

The dining hall of the 250-year-old Adamar Math in Udupi, Karnataka.

Dream homes

“A GUMBE bus stand” screamed the conductor... the middle aged couple in the bus looked around them.... Rain fell like a thick sheet of glass outside the bus. The driver looked at all the photo equipment they carried and asked what their destination was. When told it was a 200-year old house in Agumbe for photographing, he did an incredibly long reverse on the Ghats section road with all the passengers and helped T. S. Nagarajan and his wife Meenakshi get down at the door of that very house.

The house was quite disappointing though large. Nagarajan took just one picture of the dining room where there seemed to be some life... That picture got chosen by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, U.K., for their permanent collection...

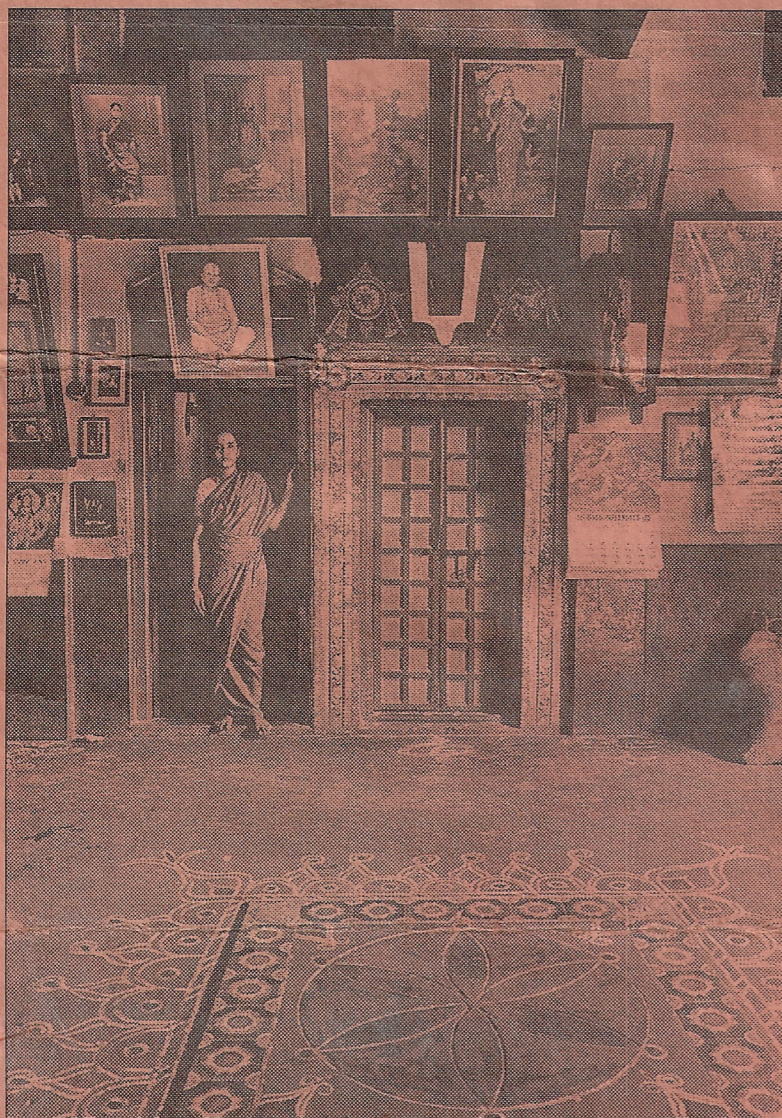
Homes all over India have opened doors for T. S. Nagarajan, the veteran photographer who has been travelling the length and breadth of India for over a decade, photo-documenting homes. Nagarajan was appointed Government of India's official photographer in 1956 and has served as picture editor for "Yojana" the journal of the Planning Commission for over two decades and the director of photo division. He has also been the consultant photographer for UNESCO in India. He resigned in 1978 to become a freelance photographer...

Sitting in his daughter's home in Kotturpuram, Madras, Nagarajan shared his views and enthusiasm for India and Indian homes, warming up a damp day—a cyclone sending torrents of rain and the gushing winds providing a background score...

"After seeing India officially through my camera lens, I realised I was falling madly in love with our way of living... dwelling places have been getting more and more standardised with modernity creeping in and bringing in its own demands... so I decided to document a slice of life in a historic period in India..."

So Nagarajan gave up his government job and began to travel with wife Meenakshi. "She serves as a companion and trusted assistant. She knows as much about the technique of photography as I do and sets up equipment before I decide on the exposure many times. She takes equal delight in travelling even to remotest villages and her benign presence makes me more welcome even in unheard of places..." says Nagarajan.

