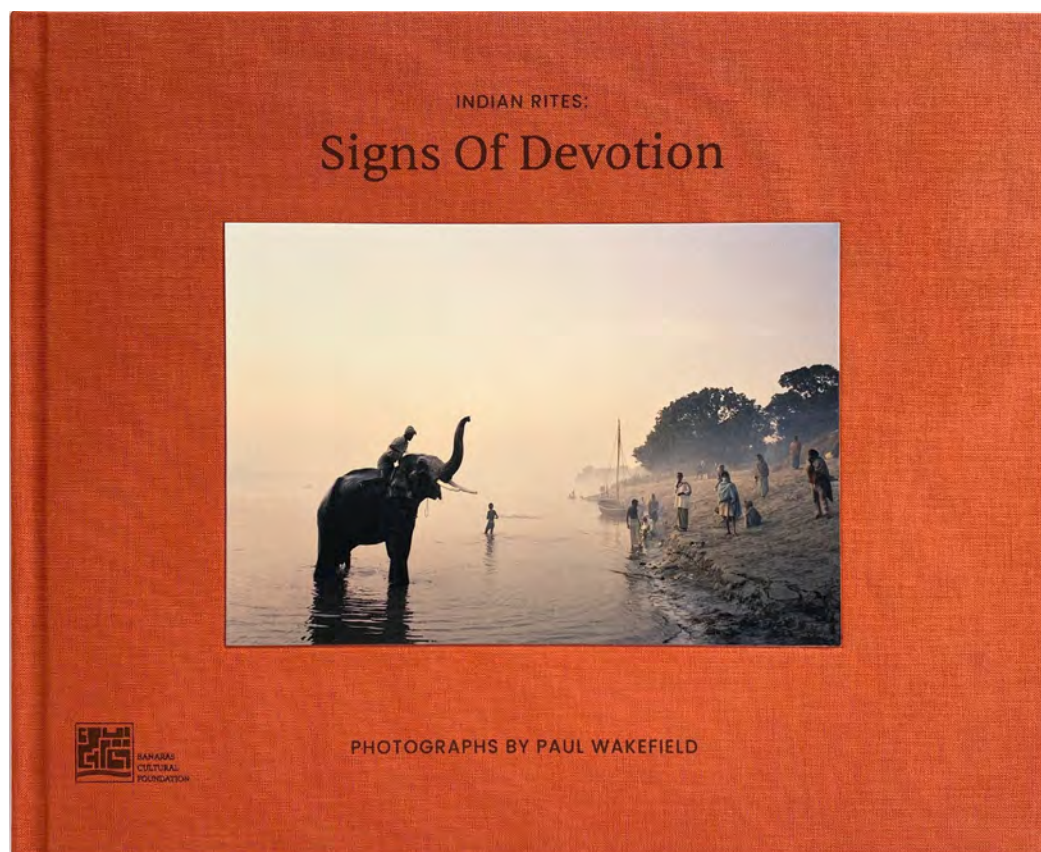
HAROLD ROSS

CHRISTOPHER BURKETT

ADAM KATSEFF

HANS STRAND

BRUCE BARNBAUM



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## BOOK FEATURE: Signs of Devotion

Paul Wakefield

**What prompted you to create the book? Was that your goal or did the idea for the book evolve?**

I went to India initially in 1982 when a friend invited us (Helen and me), to spend Christmas with his family in Kerala, where he came from. Thomas was living in London at that time. I had just published my first book "Wales: The First Place" with Jan Morris and the publisher had suggested that I include some portraits in the main body of landscape images. As Paul Strand was a big influence, I decided to shoot the portraits in his style. So I thought it was an ideal opportunity to use the same format camera to make portraits in India. However, it was a totally different experience, as setting up a 4X5 camera on a tripod using a dark-cloth, signalled the possibility of a street-show, and my subject would disappear in a crowd that had gathered, wondering what was about to happen. Many of the things I saw were intriguing but fleeting, and consequently impossible to photograph with that type of equipment. I then became very busy with commercial work and three further books with Jan Morris and other writers. But the impact of that first visit never left me, and I vowed to return.

The intervening gap allowed me to completely rethink my approach to making photographs in India in order to record those transitory moments I had found so compelling. When I did return in 1987, I took hand-held cameras with 120mm and 35mm colour negative film. There are two images in the book that survived from that initial trip, on pages 86 and 104, wrongly dated by me in the book as 1984. I should have checked my diaries!







