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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Eye That Witnessed India — Remembering Raghu Rai, the Photographer Who Refused to Look Away

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**27 April 2026 · **GS1** **GS4**

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

There is a photograph that most people who have seen it cannot forget. A man cradles a dead child in Bhopal, December 1984. The child's eyes are open. They are not looking at anything. The man's face is collapsed in grief that has gone beyond tears. The photograph was taken by Raghu Rai, who arrived in Bhopal hours after the methyl isocyanate gas from the Union Carbide plant spread through the sleeping city. Raghu Rai, who died on April 26, 2026 at 83, understood what the photograph meant: not documentation, but testimony. Not journalism, but witness.

WHAT A WITNESS DOES

Raghu Rai was trained as a civil engineer. He came to photography sideways, through his brother S. Paul, in the 1960s. By the time Henri Cartier-Bresson — the father of modern photojournalism, the man who invented the concept of the “decisive moment” — nominated him for Magnum Photos in 1977, Rai had already established himself as something rarer than a skilled photographer: a witness who understood that his presence at an event changed what the world would remember of it.

The distinction matters. A reporter records what happened. A witness changes what is possible to deny. Raghu Rai's Bangladesh photographs — taken during the 1971 Liberation War, when ten million people fled East Pakistan and millions more were killed — made it impossible for the world to look away from a genocide. His Emergency photographs — made under conditions of press censorship, using symbolic images that passed the censor because their meaning was legible only to those who were paying attention — preserved a record of suppression that the suppressor could not erase.

This is not a small thing. India's public memory is famously short. Events of enormous consequence — the Emergency, Bhopal, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 — are allowed to drift into the comfortable territory of “contested history.” Raghu Rai's photographs resist that drift. You cannot look at the Bhopal child and move smoothly to the next page.

MAGNUM AND WHAT IT MEANT

When Cartier-Bresson nominated Raghu Rai for Magnum Photos membership in 1977, it was an extraordinary act of recognition from the most selective photographic institution in the world. Magnum was founded in 1947 by photographers who had survived the Second World War and who believed that bearing witness — to war, to injustice, to the full complexity of human experience — was a moral calling as much as a craft.

Rai was the first Indian photographer admitted to Magnum. He would remain for many years the only one. This isolation was not a failure of Indian photography — India has produced photographers of distinction — but a reflection of how difficult it is for any photographer from the developing world to be admitted to an institution that combines the highest technical standards with a specific philosophical tradition of bearing witness.

Rai bridged that gap not by imitating Western photojournalism but by bringing to it something irreducibly Indian: an insider's knowledge of a civilisation in transformation, a painter's eye for visual density, and a journalist's discipline in being present at the right moment.

THE BHOPAL QUESTION

Forty-two years after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, the survivors have still not received full justice. Warren Anderson, the Union Carbide chairman who fled India after a brief detention, died in 2014 without facing an Indian court. The Bhopal district court's 2010 conviction of eight Indian executives for “death by negligence” attracted international ridicule for its leniency. The gas-affected population has never received adequate medical treatment or compensation.

Raghu Rai's photographs are still being used in Bhopal survivors' advocacy — in courtrooms, in exhibitions, in campaigns. This is not unusual for documentary photography; it is in fact its highest purpose. Photography provides the evidentiary record that testimony alone cannot provide. Rai understood this, which is why he continued to return to Bhopal over the decades, updating his archive, bearing witness to the long aftermath of a disaster that the world was encouraged to forget.

His death at 83 is a reminder that the witness is not permanent. The photographs remain.

WHAT INDIA LOSES

India has produced many great photographers. What made Raghu Rai exceptional was not technique — though his technique was flawless — but commitment. He did not photograph from a safe distance. He was present at the moments when India's public history was being made and unmade. His 56 books and 50,000+ archived photographs constitute the most comprehensive visual history of post-Independence India available to any researcher, journalist, or citizen.

There is no one to replace him. That is not a criticism of younger photographers — it is a statement about what 60 years of sustained, disciplined witness work produces. India should ensure that Raghu Rai’s archive is preserved with the seriousness it deserves, made accessible to educators and researchers, and treated as the national heritage that it is.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Art & Culture	Photojournalism; visual arts; Magnum Photos tradition; India’s cultural heritage
GS1 — Modern India	Bangladesh Liberation War 1971; Emergency 1975-77; Bhopal Gas Tragedy 1984
GS4 — Ethics	Role of the witness; journalism ethics; truth-telling in public life

Mains Keywords: Raghu Rai, photojournalism, Magnum Photos, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Emergency 1975-77, Bangladesh Liberation War, visual history, witness journalism

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Raghu Rai	1942–April 26, 2026; age 83; cancer
Magnum Photos	Joined 1977; first Indian member
Nominated by	Henri Cartier-Bresson
Magnum founded	1947
Major works	Bangladesh 1971, Emergency 1975-77, Bhopal 1984
Books	56 photography books
Archive	50,000+ images; Raghu Rai Foundation (est. 2010)
Bhopal	December 2-3, 1984; Union Carbide; methyl isocyanate; 3,787+ killed
Padma Shri	1971

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