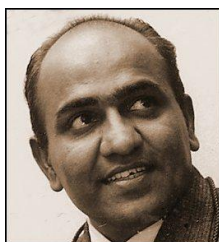


## A Morning with Indira Gandhi



**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.*

As a photojournalist, I have tried to keep myself away from politicians though I have a perfunctory interest in politics. I like some politicians, especially of the comical kind for their entertainment value - only from a distance. I know the world of politicians interests journalists and photographers. But it is a world from which I have managed to keep my camera away.

I served for a good part of my life as an official photographer at Delhi. But to my good luck, I remained a photographer of people, not of cement and steel and inaugural ceremonies. I was not required to cover the day-to-day events of officialdom. What moulded my outlook was my long experience as a photographer of the Indian Planning Commission's journal, Yojana. This position provided me with opportunity to travel to every part of India and record rural and urban change. The interaction of tradition and modernity fascinated me. I didn't care to do much "celebrity" photography.

I liked Gandhiji, his politics and philosophy but I could never see him. He was a photographer's delight; a man made for the camera. I was young. The camera bug had not bitten me. Only when I went to Delhi taking up the job of an official photographer, opportunities came my way and I found myself in the vicinity of Presidents, Prime Ministers and politicians. I admired Nehru. I went to 'Teen Murti', his official residence, on various occasions but not to photograph him. It was only when he died, a great privilege came to me. I was asked to stand vigil in the chamber in which the frame of Jawaharlal Nehru reposed, to make a record with

camera of how the nation and the world came to pay homage. As a professional photographer it had not been given to me to photograph Nehru. And so much of grandeur in death awed me.

When Lal Bahadur Shastri succeeded him, a somewhat similar situation occurred. He died suddenly at Tashkent; his body was brought to Delhi. I was at Vijay Ghat that evening, standing on scaffolding, jostling amidst a crowd of national and international photographers, taking pictures of the cremation.

It was a different matter with Indira Gandhi. I used to see her get off from the white Ambassador car at the South Block entrance and walk fast towards her room. I worked in her secretariat for a brief period helping Sharada Prasad, her information adviser, in the production of some books. I went to the South Block frequently to meet him in his office, which was close to the Prime Minister's room. There was a hot line on his table on which he would speak to the PM and others. But, on several occasions, while we were working, there would be a soft knock and the door would open a little. The Prime Minister would peep in and say "Sharda Prasadji ...". He would excuse himself and leave the room.

I saw her at Press conferences sitting in the audience and not amidst fellow photographers stooping with their cameras trained on her. Since news photography was not my speciality, I never accompanied her as the official photographer on her foreign tours. Some times I went to her home on Safdarjung Road with some colleagues to photograph her. She gave us special sittings.

Some of the pictures I did of her were used as official portraits.

Once I was asked to take some photographs of her grandchildren Rahul and Priyanka when they were very young. The photographs were required for use by the family as picture post cards. I went to her residence in the morning on a holiday. I found the lighting at the back of the bungalow good for photography. Sonia Gandhi was sitting there on a cane *Moda* (chair) with a notebook and a pen in hand. The dhobi had arrived with a pile of washed and pressed clothes. She was checking every item and entering in the notebook. First I hesitated to do the pictures there thinking I may disturb her. There was no such problem. Both the children were very cooperative and posed for the camera without any inhibition. Half-way through the session, Mrs Gandhi arrived there wearing a starched cotton sari. She wanted a picture of her with both the grandchildren riding a tricycle. More pictures were done and the morning went off well.

In July, 1972, Khushwant Singh, who was then the Editor of "The Illustrated Weekly of India", had planned a special issue of the journal on Mrs Gandhi. Though the "Weekly" had its own staff photographers, he was keen that I should take the photographs of the Prime Minister. He wanted only colour photographs. I was more at home with black and white. He had already informed the PM's house that I would take an appointment for the assignment. I did. I was asked to be in the Prime Minister's house at 10 am on a Friday.