### **India is a large country. How did you choose locations for your photography?**

Before returning in 1987, I did a lot of research on different parts of the country that might be of interest to me. A lot of the things I'd witnessed in 1982 were confusing to my Western eye and I resolved to discover more if I could. However, it's not easy to suddenly make successful images in another country with such a rich and diverse culture, and come away with anything meaningful, especially as I had still not settled on definitive subject matter. So again, that trip is represented in only a single image, on page 82/3. But that image did express a certain enigmatic quality that I often saw and that I really wanted to make images about. Sara Wheeler caught that exact ambiguity in her essay, "A Hand To Catch Time," when she writes: "If one certain thing emerges from 'Signs of Devotion,' it is the absence of certainty." It's that space between certainty and doubt that I find so alluring and hard to pin down. It poses questions rather than providing answers. It's obscure and indecipherable, which is exactly what it's like for me being in India – life affirming! That image on page 82/3 shows three people in the blue-painted Brahmin district of Jodhpur waiting for a religious procession to pass by. I could hear them coming up behind me in a clamorous fashion. From that image and some others from that trip, I saw that most of what impelled me to make photographs were actions connected with ritual and devotion so that is what I focused on. From 1989 until the mid '90s I went back as often as my commercial work would allow me to those locations I'd sourced in my research that had strong connections to places of worship. Looking back through my diaries, I spent over a year in India altogether, the last trip being in 2001 when I went to a Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. This particular lunar alignment had last occurred 144 years ago. In six weeks, 70 million pilgrims attended that Maha Kumbh Mela, and on the most auspicious dates there were five million people present. So it was a huge event and I felt it represented the opposite end of the scale of ritual. A mass pilgrimage as opposed to everyday individual ritual.











**You are known as a landscape photographer. How was it different for you to shoot this type of reportage style, documentary and even street photography imagery?**

The four years I spent in art college in the early '70s gave me the freedom to experiment in various areas of photography that I found interesting. One of those was documentary photography, which I had been looking at in my school library in old copies of Life magazine, before college, when I didn't have a camera. One of the photographers that really inspired me then was E. Eugene Smith. His photo essay in Life called "Country Doctor" (1948) is absolutely astonishing for its power and being involved in the moment, and I can still recall when I first saw those images, and did some documentary projects at college in response.



I then looked at other photographers such as Cartier Bresson, and one of the first photo books I bought was a 1952 first edition of "The Decisive Moment." It remains a seminal book after all these years. So it wasn't something completely new for me to make documentary work, and I guess being in India rekindled the spark. The similarity between my landscape photography and documentary or street work is positioning myself on the exact spot, a process that I have described in my interviews in both Medium Format and Elements when answering questions on my previous book, "The Landscape," published in 2014, regarding how important precise composition is. Getting to that place using hand-held cameras and constantly shifting subject matter was a great deal more difficult than using a 4X5 camera on a tripod, so I had to develop a slightly different strategy, which I might describe as making human landscapes rather than topographical landscapes. It involved finding a street location that I thought would reward patience if certain actions or juxtapositions happened within that framework, using that background as a base canvas, when people or animals passed through it. By the fleeting nature of the subject matter, most of the photographs in "Signs of Devotion" exist in a single frame only. By the time I'd rewound, it had vanished. It was a sharp learning curve with many failures. The image on page 17 is a good example of the base canvas approach I mentioned above. I was standing in front of a scene early one morning, thinking what a good contrast it made but felt it wasn't complete, when a man walked across and made his offering to the tethered calf. Of course it happened so quickly I missed the opportunity to make an image, but just by the relaxed nature of his gesture, I felt sure he did the same ritual every morning, so I checked my watch and returned earlier the next day. I found him downriver going through his morning routine, so I went back and decided where to stand and which camera to use etc., as I knew I would get only one frame off. I faced away from him and the background as he walked towards me and swung round as he passed and made the one exposure on page 17 with the Fuji 6X9. It's a rangefinder camera, so I can see what's happening with my left eye and shoot using my right eye. There's a level of anticipation that seems to work for me.











