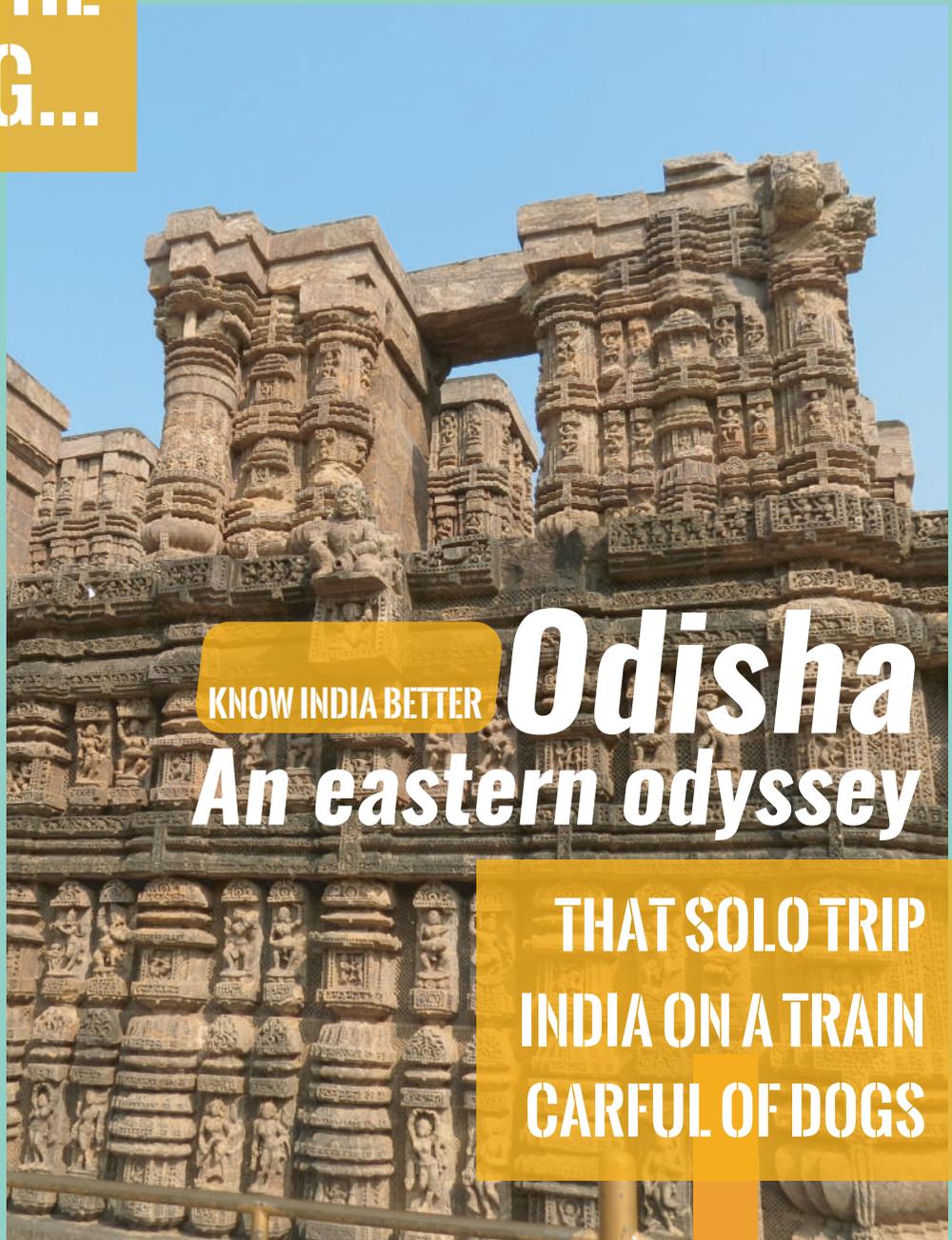


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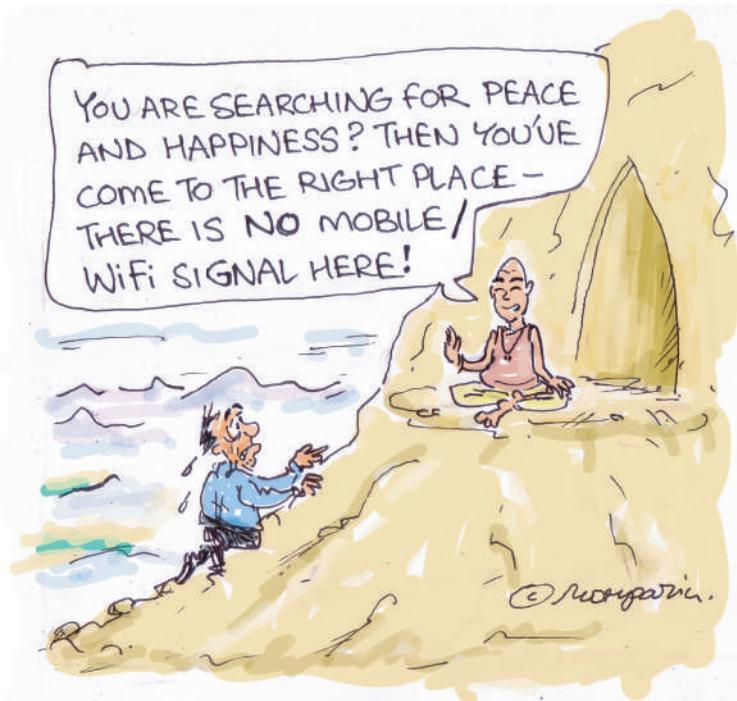
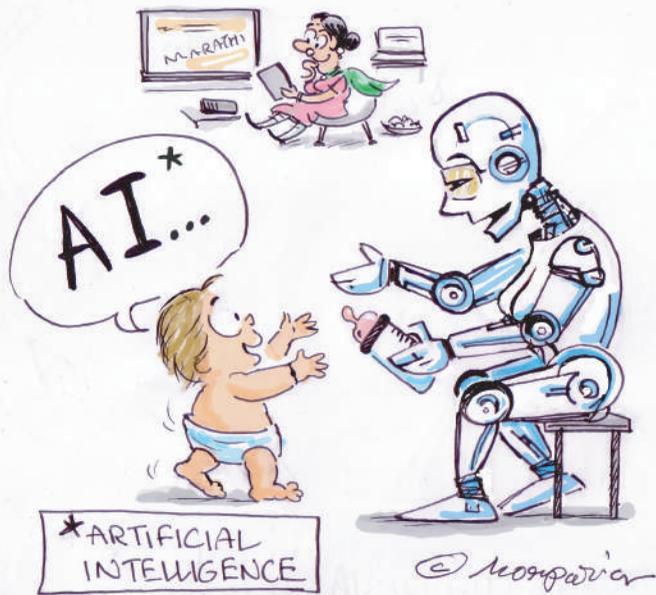
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KNOW INDIA BETTER

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THAT SOLO TRIP
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Travel of a kind

To travel or not to travel alone, is a dilemma many must face, says E. Vijayalakshmi Rajan. She loves to travel and does so at the drop of a hat, but always in company. The thought of solo travel disturbingly tickles her fancy more often than she would care to admit!

Who doesn't like to travel? From time immemorial man has travelled, as a nomad, as a seeker of adventures, to conquer new worlds, the human history is replete with the burning need of humans to travel. In recent years, travel has become all-encompassing. Some statistics say a whopping 1,300 million international tourist arrivals are recorded every year, worldwide.

Indians are travelling like never before. It is said that about 50 million Indians will be travelling abroad every year by 2020. This doesn't include domestic travel. I love to travel too. Having been around a bit, it is not travel which obsesses me though, it is the thought of solo travel. Everything about making a trip on my own, fascinates me. The thought that I could spend days alone, being wholly and solely responsible for me, is a scary prospect. Yet, a very alluring one.

It's not as if I have never travelled alone ever. I have. As a reporter in the Tamil heartland, I have often travelled alone. In fact, I have taken overnight buses and trains, often arriving early morning, when the night still cast its inky blackness on the world outside. Prudently I would wait it out in the relative safety of the station, waiting for dawn to break. But, all these trips were work related.

That's the thing about work. It focuses you, channels your attention to the tasks at hand. In my case, it was always a full schedule of interviews to be done, places to be covered, the necessary people sought out. There never was time to dilly-dally, distracted by stray thoughts. Somehow, the professional 'kavach' or armour sees one through many a sticky situation.

I never documented my travels then, which I regret today. My articles and reports about places and events got written out, but not my personal experiences about a particular place. And by jove, weren't there plenty of those! Try as much as I can to find those memories enveloped in the mists of time, I come up empty-handed. They are well and truly lost to me.

And, I digress! In the years since those active reporting days, I have got used to a life where travel is only about pleasure. And I travel only with my family. I look forward to these travels. In fact, the planning is half the fun. I try not to YouTube to death the places we are about to visit, as I feel the charm of the place is lost. But a lot of planning goes into each trip. When we reach the destination, we do everything together. The point I am making is, I am never alone. And it has never bothered me, till recently.

The sole obsession

So, why am I obsessed with solo travel? The obsession got triggered because one fine day I realised that the thought of a journey alone, terrified me. It was a stray comment by a friend which triggered it. As often is the case, I don't remember the context, but the comment, "You must be so used travelling alone", brought the realisation that

no, I wasn't comfortable any more with travelling alone. I had got out of touch with it. I had become almost entirely too self-conscious about solo travel!

It's not just the physical aspect of travelling on your own. That, is the easy part, especially today, when Makemytrip, TripAdvisor, Expedia and YouTube throw up enough information and reviews about flights, places and hotels.





A solo traveller has to chart her own course

Organising the nitty-gritties is so very easy. My husband does it so effortlessly, so I have learnt it from the best. It's the other aspect of travel – where you are on your own in a new place, where you have to decide your day's itinerary, where you are finally alone with the entire day to chart out, make decisions about everything from whether to take the tram or bus, where to eat, when to retire, how much farther to go on a particular day...and the realisation that there is no one waiting at the hotel or apartment for your return, that, is what one needs to come to terms with while travelling solo. You are, well and truly, alone.

I think at the base of my conflicting thoughts about solo travel is the fear that I will fail myself in a myriad ways – I will discover that I am not the fun company I imagine myself to be, that I bore myself to death! On the other hand, my rational mind tells me that solo travel will be a way of getting to know myself better, push the envelope further in terms of spending 'me time' in the purest form of the phrase. And really getting to know the person that I am, with nothing – no company, family or distractions – to hide behind. Believe me, it would be easier to go spend a few days alone in a Himalayan cave!

One of the biggest problems with solo travel, at least in my mind, is getting over the self-consciousness of being a solo traveler. A high degree of comfort with one's self is absolutely necessary, I would imagine. Your own presence

in a particular place is not secondary, or due to another person's plans. You are in a place because you chose to be there. And that puts everything – the blame, the success, the happiness – squarely on your shoulders.

Strangely, the safety aspect of solo travel has never struck me as an impediment to solo travel. One can google to death these variables, and information does arm you well. I imagine travelling solo must make you a more alert, empathetic person too. Travelling on your own must make you more alive to your environs, more open to local culture and influences. So, there is a lot going for solo travel. If only....

As I said earlier, the thought of solo travel terrifies me. But this is one fear that I want to conquer. Like that line in that famous commercial, Dar ke aage jeeth hai. Amen to that!



E. Vijayalakshmi Rajan is Assistant Editor, One India One People.

Walking in Colaba

A regular visitor to Mumbai, **Vincent D'Souza** writes about his favourite haunt Colaba, with its busy Causeway, bustling fishing docks, happening cafes, and stores selling antiques. His gaze is observant, uncritical, and gently proprietorial.



Colaba is an interesting warren of quaint cafes and streets

How does Bombay slow down at the end of a manic day? A perch in Colaba can give you a first-hand experience. Men and women double pace to the bus station round the bend at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA). Two taxi drivers drag on their cigarettes under the avenue trees and converse loudly.

And the sea breeze breaches the Gateway of India, as if fighting the day's pollution.

When Rashid *bhai* drops me at YWCA International Guest House on Madame Cama Road, one of my many 'second' homes across the country, I feel light. I prefer the single bedroom with a balcony and a great view. Fernandez at the front desk is accommodative. I order a pot of tea and let the evening slip slowly.

