

Memories in Black and White



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In the 1950s, when I was a Standard 10 student, in my all-girls class there was only one girl who owned a Box Camera. So when she brought it along for school picnics, she was the centre of great adulation. Everyone wanted to get as close to her as possible, just to see how this magic box worked.

We hung round while Tina Vakil gently eased out her Kodak Box Camera from its leather case. We watched her in focused silence, as she slowly made precise adjustments with the camera. Then she chose a scenic spot and got us all to stand together, as tightly as possible, while she framed us on the viewfinder before she took snaps of us at Borivili National Park.

We looked on with speechless delight when days later, we were each presented with a copy of her master shot. It was a historic moment.

Then there was the class photograph, taken at the end of the term each year. I remember the photographer would come to my school with a cumbersome camera, which he set up in laboured stages on a wooden tripod. The brontosaurus would be veiled in a mysterious black cloth. Close to him would stand his assistant, holding a protective umbrella over his head.

We students were clubbed together in this way. The prettier and fair ones sat close to the stern class teacher, while the shorter ones were given the edges of the front row. Thus many best friends were separated, and it showed up sometimes in the glum expressions in the final photograph. The taller ones stood in the third and fourth rows and struck up poses straight out of the latest MGM flick.

Meanwhile, as we waited, straightening out our box pleats, Crystal Rose De Souza and Jennifer Godfrey held their heads of recently permed hair extra high, triggering off some silly, whispered remark. This made us all giggle helplessly. The photographer already discomfited under the unwavering gaze of 35 mischievous girls, mopped his brow in exasperation.

The 3 o'clock sun would beat down on us mercilessly, while the photographer took his own sweet time making all kinds of adjustments. He would call out Ready a couple of times, and say Smile, and we smiled and smiled, only to find out the photographer was not ready, for in the last minute he would discover he had forgotten to attach some vital connection which he fished out of his pouch in slow motion.

He would repeat the same drill, and, suddenly when we least expected it, the flash gun would explode in our faces. Simultaneously, he would pull of a cap off from the lens, and dramatically cap it again. Nine times out of ten, we would be caught blinking foolishly in its blinding light

These photographers of yore, with their quirky mannerisms were really unforgettable characters.

In my native Kerala too, family get togethers were special. Not for the lunch, nor the gossip that swirled around, but the family photo which was going to be taken after lunch.

Carved chairs would be placed in a row in the forecourt of our ancestral mansion, against the lush background of coconut and mango trees.

The patriarch would sit stiffly in his crisp, newly ironed *mundu* (dhoti) and *jubba* (collarless, knee length shirt), with its descending row of tiny gold buttons, flanked by the well-endowed matriarch, who occupied her seat as well as half of his.

Then came the other grand aunts and uncles who were seated according to the family pecking order.

At their feet, massed in fidgety confusion sat all those under ten. The rows behind were taken up by the younger generation, mostly newlyweds, clinging romantically together in the afterglow of newly wedded bliss.

The last row was all male, the college going crowd, which looked down superciliously at all the rest, fully aware of being the first generation that had made it beyond the fourth form. (*Editor's note: Under British rule, and for many years after Independence, following British terminology, some secondary schools in India used the term 'Form' to refer to what is now called Standard or Class. According to the author of this piece, the term 'form' was commonly used by her parents and grandparents, and continued to be used in Malabar schools in the 1950s. 'Fourth form' is roughly equivalent to Standard or Class 9 today.*)

All of us used to stand stiffly while the photographer called out, "Tilt your head this way. No that way, Move a little closer, STEADY arrange an elbow this way, STEADY, Hoist a shoulder that way. Chin up there STEADY, - - NO, NO, chin down STEADY... his confusing instructions would finally end up in all of us looking like dying ducks in the final shot.

Photography had come into the lives of my grandparents and their siblings, somewhere in the misty turn of the nineteenth century, when painted portraits were slowly phased out in favour of photographs.

So, exquisite oil paintings – which brought out the regal beauty of grand aunts in their diaphanous white muslins, the ultimate foil for their honey gold complexions; and who were decked out royally in the traditional chunky gold necklaces, earrings and bangles which Malabar jewellery was once famous for,– were slowly taken down from the walls.

Instead, up came black and white photographs oval framed, of grand uncles in unfamiliar white coat and trousers seated in imperious semicircles, legs crossed elegantly after the British fashion, their chins jutting out a tad too defiantly, glazed expressions challenging the onlooker.

In the grandest room in my ancestral home, pride of place was given to a huge photograph, which occupied much of a single wall. It was of a football crazy uncle who proudly chested,

hundreds of silver medals won at many a paddy field tournament. Alongside, his brother, who had then joined the army, sat in starched khaki shorts and shirted splendour, with an impressive cross leather belt on his chest adding further aggression to his unsmiling countenance.

Aunts in the first bloom of youth posed bashfully, strung together tightly like the flowers in a garland ... their arms hanging down in terrified stiffness. Their meek expressions reflected the way they had been brought up. In their tender years they had been taught never to smile in the company of strangers ... and they never did!

Then there were angled photographs of aunts, who had just joined Queen Mary's College in Madras. All of them stared at the same distant point, affectation obvious in the way their right arms were identically angled at the waist and their right hands clutched their left elbows in self-conscious rigidity.

Wedding photographs of my uncles and their spouses, spoke of uncertain beginnings. The couple stared unwaveringly into a glorious future. The uncles were booted and suited, their hair slicked back with Brilliantine, Their wives wore pure white, gold bordered saris, their hair elaborately coiffed after the style of the reigning film actresses, with a string of flowers on their buns

Home-made kohl, which was lavishly applied, sadly seemed to streak their otherwise sweet faces, pooling darkly under their eyes. You could sense their discomfort, after their punishing hour with a disgruntled photographer.

Next, hung up in single file, were photographs of each of their first-born. Each one bore the trademark black spot on the right cheek to ward off the evil eye.

The front row in the naval photographs from the days when my father served the navy, blazed him and his colleagues, seated in sparkling white uniforms, their crested caps resting on one knee while a clenched fist rested on the other. The way the hands and feet were placed breathed a military precision. Those standing in the rear posed an affected shoulder angle, working inwards from the edges towards the centre, their elbows crooking their naval caps.

Albums of school photographs showed up the innocence of those days, so obvious in the open smiles. The dreams we had, are still there in those photographs, in our starry, starry eyes, blithe unconcern in our languid stance, for we had not known then, what fear or rejection was.

Those black and white photographs have been the strongest anchor in my life.

Looking at these photographs for me is time well spent, for it is a soothing return to an age which had known much peace and contentment.