### **How did you decide on the image selection for the book?**

Being a view-camera devotee, I don't make a lot of images generally, and that habit of careful looking and framing with a 4X5 has been instilled in me and become second nature. So it was natural not to shoot a lot of film just because I could. I did make more photographs on that project than I normally would mainly because, as I've mentioned above, many didn't come off, so I might hang about at the same spot in the hope it would. Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn't, and I'd move on. But the bottom line for inclusion had to be its connection with ritual and devotion however tenuous that might appear to be. The fact that some form of devotional ritual occurs in so many actions and everyday habits of people in India can be overwhelming, and that is where creating a narrative in the pages of a book helps make decisions about whether to include a photograph or not. The photographs on pages 76 and 77 are a good example. They are arguably both portraits, one frontal and one side-on. They have a connecting colour palette and a strong similarity in black and white design motifs. One is of a young man from a particular sect and the other is of a cow, which is a highly revered animal in India and believed to be the earthly representation of the divine Mother Goddess. The black and white decoration of the tree in front of the cow signifies the festival of Pongal in South India, and the black and white design on the man's shawl defines him as being a devotee of the Haridasi sect, who live in close harmony with nature in Vrindavan.



### **What was one lesson you learned while working on the book?**

There's a correct time and place for everything. I had serious interest from two publishing houses in the 2000s but neither worked out. I've ultimately ended up with a much better book. It's more structured and defined, and with the correct contributors – writers / publisher / designer – and most importantly published in India, where the photographs were made. It was essential that the book would be available in India, and as it's very difficult importing into India from the UK now, publishing it there made a lot of sense.













**Could you please tell us about some technical aspects of this project, like gear, lenses, image processing, etc.?**

I used two cameras predominantly, both rangefinders – a Fuji 6X9 120mm with a fixed 65mm lens and a Leica M6 35mm with a 35 mm lens. Both cameras and lens combinations are almost identical in ratio aspect to the 4X5 camera and 120mm lens I use when photographing landscape, so I was well within my comfort zone of a common viewpoint in all aspects of my work. It's an essential part of my work process that my equipment choice is as uncomplicated as possible. The least amount of equipment I carry frees me up hugely. I also used a Fuji 6X17 panoramic camera, but only sparingly. There are three images in the book using this camera, which I took on two trips only, before deciding I didn't need it. All the film was colour negative, mostly Fuji NPS. I then have the film drum-scanned to 4000 dpi. My image processing is done through Photoshop, with the contact sheet and my memory as guidelines.



**What advice would you give a photographer who wants to start working on their own book?**

All the obvious advice, really. Is the content interesting and strong enough? Who is the target audience? Is there a market out there for it? I think if you have positive answers for those questions, the cost is secondary. It's important to have a good critical sounding board in someone you respect and whose judgement you're prepared to take if it differs from your own.











### **What determined your choice of paper and printer?**

I had quotes for printing from a company in the UK and one in India, but ultimately decided to print in India, as my publisher Navneet Raman is Indian, as is his designer Tulika Patel. Shrivat-sa Goswami who wrote the introduction is also Indian and is the head of an academic ashram in Vrindavan.

We used Pragati Offset, regarded as one of the best printers in India. I chose the paper from seeing how well it printed in a few books in the UK and saw that it was available in India. I travelled to Hyderabad with Navneet and Tulika for the printing, and the initial gang proofs were very disappointing. It was obvious the paper had absorbed the ink in a way I hadn't expected. I said it was absolutely unacceptable, and there was a lot of head shaking, confusion and grinning, but I laid no blame on the printer as it had been my decision entirely which paper to use. After a lengthy discussion and advice from Vijay, the print manager, on what he felt was the right choice of paper, the printing press was already on another job until the next day. So Navneet said, "Let's go and visit that temple you wanted to see." It was on the other side of the city and belonged to his uncle. When we arrived, and unbeknown to me, Navneet presented a rolled up set of the bad proofs to the priest to receive a blessing! It took about 20 minutes, and when we came outside, Navneet received a call from Vijay, saying that the printer had broken down on that other job, so as "the photographer was agitated" they had cleaned it, reset it, and done new proofs for us on the new paper. We went back to Pragati to pick them up and they were virtually perfect. Vijay made a couple of tiny adjustments the next day, and the sheets came off looking exactly like the match prints I'd taken out with me.



### **Where can we buy the book?**

We had 750 copies printed, split between me in the UK and Navneet in India, under Banaras Cultural Foundation, which Navneet runs in Varanasi. I'm not selling any books personally in India; Navneet is co-ordinating that. I'm selling copies worldwide – apart from India – through my website [www.paulwakefield.co.uk](http://www.paulwakefield.co.uk). There is also a Limited Edition of 55 numbered and signed copies that come in a slipcase with two numbered and signed A4 prints. One is included in the book and one is not and will only be printed as part of the Limited Edition.



Paul Wakefield  
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