Colaba lives in times past rather comfortably, even as it keeps pace with Mumbai's people. The evening walk takes me to the other end of Azad maidan, where a few hundred cricket players are into the final phase of matches. I stretch out on the grass and watch aimlessly across the maze of flannels. I skip dinner at the Y and walk down to Cafe Mondegar, one of the iconic watering holes of Colaba.

Tourists have this place marked out on their brochures though many prefer now to walk further down to sit at a table at the Leopold Cafe where travelers and newbie

Mumbaikars share colourful anecdotes of the Mumbai shootings of 26/11. Leopold was the theatre of one of the gunfire – the gunshot wounds on the walls are still preserved between framed posters of the 50s and 60s.

Colaba's sidewalks are made for walking, sidestepping the hawkers.

Regal of yore

'Gully Boy' was playing at Regal Cinema. The film, starring Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt unravels a facet of Mumbai we haven't seen much – its native rappers and the music they create in the gullies of the city. I had watched 'Gully Boy' the week it was released, but I hadn't experienced an art deco cinema hall like Regal which has survived the multiplex wave across India. In minutes, the tickets were sold out.

"Best place to see movies," the 50-something Akash told me at the box office counter. "It is grand and the tickets are affordable." I stepped into a wooden lift that could hold three-and-a-half people to access the gallery. Regal is more like an auditorium for classical music concerts, and since 'Gully Boy' is more music and poetry of the streets, it held my attention until the interval. It was time for fresh air at the 'round-tana' where hawkers of tea and vada-pav were spraying their tables with water.

A day's work in Colaba

Your Colaba mornings can be well spent at three sprawling campuses. The National Gallery of Modern Art, which appears a tad tired now, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Museum, and the Jehangir Art Gallery. If 'people-watching' engages you, find a perch in this area and keep watching. You may be joined by a young artist for a chat.

This place is some sort of a tourist hub; throughout the day overloaded buses screech to long halts, and disgorge scores of people who first gorge on vada-pav, and then walk invariably into the museum, or towards the Gateway of India.

I walk off to another Colaba destination – Phillips Antiques, a 19th century heritage. Behind heavy doors are fierce wooden horses, paintings of buxom women and cold bronzes at this place for antiques and collectibles. I check out the section that holds prints of colonial India maps and vintage photographs. An aged Parsi woman walks up to me, slowly, keen to help.

Madras is on my mind, I tell her. She goes away and returns with two metal print artworks of Fort St. George. 7500 bucks for each. Peering at them is free of course. I do just that, make an excuse and step out. A hawker is making masala chai down the sidewalk – I can smell it.

I carry an intention to the Gateway of India water-side one evening. A suited young man tries to sell me a boat trip to a floating restaurant out at sea. The menu card doesn't impress me. And I don't want to spend my evening with strangers. I gaze at the Taj Mahal Palace at Apollo Bandar. I have read that a seat at its bar (or it is a coffee place) offers great sights of the Arabian Sea where the ships and boats have switched on the twinkle show. I don't intend to challenge the hotel's doorman – I am in my khaki shorts.

I take a long walk – towards another Colaba landmark of ol' times – The Bombay Presidency Radio Club. Its history draws me there. In 1929, a note says, the club installed Bombay's first radio set fitted to a giant aerial.

I walk alongside three young men who carry lit boards that advertise a furniture sale in the city.

"Are there any old radios exhibited in the lobby?" I ask the heavy-set security man. "I think there is but come in the morning," he waves me off as a Merc rolls in.

I am in the mood for a drink. And it must be Colaba's own hangout. A quick online search and my taxi drops me at the edge of a market. Clothes, electronics, vegetables and fruits and vada pav.

"Sujatha Lunch Home kahan hai?"

The vada pav hawker waves his right hand to the

opposite side.

I find a table close to the cash counter cum liquor chest cum altar for the Gods. The man at the counter launches into an animated conversation in Tulu on his hand-phone. It reminds me of the era of the migrants from coastal Karnataka who have made their lives in Mumbai.

The tables for diners are stacked close. A staircase takes clients to a modified upper floor. This is a no-frills bar where your drink arrives in two minutes. I order for rum, a cola, and a Bangada fry. And while I sip on the rum mix for the next 40 minutes, I watch Colaba's market life ebb into the night.

The possibility of a fish-pav

I should have been up at 5 a.m. for my final exploration of Colaba. A taxi drops me at the imposing arch of Sassoon Docks at 8 a.m. Scores of men and women are carting out fish auctioned inside. This board says 'Welding Works', but the men are hammering large blocks of ice on one side, and on the other, a few are skinning big fish on the wet floor.

Mini vans stocked with greens and vegetables kick off their sales – making it easy for fisherwomen to shop for the day on their way home. The sun shows up Mumbai's ironic sides - 20-storeyed apartment blocks looking down on a filthy bay where dozens of large fishing vessels are parked. On water's edge, decaying walls of an old textile mill that was destroyed in a fire are vestiges of old Colaba.

The last of the auctions of the day's catch is on. I sight a basketful of large Sting Rays and my mind goes back to mum's spicy hot curry of the Ray, Mangalorean style. I look around to see if a hawker is offering fried fish pav! Groups of women clean heaps of prawns and pack them into boxes laced with ice cubes. Others are making quick deals with Mumbaikars who head here to shop for fresh seafood.

"Eight men manage this boat," a fisherman tells me as I take a close look at one vessel which came in the previous night. I head to a restaurant. It is a 'Hindu' one – so says its signboard. The tables are full, men tucking in dosa and pav. I order for 'cutting' chai and open the day's newspaper. I wish this place offered fish-pav. Colaba may well trigger a new food fad for Mumbai.



Vincent D' Souza is a Chennai-based editor and publisher. He runs Mylapore Times, a weekly, free, English newspaper now in its 25th year.

India on a train

Riding the Indian train is a life experience, where one comes across not just people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, but one confronts the very soul of India.

Gustasp and Jeroo Irani describe the journeys of a lifetime.



Train chugs in through a tea estate in West Bengal

It was to be a holiday to remember ... in Rajasthan, with members of our extended family flying in from the US. We travelled in two taxis to the railway station, quite a distance from our home, and we were running late. One taxi (with the adults) sped ahead thanks to our constant screaming and nagging at the driver; the second one with the 20-somethings, trundled along at a sedate pace, more suited to a dowager with arthritic knees.

We reached the station and ran down to the platform as just five minutes were left for the train's departure, and the second taxi was another five minutes away. The driver was already in his cubicle, fingering the controls, ready to start. We ran up to him and begged him to delay the train for three minutes as the rest of the family was on its way. The driver looked shocked: "What!" he exclaimed in Hindi. "You want me to delay an Indian train? How can I do that?"

But, thankfully he did delay it by three minutes! In the meantime, the second taxi had arrived and we dragged

the lot of them into the first compartment even as the train jerked and shuddered and started on its way!

A racy thriller!

Travelling by an Indian train is like seeing a racy thriller unfold in front of your eyes; the narrative is generally brimming with surprises and, in the old days, the ending was often unpredictable in terms of whether one would reach on time.

This is why it is often said that you don't see India from a train, but on a train; a somewhat timeworn cliché. It is estimated that over thirty million people (that's more than the entire population of Australia) on average travel daily on Indian trains, and it's the best way to take in the beauty of the country, its colour, and its sheer size.

Indeed, we enjoy chugging by the iron horse, absorbing the heat, dust and the limited space with a motley group of pilgrims, raucous travelers with heaps of

baggage, and hyper-kinetic kids. Gorgeous landscapes sweep past in a blur – green fields smiling under a bright sun; dilapidated forts that brood on a hill; a palace with turrets and domes; a chortling river that snakes its way across the land; craggy mountains that seem to rake the sky; deep mysterious forests ...

At night, the train's whistle rents the deep quiet, and the iron horse resembles a long moving pencil of light, even as it seems to rock on the rails as though in a hurry to reach its destination. Deserted stations with names that are redolent of a past long gone, loom outside our windows – Sawai Madhopur, Vasco Da Gama, Castle Rock... A man sleeps peacefully on a bench while within the train, the quiet of the night is often shattered by loud snores and other sounds; and sometimes the whispered sweet nothings uttered by newly-weds, embarking on the first journey of their life together.

A new day paints the sky in pastel shades and then come the fiery colours, even as the train continues to race across a landscape lit by the rising sun. As it pulls up in the day into a lively station, a kind of nasal cacophony breaks out. Men with flasks of tea (earlier they carried metal tea pots), run up and down the corridors, shouting "Chai ya" in different tones and pitches, while others push steaming hot vadas and oily omelettes under our noses.

On one of our excursions, we shared space with a

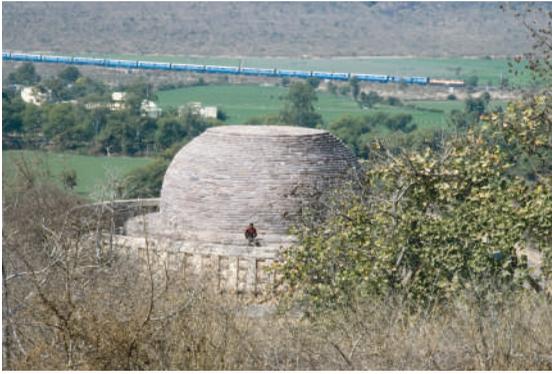
group of maroon-robed Tibetan monks, and a village chieftain who was carrying several sacks of grain, and a pet pup in a plastic basket back to his village. As the train steamed out two hours behind schedule, the hum of the Tibetan chant, Om Mani Padme Hum seemed to vibrate in the lamas' barrel-like chests, and gently wafted on the air to mingle with the click of small spinning prayer wheels that they held in their hands. The chant was soothing and seemed to restore order in a wonderfully chaotic world.

When the Tibetans rose and left their seats to stretch their legs and buy some tea and snacks from the station, they lost their seats to incoming hordes who bulldozed their way in, sans reservations. The Tibetans' despairing cries of "Mine! Mine!" (they spoke very little English) went unheeded. They were as summarily ousted from their seats as they had been from their ancient homeland! Finally, a sympathetic TC and some helpful passengers dispatched the encroachers to an unreserved compartment.

On another occasion, we met a bunch of sadhus in flaming orange garb, carrying small tridents. One had forsaken his family and the bright lights of Mumbai's tony Peddar Road to retreat to the Himalayas. We chorused: "That's amazing!" and commended his courage and freedom from earthly wants. "You too can do it," he said, eyeing us like we were ideal candidates for sanyas. "In the Himalayas, you don't need your family nor earthly trappings. The Himalayas are vast and you are never alone... you have your soul."



Tibetan monks and a mother and daughter waiting for their trains to arrive at a station; (bottom right) Mysore railway station from the railway bridge



To travel by train is to get a close look at the real India

As dusk gathered, the sadhu shared our dinner and we were ready to sleep, but a group of young men decided to play a round of rummy. As the excitement of winning and losing peaked, we decided to exert our authority and told them to quit. They did so obediently like chastised school boys.

It was then that another gent, afflicted with insomnia, decided to regale us with the story of his life... his wife (woe) and mama (joy) were the protagonists. His wife had left him for another man, taking their kids with her. "Go East, go West, mama is the best!" he said.

Better late than never...

Many years ago, we discovered to our horror that the train (Pawan Express) that we were booked on was 24 hours late! The booking counter would not open till 9 am, which meant we had very little time to purchase fresh tickets. However, the Pawan Express of the previous day was due to steam in – 15 minutes later. We had less than 15 minutes to explain to the station master our plight. A ghost of a smile crinkled his face; he agreed to issue fresh tickets, and soon we were pounding the platform even as the train came tooting in. We ran alongside to locate the right compartment and vaulted in, while a wall of people

seemed to materialise from nowhere, blocking our porter and our luggage from view. We screamed at them to move and they fell back in horror even as the porter flung our suitcases in with unerring accuracy even though the train had started to move.

The Indian Railway system comes close to John Kenneth Galbraith's idea of a "functioning anarchy!" The miracle of watching this functioning anarchy in action is well worth the cost of a rail ticket.



Guspasp and Jeroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth; sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in Hong Kong, have danced with the Samburus in Africa, stayed with a local family in a Malay village, cracked the Da Vinci Code in Paris... For them, writing and photography are more than just freezing moments of that journey; it's a passion.