Nagarajan first began to document "Doors." In a small town in Tamil Nadu, he chanced upon an old door. "As I was photographing it, I found almost hypnotically drawn inside... On the other side, hidden like a secret, was the home of a simple musician. A



Home of a Sanskrit scholar in the ancient temple town of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu.

home where the family had been living for centuries in a manner untouched by the passage of years in the bright, noisy world outside... looking around that home was like touching a delicate gauze of memory that went back nearly a century... It opened a new chapter in my life...

Ever since, Nagarajan has been involved in a major labour of love, hunting out the old, forgotten turn of the century homes of India and photo documenting them. "I am interested only in dwelling places of about hundred years old which have been lived in uninterruptedly. I have not looked at places and public buildings as they have been built with different considerations in mind.

A home is built for an individual, a family, for a life-style and reflects the aspirations, aesthetics and attitudes of the people living there. A home is a mirror of life in it."

In Bombay, while photographing

the grand mansion of the Tata house, Nagarajan learnt a lesson that a home is where it is lived. Naval Tata and his wife Simone conducted Nagarajan and Meenakshi around the mansion which breathed of France. During the war when the house was built, a shipload of things for the house had been torpedoed and sunk. Another shipload had been ordered and the mansion had retained them in immaculate order even today. French opulence at its best.

The top floor had a plain stark and simple room ten feet by twelve feet with a functional writing table in a corner, a few book cases and a double cot shorn of ornamentation... "this is our home" said the Tata couple... "we just take the lift and come here straight. This is where we are happy."

At Nanjangud near Mysore, Nagarajan was photographing a 250-year old house gifted by the Maharaja of Mysore. An old man

Photographer

T. S. Nagarajan presents his exhibition "Behind closed doors" — photographic glimpses into the turn-of-the-century homes of India, at the Lalit Kala Akademi Galleries, Madras, from December 1 to 7.



came and invited Nagarajan to photograph his own home which he claimed was even more splendidous. The old man waited till Nagarajan had finished his work with the grand home and then took him to a dilapidated structure with most of its roof gone and three-fourths of the walls collapsed. In a little corner the old man and his wife lived.

The couple spoke with great enthusiasm and love about their house describing the good things that have happened there, not once bothering about the condition of the house. Nagarajan's heart filled and he took just one picture. That picture is also in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

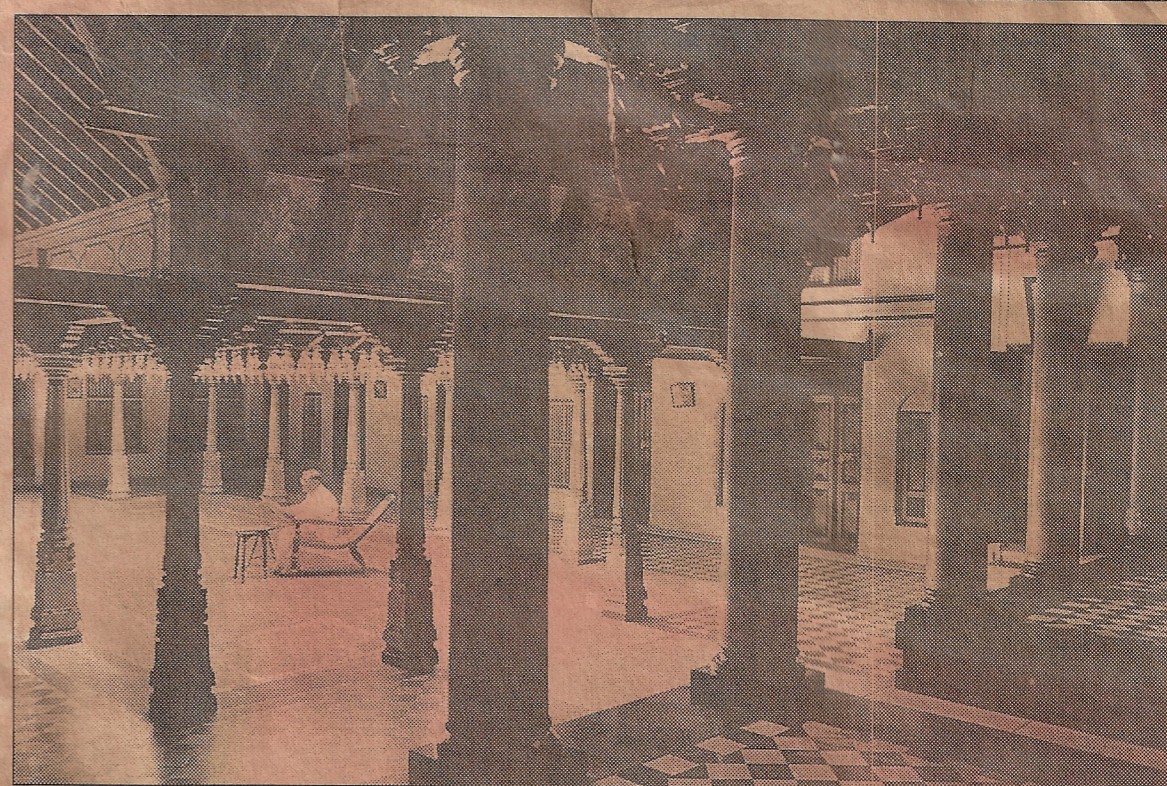
"You build your homes in your mind" says Nagarajan. "A house becomes a home when it is taken pride in. What has fascinated the Nagarajans is also the way the traditional Indian homes have let nature be in harmony with living. A house got built around an open space, a *nadu mittam* in Kerala with *oru kattu or nadu kattu* depending on the finance, an *Angala* in Karnataka or an *Angan* in North India. This open space in the middle of the house was the focus of daily life all over the country where living was exposed to the sky and the elements provided a direct contact with nature for 24 hours.

