

TS Satyan: A life less hurried

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"I have begun to despise politicians and their ways. At my age, I don't want to photograph any of them unless Barack Obama visits India."

As India goes to the polls at the start of its rather overwhelming general election, the words of TS Satyan, a revered photojournalist who has spent his life chronicling India and Indians, offer a glimpse of how the modern world seems to those who have watched it age with them.

I came across TS Satyan on a recent visit to Mumbai. India's newspapers were filled with tittle-tattle in [the build-up to its election - which begins today, 16 April](#). The leading paper, [The Times of India](#), placed a modest banner headline at the top of each broadsheet page of coverage, branding the 2009 election a ["Dance of Democracy"](#).

Amid low-level election scandal (centring on an anti-Muslim rant by [Varun Gandhi](#), another member of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty), there was [a revealing interview with Satyan in the pages of Time Out Mumbai](#).

Answering questions as an exhibition of his life's work opened at the [Institute of Contemporary Indian Art](#) in Mumbai, Satyan - now 85 and a veteran of the *Deccan Herald*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Time and Life* - described the pressures on photojournalists in India in depressingly familiar terms.

Those wanting to take to this profession must consider it carefully. You have to know more and work harder to earn less than in many other professions. You need the strength of a packhorse to carry around all the equipment. You must develop resourcefulness, ingenuity and adaptability to solve assignment logistics. Most important, you must stay healthy, always. You have to be your best self. The expectations of editors and readers are high.

News photography in modern times is not only fatiguing, but also dangerous and calls for alertness and dedication. In India there is not much money for those wanting to work for the print media. No wonder more and more young persons are branching out to other areas like advertising, industrial and fashion photography.



Exhibited in the quiet confines of the ICIA, Satyan's body of work was impressive. The common theme in the work hung in the gallery was of a quiet, knowing peek inside of India itself. He chronicled rituals, personalities and intimate moments often unseen by outsiders. His images were beautifully composed and lit with a delicate and natural touch.

The literature at the ICIA included an introduction to Satyan, highlighting the influence on his work of his home, the educated, literate, princely state of Mysore - home, too, to one of India's greatest writers, RK Narayan.

And while Satyan in Time Out claimed he was most proud of those of his photographs with an artistic quality, the introduction stresses his roots in news photography. "Satyan insists that he is a photojournalist and not a photographer."

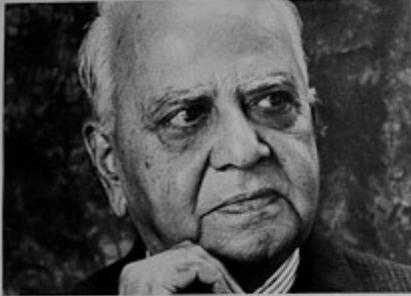


But the photographer himself appears to lament the fast pace of modern journalism, telling Time Out he feels there is now a lack of interest in the work of what he terms "the concerned photographer".

Indian editors are not bothered about him and his work. They are not visually thrilled. They don't seem to realise that in its own way, a picture can activate the conscience of the reader. They don't realise that without being preachy the photographer can sensitise, motivate and subtly show us the need to search our own hearts. It is unfortunate that rank commercialisation of the mass media has worsened the situation.

There appears to be no Wikipedia entry for TS Satyan ([the best Wikipedia's search engine can offer is "Satan"](#)), so I have posted below my photographed copy of his biographical details, along with the introduction to the recent Mumbai retrospective.

TS Satyan's photographs reproduced from [Time Out Mumbai](#)



T S SATYAN

T S Satyan was born in 1923 in Mysore and was also educated in this glorious capital of a princely state. He was among the first to take to photojournalism and for most part of his professional life remained a freelancer doing special assignments for national and international publications. Satyan's pictures have been published in the now defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India* and *Life*, besides *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Outlook* and *India Today* among others.

Satyan has also done special assignments for international agencies like UNICEF. To mark the International Year of the Child in 1979, the UNICEF organised an exhibition of Satyan's pictures of children at the UN headquarters in New York.

Satyan has also published picture books on various themes and they include *Exploring Karnataka*, *German Vignettes*, *Hampi - The Fabled Capital of the Vijayanagar Empire* and *In Love with Life- A Journey through Life in Photographs*. In 2005 Penguin published his memoirs titled *Alive and Clicking*.

Satyan was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1977 and the Mysore University, his alma mater, conferred a doctoral degree honoris causa on him in 2003.

A LONG EXPOSURE

by Sugata Srinivasaraju

Satyan's pictures are tranquil and leisurely. They carry a pining asceticism; reflect an uncluttered aesthetic enlightenment; they are pensive and reflective but never sad. And they are of course hauntingly embedded with the stillness of time. Satyan is engaged in a consuming search for human dignity in even the poorest of poor he shoots. Even when he photographed celebrities, his lens scouted their simplicity and their human essence. The questions that his many ordinary characters may throw at you about the paradoxes of life can never be captured in an intelligent caption-phrase. Those questions land softly on your mind, get caught in its gentle whirlpool and slowly make their way to your heart to stay there for a while. It is in this little journey and the resting lies the triumph of Satyan the photographer.

From where do these qualities that embellish every single picture of Satyan come from? I would like to give a good share of the credit to Mysore. Satyan evolved in a remarkably progressive, most benevolent, fairly cosmopolitan and a liberal-human milieu of pre-Independence Mysore. He had great teachers and great friends who helped him answer his calling in life and nurtured his talent in its different bends. Mysore had a distinct worldview and Satyan carried it wherever he went. You can recover that worldview in parts in the novels of R K Narayan, in the cartoons of Laxman, in the music of Veena Doreswamy Iyengar, in the integrity of H Y Sharada Prasad, advisor to three Indian prime ministers, and of course in the pictures of Satyan. Like ordinary people became an abiding interest for Satyan's lens, the common man with a keen eye defined the work of both Laxman and Narayan. Significantly, all of them were from the same Mysore generation.

Satyan insists that he is a photojournalist and not a photographer. For decades Satyan's pictures were accompanied by text, captions, historical contexts and the emotional exigencies of the time. But now, in an exhibition hall they stand independent. Even with the absence of paraphernalia that has dropped off in time, what still remains is a tribute to the pure serene of the human spirit. His pictures shun the modern and evoke nostalgia, but to read nostalgia alone in his pictures would be limiting their purpose. They certainly cross the boundaries of nostalgia to allow a sacred communion with life.