That solo trip

*Women must travel, and sometimes sans their families, says **Nivedita Louis**, an ardent votary of 'girls' trips'. It helps to recharge their energy, and makes them appreciate life once again, she avers.*



Women must travel and often!

“To move, to breathe, to fly, to float, to gain all while you give, to roam the roads of lands remote, to travel is to live”- Hans Christian Anderson.

Travel to me has always been a rewarding experience, be it a long vacation in the Himalayas, or the shorter ones at the nearby Kodai hills. A travel is indeed shifting in time, place and mood. Have you ever wondered how a tour looks like to the woman of the house, with two little ones? A disaster, I say! When the whole family starts on a "yearly family vacation", you ought to vacate the house (literally!). A paraphernalia of child articles – starting from the giant sized diaper pack to the flasks, baskets, milk powder, bibs, utensils to sterilise, electric kettle, truckloads of towels and dresses, have to be neatly packed in 'just two suitcases' as per the instruction of the man of the house. "Travel light!", he keeps reminding you, as you pile up luggage after luggage.

The journey is a miserable procession if you are travelling by a car, with multiple pitstops for food, diaper

change, bottle change, and what not. You step down at the posh resort hoping against hope that you might visit your favorite joints of the town, but junior 2 decides to have a ball yelling his lungs out. Ear infection, too cold to take him out, he is tired and umpteen suggestions later, you are left with the peacefully sleeping infant in your arms at the resort room, while the rest of the family roams the town. Grown up kids? Well, the problems are different here. When child 1 has exams, child 2 has vacation and vice-versa. Schools have the perfect knack of splitting vacations for the children. If you still can plan one involving everyone in the family, then you've hit the jackpot.

Every woman needs her 'me time'

A woman all through her life spends more time worrying about the family and caring for them. The most 'me time' women might have enjoyed would be BM and not AM. Marriage is that barrier that cuts short the 'me time'. The best 'me time' a married woman can get is the evening 'TV soap



time' that eats into her senses and time. Still, there are partners who understand the working women and share the travails of mundane everyday activities like cooking and cleaning. But who else can share the personal time and private space that most women need and are constantly denied?

Taking time off from family is itself a 'crime' to conservative families. "Look at your mom! Did she ever travel alone even to the neighbourhood ghee shop?", will be the first missile that one encounters when she announces her plan for a solo trip. The husbands and partners are a willing lot, in fact most of them encourage the women travelling alone or in groups, so long as they get the mothers and fathers-in-law to care for the children. It is P-A-R-T-Y-T-I-M-E when the wifey is on tour! Who steps in and stalls these endeavors of the women? Her parents, of course! Starting from lectures on 'responsibility towards family' to citing examples of such 'free' women from the near and dear families, they will try their best to reverse your decision. Then comes the hardest part – planning a womens' only trip.

I tell you, planning a trip with women is harder than NASA sending women to space. You may be a rocket scientist and plan your moves well, but to your girlfriend, you are always the 'careless bugger' who doesn't know the difference between passport and ration card. When you decide on visiting the museum, one of the 'gangstistas' will suggest go-karting. Come on, you visit Mahabalipuram seashore sprinkled with 1,000 year-old temples, and your girl plans go-karting on the beach sand. Ah, I should thank my stars for the 'me time', watching the adventure freak go-karting as I look longingly at the temple towers looming behind us.

Who must you go with

Finding a friend who shares the same passion as you, is the foremost prerequisite for planning a trip with friends. Even if friends don't cooperate, try making friends on group tours. Depending on your likes and dislikes, you may end up making your best friend or worst enemy at the end of the trip. What is wrong in trying? Solo trips are much easier, but try telling that to the family, you will be met with glances cold enough to melt a glacier. Solo trips are for the more adventurous of the tribe, not for centrally controlled women like us. We are left with no choice than being stuck with the go-karting girl. Hobson's choice, you see!

Three of us women friends planned a trip to a town two hours away from our city recently. The moment we planned a trip, the 'permission phase' was planned as a week. One week to obtain permissions for a day long trip starting and ending the same day! Next came the where to go and what to see. Thankfully we three were interested in heritage and so we discussed what to see and what not in our whatsapp group, and were armed with loads of information before we set off on our journey. The travel again was thankfully in the car of one of us, and we ensured we had the known 'driver anna' to ensure safety in case of trouble. The morning departure got delayed because our senior friend planned to cook idlis for breakfast. I had the luck of packing off straight from home without the mandatory 'cooking ritual' of the day. Lucky me!

We set off to "Chaliye Puducherry to Vanakkam" and roamed about famed temples and churches of the town. We were greeted with total casualness and calm wherever we went, as the three musketeers. A visit to the town's famed restaurant for lunch and burp...we were ready for another round of street walking. We bought flower crowns to adorn our heads and took groupies. Then another one, posing with a pouting smiley cushion. Then another hugging the century old lamp post. And another through soap bubbles floating by the beach. I don't remember when I had felt so care-free and happy as we sat on the rocky beach, our hair being whipped apart by the wind. The waves roared, echoing the happiness in us and as we blabbered and laughed till tears shone in our eyes, came the alarm call. "Where are you?", the dreaded question echoes cutting above the noise of waves. "We are about to start", I say in a quiet, clipped voice. Another of our friends gets her call, "Mom, where and what shall I order for dinner?", and the bubble is burst. We sit back in the car, listening to Janaki humming la-la-la-la, with mixed emotions. Sad that the day was about to end and happy to reminisce the trip and the happiness.

Once a while, it is okay to be free. Once a while, it is alright to take some 'me time' off. It is perfectly normal to go on a girls-only trip, occasionally. Once a while it is good to break away from the mundane and do unexpected things. It is alright to do all that you want and not feel guilty about it. As I type this, my passport leaves flutter near me, reminding me of the next 'girls-trip' I will be embarking upon by the week end to Bhutan. They say Bhutan is the land of the thunder dragon. Hopefully, thunder dragon will meet this woman worse than him/her. And I will be back to tell the stories from Druk Yul!



Nivedita Louis is a writer, blogger and social activist by choice. Bitten by the travel bug, and smitten by nature, she loves travelling and cooking. She blogs at www.cloudninetalks.blogspot.com.

A carful of dogs

*Travelling with a pet was unheard of just a decade ago in India. But today, with the proliferation of dog owners, dog-friendly homestays and resorts have come up in a big way too. Hence, the need for a checklist of things to do and carry when travelling with pets, says **Anushree Thamanna**.*



The writer with her pets with whom she travels often

Sitting on the hammock, embracing the sun's warmth and cradling an unopened book, it felt like I'd been here for days; like this was my life. In the distance I can hear the rustling of the leaves, the inaudible chatter of friends, and the promise of some peaceful days ahead.

I lean back into the hammock, the twining of the ropes imprinting themselves on the backs of my bare legs and arms as I stare up at the fullness of the jackfruit tree looming over me. Life can be so joyous; where do we belong, if not with nature. I let my mind wander, and I feel my eye lids heavy as they slowly force their way shut. It may have only been a few seconds, and I am jarred back to consciousness by multiple voices screaming, 'No, drop it', quite frantically too.

Hesitating and all too knowingly, I sit up and glance towards the portico of our pet-friendly home-stay for the weekend. Five humans running after one small dog, as six other varied breeds and sizes of dogs excitedly and blindly join in on the chaos, for fun; an amusing sight.

I resign to the comfortable position I was in just before this madness ensued, and as the exaggerated screaming fades into background music, I wonder how I got here.

A journey begun young

When I was younger, two and a half decades younger, I remember standing in the layout of our building, beaming at a community dog after I had just fed her, it was my first time. Looking back, I think of what it must've looked like from the outside. A five-year-old, standing proud, clutching an empty bowl as hundreds of red ants made their way up my feet and legs. Obviously, I didn't notice at the time, and armies of red ants have this habit, a terrible one in my opinion, of conspicuously hanging about for some seconds before deciding to go in on their victim.

Hundreds. All at once.

I'm only glad that when I reminisce, I still feel a deep sense of satisfaction from feeding a dog, knowing she would sleep well that night because of me, instead of the unimaginable pain of a leg that was swollen to thrice its size, or how even a bucket of iced water and a chilled Lolli did little to muffle my sobbing.

So that's how I got here.

Many moons and four rescued dogs later.

When we decided to adopt a dog, I knew he/she was going to be a part of my life, like a child would. In a country like India, this can be challenging. But not impossible. In fact, in just the last few years, the number of pet-friendly people and places have multiplied. There's a much-needed awareness about adoption of dogs, and for making dogs your family. Not your watchman.

So, of course, now that I'd decided that dogs are family, and my family and friends-like-family like to travel, I needed to find ways to travel with our dogs. Now this seems difficult, because honestly it can be. But there are ways you can make travel easy for your dogs and for you. Our dogs are rescued, which often means they have been separated from their mothers at an earlier than normal age, and/or have grown up under circumstances I know little or nothing about; they needed time to open up and trust us.

It's important to really learn to get to know your dogs and build a bond with them before you decide to take them on a road (or any other kind of) trip. Because all dogs are not the same. They have their own personalities and triggers. Think of a dog as an adult in the sense that not everyone is the same, they react differently to different situations; we must learn and respect who they are.

The dog-travel checklist

Once you know what makes your dog/s comfortable, it's important to follow a basic travel check-list that ranges from things to carry to things to prepare and be prepared for.

Where should you go?

This is easily the most important thing on your list. Confirm that the pet friendly place you're traveling to is indeed 'your' pet-friendly.

Make sure that the resort is safe for dogs in general, is enclosed within a compound, has pockets that can be cordoned off in case there's friction amongst dogs, and allows dogs in all spaces within the resort. The most important aspect is to ensure the staff are pet friendly. When you take your dogs on a vacation, it needs to be a relaxing and enjoyable experience for them too. Read up reviews extensively, and ask people who have visited the place for honest opinions, and then make your decision. Because I like to have access to a kitchen to store and cook their food, I prefer home stays, but sometimes resorts and hotels have balanced dog meals on the menu, so that works too.

Choose a place that has something for your dogs to do. It doesn't take much – an open space and a safe water body.

What should you carry?

While it's good for dogs to have new experiences, it's critical that you maintain some sense of routine and familiarity for them. So carry their things, items that make them feel secure – bed, bowls, toys, chewies, an extra set of harness, collar and leash, and so on. We have a bag that's dedicated for them, it resembles a diaper bag in structure, so we compartmentalise their things. I often include their towels



A pet resort, where the pets and their owners, can all relax!

and bathing accessories because they insist on diving into the filthiest pond, so this always comes in handy. A basic first-aid kit is critical to your dog's travel bag because you cannot always control a nose nose.

I don't read the newspaper, but I do subscribe to it, so we carry them on road trips; they're just super handy.

How do you prepare for travel?

This is where knowing your dogs comes in handy. Our dogs have motion sickness, so we choose to travel at the break of dawn, while they are on an empty stomach. We also have never travelled with them on more than a seven hour journey and if you are doing a longer journey, make sure you look up places you can stay at on the way to break up the monotony of the car ride. You can line the car seats with bedsheets or anything else to keep them comfortable and also hook them up to a seat belt for dogs. I personally haven't tried this because the car seat we use is like a cocoon in itself. We tend to pack the night before, just so we are not stressed out before travel. Dogs are very intuitive and you really want them to feel safe and calm before a trip.

Sometimes, especially if the journey is long, you may need to stop for toilet breaks. It is seriously important that you choose areas off the highway that are quiet and safe for them to go. Always keep them hooked on the leash, and keep a close watch on them and the surroundings, to ensure their safety.

What are the essential things to remember?

- Keep your dogs on the leash (hooked to the harness or use two leashes for the collar and harness each if your dog is known to be skittish) for the first few hours or even an entire day of your vacation, until you can see that he is comfortable with the space and people around him.
- If people and other dogs or loud sounds startle or scare your dogs, do not leave them off leash at all except in an enclosed area where you and they are within eye-sight of each other.
- Always ensure that your dog's collar has a name tag with their name and your number.
- If your dogs are like ours, and take time to trust people, then travel only with people your dogs have met and are comfortable with.
- Do not force your dogs to something they are scared off or uncomfortable with the hope that they will come to like it. Make sure that your dogs are well socialised before allowing them to mingle with others, and in the same note, make sure other dogs there are socialised so you can leave your dogs safely around them.
- Dogs may fight but before they get into a fight there are plenty of warning signs they give off and it is your duty as a pet parent to understand these signs as well as triggers that



Being amid nature, with your pets, is a joy indeed

lead to a fight.

