



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Photo Q & A

# An Equal Light

Photographer G Venket Ram talks to us about all things light and the details that go into the making of an image and the inevitable divide of vision and form.

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On a rare, rainy day in Chennai, I met with photographer G. Venket Ram at his studio, and discovered the biggest conundrum in his world is one that concerns meanings, specifically the meaning of the word that is meant to define his profession. 'People always wonder how to classify me – film photographer or fashion photographer or advertising photographer or fine art photographer. I usually tell them just "photographer" would do, but that seldom works. I end up becoming a "celebrity" photographer, if all else fails,' he says and laughs, almost surprised that in this world of hyper definitions and hashtags, categories still matter. (And to add to this confusing mix, Venket was also the first one to shoot Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official portraits.)

In Venket's world, however, all that matters is light. The subject, the location, the image, the colours move around this entity like perfectly synchronised ballroom dancers. It would seem obvious, yes, that a photographer would concern himself with light. And even more so when in over two decades of a sprawling career in photography Venket's dialogue with light has been anything but predictable. Starting with how his own journey began. 'I was studying engineering in a college in Maharashtra, and we were surrounded by sugarcane fields in the middle of nowhere. I used to go for a run every morning and something about the light there





made an impact. In the South, we barely see a difference between summer or winter days – they are bright days at all times. But over there, the seasons were clear cut. The diffused light of the rain, the months of barren wilderness and the sudden burst of green, the rocky terrain, the waterfalls – all of it exposed me to the different textures of light. In my second year of engineering, I quit college and took to photography.’

Twenty-five years later, Venket’s tryst with light continues as the only definition colouring his world. In this

space, in this studio, through his lens, it doesn’t seem so much as if the photographer is concerned with light as it is the light concerning itself with the photographer. The subject, the location, the image, the colours, therefore, behave.

**Excerpts from the interview**

*I want to start with your solo show of fine art photography in 2003 of the Thanjavur temples. How did that happen?*

I have always been intrigued by temple architecture, by its history and the stories that

surround it. I have read a lot of books on this subject and have especially been interested in the Chola dynasty. So it was quite organic that this would become the subject of my first solo show. I chose the black and white medium because the temples themselves are monochrome and I was concentrating on the subject and not on people. In fact, for my next show of fine art photography, the concept was a simple one – of everyday kitchen utensils – and this was shot in colour. There was no particular element of nostalgia or anything connected to the choice of black and white.

*What is it about light that captures your imagination? And how do shadows factor into that definition?*

I have always believed that if you understand light first, the shadows will follow. I have had so many young photographers analysing my photographs and asking for the angle of that shadow or where that light is falling from. I never know how to answer that question because I honestly don’t know. Every time it is a different experience. I always think lighting is so much like cooking. You don’t always measure the salt or the oil or how much spice to add. You make a decision based on the colour or the taste or sometimes even the demands of the person eating that food – are they diabetic, do they need less salt, and so on. It’s the same with light. There are so many elements you need to factor in and handle – the mood of the picture, the subject, and even one’s own frame of mind because an artist that is constantly growing and evolving. How you did it at that moment in time is all that matters.

Also, technically, light is something you can’t see. You can see the source of light and how it reflects back when it hits a particular object, or if there is dust in the room you can see light passing. But, otherwise, light is something you cannot see. You only control light in degrees, like you control water. You can disperse it via a tube, or with a wider pipe or a sprinkler – that choice is up to you.



*Do you look at something and think yes, this would make a good image, or, yes, this light is something I should note, or is it all subconscious?*

Oh, yes, all the time. I never sleep while I am travelling because everything I see is interesting. Sometimes it is the light falling on a wall, sometimes it is someone’s body language, sometimes it is how the person speaks, and I always think about how to replicate that into my work. It is constantly being filed away because you never know what will be of use when. I notice the smallest of details and use them to add to the story of my image, because every image always carries a story. For instance, I recently had to shoot for a print ad and it was meant to be a family of four sitting on a sofa on a Sunday. And I noticed one of the

models was sitting with the toes turned upwards, and that is a sign of being uncomfortable, because you are essentially sitting next to strangers. That’s what I mean – I love noticing these details and I can do this all day. I can sit right here and look outside my window and watch a squirrel scampering across a tree. And maybe this is the one thing the younger generation doesn’t have as they see the world around them through their screens.

*You are in the world of images at all times – the lucky few whose passion is also their work. Do you then feel the need to include a lot of variety into your work? In the sense, is it creatively more energising to be working in multiple platforms?*

I think I just have wider interests. What usually happens is you shoot a particular kind of

photograph and then you are recognised by it and you are quickly stamped and categorised because it is easier to remember things that way. I am actually happy when people struggle to categorise my work. And I am conscious of not falling into a predictable space. Sometimes people tell me I can look at a photograph and say it is Venket's work, that I have a style, and that worries me because then I think I am stuck. So I am conscious of this. It is difficult, but I am always looking for a new perspective within the image.

