

VIEW FROM THE GALLERY

Mohammed Arfan Asif on Dubai's First Lady of photography

A decade ago I had the privilege of encountering yet another of our most unique and interesting species. Someone intoxicated to the brim with the medium of photography: Neenal Godhia. I used to call her 'the lady photographer on the motorbike'. Today, a car has replaced her motorbike but her enthusiasm has increased manifold. This exemplary craftswoman, with her 20 successful years in the profession, has displayed many dimensions of her

personality and capability.

As I sit with her over a cup of tea in bustling Satwa in Dubai, she recounts the struggles faced in her early years back home in Jodhpur, India. Neenal followed her father to Dubai in the early 80s. Her childhood interest made her plunge into the commercial world of photography. Eventually she started her own studio, Al Neenal Studio, first in Bur Dubai and later in Satwa. Soon she became popular with the UAE women and built up a reputation that enabled her to create a niche for herself in the field. She learnt the various intricacies of the medium from experience and from her mentor, the distinguished photographer Kali Jal.

Interestingly she has the unique distinction of being the first female motorcyclist in the Emirates, and probably she is also the first female photographer too! She is one of those early photographers who captured the local horse and camel races in Dubai. On the rare occasion she gets a holiday she shoots subjects that can evoke laughter. "Humour photography as a theme interests me most," she says. "It requires a different temperament and approach and when achieved it is very satisfying to see people laugh."

Her main stock in trade is the wedding ceremonies of the national women of the Emirates. She has received invites from Abu Dhabi to Muscat. No doubt apart from her skill in the medium it is her friendly personality that makes the difference. It reminds me of Ann Marie Gripman of Sweden and her child subjects. The relationship with the subject in whatever kind of photography one does is most important and there is no denying the fact that it is psychology that plays a significant part in capturing emotion. The expression of laughter and joy, of mirth and gaiety, of colour and splendour, are all captured with a finesse honed over the years. Her images of the wedding festivities are personal treasures to a generation of Emirati women.

Neenal is always improvising her approach. "Though I have adopted digital photography, since it is fast and serves certain purposes," she explains, "I am not too happy with the quality and for the present time would always rely on analogue." Neenal maintains a team of lady photographers, comprising her aunt Lata and cousin Sunita, who have been with her right from the start, through thick and thin. Neenal says it was Lata who looked after her and nurtured her during her struggling days. They help her with the work, which also involves videography, studio shoots, editing, mixing and printing. "I am still learning. I have specialized in something very specific, but love to do all kinds of photography," she says. "I am content with what has been achieved and understand at the same time the competition out there. But with faithful customers always depending on my skills I have nothing to worry about. It is my passion and I would never tire doing it."

Neenal is undoubtedly a talented artist and a specialist who has come a long way in her chosen field. ■

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▲ Lady Godhia rides again

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