- Dogs are easily excited in new places, and can roam around endlessly looking for new sniffs, but you need to make sure they get adequate rest. Otherwise you will have a grumpy puppy on your hands.
- Dogs are wonderfully adaptable but it's up to us to allow them to do so in a way that is enriching to who they are, and to the bond you share with them.

I bring myself back to this quaint little homestay in Coorg, miles and miles away from a tarred road, and I feel blessed that I can share my life with a dog. I feel like I did as a five-year-old, dreaming of the time a dog will sleep well again, because of me.



Anushree Thamanna is an animal lover who has a special fondness for rescued dogs. A social media copywriter and marketing geek by profession, her passion for animals has allowed her to be blessed by many an abandoned dog, inspiring her advocacy towards the 'adopt don't shop' philosophy.

A story of glory, and neglect

*In India we show amazing apathy for the architectural treasures of our past, even though we are willing to travel miles to see such monuments. **Rashmi Oberoi** writes about the famous Sanchi Stupa, which awes its visitors, but is also a victim of neglect.*



Sanchi Stupa, a World Heritage Site in Madhya Pradesh, is one of the oldest stone structures built over the relics of the Buddha

A day out to Sanchi recently, took me back in time. I remembered with sheer nostalgia my childhood sojourns to such legendary places with my parents – road trips laced with historical descriptions of their grandeur, beauty and magnificence, through my father. Driving through India is nothing short of an adventure. There is so much to soak in and imbibe.

However, as we drove through rather dilapidated stretches of the highway from Bhopal – it is about 50 km away, and reached there, without much fanfare, hoardings or even a board showing the turn and path to the Stupa...the aura of the splendour associated with these monuments, as fixated in my mind since childhood, crumbled. We really need to support preservation through advocacy and action.

A tale of apathy

The state of utter dilapidation, disrepair and degradation, has to be seen to be believed. Rampant apathy of

those concerned with the maintenance and upkeep of the premises is writ large everywhere. The broken cobbled paths, garbage strewn on either side of the route leading to the stupa, leaves you ashamed as you see a multitude of local and foreign visitors making their way to the stupa.

On entering, the dome of the Sanchi Stupa looks perfectly intact, and blows your mind away by its sheer beauty. There is a sense of peace and solitude as you walk around the site. Luckily, the sun wasn't harsh and the cloudy skies kept us cool, as we traversed the length and breadth of the grounds. This UNESCO World Heritage Site surprised me in many ways.

What it tells of a great king

A visit to Sanchi brings alive the awe you felt as a child, when you opened your history books and read the tales of Emperor Ashoka.

(continued on page 30...)

KNOW INDIA BETTER



Odisha

An eastern odyssey

The state of Odisha offers an enviable array of destination for every type of tourist - the nature lover, the pilgrim, the wildlife enthusiast, the beach bum, et al. One has to visit this state to really experience the sheer diversity and magic of its destinations.

*Text : Anuradha Dhareshwar
Photos: Madhusudan Garud*



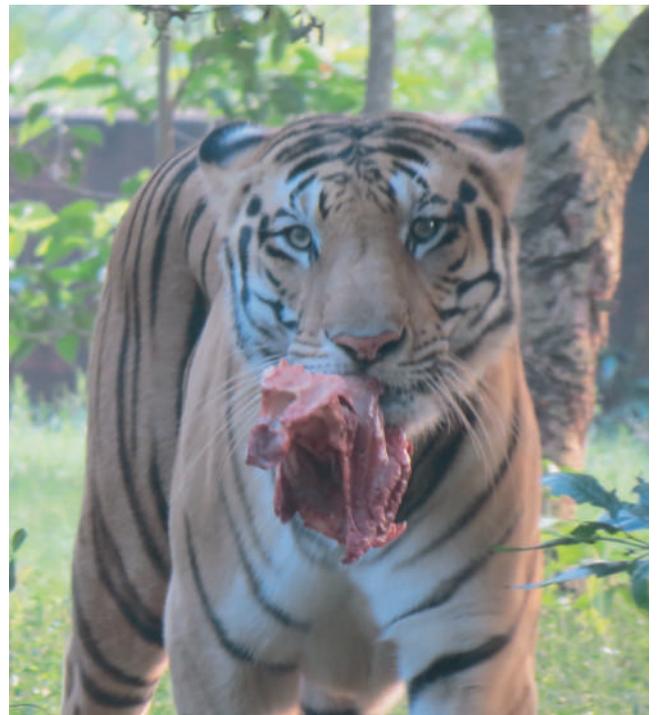
A pair of Royal Asiatic Lions relax at the Nandankanan Zoological Park

It was a warm October afternoon when our flight landed in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha. As we waited to collect our luggage, my eyes fell on rows of huge colourful lanterns dangling from the high ceiling inside the airport lounge. Diwali was around the corner, and I recognised the gently swaying lanterns as those made by the famous Pipli craftsmen of Odisha. The vibrant colours lifted our sombre mood on a sultry day as we drove to our hotel in a tourist cab. After settling into our rooms and a quick lunch of rice and spicy fish curry made in Odisha style, we headed for the Nandankanan Zoological Park, a short distance from the hotel.

Nandankanan – the celestial garden

The zoological park spread over 400 hectares, is home to a large variety of mammals, birds and reptiles, some of them endangered species, but its most famous occupant is the white tiger. Nandankanan had shot to fame some years ago, when a pair of normal coloured tigers gave birth to a white tiger. Tigers have always eluded me on my visits to some of the famous wildlife sanctuaries in India; so the thought of seeing a white tiger – a rare species, even if it was in captivity, excited me. At least, I was sure of ‘sighting’ one, I chuckled to myself, as we began the walk inside the park.

The afternoon sun was beating down on our faces,



The white tiger looking for a quiet spot to enjoy his dinner

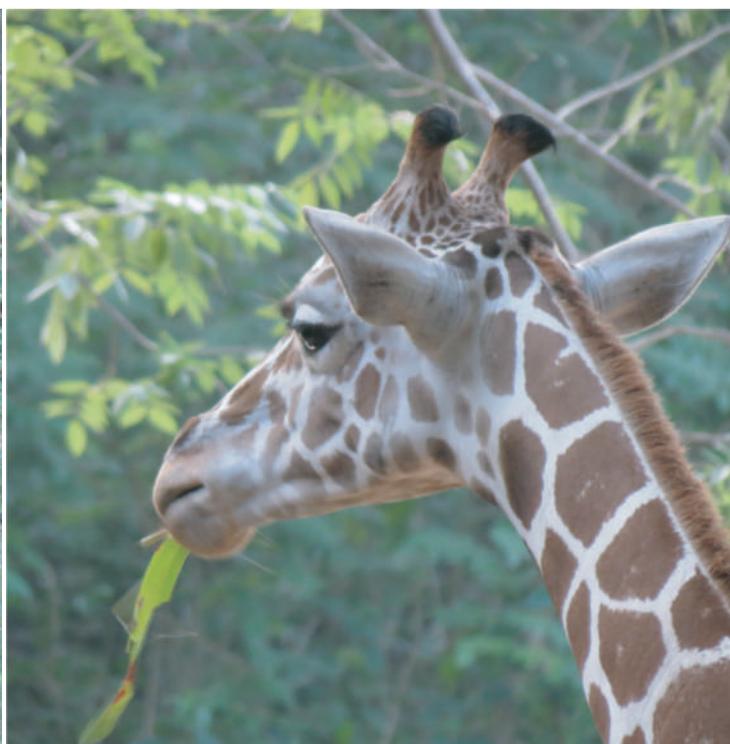
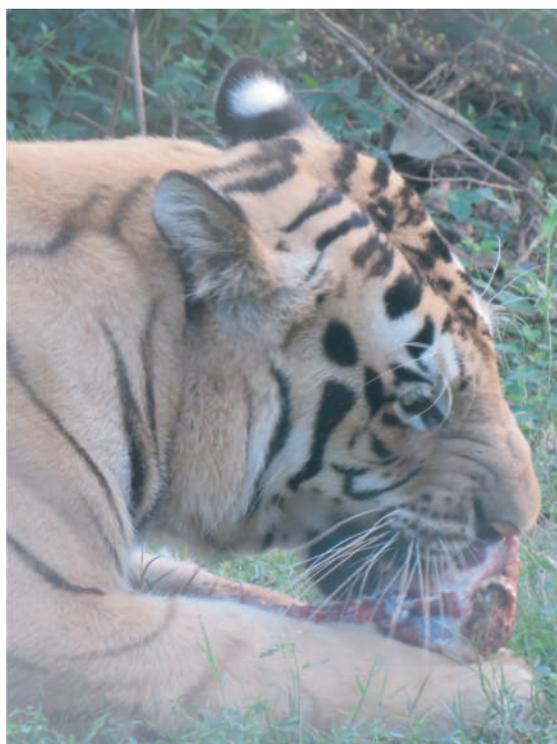
non-stop chatter of visitors inside the park was loud enough to scare away some of the simians, swinging merrily, from the trees. However, the huge canopy of trees in the park provided relief to our scalding heads, and made the walk somewhat pleasant. After admiring herds of spotted deer, antlers, and watching the antics of a bear, we came to a large enclosure that housed a pair of the Royal Asiatic Lions. Oblivious to the throng of visitors trying to find vantage points to watch them, the pair sat far from the madding crowd, playfully licking and nudging each other, displaying none of their wild side. As cameras went click, click, trying to capture the romantic felines, the male, let out a big yawn right into our cameras. As if it wanted to give the visitors their tickets' worth, he then got up to patrol, halting briefly close to the barricade, shaking his head to show off his shiny golden mane, inviting loud gasps from the crowd. Satisfied, the lion strode off coolly, without throwing a second glance at the visitors.

A few metres ahead was another large enclosure with the signboard and picture of the famed white tiger. But the occupant was nowhere in sight for a long time, and my heart sank a bit, thinking that I was going to leave the park without "sighting" the tiger. Just then, far away, on the other side of the enclosure near a heap of dry leaves, there was a slight movement, and as a white form rose to walk towards the cage, there was pin drop silence in the crowd. It was the white tiger! But before the visitors could have a glimpse, it had disappeared into a cage, only to come out within minutes holding fresh red meat between its jaws. The sight of the tiger striding unhurriedly towards us was thrilling enough to compensate for all the unsuccessful tiger trails I had, had so far. Spotting a shady, secluded place far from the din, it

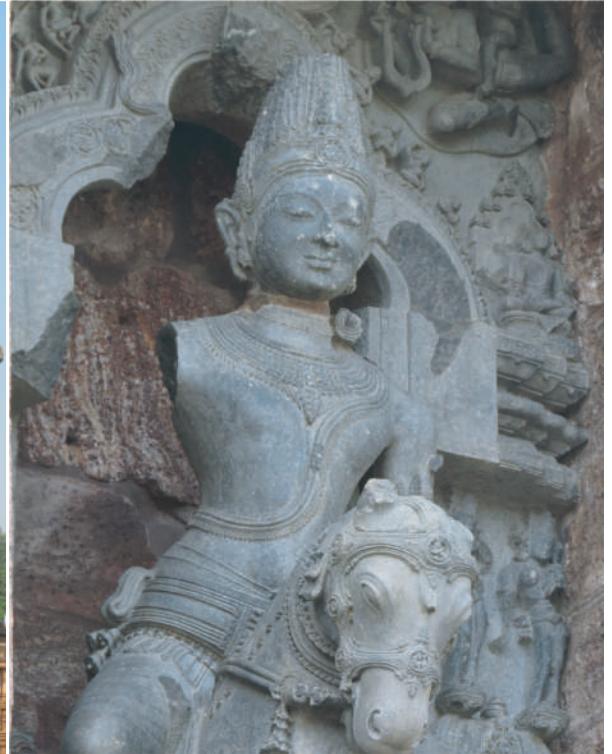
settled itself comfortably, to enjoy an early dinner.