*Where do you draw your inspiration from? I ask this in the context of is inspiration or to be inspired a continuous process to stay relevant in this increasingly digitised world. Do you worry sometimes that your work might become redundant?*

I think everything inspires me, but I always go back to classical paintings. I think the artists then were the best photographers, because essentially they painted something they saw and committed to their memory, because the kind of light they saw at six in the morning when the painting began isn't the same even five minutes later. They must have absorbed so much in that one instance to be able to bring it out in a painting, with so many details including the faint droplets of water in a fog, that could take even weeks to complete. It's a great learning experience of how much can I artistically dramatise using light. Also, I think this question of relevance is a double-edged



sword. If you try to do something to stand apart consciously, then you will be categorised and then you are back to square one. What is important, like I said earlier, is to look at the light. Everything else will follow.

*Taking off from the previous question, do you think the idea of photography itself has changed today? Is it something to moan about or something to embrace and move on?*

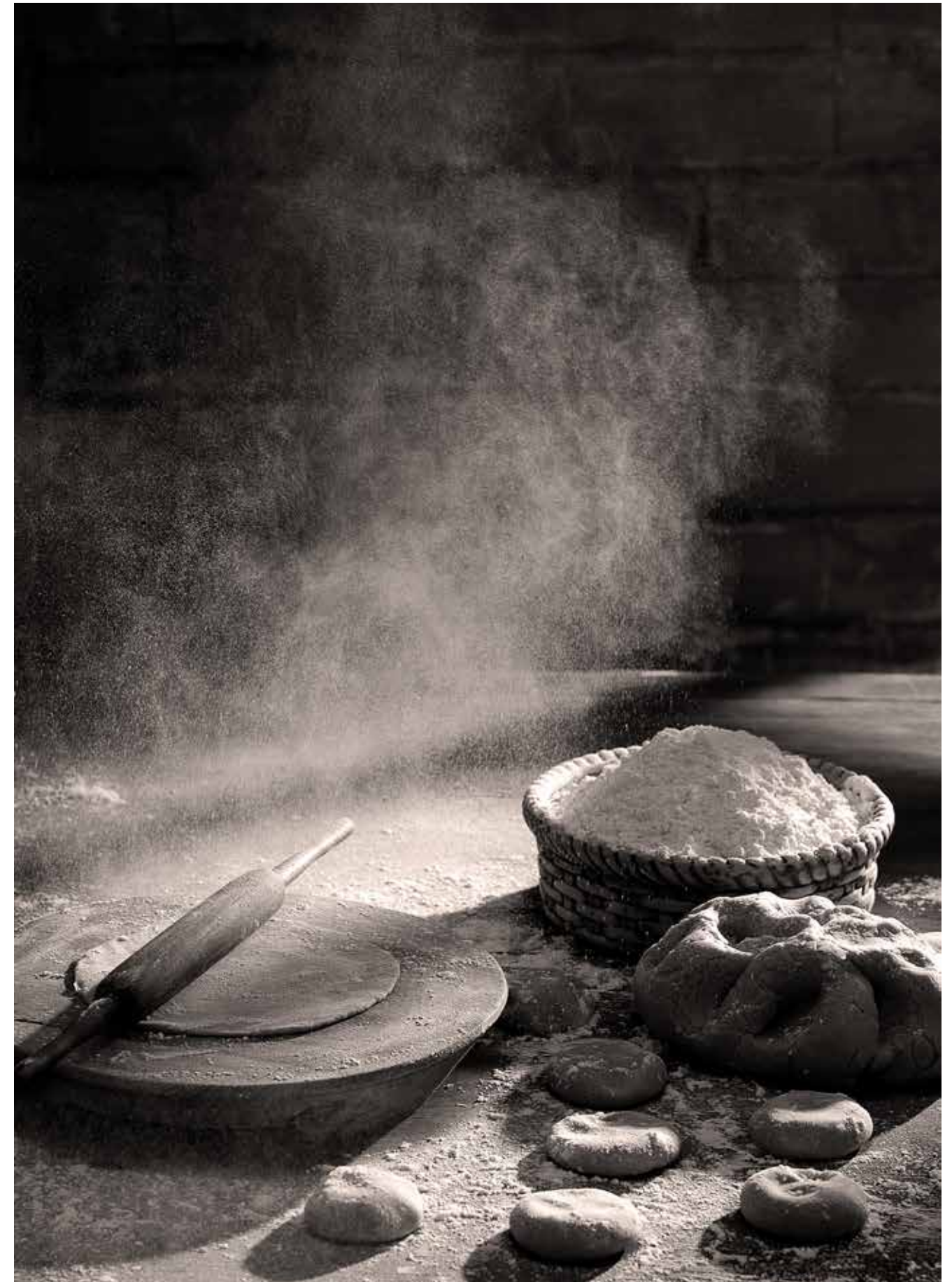
I am actually quite happy that everyone today is a photographer. It's probably the only profession that has become universal – everyone isn't a plumber or an electrician or an accountant. It's a rare thing and I feel the merit I saw in photography 25 years ago, when everyone thought it was a crazy idea, is now being embraced. Also, I feel the image is constantly evolving. Today, the trend is to make everything rosy, everything perfect and to take innumerable selfies. But realism will come back, people will get bored of this perfection, and the cycle will continue.



*And, finally, if you were to place yourself in a frame, where would you be? At the centre or the periphery and why?*

A bit of both, actually. Sometimes I am at the centre and I feel like I should step back and sometimes I am at the periphery and feel I need to move closer to the centre. And sometimes I feel like I should be nowhere near the image! So it changes, image to image, light to light.

All Images Courtesy G. Venket Ram



A Floury Afternoon



Churners on a Break



Pickle



Rusty Metal



Chai

