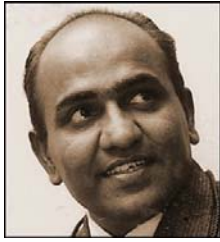


The Turmeric Trick



T.S. Nagarajan

T.S. Nagarajan (b.1932) is a noted photojournalist whose works have been exhibited and published widely in India and abroad. After a stint with the Government of India as Director of the Photo Division in the Ministry of Information, for well over a decade Nagarajan devoted his life to photographing interiors of century-old homes in India, a self-funded project. This foray into what constitutes the Indianness of homes is, perhaps, his major work as a photojournalist.

Gundu Rao was the postmaster at the Saraswatipuram sub-post office in Mysore during 1954-1956. But, he never behaved like a postmaster. He considered the post office his home. In fact, it was. He sold stamps, booked money orders, registered packets and even helped Gafoor, the postman, in the despatch work – all in one room. He used the other two rooms as his home.

He never took a day off. Even on the day of his father's death anniversary, somehow he managed to attend to his office work. Retired professors, pensioners and advocates living in Saraswatipuram, close to the University and the law courts in Mysore, liked him. He never made them wait at the window outside but allowed them to come inside to transact business.

When he first arrived on transfer from far off Agumbe on the Western Ghats, Karnataka's hill town known for its abundant rains and beautiful sunsets, he initially faced the usual reservations that people feel about an outsider. A point against him was that he had served only in rural areas. "I don't think he has ever handled literate clients," commented Vasu, the popular teacher, who had become an insurance agent after his retirement from a Convent school. Only Gafoor, the postman, described his boss as 'an experienced hand'.

Gundu Rao liked me because he loved photography. At that time, I was a budding photojournalist. He had even showed me an early picture of himself as a naked boy of four with a short pigtail bedecked with jasmines. "Lalitha, my wife, is the only one who does not like this picture," he once said to me with a chuckle.

Whenever I went to the post office to mail photographs, Gundu Rao made me sit in front of him and then carefully examined my packet of photographs before going through other formalities. He always insisted that I write 'Open for Inspection' whenever it was an unsealed 'book-post' packet. (*Editor's note: Unsealed 'book-post' packets were cheaper to mail than sealed letters or packets.*) The moment I finished writing this, Gundu Rao would open the packet, much to my dislike, and examine its contents, looking at every photograph. He would then repack them, and send my packet on its way. He told me more than once, "This will be accepted, but I still feel you must do a serial on our *Mundan* ceremony, beginning with the unshaven head and ending with the completely shaved one. Any editor would grab a picturesque subject like that." It was his grouse that I had not followed his repeated suggestion.

I still remember the day when I sent one of my photo-features to a newspaper abroad. As usual, Gundu Rao scrutinised the packet, and then looked at me with pleasure and

surprise. He said, “I hope you are sure *Asahi Shimbun* exists and that it is in Japan.”

It was my first contribution to go abroad, addressed to the editor of the well-known Japanese newspaper. Gundu Rao did not want to take any chances. He thought for a while and said with much conviction, “Nagaraj, I suggest you write ‘Japan’ vertically instead of horizontally. That’ll please a Japanese editor, you know.”

I agreed in the interest of my packet reaching its destination. Gundu Rao took the date-stamp marker, banged it thrice on the soft black ink pad and paused before bringing it down on the postage stamps. “Lalitha,” he called to his wife, who came in haste from the kitchen, “take this to the *puja* room, place it before the God and bring it back.”

After a while, she returned with the packet. Its corners were smeared yellow with the auspicious turmeric. “Nagaraj, you will see these photographs will never come back,” he told me proudly as he marked the postage stamps, and wrote out the receipt for the registered air-mail packet I had booked.

Weeks later, I got my first ever cheque from a foreign editor. The turmeric had done the trick.❖

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