As the sun was beginning to mellow, we proceeded to enjoy the other inmates of the zoo, and also the natural beauty of the park. Nandankanan is the only zoo in India, which has some rare species of animals and birds like the Patas Monkey, Eastern Rosella Open-billed Stork, Indian Pangolin, Orangutan, Burmese Python, Green-winged macaws, Cinereous Vulture, and Nicobar Pigeon. The park had shot into limelight in 1980 for the successful captive breeding of the endangered 'gharials', which are now found in large numbers in the zoo. The Malayan Giant Squirrel, mouse deer, sloth bear, brow-antlered deer, zebra, giraffe, siamese crocodile, Indian porcupine, swamp deer, grey heron, are the other residents of the zoo. The park has a large botanical garden with some exotic flora, and the beautiful Kanjia Lake, a wetland of national importance.

As the sun went down, a crimson, golden hue, engulfed the park, giving it an ethereal look, and it was not difficult to guess why this park is called Nandankanan, which in Indian mythology means the 'celestial garden'. It was getting dark and cooler inside the park, as our feathered friends made their way home, twittering loudly. As we gazed at the sky to look at the winged creatures, a large numbers of bats could be seen hanging from the branches of the tall trees, looking at the world upside down. There were also a number of giant spider webs, some bridging two trees and a few hanging loose, just a little over our heads. As the zoo attendants were getting ready to close the gates of the park, we hurried towards the exit and made our way to the nearby stalls for some refreshments.



The tiger settles down to enjoy his meal; (right) A giraffe munching on some greens inside the park

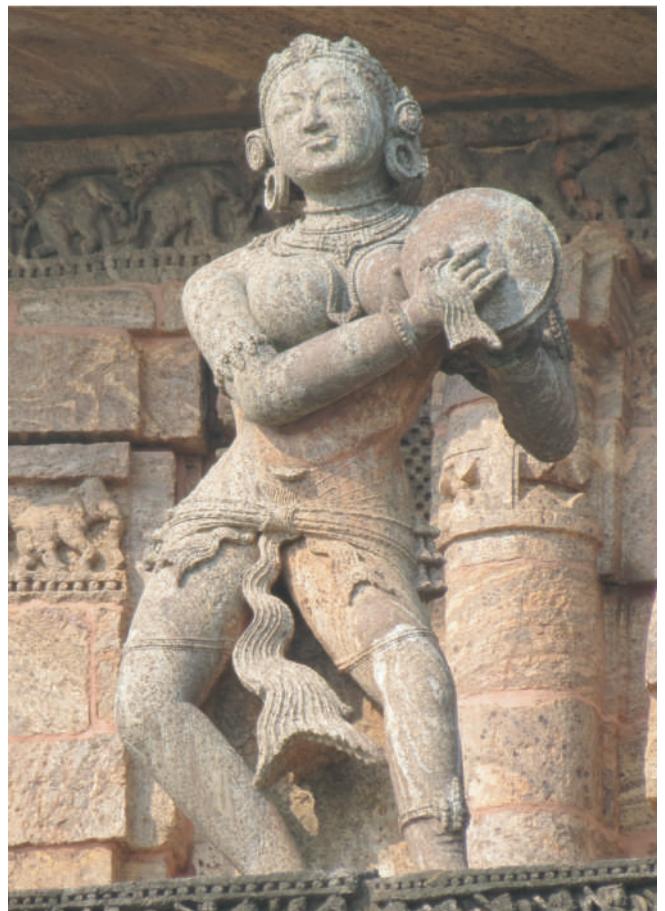


The Konark Sun Temple; (right) A statue of the Sun God

The Konark Temple

Early next morning, we set out to visit the famed Sun Temple of Konark, a 65 km drive from Bhubaneswar, declared as a world heritage site by UNESCO in the year 1984. However, we missed the glorious sight of the first rays of the sun falling on the temple. Konark gets its name from *kona* (corner) and *arka* (sun), and is situated in the north-east corner of the temple town of Puri. The structure which stands today is actually the entrance to the main temple. The main temple which enshrined the presiding deity has broken down, and only the remains can be seen. Even from a distance, this architectural marvel built in the middle of the 13th century, by the great ruler King Narsimhadeva I of the Ganga dynasty, looks striking. It is said that the king was so captivated by the beauty of the sunrise and the roaring sea that he decided to build this temple at this site, on the bank of the Bay of Bengal. The sea has now receded, and is far from the temple. It took twelve years and nearly 1,200 artisans led by the king's chief architect Bishu Maharana, to build this temple dedicated to the Sun God.

The temple is designed in the form of a celestial chariot mounted on 24 giant wheels, each nearly 10 ft in diameter, and drawn by seven galloping horses. We were spellbound by the detailed carvings on the temple walls. It is difficult to fathom how the artisans of the time could have filled out every inch of space on the structure with such intricate carvings and figurines, purely from imagination. On the south, west and north walls of the temple are images of the Sun God, positioned to catch the sun rays at dawn, noon and sunset, the three *prahars* (traditional Indian time).



Sculpture of a dancing woman

The entrance to the temple is from Nata Mandir or the dancing hall on the eastern gateway. It is a big pillared hall built on high plinth and is roofless. The floor has beautiful motifs and was used for offering dances by the Devadasis during the worship of the Sun God. Its basement pillars are carved with dancing figurines playing different musical instruments.

The base of the temple has figures of lions, elephants, horses, crocodiles, birds, warriors, musicians, dancers, Hindu deities, and events during that time. The wheels of the chariot elaborately carved with figures of animals, foliage and women, among other things, represent the 'Wheel of Life'.

The monument is surrounded by a beautifully landscaped garden. Every year, in December, tourists from India and abroad visit this heritage site to attend the popular Konark dance festival, where celebrated Indian classical dancers, gracefully perform against the backdrop of the temple. Though I could not time my visit to attend the festival, I could visualise, how magical the place must be getting transformed into. I could imagine the stone figures of the dancing women on the temple walls come to life to enthrall the audience.

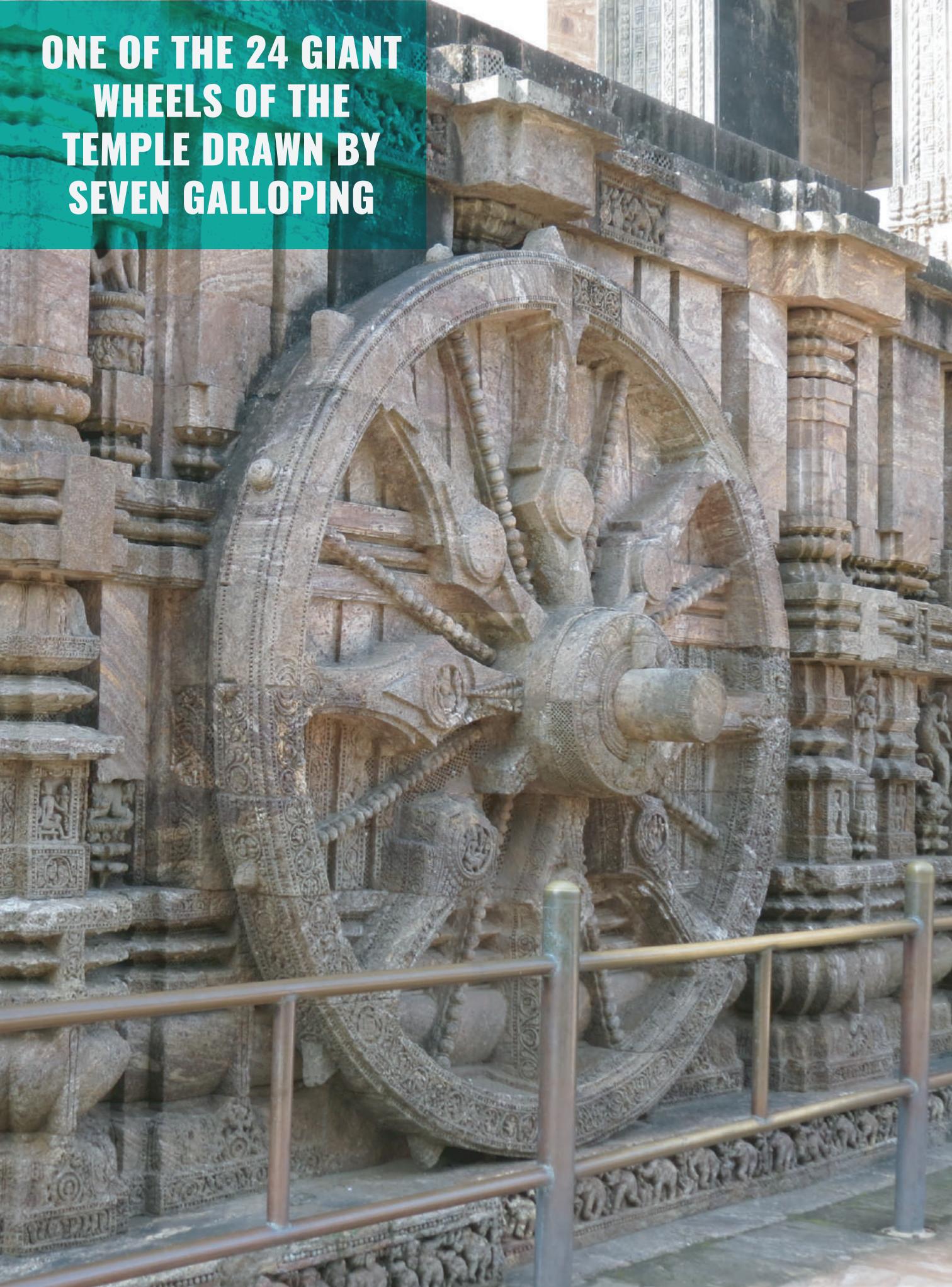


Gajasingha mounted on an elephant at the entrance to the Nata Mandir



Intricate carvings on the outer wall of the Nata Mandir

**ONE OF THE 24 GIANT
WHEELS OF THE
TEMPLE DRAWN BY
SEVEN GALLOPING**





The Sun Temple complex has beautiful sculptures and elaborate carvings

As I left the temple premises, I was reminded of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore`s description of Konark: “Here the language of the stone surpasses the language of the man”.

The legend of Chandrabhaga

Just three kilometers from Konark, on our way to the temple town of Puri, we passed by the picturesque Chandrabhaga beach. Once upon a time, the flowing sea ran all the distance to touch the base of the Konark Temple. But now the sea has receded. Our driver Kailash, a young local lad, coaxed us to visit the beach. But it was too hot to leave the cool comforts of the car and venture out onto the burning sands, so we briefly stopped by to take a few pictures and proceeded to Puri. On our way, Kailash told us that the water of Chandrabhaga has medicinal properties, and people with physical ailments come here for healing.



The waters at Chandrabhaga beach are said to have healing properties



The Jagannath Temple of Puri (source: Wikipedia)

A good storyteller, he regaled us with the mythological story of Sambha, the son of Lord Krishna, who is said to have been cured of leprosy after carrying out a penance on the banks of the river.

He narrated another interesting story about Chandrabhaga, who was the daughter of a sage. It seems, she was so beautiful that the Sun God descended on Earth, and proposed marriage to her. But the damsel declined. Humiliated, the Sun God chased her, and a frightened Chandrabhaga ran and jumped into the river and ended her life. Chandrabhaga is revered by the locals even today. At the annual Chandrabhaga Fair held in the month of Magha, lakhs of people visit the beach to pay homage to her by taking a dip in the waters, and offer prayers to the Sun God.

Kailash, who spoke fluent Hindi, told us about his stay in Mumbai, where he worked at a Bhiwandi powerloom for five years before returning to his home in Bhubaneswar. Whenever he missed the sea in Mumbai, he visited the Chowpatty and Juhu beaches. He recalled, how he was once literally taken for a ride by a cabbie, who promised to show him India's superstar Amitabh Bachchan from close quarters. "We waited outside in our cab at

a distance, for more than an hour, and all he showed me was the actor's bungalow and then overcharged me", he smiles, emptying a sachet of flavoured tobacco into his mouth.

The temples of Puri

We soon reached Puri. After parking the car at a distance, we walked on the main road leading to the famous Jagannath Temple. It is the road where the famous *ratha yatra* (chariot procession) is held annually. Among the existing temples of Odisha, the Jagannath Temple built in the 12th century is the highest, and the temple spires could be seen from a distance. As our visit to the temple coincided with an auspicious day of the Diwali festival, there was a long wait for the darshan of Lord Jagannath (Lord Vishnu) also known in Hindu mythology as the Lord of the Universe. Unlike most Hindu temples, where the icons of deities are carved out of stone or metal, here the idol of Lord Jagannath is made of wood. Like some of the famous temples of India, this temple too has become a victim of commercialisation.