Country green was brought into the dwelling place in the form of a Tulsi plant. Going around Tulsi, singing to her was a way of interacting with nature.

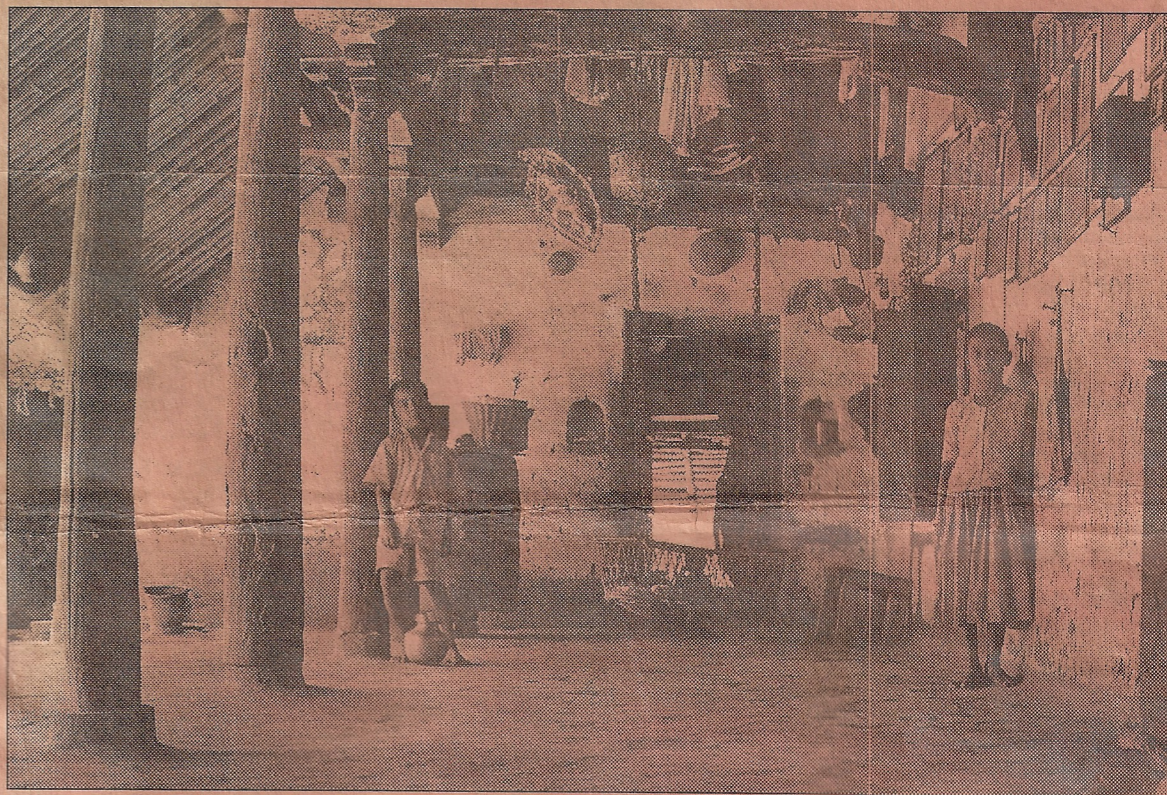
In Goa, houses were huge with large gardens. Windows were very large with heavy ornamentation. In Rajasthan, the Nagarajans were given a small room built with stone on the top floor of a complex of homes in a fort. A tiny window was all the ventilation provided. Peeping through it, one could see vast stretches of nothingness and sand. In the night, cool wind from the desert wafted in keeping the room cool. If the window had been large like in Goa, too much light and dust storm would make living very difficult.

