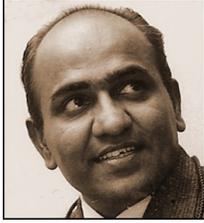


A Fish-eyed Goddess from Madurai



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.

Editor's note: This story is reproduced from Mr. Nagarajan's not-for-sale book of his memories, A Pearl of Water on a Lotus Leaf & Other Memories, 2010.

I decided to marry at 25, two years after I got a job in Delhi as an official photographer in the Information Ministry. I wrote to my parents in Mysore asking them to look for a suitable girl for me, preferably from Tamilnadu. I had nothing against Kannada-speaking girls. But, somehow, I felt Tamil girls were smarter, had classical looks and above all they were very photogenic.

During my travels, I had photographed a number of Tamil women in various walks of life. I remember a photograph I had taken while driving from Thanjavur to the temple town of Madurai. A group of rural women, young and old, who were transplanting paddy, posed for me with bunches of seedlings in their hands. The picture thrilled me. The women with their skin shining like ebony in the midday sun and eyes those of angels appeared as though they had descended from heaven just to taunt the chiselled figurines in the Meenakshi temple, not far away.

My vote in favour of Tamil girls pleased my mother. My father, a Kannada-speaking Iyer from Devarayasamudram in the Kolar district of Karnataka, was a bit disappointed. But he couldn't press his disappointment because he had also married a girl from Tamilnadu. My mother was from Madurai. My father's decision to marry a girl from a

Tamil family was not, of course, deliberate. The girl's father, Krishnaswamy Iyer, had migrated to Mysore from Tamilnadu because he had found a job in the city. He was the manager of a taxidermist's firm in Mysore called "Van Ingen & Van Ingen" owned by a Dutch company. There was a need for taxidermists in Mysore in those days because hunting was popular among the rich and the famous. The Mysore royal families had practised and promoted the sport.

Krishnaswamy Iyer and his wife Seethalakshmi had three sons; my mother was the only daughter. They named her Rajalakshmi. The family preferred a local alliance for her. My father had passed his L.M.P. (Licensed Medical Practitioner, a diploma from the government medical school in Bangalore) and had started his career as a doctor with the Mysore Medical Service. The horoscopes agreed. Rajalakshmi was just thirteen years old when she was married. This is how our family acquired a Tamil connection.

Regarding finding a bride for me, my parents discussed the matter with one of my uncles (my mother's brother) who had become some sort of an adviser to them on all important matters. He said that his friend and colleague had a sister ready for marriage. The family lived in Madurai. My

parents, especially my mother, jumped at the proposal and wanted him to proceed further with the alliance. After this, things moved fast.

I received a photograph of the bride for initial approval. In the postcard size black and white photograph, she looked slim, elegant and beautiful. The picture floored me and my friends. I put the photograph into a frame and gave it a pride of place on my office table. My uncle wrote to me asking for a photograph of me to be sent to the girl's parents. He thought that for a professional photographer to produce a flattering portrait of his own was no big deal. It was not so.

That evening after dinner, my friends and I sat together and went through my collection. None of the pictures made the grade. A fresh picture had to be taken. I discussed the matter with my colleague Sardar Harbans Singh in the office. He felt that it should be a picture showing me as a senior officer sitting in front of an impressive table covered with green flannel with a table lamp, pin cushion, calling bell etc. Just the way you find senior civil servants in Delhi show off their status. Being a junior gazetted officer, I shared a room with a colleague with the minimum furniture. There was nothing to show off. Finally we thought of a simple solution. The picture was taken with me sitting in my boss' chair in his room after he had left the office. It was an impressive shot. Years later, I told Khushwant Singh, who was my boss, the story and showed him the picture. He had a hearty laugh.

I came to Mysore on a short leave from Delhi. The boy and the girl saw each other (from a comfortable distance, no conversation was permitted) in a cousin's home in Bangalore. The alliance was finalised. The date and place of the wedding was fixed as August 20, 1958 at Madurai.

Now, for all that happened in the bride's home at Madurai, let us listen to Meenakshi, then bride and now my wife:

Looking back some 40-odd years, I remember myself being confronted with a difficult choice about the course of my life. I was then an English-speaking matriculate from Madurai's St. Joseph's Convent, a much sought-after girl for a matrimonial alliance. I was given the option between a young man who worked as a clerk in the district Collector's office and a photographer living in the nation's Capital. My mother's advice was that I should nod my head in favour of the clerk. After all, without doubt, he was an important local official with position and power as against the young man from Delhi with the dubious description of a photojournalist.

My parents knew the clerk's family. He was, indeed, "a decent boy with no habits". My mother wanted to play safe. She had the support of my father, who, as an engineer with a private firm, had much to do with the collector's office, and knew what it meant to have a son-in-law working there. As against this strong contender was the photographer. Not much was known about him and his family except that he had been recommended by his maternal uncle, a friend of my brother.

Somehow, I was not impressed by the clerk. Marrying him meant staying on in Madurai. I was all for a change. A new style of life, some adventure away from my parent's protective umbrella. Also, the idea of having an in-house man with a camera, an artist, whose name appeared in the prestigious "Illustrated Weekly of India", appealed to me. When I took the final decision, the clerk had lost the race.

I arrived in Delhi to a noisy welcome from my husband's friends. Life in a flat was a new experience. I loved the change from rice and *rasam* to *dal* and *roti*. Not knowing Hindi, I spoke only in English. "Phatphati", Delhi's famous motorcycle rickshaw, thrilled me. But the sight of a Sardarji drying his hair after a bath in the winter Sun puzzled me most. I had never seen a Sikh before. But in course of time life in Delhi became a pleasant experience.

Let me close this account with one of my unforgettable experiences which happened within months after I landed in Delhi. One morning an invitation arrived asking us to an official reception at Hyderabad House for the visiting president of Ghana. I was excited at the prospect of seeing Nehru and couldn't wait for the evening.

The banquet hall overflowed with diplomats, bureaucrats and ministers. We were there because my husband was part of the Capital's press corps. The hall reverberated with the chatter of the crowd as liveried waiters scurried around with snacks and drinks. Suddenly the noise died down. From an entrance at the corner emerged the prime minister (with his guest), looking resplendent in a black *bandhgalla*, white *churidar* and a Gandhi cap. The invitees vied with one another to meet him. We were far away. I couldn't see much of what was happening. My husband was talking to his friends undisturbed by the prime minister's presence. I pulled him aside and whispered, "Take me to Nehru, introduce me to him". He laughed and said sternly, "We are not here because I know Nehru. I hope you know that. If you wish, you can go to him and introduce yourself."

Hardly had he finished admonishing me for being so naive, I literally ran up to the prime minister. I landed myself in front of him, a bundle of nerves. Nehru saw me and smiled. I folded my hands and muttered, "Namaste". Nehru moved closer, put his hand around me and soon we were talking to each other.

"Where do you come from?"

"Madurai."

"What is your name?"

"Meenakshi."

"That is the name of the goddess in the temple. Do you know Hindi?"

"No."

"You have to learn Hindi."

Bulbs flashed and cameras clicked. Our conversation was abruptly interrupted. Someone important drew his attention away. I said "Namaste" again and walked

back in a state of trance to join my husband. We did not talk to each other for a while.❖

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