I planned a series of picture possibilities in my mind and went to bed the previous night thrilled with the prospect of Mrs Gandhi sitting specially for me the next morning. Halfway through the night my sleep was disturbed. It was raining accompanied by thunder and lightning. I said to myself that all would be well by the morning and went back to sleep. It was not so. I woke up to a very dull morning with rain still pouring heavily. There was no sign of it stopping. The roads were flooded and it was difficult and possibly dangerous even to drive.

There was another factor which bothered me. I preferred taking photographs in natural light, what photographers call 'available light'. I hated using a flash gun with my camera while

working. I believed that using a flash light in a serene picture situation was like throwing a bomb amidst a symphony. I was not fond of buying gadgets and worked with the minimum of equipment. A rainy day with its dull grey light was most unsuitable especially for indoor photography. If the pictures were to be in colour, it was worse unless, of course, one filled the interior with artificial light.

I thought over the matter deeply and decided that I should make an effort to call off the assignment for the day. I telephoned Mr Seshan, the PM's secretary, and informed him of my predicament. Pat came the reply "Nagarajan, why don't you use flash light?" I had to play my usual tape on the philosophy of available light photography. He appreciated my point and assured me that he would manage to cancel the appointment for the day but urged me to call the PM's house next morning for a fresh appointment. I heaved a sigh of relief hoping all would be well.

It didn't rain the following morning though the day was dull with an overcast sky. My telephone call was answered by Mr Om Prakash who was part of the PM's staff at the house. He told me that the Prime Minister was going out at 10 am and she may not be free for the photo session. I told him that I had a deadline and Bombay was waiting for the pictures. In view of the urgency, would he be good enough to have a word with Mrs Gandhi and give me a call. Mr Prakash promptly called me back to say that Mrs Gandhi wanted me at her home at 12 noon. It was already 10 am. I just had enough time to get ready and reach No.1, Safdarjung Road. As was the practice, I took my wife Meenakshi with me to assist.

We reached the Prime Minister's house ahead of time. No rain. We were ushered into the visitor's room. I noticed a photograph of Nehru on the wall. The caption said that it was taken on the day he inaugurated the Rihand dam. A bearer brought in two glasses of cold water for us. It was quarter to twelve. A car drove in. Mrs Gandhi got out and walked in. She was in a white Saree with a yellow border wearing a matching blouse but looked very grim. A group of women with some foreigners followed her, chatting among themselves. The Prime Minister peeped into the room where we were sitting. I

tried to introduce myself saying “Nagarajan...”. “Yes, I know.” she said and walked away.

Mrs Gandhi's secretary Mrs Krishna (Gen. Thimmaiah's sister) came in and greeted us.

“What a day you have chosen! The PM is just back after seeing the film ‘Love Story’ at Rashtrapati Bhavan. The film was very moving. She is in a very emotional mood.” Krishna told me and added that I should not be very demanding when I took the pictures and try to finish the job quickly.

I nodded my head.

“How many pictures you want to take? In colour or black and white?” she asked.

I told her that all the pictures would be in colour and that in addition to a formal portrait I might do a few more showing Mrs Gandhi in her study and outside in the garden.

“No flower arrangement, please. She doesn't like it. Don't suggest anything and argue with her. Say 'yes' to all that she says.” she warned me.

I quietly listened to all the dos and don't s without any reaction on my face.

“What colour do you prefer for the Saree?” she asked.

“Any colour the PM likes except blue” I said.

I ruled out blue because the brand of film I was using exaggerated that colour. Krishna ran in and returned with a pile of hand-woven and neatly pressed cotton sarees. I chose one in dark pink. We were then led into a large living room at the back of the bungalow. It was very tastefully done up with some paintings and bronzes. There was a book on a teapoy -“Only One Earth” by Barbara Ward. Mrs Gandhi walked in with Krishna.

“There is a lot of glare outside,” I said. She agreed and said “Then let us do it inside.” I wanted her to sit on a sofa which was furnished with an attractive fabric in yellow.

“Which way the PM should look?” asked Krishna.

“I am sitting for you. You should tell me.” answered Mrs Gandhi with a smile turning towards me.