Birds frolicking at Chilika Lake



A heron watching the boats pass by

After a quick darshan, as we made our exit, our senses were overpowered by the rich aroma of flavours emanating from the sprawling temple kitchen, where prasad bhojan was being cooked in pure ghee, in large earthen pots.

We visited the smaller, but equally beautiful temples in the neighbourhood, and after lunch, left for an excursion at the famous saltwater Chilika Lake.

Cruising the Chilika Lake

After negotiating the fare, we hired a small boat

from Satapada to cruise Asia's largest brackish lagoon, dotted with small islands, the more popular ones being Nalaban, Kalijal, Parikud and Satapada. Satapada (meaning a group of seven villages) is closer to Puri, lies to the south of Chilika Lake, and is home to the critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphin.

Our boatman promised us a sighting of the dolphin, as we cruised the lake for two hours to reach the Dolphin Point, in the hope of seeing one. Everytime there was a small movement in the calm waters, there was a wave of excitement in the boat, and we would squint our eyes in the afternoon sun, to look for the dolphins in the shimmering



Fishermen prepare to lay their net at Chilika



The setting sun on the beach as seen from Rajahansa Island

lake. We were, finally, lucky to spot one, but it disappeared in one quick splash, making us wonder if it was a mirage.

On our way back, we saw a few birds, mostly herons, and egrets, watching dispassionately at the passing boats. It was too early for migratory birds to visit Chilika, we were told. We then cruised towards the Sea Mouth Island, another famous spot, where Chilika Lake meets the Bay of Bengal. The meeting point was an enchanting sight from the Rajahansa Island, where we had disembarked to watch this phenomenon.

The Rajahansa Island itself was a small getaway that had a few nondescript shops serving tea and savouries made from the fresh catch of the day – fried fish, shrimps and crabs, to the island visitors. The beach was just a short walk from there, where one could see thousands of little red

crabs crowding the shore, scurrying their way into the sandy holes. The island offered a spectacular view of the sunset, and as evening descended, we got into our boat. The rest of the journey was pleasant, as cool breeze blew on our tired faces, as we sailed away from the island to the jetty from where we had boarded.



Anuradha Dhareshwar is Editor, *One India One People*.

Our Last Six Issues

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“To travel is to learn”.

Bhavesh Oza is Vice-President, International Market, Blue Star Air Travel Services, which has a wide footprint across India.

Joining the family-owned travel business after an engineering degree was a natural choice for Bhavesh, an avid traveler.

Rajasthan in India and Copenhagen in Denmark are his favourite travel destinations. He believes that India has a huge untapped potential as a favoured tourist destination. In a

tete-a-tete with **Anuradha Dhareshwar**, Bhavesh says, if India could invest in infrastructure, and the citizens contribute in keeping the environment clean and green, Indian tourism will be in a different league altogether.

Tell me briefly about yourself and your company Blue Star. What services does your company Blue Star provide to the tourist?

Bookonbluestar.com is an Online Travel Consolidator which has a network of 35,000 travel agents across India, with sales representatives in more than 33 cities. It was started as a family enterprise by my father and uncle in the year 1987. Our products include booking air tickets, IRCTC train tickets, hotels, bus, travel insurance, tour packages, visa and foreign exchange. Any passenger who wishes to travel anywhere in the world (including India) can deal with a Bookonbluestar.com appointed travel agent across India.

When did you start working for Blue Star? What sets your company apart from the rest?

I joined Blue Star in June 2009, and have been associated with my company in various capacities since then. Besides providing a wide range of products under one roof, the USP



of our company is its work culture. At BookonBluestar.com we believe, “We are an online company with a face”. Therefore, right from the junior staff to the management level, everyone is accessible to the customer. This is what sets us apart from the rest.

What are the recent travel trends you have witnessed among Indian travelers?

Leisure travel has increased manifold recently, and the Indian traveler has matured. Gone are the days when domestic travellers booked a typical 4-5 nights itinerary to traditional destinations for sight-seeing. Today, the Indian tourist is well-informed and yearning for more. They not only want to explore new places, but also want to know about the local people, their culture and cuisine. They are adventurous and want to experience something new.

Weekend travel has also become popular. Whenever there is a long weekend coming, people want a break from work, make short trips to places in India, or even outside to places like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sri Lanka, and Bali.

Which are the hot destinations in India and what makes them preferred destinations?

Travelling in India depends at what time of the year one is travelling. For example, if it is summer, people like to travel to hill stations in North India. Shimla, Manali are favourite destinations. The Shimla-Kalka route is so scenic that people love to travel by the Pardarshi Train from Shimla to Kalka and back. The journey is not only affordable, but is a visual treat, which earlier, travellers could experience only in international destinations like Europe. If the travel is during winter, then Rajasthan happens to be a favourite choice, followed by Kerala. In Rajasthan, a Jodhpur-Jaisalmer trip (en route Kuldhara, an abandoned village which has a unique story to tell) is popular with tourists. Jodhpur offers a royal experience to the tourist with the Mehrangarh Fort and Jaswant Tada being major attractions. It is also a place to enjoy authentic Rajasthani cuisine like the mirchi vada, dal baati and kachori. Spending a night on the Sam sand dunes in Jaisalmer is an unforgettable experience, which I would urge every traveller must experience. A visit to the Jaisalmer Fort, Patwonke Haweli, and a city tour are a must do in Jaisalmer. In South India, Kerala is a preferred destination. People love to take the backwater ride and trips to Munnar and Thekkady. If you are on temple, run then nothing can beat Tamil Nadu or Karnataka.

Which are the preferred international destinations? And why?

Singapore, Dubai and Thailand are traditional destinations where approximately more than a million Indians travel every year. Sri Lanka and Malaysia too have emerged as favourite destinations. The availability of flights to these places, the ease of getting visa/visa on arrival, the shopping experience, et al, have contributed to making them popular with Indian tourists. Indian cuisine, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, is also easily available at most of these places today, which is drawing senior citizens and people with specific food preferences. Europe is also a preferred destination with Indian travelers for the same reasons. Of late, Vietnam, Cambodia and Bhutan in Asia, and Croatia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, in Eastern Europe, are emerging as the new favourite tourist destinations. Australia and New Zealand are traditional favourites for families and honeymooners. Fiji has also emerged as a hot favourite.

Do Indian travelers like to travel as a group or do they prefer customised family tours? What are the advantages for those who travel as group as against small family tours?

Indians love to travel as a group, but customised tours for small families are also in demand. Travelling in groups is always more fun, and works out to be economical for the traveler. You also make new friends and memories. With small family tours, the advantage is you can customise your holiday the way you want to. You have the

freedom to choose your travel dates and the time you wish to spend at a particular place. Basically, you are not bound by a particular itinerary; you have your own itinerary.

How has travel impacted you as a person?

Travel has taught me many things. Although, I have travelled to just about 25 countries, I have learnt one thing or the other from every country, which I have then tried to incorporate in my life. For example, visiting Japan taught me the importance of hardwork and quality. Honesty is something one can learn from Swiss nationals. No one can beat the way citizens of Denmark make an effort in keeping their environment green and clean. I therefore take the liberty of tweaking Hans Christian Andersen quote which says, "To travel is to live". I would like to say, "To travel is to learn".

What are the major challenges for service providers like you? Is it a good time to be in the travel business?

Every business comes with a set of challenges, our industry is no different. But trust me, travel business is exciting, and we take on challenges head on. Be it taxation issues or Rate of Exchange issues, we are geared up to deal with it. We are a growing online company, so we have to constantly keep pace with technology and customer support. We consider everyday as a new day, and try to find innovative solutions to every challenge.

As a much travelled person, which are your favourite destinations in India and abroad?

I love visiting Rajasthan any number of times, simply because it is colourful, the food is great, and the place has great history. Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer are my favourite cities, and I have spent many summers at Mt. Abu visiting many old and unexplored temples. Holi is celebrated in a unique way at Mt. Abu, and I enjoy being there to participate in the festival. Among international destinations, it is Copenhagen, Denmark. I love the charming waterways and the classic open-faced sandwich, which is a sumptuous meal. People are environmentally conscious, and the best way to explore the city is by cycle, which most locals use to go to work.

Abroad, tourists can learn to cook a local cuisine or learn new activities, when they travel. Does India offer such options to tourists?

India too has a lot to offer in terms of culinary experiences, as every state has a unique cuisine to boast. Today, there are cooking classes conducted for tourists, who can enroll and learn during their stay. There is also huge potential to develop adventure sports, but the options here are limited due to lack of infrastructure. If we invest in infrastructure, then Indian tourism will be altogether in a different league.

Which are the untapped destinations in India, and what needs to be done to make them popular?

There are many places to list, but Hampi in Karnataka grabs my attention. This is followed by national parks in India – Ranthambore in Rajasthan, Kaziranaga in Assam, Badhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh, Jim Corbett in Uttarakhand, and Tadoba in Maharashtra, all have huge potential, and we must do much more to promote these places to both the domestic and international tourists. Promoting national parks automatically promotes the cities nearby.

Kashmir has always been a favourite destination for Indians. How has the trouble in the valley affected tourism?

The valley has dominated the tourism industry for decades and charmed travellers since ages, and it will continue to do so. Yes, the continuous trouble has affected tourism, particularly the last year has been very bad. I wish the problems are sorted out quickly, and tourists get to enjoy their favourite destination soon.

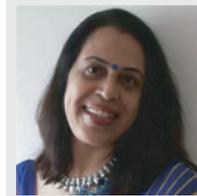
Is India a safe country to travel, especially for women?

Well, India is absolutely safe, although there have been a few unfortunate incidents with respect to women's safety. Laws have to be enforced strictly and justice has to be dispensed quickly to restore tourist confidence.

What according to you needs to be done to improve infrastructure in India?

The last few years have seen the Government taking many initiatives to improve infrastructure like roads, toilets, etc., which is laudable. Connectivity via road and railway has also improved, but still a lot remains to be done. We need to improve the quality of railway coaches and safety measures on road. We need more fuel and food outlets on highways, and also accommodation options.

Personally I believe, as citizens, we also need to take up certain responsibilities and ensure that the schemes launched by the Government are executed well. We do not care enough for our environment or respect laws. I have seen many a times, we ourselves don't use dustbins, litter in public place and misuse toilets. Recently, there were reports of damages on the Tejas Express on the Mumbai-Goa route. This is condemnable. It is the responsibility of every citizen to keep public places clean, and be a guardian of public property.



Anuradha Dhareshwar is Editor, One India One People.

WHO AM I?

*I am a proud Indian,
citizen of the world community,
inhabiting this lonely ...
but lovely little ... ★
planet ...*

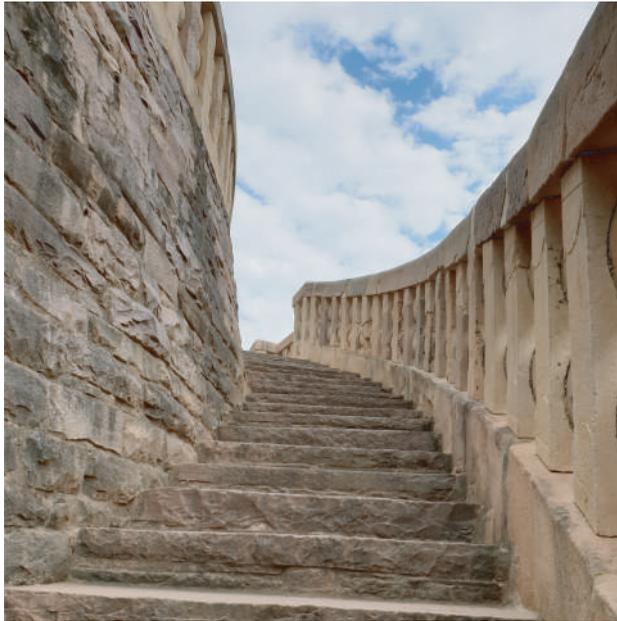


Earth...



