PICTURE
PERFECT

When it came to 'stock photography', India was a late bloomer. The first stock photography agency had emerged in 1920 in America but the term was virtually unheard of in India till the better part of the last century. All that was set to change when **Jagdish Agarwal**, a headstrong young man, started India's first stock photography agency—Dinodia—in 1987. Regarded as the pioneering force behind stock photography in India, he single-handedly turned the industry around by empowering professionals, inspiring amateurs and modernising the way companies did business.

Text ✳ **Sharmila Cirvante and Ranjabati Das**

T ODAY, WITH THE INTERNET overflowing with images, photo-sharing services and image hosting sites, it is hard to imagine a time when procuring images for consumers posed a real problem to Indian businesses. In the pre-Internet era, the world as we know it today didn't exist. There was no GettyImages.in to scour through for images, no e-mail to facilitate the quick sharing of information or photos and no Google Images to make reference shots readily available.

In those days, Indian creative and business entities faced a gamut of problems when it came to sourcing photographs, as it wasn't always practical or even possible to commission shoots. Nor did they have the resources to purchase photos at will from international agencies. Consequently, they often found themselves depending on in-house artists. In spite of a very real demand in the market, Indian enterprises never saw stock photography as a potential game changer that would monetise and renovate the profession which the general public associated more with the press or the great Indian wedding rather than as a talent, hobby or a form of art.

Agarwal, too, had never taken to photography, considered an expensive hobby for a child in those days, and preferred to write instead. "Photography was never on my mind. In school, I was interested in writing Hindi poetry and prose, so much so that when our annual publication published all 10 poems of

Facing and next page: A collage of black & white photographs shot by Jagdish Agarwal
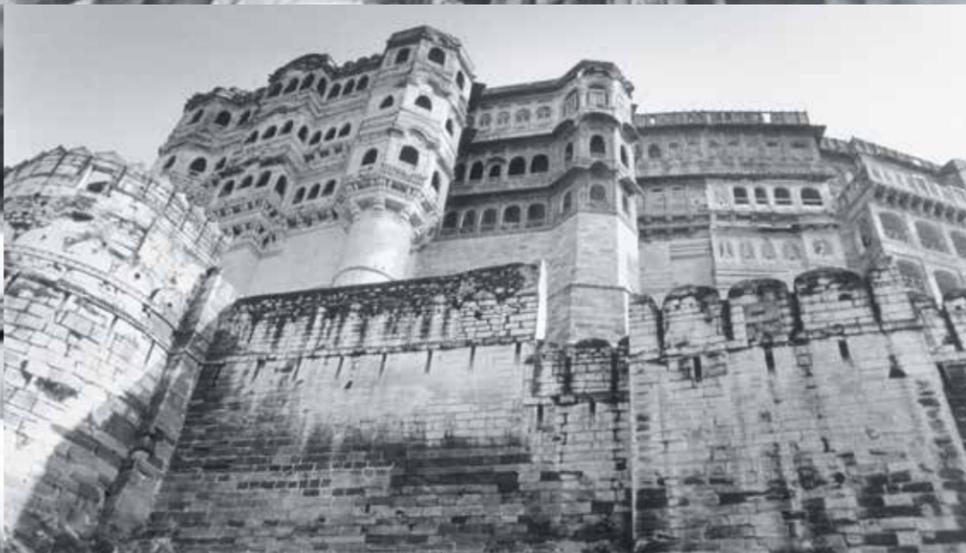
mine, I was credited for only five to ensure that the other students didn't feel bad," he reminisces. Then, his uncle gave him a gift that would change his life. A camera.

Having received plentiful appreciation for his favourite new distraction—photography—Agarwal enrolled in a course at Mumbai's Indo American Society in 1967. There, he won the class photo contest the very same year before going on to win the annual photo competition (which had invited over 2,000 entries) organised by the institution in 1969. Around the same time, he also enrolled at the School of Modern Photography in New York via post and participated in the All India Railway Competition, where he stood second (the first prize went to Raghu Rai). Having won three prizes in just a few months, Agarwal would have seriously considered taking up photography as a career option but he felt compelled to join the family textile business instead. "I followed my father during the week and my heart on the weekends," he says of the days when he would take off every weekend to trek and take photographs. At the same time, he also joined the World Wildlife Fund and Bombay Natural History Society which gave rise to a ritual that would last for the next 10 years. It essentially meant that eight to ten members, Agarwal included, would travel all over the country to shoot in national parks and sanctuaries whenever they could make time. "Sometimes, our trips would last for a week, sometimes

longer, so that we could tour whichever state we were in," he adds. After a moment of silence, he asks, "Would you believe that those pictures are still in demand?"

That Agarwal was dedicated to his 'hobby' would be putting it mildly. In between building his business, he also found time to build a portfolio. "Once, I saw a hoarding of a Times Group magazine at Dadar station and thought that my pictures were as good. I sent some samples of my photography to Anees Jung who was the editor at the time; two weeks later, when I was at the same spot again, I was surprised to see one of the photographs staring right back at me," he smiles. In the years that followed, Agarwal interacted with stalwarts like M J Akbar, Vinod Mehta and Vir Sanghvi on a regular basis and became one of the few photographers in the country to have nearly 500 photos published every year in publications including *Dharmyug*, *Youth Times*, *Onlooker*, *Mirror*, *Bombay* and *The Independent*.

