

Frozen Frames

There are contrasts-the great Mahatma Gandhi getting off a Third Class compartment while Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister getting off a First Class compartment at a railway station. There are moments captured in frames of Gandhi arguing with Mohammad Jinnah. Moments from chapters in history never seen before, captured in camera by an unknown but talented photographer Kulwant Roy. Aditya, his nephew, now is on a mission of getting some recognition for Roy as well as restoring the treasure the great man left behind. An exclusive report by Dr Neelam Verma.

The year was 1947. The country India. There was chaos everywhere. Deluge of people running helter skelter. Men, women, children, old men, old women, and the disabled the helpless were moving with their mere belongings from one place to the other. Pakistan was being carved out of India and there was misery. People were moving but were aimless. They did not know where they were going but the only thing they knew that they had to move. People from all walks of life suffered tremendous losses in terms of life and property during those times.

As things settled down, a young photographer by the name of Kulwant Roy set up shop in Mori Gate, in old Delhi, India. That shop was then called Associated Press. Over the next few years Kulwant witnessed close up many of the countless events that led up to the independence of India. Following mainstream national leaders, major meetings and events, travels and engagements, his work captured the spirit, energy, hopes and aspirations of those times.

Kulwant learnt the art of photography from Raj Gopal, of Gopal Chitra Kutter studio in Lahore, Pakistan. Documenting the meetings between Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan in the North West Frontier Province in 1938, much before partition, at the time not realizing that those pictures were history in the making. In 1941, he joined Royal Indian Air Force and took aerial shots from cockpits of planes. However, he found it difficult to tolerate the discriminatory polices of his British superiors and left the service after he was court-martialled.

As he had no other family member with him, he became acquainted with his neighbours, the Aryas. In a span of a few days, he became a member of the Arya family and would share his life and photographs of the great leaders with them. Aditya's father was a lecturer in Delhi University's St. Stephen's College. Aditya remembers Kulwant dropping into their home regularly since the '60's when Aditya was just a school boy. "He would tell us wonderful stories about his travels and all the famous people he had met in his life in the course of his work," remembers Aditya of his uncle he affectionately called 'mama'-mother's brother.

In 1958, he decided to travel the world and he took with him pictures of pilgrimages, religious events, costumes and snow capped mountains of Kashmir and sold them in the West. The pictures he sold helped him fund his travels to twenty countries. And along the way, he took pictures of the countries he visited and mailed them to his address in Delhi. Unfortunately, when

he came back from his visit in 1963, none of the boxes ever reached his residence. They were all stolen. He spent years looking for them in post offices and garbage bins but to no avail.

He died in 1984 of cancer but till then, he was always taking pictures and still looking for his lost ones. But not before teaching young Aditya the tricks of photography. Aditya when growing up would go for Kulwant's photo shoots whenever he could. Sometimes, Kulwant would take Aditya with him during assignments. "I particularly remember how, when he had to cover the Republic Day parade, he would pick me up at five in the morning and we would go to the Press Box. Many of his friends would be there. He would carry a flask of hot coffee and packets of moongphali for them."

Kulwant died unsung, impoverished, unrecognized for the great work he had done, perhaps unknowingly to him too. He bequeathed his treasure of photos and negatives to his family friend Aditya Arya's mother who had become more of a sister to him. Aditya's mother in turn, passed them on to her son as he was a budding photographer himself. For almost 24 years, Aditya carried those boxes from one studio to another while trying to establish himself as a commercial photographer.

Every time he tried opening those boxes, he found it too time consuming and would let it go for some other day. There were just too many of them. The cartons stood in a corner of his studio for years gathering dust. Aditya, talking exclusively to *The Asian Outlook* during his recent visit to Vancouver said, "My mother would remind me of their existence every few months and every time I would promise her that I would open them soon. But it took me 24 years before I could really get to them. "

Then sometimes in 2008, he finally found the time and the inclination to blow the dust off those boxes, turning yellow by then. He exclaims, "I was shocked and amazed at the collection of thousands of photographs and negatives from the pre-Independence era of India to the post-Independence era, which the world had never seen. Kulwant had not even gotten around printing some of the historical pictures he had shot during his lifetime. It was like history frozen in frames."

"You name any great leader from Mahatma Gandhi to Sardar Patel, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Jinnah, they were all there. Then there were the dignitaries of the National Movement. Events of historical importance like the INA trials, the coming of Cripps Mission etc were all captured frame by frame. Not only that, there is an entire series of the Bhakra Nangal Dam all chronicled and dated."

More than a year later, Aditya is still under mild shock for sitting on pieces of history for decades. "When I opened the cartons, I found that each one was full of packets all neatly labelled according to the pictures," he says. "There were packets labelled simply, 'Gandhi' or 'Nehru'. There were others labelled 'Muslim League' or INA Trials or Gandhi's visit to the North West Frontier Provinces and Gandhi getting off a Third Class Compartment in 1938 while Nehru getting off a First Class compartment. Some packets had photographs, some had negatives. They were all gems. In many cases, the negatives were stuck to each other and badly damaged."

The realization that he was breathing a piece of history left him dazed for days. History that the world had never seen before. All those great leaders captured in time were long gone. The country had changed and moved on. People were now talking of global warming and multinationals. History was slowly being forgotten but he knew that even if he sold those pictures today, it would fetch him millions.

But he did not do so. He and his friend Suresh Neotia, an industrialist, decided to archive those pictures for future generations, create awareness of the historic value, encourage dissemination, access and use of such archives for academic, institutional and cultural purposes as well as encourage the development of critical reading and interpretation of content, politics and aesthetics of photographs as a visual medium.

Aditya has embarked on a task of building together his uncle's life as well as archiving the collection. He peeks through his uncle's private papers, by talking to his mother and locating people who have known him though most of his friends too are no more. The task is onerous, laborious, time-consuming but very exciting. Apart from all the work he has taken on himself, Aditya now travels the world with his treasure to share his discovery with those who would never get a chance of looking at them.

With the help of Simon Fraser University and Consul General of India, Aditya recently brought his treasure to Vancouver. Even the negatives all stuck together were on display and for sale here before he moved on to Washington for another exhibition there. Ashok Das, CGI, Vancouver, expressed a need to have a cultural centre in Vancouver. "Looking at the number of Indo-Canadians here, I feel it is important that we have a cultural centre where we can share our history and art with other communities. It would be important for our children, who have never studied Indian history to learn about our roots and our country."

Aditya is now on an onerous task of not only restoring and archiving history but taking his treasure to the doorsteps of those who otherwise would never get to see them. He is seeking the help of professionals in restoring some pictures. Unfortunately, some of them are lost forever yet others will live forever.

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