A story of glory, and neglect

(...continued from page 16)



A Shunga balustrade and staircase

He built this great stupa and made the town of Sanchi sacred as well as popular, in the 3rd century BC. Later, a British cavalry officer rediscovered and revived the inviolability of the town in 1818. Buddhist influence over the central Indian landscape had declined by the 12th century, and the stupas and other monuments slipped into obscurity. As Buddhism recessed, these architectural marvels were no more considered useful, and eventually, were completely forgotten.

It was in the year 1818 that British officer General Taylor discovered the site of Sanchi. He set about restoring its glory. Between 1912 and 1919, these beautiful ancient structures were restored to their present condition under the able supervision of Sir John Marshall, Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Today around 50 monuments remain on the hill of Sanchi, narrating the rise and fall of Buddhist art and architecture.

The Sanchi Stupa is more than a reliquary preserving the remains of Buddhist teachers and Buddhism. It shows the journey to enlightenment. Traditionally, stupas do hold relics of Buddha or influential Buddhist monks. But at the same time, these structures also explain how Buddha achieved enlightenment, freeing himself from the cycle of life and death.

The stupa consists of a base bearing a hemispherical dome (anda), symbolising the dome of heaven enclosing the earth. It is surmounted by a squared rail unit (harmika) representing the world mountain, from which rises a mast

(yashti), symbolising the cosmic axis. The mast bears umbrellas (chatras) that represent the various heavens (devaloka). The Toranas present at the stupa indicate trust, peace, and courage.

The most interesting feature about the Sanchi Stupa is that Lord Buddha has been symbolically represented by footprints, wheels, thrones, etc., rather than by his own image. As per the legend, the name 'Sanchi' originated from the word 'Sanch', that means 'to measure'. Visiting this historical place will enlighten you in many ways. It is believed that originally the stupa was made of bricks. And in the later period, the current stone stupa was built on top of the brick one. The brick one is said to be only half in size of the new one. One needs to be thankful for the stone construction, as it has weathered many a storm. There are multiple stupas within the complex as well as around Sanchi that are made of brick, but have not withstood time. History says that during the Shunga period, the outer stone wall was constructed.

The town of Sanchi is naturally synonymous with Buddhist philosophy. Sanchi has been protecting these beautiful and sacred architectural wonders, just the way these wonders have been safeguarding ancient history and the art of the Mauryan period. The town, located in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh though, needs more visibility and infrastructure to handle the endless stream of visitors, most of whom are foreigners. The town barely has a handful of below average lodges and eating joints, and most visitors end up staying in Bhopal, and driving down for the day due to this.

As I stood at the entrance of the stupa, and soaked in the figurines and stories etched on these gateways, it made me realise that preserving history is important because it connects us to specific times, places and events that were significant milestones in our collective past. We must treasure remnants of our glorious past. The state of Madhya Pradesh is a perfect confluence of different kinds of heritage – natural, cultural and aesthetic. What is truly epic about its cultural repository are some of the geographical aspects emanating from history, and well, geology. Take for instance, the Tropic of Cancer line that passes through Vidisha district, another common stopover for enthusiasts, en route to the glorious Sanchi Stupa.



Rashmi Oberoi an army officer's daughter was lucky to travel and live all over India. She loves to write and has authored 2 story books for children - My Friends At Sonnenshine and Cherie: The Cocker Spaniel.

Restoring our pride

*This is a heartening story of the restoration of a century old school in Bangalore, which would otherwise have gone the way of several old heritage structures in India which are dilapidated, and uncared for. **Usha Hariprasad** writes about the restoration of the Fort High School, which has several interesting staircases, courtyards, ceilings, arches and gables, and is today, thankfully, restored.*



This century-old structure has Roman arches, gables and cornices

Last year, a century old house in Malleshwaram, Bangalore, was brought down. The grand 19th century bungalow known as Villa Pottipatti was run by Neemrana Group of Hotels as a heritage hotel. However, the bungalow was recently razed down when it went into the hands of private developers. No heritage laws or bodies to stop it. A little before that the city had lost another century old building – a classical colonial structure known as Krumbiegel Hall. Krumbiegel, a botanist from Germany contributed to the horticultural landscape of Bangalore, Mysore, and a host of other cities in the country. Once again, no value for historic sites in the city.

Giving up on heritage

While some heritage struc-

tures fall prey to the rapid urban development, in some cases the owners themselves have no choice. 'There is a dearth of skilled masons for repairing old buildings. In some cases I have to end up paying double to get a mason. It is better to sell my hundred-year-old property rather than retain it,' mentioned a frustrated bungalow owner in the city.

There are other factors too that destroy heritage buildings. Environmental factors like moisture, sunlight, air pollution, temperature variations play a role too. Timber, bricks used in buildings can be affected by insects, moss, etc. Moisture in timber and bricks can lead to cracks in walls. Sunlight can also dry out and damage surfaces leading to cracks and discoloration. Traffic vibrations enter the foundations of buildings and

cause damage. Thus a dilapidated building is a cause of concern, and often gets pulled down by authorities. Unlike Singapore that has a National Heritage Board to look after sites of historic value and gives permission to the owner if any renovations have to be done or a structure has to be pulled down, in our country the legal laws for heritage monuments are very lax.

Fort High School – a heritage building

So it came as a nice surprise when the Bangalore Charter of Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) threw open the Fort High School of Bangalore to the public to check out the conservation efforts going on in this 112-year-old building. Built in 1907, it was one of the first government high schools in the princely State of Mysore.



The restoration at the Fort High School in progress

It started out as a boys' school and offered up to eight languages – Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Telegu, Kannada to name a few. Earlier there was a school in the same premises that was managed by the Fort Church. The school was once single storied; today, it is more than that. Occupying a three acre premises, having more than one floor with classrooms added, it has been thrown open to girls as well. The school has seen stalwarts like Kengal Hanumanthaiah – former chief minister of the State, H.S. Doreswamy--freedom fighter, cricketer G.R. Vishwanath, film actor Shakti Prasad, etc., as its students. For a short while, Mysore Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar too was a ward here.

The school along with a host of other buildings like Victoria Hospital, Summer Palace, armoury, form part of the old fort area. Apart from this, cannons and stone balls were

found during construction and excavation activities here, making this an important historic site. A couple of years ago this lime mortar building was not in a great condition. The walls were damp due to leakage, the clay roof tiles were damaged, and the floor, teakwood staircase were in a poor condition. The classrooms were pretty much useless, and the walls were badly in need of plaster. When INTACH did a survey it estimated the repair cost would come to about Rs. 2.5 crore. Ten months ago it started the restoration work. The focus was to repair roof tiles, floor, plaster the school walls with lime and mortar, repairing stairs and waterproofing of the building. And to see this first-hand, an open day was organised by INTACH.

The school architecture

The colonial building is quite attractive. It has a mix of vernacular

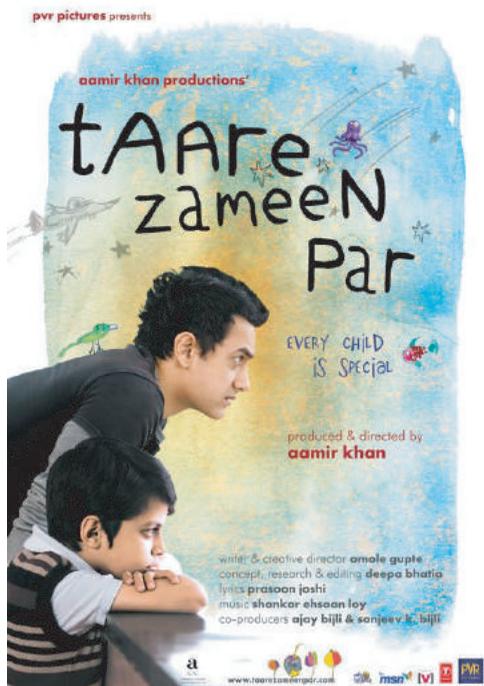
features like Madras terraces, teak wood staircase, central courtyard, etc. However it also has European features like Jack arches, Roman arches on windows and doors, Polonceau truss on ceilings, gables, cornices etc. While on the outside it looks quite English, inside it has the feel of a typical Indian classroom with a central courtyard and classrooms all around it. Sloping roofs with clay tiles, Madras terraces, teakwood staircase are all Indian elements added to the school.

The building was built in two phases. The front portion was probably built in 1907, and later an extension was added to it. This can easily be made out. The first phase has the traditional Madras terraces, while the second phase added later has Jack arches and reinforced brick ceilings.

(continued on page 35...)

The mental block

Indian films are not known for depicting differently abled people with any degree of sensitivity, or awareness of their particular challenges. This has to change, says **Shoma A. Chatterji**, as she dissects movies of the recent past.



Are our movies sensitive enough?

The main problem with the depiction of mental illness in Indian films is that it is not backed by the depth of research it demands. This comes across with even very successful films like *Taare Zameen Par*, where Ishaan is a victim of dyslexia, which is not a mental illness at all, but is a learning disability.

Path-breaking movies, yet...

Taare Zameen Par is a path-breaking film in the way it set off a trend among filmmakers who began to take a deeper look into the minds of people who are differently abled – genetically, physically and mentally. They are people with average and above-average levels of intelligence. But since they do not fall within our accepted notions of ‘normality’, we tend to alienate them from the mainstream. Most of the time, thanks to our ignorance, we cannot even recognise their problems, let alone acknowledge

them. The film turned out to be a miracle. It had all the ingredients of a masala film – songs, heart-tugging sentimental scenes, violence, a multi-layered story with twists and turns. But the message came across – good and strong.

By the same argument, the character Amitabh Bachchan plays in *Black* is of an alcoholic teacher who can teach and counsel children who are physically challenged. But towards the end of the film, he is shown affected by Alzheimer’s that keeps progressing with time. Yet, towards the end, the film shows that perhaps his memory is coming back which is medically impossible as of today. Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Black* evoked the wrath of medical specialists for its misrepresentation of Alzheimer’s which, they insist, is incurable. This incurable, degenerative and terminal disease was first described by German psychiatrist and neuropathologist Alois Alzheimer’s in

1906, and was named after him.

A recent feature film on Alzheimer’s and how it impacts not only the patient but also the entire family, came across very movingly in a film by Geeta Sahai called *I Remember*. *I Remember* is about Adhira Goswami and the intense mental pain she suffers when she just begins to realise that perhaps, she is losing her memory. Her family, comprising her husband Gautam who is a financial analyst in a corporate firm, daughter Shivani who is a research scholar, and their maid Renu, suffer as they grapple with the changed situation in their lives, and the changing equations between and among their relationships and interactions. She is diagnosed as an Alzheimer’s patient and this is just the onset of the ailment, the doctor informs. The very successful professional woman who holds a high-powered job in a television channel, “struggles with the gradual loss of identity and lack of



***I Remember* is a moving film about Alzheimer's disease**

identity and lack of control over her own life," says Sahai.

Other symptoms of Alzheimer's shown in passing are – Adhira having panic attacks when she cannot even remember what she is looking for, or, pointing out to a photograph of Gaurav to her maid and saying that this man must have taken away a hundred rupee note from her purse, hating to visit relatives or going out anywhere, repeating the same question, till Shivani gets annoyed and walks away, and so on.

"The facts are shocking – approximately 50 million in the world have Alzheimer's, four million Alzheimer's patients are from India and most striking – 2 out of 3 people with Alzheimer's are women. With these statistics, how could I not do anything? It was disturbing. The campaign call by Alzheimer's Disease International – every three seconds someone in the world develops Dementia/Alzheimer's made me realise that the time has come now where each second counts. Meeting caregivers made me understand the pivotal role they play in supporting Alzheimer's patients live a dignified life, which I have tried to show through my film – *I Remember*", says Sahai.

Hichki is much more than Tourette's Syndrome, which, simply defined is a genetic disorder characterised by vocal and motor tics. There is no cure for it till date. According to data provided at a 2006 conference by the National Institute of Neurologi

cal Disorders and Stroke, Tourette's Syndrome affects approximately six out of 1000 school children in the US. However, experts opine that it is impossible to find out the exact demographic break-downs of the percentage of TS-affected people in any population, because this neurological disorder has not been thoroughly addressed in any of the published literature or even on the TS Association's website. But it is not a mental disease. It is a genetically challenging condition where the patient is perfectly normal in every sense other than the chronic hiccups he/she suffers from for which there is no cure. *Hichki* deals with this very logically without either glamorisation or misinformation.