An idea clicks

When Agarwal first dabbled in the stock photography business, back in the '70s, it was as a contributor. "I read about a photo library in Washington and promptly sent my pictures to them. They were accepted, so I also sent some to 30 libraries in New York, London, Paris, Germany, Austria, Australia, Netherlands, Singapore and Japan. Mind you, back then prints had to be made and sent by ordinary post, so it was an expensive

process. It ate up all my savings," says Agarwal wryly. About a decade later, when he had solidified the foundations of the family business and his brothers were also ready to assume responsibility, he launched the country's first photo agency with a handful of colour slides, one light box and an assistant at Kalbadevi in Mumbai. He named it Dinodia, after Dinod, a small village in Haryana where he had been born.

Dinodia received over 1,00,000 images from over 100 photographers in India in its first year itself. When the American Society of Media Photographers carried out an international survey–where the criteria was reliability and on-time payment–in 1989, Dinodia made history by being the only photo library listed between Hong Kong and Rome. In 1997, it became the first Indian photo agency to register a website domain, following market leader Getty Images, which had pioneered licensing imagery online and secured a huge clientele for itself only two years before.

Today, he has a 2,500-sq-ft office spread over two floors where he continues to mentor photographers. Dinodia boasts of a collection of over two crore images which includes rare and historical images from the pre-Independence era. These include a huge collection of photographs of Mahatma Gandhi from 1870 onwards. Gifted to Agarwal by a private collector who owns Mani Bhavan, Gandhi's Mumbai headquarters from 1917–34, these are available on the website as a

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IMAGE: DHIMAN CHATTERJEE

specialised collection. Apart from an in-house staff of 18 and their very own team of photographers, whom clients can hire, Agarwal represents 10,000 photographers which include about 100 international libraries and thousands of freelancers.

Leading the way

Agarwal has not only pioneered the concept of stock photography in India but, indeed, reinvented it by correcting irregularities of existing international libraries. For example, the industry norm was to offer payments after a period of three months but Agarwal reduced that period to a month so that it could be a realistic source of income for professional photographers. He also set up a transparent billing system whereby an invoice with a unique three-alphabet photo code would be printed as soon as the image was sold in a bid to avoid ownership-related issues. The payment would also be credited to the photographer's account immediately so that he could be paid at the end of the month.

Agarwal was also far more approachable than any other agency owner, often devoting his Saturday afternoons to discussions with photographers apart from organising weekly art walks, motivational camps, an annual awards function and an annual photography exhibition for budding photographers, all of which remain popular to date.

That Dinodia owes much of its phenomenal growth to Agarwal's foresight is a given, but it is also his personal sacrifices that turned Dinodia's fortunes around. One of the first obstacles that he faced soon after the launch was the lack of trust felt by the contributors for no apparent fault of his. "Photographers hesitated to give me their work because I was a photographer," he says. To establish a fair practice, he stopped taking photographs. For the second time, Agarwal had to put his passion on hold. "I decided to stop my personal commercial work and focus only on developing their talents," he admits, adding, "And I never overcharge clients. Maybe that's my stupidity. Maybe that's my honesty."

Future plans

Over the years, Agarwal has won nearly 50 awards, exhibited his works at various prestigious galleries across the world and been featured in the most revered papers in the country and even abroad. For most, it may be enough, but for Agarwal, it's all about being one step ahead.

Right now, as he prepares to shift to a new office at Nariman Point, he is about to give a new direction to his passion. He plans to share the new space with a prestigious Mumbai art gallery with which he will be collaborating. He is now keen to grow his business of photography for offices and
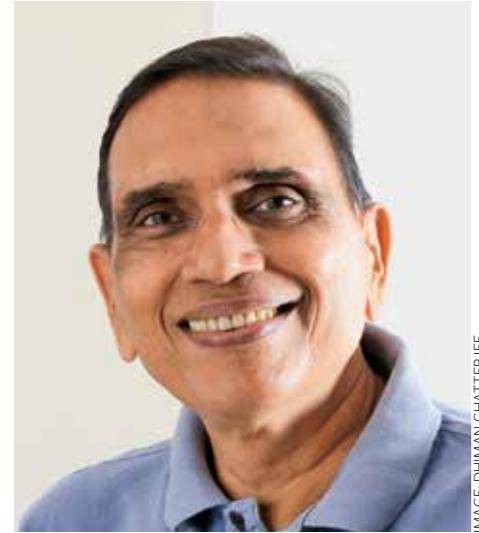
homes by promoting fine art photography as a form of wall décor.

Ask him about the proliferation of photographers on social networking sites today, and he says, "Mobile phones equipped with 41 MP cameras are making photographers out of anyone and publications abroad are inviting such entries." Far from being condescending, what really bothers him is that these photographers have "stopped thinking", relying far too heavily on software instead. "Even today, I shoot only pure photos where the framing and cropping is done before the clicking. To stand apart, one must work hard and be disciplined. Shoot every day," he says.

There are many things to take away from a meeting with Agarwal. His modesty is as inspiring as his rise to fame. He believes that being humble is essential if you are a photographer since it puts you in a position where you can leave behind a timeless legacy. His patience and foresight is also noteworthy. While working in the family business, he waited for the right time to put his ideas to test. Then there is another lesson that Agarwal teaches which has nothing to do with photography. "Follow your heart and the rest will follow." Granted that we can't all be visionaries, but it's a start anyway. ✳