The light within the room was inadequate for colour photography. I put my camera (Mamiya C-330 professional) on a tripod and asked Meenakshi to bounce some light from the white ceiling using a ‘Sun gun’. There was a faint whizzing sound.

“What is this sound?” asked Krishna with some concern.

“It is from the light she is holding,” answered Mrs Gandhi.

As I clicked more frames, I explained to Mrs Gandhi that because of printing problems photographers in the country were forced to use unwieldy equipment (in preference to miniature 35mm cameras) while shooting in colour. The press required colour transparencies in a large size. Mrs Gandhi appreciated what I said and appeared mentally ready in case the photo session took more time.

I noticed a very beautiful flower vase in a corner. Ignoring Krishna's warning, I asked Mrs Gandhi whether she would like a picture while she did a flower arrangement.

“It is already dumped with flowers. What is there to be done now?” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “I take objection to this,” said Krishna with a smile.

“Yes. I did it myself.” admitted Mrs Gandhi and after this light-hearted banter with her secretary, she remarked “The colour of this Saree will not be all right with these flowers.”

“Perhaps, yellow would be better,” I said.

“Yes, I will change into yellow. But before I change do you want to take any more pictures with this Saree?” she asked.

I wanted a picture of her with a book.

“Do you want me to pretend or read?”

“I want you to read.”

“Then I will wear my glasses,” said Mrs Gandhi.

Krishna brought her reading spectacles from another room. Mrs Gandhi started reading the book, which was on the teapoy giving me enough time to do the pictures.

As I changed the film in the camera, Mrs Gandhi and Krishna walked away. They returned after a few minutes. The Prime Minister had changed into a lovely yellow cotton Saree with a border in green and a blouse to match.

“This is a beautiful Saree,” commented Meenakshi.

“Yes, an ancient one. We got it dyed recently. It was white.” said Mrs Gandhi.

She looked very attractive and made an excellent picture as she rearranged the flowers in the vase.

I thought of a formal portrait next. I wanted her to sit on a divan facing the lawn outside. As she posed for me, I noticed through the translucent *pallu* of her Saree a bunch of keys stuck in the waist. Mrs Gandhi looked at me and exclaimed “Oh! The keys!” and removed the bunch and passed it on to Krishna. There was all round laughter.

I suggested that we could go out to do some pictures on the lawn.

“No. The lawn is very wet. The PM may not be comfortable walking on the lawn.” said Krishna.

“No, I can walk, get my shoes.” said Mrs Gandhi.

A waiter dressed in white with a cap on brought her a pair of green shoes. “You are not taking my legs, I suppose. The shoes don't match the colour of the Saree,” she said.

I wanted her to spend a few minutes walking on the lawn. She walked fast talking to my wife. Meenakshi told her about an interview with her published in the popular Tamil magazine ‘Anada Vikatan’.

“I read it out to my husband,” she said.

“Why? He can't understand Tamil?” asked Mrs Gandhi.

“He speaks but can't read. His language is Kannada,” said Meenakshi.

Turning towards Krishna the Prime Minister asked her “Is the language in Coorg different from Kannada?”

“Yes, it is a dialect of Kannada but sounds very different,” I answered.

“Let us go near the birds,” suggested Mrs Gandhi.

We went near a cage in which there were some Fantail Pigeons. But no pictures were taken since the birds were dirty because of rain.

“I want a picture of you with the family,” I said.

“I am all alone. They have all gone to Italy. Sanjay is in Simla,” answered Mrs Gandhi.

I told the Prime Minister that I had finished with the assignment and there were no more pictures to be taken.

“Can we see some of these pictures?” asked Krishna.

“Yes, after their use by the ‘Weekly’. I am sending all these exposed films to Bombay this evening. They are holding up printing, waiting for these photographs,” I said.

“You remember sometime back someone took a lot of photographs of me and the family. I haven't seen any of them till today,” remarked Mrs Gandhi turning towards Krishna.

“Yes, most photographers suffer from this accusation, including me,” I said, as all of us had a hearty laugh, a fitting finale for a memorable morning. ❖  
(Delhi, July 9, 1972)

---

© T.S. Nagarajan 2010