Many homes photographed by Nagarajan have not been there on his second or third visit. Modern demands have made looking after the ancestral homes an impossible task. In Pallathoor, in Chettinad, the couple was hosted in a huge home. It took more than ten minutes to walk from one end of the house to the other. The owner was on his annual visit and said he did not know how long he could keep the house. He was willing to give the large house free to anyone who would live there and look after it with love and care.

A house is no longer a home when it is not lived in. When life abandons a house, the house dies. A garden glows in green when the gardener



Courtyard of a house built by Dewan Bahadur A. M. Murugappa Chettiar, leading Indian industrialist.



Nucleus of tradition... the home of a brahmin musician at Thiruppayalam near Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu.

goes round the plants at least once a day. Living structures are built of memories and are part of family's history. The A. M. Murugappa Chettiar's house in Chettinad is very well kept and is one of the ten most beautiful homes in India according to Nagarajan.

He continues the conversation. "In Kerala and Western Ghats of Karnataka, one can see the architecture and the use of materials in complete harmony with Geography and climate of the land. When there is dichotomy, one of them gets destroyed. The huge jackfruit wooden pillars of the 250-old Adamaru Mutt near Udupi do not even require oil massage. The black oxide flooring shines more with people walking on it."

While being served food on plantain leaves at a Taravad in Kerala, Nagarajan could not take his eyes off the full reflection of all the people eating on the floor. "In Kerala traditional architecture, emptiness is used cleverly as a decorative element. There is an incredible harmony between the white walls, black floor and brown wood. When people with stark white clothing walk on the shining black floor against a door that lets in light in the only way it should, it is a magical sight..."

Nagarajan works mainly with black and white photography. "Colour has an inbuilt sense of exaggeration. It is like a wild horse and difficult to control. It has a presence of its own and at long exposures gives a reciprocity failure."

The homes that Nagarajan is interested in are, as a rule, poorly lit being centuries old. Artificial light has

to be brought in for colour photography which disturbs the original play of light in the house and then the documentation fails. "I am documenting a slice of history and do not want to interfere with lives. Many photographic sessions have been during heavy rains and winter. Sometimes I have exposed films for more than a minute and a half!" Colour would definitely have been useless in these cases.

Nagarajan and Meenakshi keep detailed notes of the houses visited and people living there. He always sends copies of photographs to them and keeps in touch. In the process, the Nagarajans have spent all their savings with no sponsorships for travel or photography. But the relationships built are greatly cherished ones. "We are happy" say the couple in unison.

T. S. Nagarajan's photo symbol is an elephant with a camera on its back. The elephant has a special place in his heart. He has a vast collection of elephants made in all kinds of materials and in all sizes picked up in his long travels. In fact it was an elephant that set him on his photo journalism. Nagarajan was a student in 1954 when Iravatha, the beloved Ambari elephant (Pattada Aane) of the Mysore palace died. Like his classmates, Nagarajan had also rushed to the funeral and shed tears along with the Maharaja of Mysore. Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, Nagarajan went home, wrote an article, titled it "A Mysore gentleman passes away" and addressed it to Mr. C. R. Mandy, editor, the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Bombay. A week later a telegram arrived. "Elephant story excellent. Rush pictures." The young boy visited

every photographer in Mysore with the telegram but could get only one old picture of the elephant carrying the Maharaja in a Dasara procession. Nagarajan wrote about this to C. R. Mandy who wrote to him to pick up a camera and take his own pictures. C. R. Mandy and Nagarajan remained close friends for many years and Nagarajan published many historic pictures in the *Weekly* but the two never met. Close family friend R. K. Narayan had arranged for T. S. Nagarajan to join *The Hindu* as a correspondent but by then the Government of India job was already his.

The position of official photographer and the director of photo division gave Nagarajan a unique opportunity to see India as given to no other man presenting to him through the view-finder all the vast beauty and ugliness, the colour and potential of the young country and its leaders.

National and international awards and world-wide exhibitions followed but Nagarajan cherishes this stage of his life best. When he stopped at the door of the scholar Annangaracharya in Kanchipuram, the couple was welcomed warmly. The photographer began to introduce himself but the scholar stopped him short. "Your face shows your love and your sincerity. The house is open for you. Come in and take as many pictures as you want."

It is this love, sincerity and affection for people and their homes that are the distinguishing features of T. S. Nagarajan's photographs. ■

V. R. DEVIKA