

**Photography and Health**

by

**Arun Ganguly**

**Volume II**

**Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal**

**Janki Devi Memorial College**

**University of Delhi**

**Find us at - <http://perspectives-jdmc.in/>**

## Photography and Health

by

Arun Ganguly

A few years back I was requested by my friend and renowned photographer, Mala Mukerjee, to take some photography classes in an international school for children to relieve her for a few days as she had to go to Mumbai to take care of some urgent personal matters. I have a long experience in teaching photography to college students and grown up aspirants, both men and women, but this was the first time I had to interact with children. To make an easy inroad into the minds of my little students, in the first class I scrawled on the blackboard the following dictums for their edification:

What is photography?

Photography is fun.

Photography is art and science.

Photography brings you closer to nature.

Photography brings you closer to people.

Photography helps you to know the world better.

Photography is good for your health.

Photography is meditation!

The most popular questions asked by the students were explored how does photography would help them to lead a **healthier life**.

Well, you cannot get the answer from a doctor, a coach in the gym or from the health videos that circulate on the internet. This truth I have realised from my life's experience as a photographer practising my art and craft for the past six decades of my life.

I shall explain how I arrived at this conclusion from an interesting episode that happened when I was documenting the wonderful city of Benares.

The year 1989 was one of the most enriching that I ever had in my lifetime. From April to November that year I made several trips to the city of Benares ostensibly to photograph the city and its many facets of life. I got a rich harvest of photographs, but what I also got as bonus was my interaction with the people of this city, as also the visitors who comprised of the seekers of salvation as well as curious foreign tourists who wanted to 'do' India. The riverside ghats of Benares are the meeting place of the brotherhood of humanity. People from all over the world come here to experience the flavour of life in India in a way that few other cities have to offer. Whichever other destination in Benares I had in my plan for the day, an early visit to the ghats would be the first thing to do, in order to share the ambience created by the multitude of people that visited the ghats in the morning for various purposes.

One of the most interesting characters I got acquainted with was a Japanese Tai chi master with the self-assumed name of 'Tron'. Tai chi is a Chinese physical exercise in which you make slow controlled movements. A short man with a muscular and trim body, long hairs and straggling beard, bare chested and wearing a loose pyjama that was cinched near the ankles, he would arrive at the Dashaswamedh Ghat in the early hours of the day and settle down to impart training in Tai chi to anybody who felt interested. His followers comprised of people of all

ages, men and women, young and old, Indians as well as nationals of other countries. I noticed among this assembly of physical fitness enthusiasts, one individual with horribly contorted features whose vocation could only be begging which depended on his disabilities. When the Tai chi session came to an end, Tron would take a hearty dip in the Ganges, dry himself up, have a long smoke and take a comfortable seat. Then he would take out a long musical pipe from his bag and play the most melodious tunes for as long as he desired.

One morning when Tron had finished his morning classes and was resting awhile, I approached him to ask if he would be kind enough to teach me a little Tai chi, which I felt, could be beneficial to me and help me to carry on with my strenuous profession more effectively. To my surprise, Tron grabbed one of my cameras hanging from my shoulder. He then took up different poses as if he was taking photographs and with each pose he exclaimed ‘this is Tai chi’, ‘this is Tai chi’, ‘you are a photographer, you don’t need Tai chi’, and ‘photography is Tai chi’!

This experience encouraged me to reminisce about my life since childhood to the present as an individual and as a photographer. I must admit that through my childhood to boyhood I did not have good health. While in school, I used to suffer from periodic attacks of asthma which affected my education as well as my health. For days I would be laid down gasping for breath and my body convulsed with a racking cough. The things started to improve when, during my college days, my father taught me the process of ‘pranayama’ (yogic breathing exercise) as part of the ‘sacred thread’ rituals that I had to perform twice every day. I was required to continue this for one year only, but I could feel that some change was taking place in my body and so continued to practise it twice daily till I went for graduation where I had opted for the evening

classes. I graduated in 1956 and got a gift, a Kodak Brownie Box Camera from my elder sister. A new chapter started in my life!

Initially I used to feel very shy about carrying my simple camera around the streets of Kolkata. So I would pack it in a cloth bag, go to the Howrah Station on weekends and take a train to some local area to spend the day braving the elements to take photographs of the rural countryside. In the year 1957, I joined the premier advertising agency Clarion Advertising Services Private Ltd. and soon saved enough money to buy a second hand Rolleicord camera from an office colleague and then went ahead to get a membership of the Photographic Association of Bengal (PAB), which at that time was the gathering place of many of the leading photographers of India. After learning the process of making black and white prints at the PAB darkroom I learned to process films from a technical publication from Kodak. Thus, slowly but surely, I equipped myself to progress to the bigger world of photography.

I was never very keen on artificial light and indoor photography. While I had to use artificial light when shooting industries most of my photography was done out in the open and that meant braving the elements. While executing industrial assignments, I often had to shoot black and white, as well as colour negatives and transparencies with both 35mm and bigger format 6cmx6cm cameras with all their lenses and accessories. Add to that the lighting equipment and my personal effects. I worked without assistants and carried all these things myself, two cases in my hands and two bags on my shoulders. I could carry on with these hardships because perhaps due to the exposure to the elements my asthma had vanished from my body long ago leaving me in such good health that I could participate in the formidable trek to the Amarnath Cave in Kashmir during yatra where we encountered incessant rains on one day at the height

of 9000 to 12000 feet and didn't sneeze even once!. I came back hale and hearty and more confident than ever about my health and strength.

Apart from my professional work, which took me to many remote places away from Kolkata as well as to different cities all over India, I had my own wanderlust. From the snow clad mountains to the sea coasts in the east, west and south, the deserts of Rajasthan, the watery paradise of Kerala, the lush countryside of Bengal and historical destinations, I travelled to soak in the spirit of our wonderful country. Later on, while reminiscing on my journeys I suddenly became aware of the fact that never during my journeys did I carry any medicine with me and I never became sick either!

The regular exposure of my body to the sun, rain and winds had toughened me up and had transformed me from an asthmatic young boy to a strong and sturdy photographer!

About the author:

Born on 12 April 1938 and based in Kolkata, Arun Ganguly is one of the senior most practicing photographers of India. A self trained professional, his work encompasses art photography, advertising photography, travel photography, industrial documentation and photojournalism. In 1957 Ganguly joined the giant ad agency Clarion Advertising Services which later joined hands with the American biggie McCann Erickson. He left Clarion in 1975 where he was in charge of Creative Photography and has been freelancing ever since. He has also been involved with teaching photography as faculty member of several renowned institutions. Ganguly's photographs have been exhibited all over India and abroad and he has worked on major book projects like "The Endless Wheel" (Germany), "World's Most Natural Places" (Italy), "India 24 Hours", "Woman Goddess", "Childhood In India" and "If I Were Rain". The entire photography and text of the coffee table book "The Lure of the Lakes" (on a major waterbody in Kolkata was done by him.

Ganguly's most favourite hobby is gardening and for inspiration he listens to Tagore songs.

Ganguly stays at his 175 years old ancestral home in Bhowanipur, Kolkata with wife Niti, son Santanu and daughter-in-law Nabanita.