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REVIEW: ARTWORKS BY BAPTIST COELHO

Life in Siachen: frost bites, chilblains...

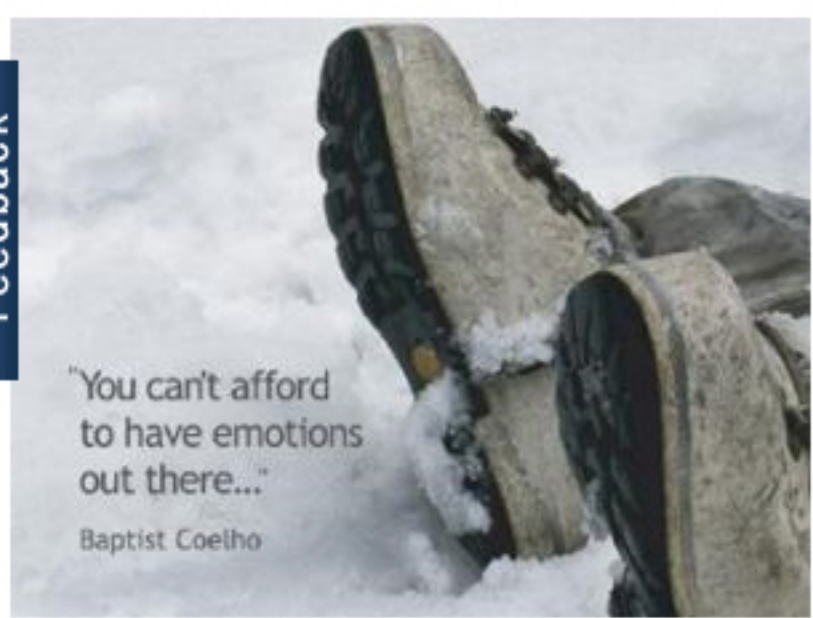
BUZZ BUREAU
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A soldier in India is burdened to live a life that can hardly be called normal. Either the masses and the popular medium cloak him in unnatural hues of 'superhero' status or he is treated as a mere statistic by the power centre in the country.

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The soldier at Siachen: more than a head count



Lost in the crowd is the man. The man who has a family. The man who has emotions. The man who feels pain just the way you and I do but refuses to show it. The man who cries. The man who loves life. The man who craves for a pizza. The man who longs to see colour...

It is exactly this 'man' that Mumbai-based photographer and artist Baptist Coelho tried to unravel.

Says Coelho, "I have been absolutely in awe of these guys. I have often wondered what makes them tick. Yes, we all know that they are super heroes. But surely subsisting in such conditions must be taking a toll."

The exhibition, aptly called 'You can't afford to have emotions out there' is the outcome of several journeys and periodic sorties by Baptist Coelho to scavenge objects and stories away from the Siachen Glacier, one of the most remote battlegrounds in the world.

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So, what made Coelho pick a subject as unusual as a soldier in Siachen? Well, to begin with it was just awe, says Coelho. "For someone who has stayed most part of his life in the relative comfort of Mumbai, I was intrigued and was in awe of these people who chose to work in such hostile conditions."

It was an intensely personal nature of a research that eventually led to this art collection.

Says Coelho, "It was this contrast in our worlds that first pushed me into understanding their—I mean I hate the cold; they work in minus 60 degrees, I am hardly a daredevil kind of a guy; these men have to be superheroes always..." It was this that pushed him to study his subject.

Spending months researching and then going to Ladakh to be with these soldiers and observe their lives, Coelho came back with not just awe but so much respect for them.

But in the bargain, he also was a mute spectator to the hardships these men go through at the coldest battlefield in the world. In the process of his journey of discovery, he spoke not only to foot soldier, but also senior officers, mountaineers, porters and local Ladakhis.

Says Coelho, "I discovered that behind this veneer of bravery and manliness was a very susceptible human being. Men who cried. Men who faced mental breakdown. Men who craved for simple things like colour. Men who often got hallucinations, thanks to the cruel sub zero conditions that they lived in."

Yet, Coelho's wasn't a journey of an intellectual ivory-tower critique. Instead, it was an empathetic journey of discovery. Through his exhibition, Coelho has done a rather tight-rope walking, avoiding to be overtly jingoistic yet not getting to be critical of war.

Explaining his position, Coelho says, "I deliberately avoided any attempts to bring politics into the scene. My gaze was fixed firmly on the soldier and the human condition he was in."

Coelho went till last point Panamik via Khardung La – the world's highest motorable road. And at that point the temperature hovers around 8 to minus 10 degrees (during summer time). And these men stand guard at minus 60 degrees.

The whole experience takes an immense toll of the soldiers. Coelho would ask these men simple questions: how does the snow on eyelids feel?

Speaking about what an army personnel once told him, Coelho says he was struck dumb at the matter-of-fact manner in which he spoke about the harsh conditions. Explaining further Coelho said, "I was surprised at the way the personnel said that he has faced bodily loss to frost bite. And yes, the officer did want to cry but never ever did it in front of his juniors. That's part of his job."

The artworks exhibition is a collection of photographs, installations, video footages and audio conversations of these men.