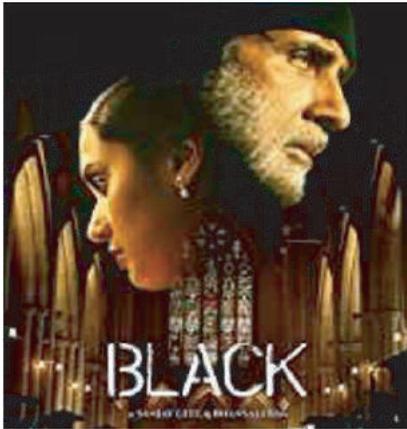
Stuttering and stammering again, is not a mental illness, but a genetic aberration. Those who stammer and stutter are as normal as you and me. But they are generally socially ostracised in certain ways because of their difficulty in speech issues.

Members of the Indian Stammering Association had, in the recent past, decided to file a petition in the Nainital High Court seeking legal action against *Golmaal-3* which shows one character who stammers endlessly, and is made fun of by the rest of the gang. The audience joins in the laughter and participates in the collective insult. "This promo portrayed stutterers in very bad light, like they are dim-witted people with less intelligence", says Nitin Tomar, an active member who moved this idea of filing a petition. Nitin is also

planning an online petition to CBFC, and to the Ministry of I&B, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare so that it acts as a deterrent in the derogatory portrayal of people who are differently abled or are born with minor defects.

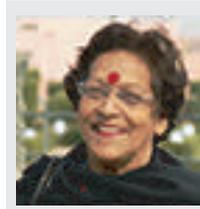
My Name is Khan zeroes in on the hero, Rizwan Khan, portrayed by Shahrukh, who suffers from Asperger's syndrome (ASD). Asperger's syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder. Victims of ASD show significant difficulties in social interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests. It differs from other autism spectrum disorders by its relative preservation of linguistic and cognitive development. Such people are often physically clumsy and use atypical language. There is no single treatment, and the effectiveness of particular interventions is supported by only limited data. Intervention is aimed at improving symptoms and function. The mainstay of management is behavioural therapy, focusing on specific deficits to address poor communication skills, obsessive or repetitive routines, and physical clumsiness.

Bangalore-based consulting psychiatrist Ajit Bhide was so angered by the misrepresentation of mental illness in the Ajay Devgun film *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* plagiarised from the Sean Penn film *I am Sam*, he wrote a scathing piece in the Karnataka edition of The Indian Psychiatric Society. "The director remains totally unclear about the condition of the hero, the exact handicap(s) he has, and does a great disservice by confusing autism with mental retardation," he writes. James M. Wall, editor of Christian Century magazine writes, "The slightest suggestion that a disability is to be either pitied or laughed at, destroys the integrity of the work. Because our society understands that disability is not funny and is not fatal. Rather, they happen in a person's life which must be received and handled with courage and growth. Films that make this point artistically serve as an education to each new generation regarding both the challenge and the opportunity of disabilities."



There are many more films that have been centered on mental issues such as *Barfi*, *Ghajini*, *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*, *Krazzy Four* and many others. According to some studies, cinema dramatises and

distorts images of mental illness, emphasising on its danger, criminality and unpredictability, with such images leading to negative reactions such as fear, rejection, derision and ridicule. Added to incorrect representations of the clinical picture is the often incorrect depiction of its management, treatment and rehabilitation. There is little distinction made by filmmakers, insist medical and psychiatric experts, between intellectual disability and psychotic disorder, and the character ends up with a bizarre depiction. The saddest part of this whole story is that when we watch films that are designed as powerful psychiatric melodramas, we respond with neither laughter nor fear, but pity for the bewildered victim. Is that what he would want?



Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards.

Restoring our pride

(...continued from page 32)

Interesting features of the school

There were some interesting architectural elements in the school. One of them was the Polonceau Truss with its eight ridges used in the roof design. It has timber, cast iron elements used in it, and gives the rooms an impressive look. For the uninitiated, the truss is a roof design of the 19th century. It is basically a structure that has triangular units all arranged according to a predefined pattern. The Polonceau Truss was invented in 1839 by an engineer Camille Polonceau. The truss started out with timber-iron, later on it adopted pure iron constructions as well.

Another interesting feature is that of the gables in the building. The gables have the Dhajji Diwari system, also known as the brick nogged construction. Such types of construction are most often found in Kashmir. The timber framework makes it earthquake resistant. Generally in buildings the elevation of upper floors is less compared to the lower floors. But in the Fort High school the upper floor has a higher elevation thanks to its

gables. The timber frame of the gables filled with brick masonry resists lateral deformations successfully. It also reduces the stress on the cornices – the ornamental features present in the front portion of the school building.

Conservation activities at school

Quite a lot of restoration work was carried out by the team involved in conservation of the building. The planks of Madras terrace were being replaced-not all, only the broken ones. The clay tiles on the sloping roofs were new. Some arches were being reconstructed; there was still work to be done to treat wooden and steel members on roof.

Use of traditional lime mortar

Lime mortar was getting used for wall plastering. 'The beauty of lime is it allows the structure to breathe, is durable and is also less susceptible to cracks', explained the team involved in restoration. The process of making the mortar is a long one. The quarried limestone is burnt in a kiln. The burnt limestone is made into putty by soaking it in water. The slaked lime is then mixed with sand,

Surkhi and organic additives like jaggery, bael fruit or wood apple pulp to produce mortars and plasters. It is then applied on walls and checked to see if its consistency is right, then several layers are applied on walls. For restoration the same materials were being used when the school was first constructed.

In midst of all these activities classes were going on; the teachers didn't complain, and lessons were carried on as usual. There was hope perhaps that with the school restored the strength would increase, and the school will run for another hundred years to come.



Usha Hariprasad is a freelancer who is fond of travelling, discovering new places and writing about travel related destinations around Bangalore at Citizen Matters. Currently, she works in a trekking organisation.

Sarla Thakral

A gutsy pioneer (1914-2008)

Sarla Thakral was the first Indian woman to fly an aircraft. Aspirations and dreams of women in 1936 were limited, equality and women's empowerment were merely arbitrary concepts, but Sarla proved everyone wrong. She was already living her dream in the skies, quite literally, when women were fighting for an equal status in society. She said, "I knew I was breaching a strictly male bastion, but I must say the men, they never made me feel out of place." She never faced any opposition to her venture.

Fortunately, she had married into a progressive family of nine pilots. Her husband P.D.Sharma, whom she married at age 16, was the first man to get an airmail pilot's license, and flew between Karachi and Lahore. He encouraged her to garner the courage to achieve her dream to fly an aircraft. His support spurred her to get trained for her solo journey.

Aviation was only about men then, but Delhi born Sarla, clad in a saree, entered the cockpit of a Gypsy Moth, and made history as India's first lady pilot in 1936, during the British rule. She was the first Indian woman to get an airmail pilot's license, and flew between Karachi and Lahore. Dashing, courageous, and fiercely ambitious, Sarla became the new face of aviation in India, and was a fresh breeze of courage and determination, even as the mother of a four-year-old daughter.

She persevered and completed one thousand hours of flying in the aircraft owned by the Lahore Flying Club, obtaining her 'A' license after accumulating over 1,000 hours of flying.

Life always has something tumultuous in store for all. Soon after her flight expedition and her training at Jodhpur, her life took an ugly turn when her husband tragically died in an airplane crash in 1939, and Sarla was widowed at 24.

Shaking off the initial shock, she was then looking for the group 'B' license which would've authorised her to fly as a commercial pilot. However, World War II broke out, and civil training was suspended. This was a road block in her career,

and she had to abandon her plans, and return with a broken heart.

Needing to earn her livelihood, she returned to Lahore and obtained a diploma in fine arts from the Mayo School of Arts, specialising in the Bengal school of painting. In 1947, after the partition of India, Sarla moved back to Delhi. An ardent Arya Samaj follower, life was not easy for her with two daughters, until she met R.P. Thakral, whom she married the next year.

In this second phase of life, Sarla, also known as Mati, established herself as a painter and businesswoman. She supplied her costume jewelry designs to several cottage industries for over 20 years. She also started textile printing and sari prints that did amazingly well with the fashionable crowd. One of her clients was Vijayalaxmi Pandit. She also did block printing, and designed for the National School of Drama.

She opined, "Every morning I wake up and chart out my plans. If there is plenty of work, I feel very happy; otherwise I feel a precious day has been wasted". She insisted, "Always be happy, it is very important for us to be happy and cheerful. This one motto has seen me tide over the crises in my

life."

Sarla Thakral is truly an inspiration! A true gem, who regardless of the twists and turns in her life, lived every phase just perfectly. She represented the face of the new and confident Indian woman. She was an exemplary woman, who showed courage at a time when women feared stepping out of their homes, and faced everything in her life, fearlessly.

Sarla Thakral passed away in 2008. The India film industry needs to make a biopic on this lady who pioneered a career in aviation for women.

A.Radhakrishnan is a Pune-based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.



Lt. Karamjeet Singh Judge, VC

A brave soldier (1923-1945)

Karamjeet Singh Judge was born on 25 May 1923, at Kapurthala in Punjab, where his father was the police chief. His brother had joined the Royal Indian Artillery Regiment of the Indian Army.

While studying in college at Lahore, he had joined the Indian National Congress. The family was not happy with his political activities, and persuaded him to join the army. Karamjeet attended the Officers Training School at Bangalore, and opted to join the Pioneer Corps to get near the frontline in Burma. On his brother's written request, he was commissioned into the 4th Battalion of the 15 Punjab Regiment. He was posted at Ambala, and the unit then moved to 39th Division in the 14th Army in Burma.

The Japanese Army had made a rapid advance in Burma, but by 1944, they had been checked. General William Slim's strategy was simple – to divide the Japanese forces at the railway station at Meiktila. The drive led to some of the most savage and bitter battles of the campaign.

The Allies were planning a major counter-offensive at Meiktila in the drive to Rangoon. 4/15th Punjab was part of the brigade assigned the task to clear the Nyaung-Sindewa area.

On 18 March 1945, Karamjeet Singh was ordered to capture a cotton mill. The post was heavily defended, and there were extensive minefields. The initial attack was launched on Myingyan, the strategic river port. The Jat Company of 15 Punjab was to lead the attack. They were supported by a troop of Sherman tanks of the British Army commanded by Lt. Hugh Baker.

They faced stiff resistance. The ground was not suitable for tanks, and there was no cover for the tanks. About two hundred shells fell around the tanks and Infantry. The tanks could not see the well dug in bunkers firing with machine guns. Every time the Infantry was held up, Karamjeet Singh went forward to recall the tanks and indicated the targets to them. He displayed complete disregard to his own life. In this

way ten enemy bunkers were destroyed. On one occasion, two enemy soldiers rushed out from a drain with fixed bayonets.

He reacted fast and killed both of them from a distance of only ten metres. Three bunkers were still left, and the tanks were finding it difficult to approach them. Fire from these bunkers was holding up the advance of the Infantry. Karamjeet Singh managed to guide a tank to a point about twenty metres from the bunker, and lobbed a smoke grenade to indicate the position of the bunker. He asked the tank to cease fire, and went forward to a distance of ten metres from the bunker, when he was hit by machine gun fire.

He was mortally wounded. Enraged, his men stormed the enemy position and completed the task. The battle for Myingyan raged for four days, and later Baker had exclaimed that Karamjeet was the bravest soldier he had ever met.

He had dominated the entire battle field with his courageous deeds. He was a brave soldier. In three previous actions, Karamjeet had proved himself to be an outstanding leader of matchless courage. He confided in his commanding officer, Major Johnny Whitmarsh-Knight, of his keen desire to achieve glory. He was awarded the Victoria Cross (posthumous), for his brave deed.

Had it not been for Karamjeet Singh's actions that day on 18 March, the battle of Meiktila would have caused many more casualties to the British. The relentless drive and use of nuclear weapons led to the surrender by Japan on 14 August 1945. The following day, 15 August, was celebrated as the day of victory over Japan. Celebrations were held in London and capital cities of the Allies countries on the 70th anniversary of the victory over Japan. In UK, the Queen paid tributes to Karamjeet Singh and other heroes who distinguished themselves in the conflict.

- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)



ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

A visionary and a statesman (1924-2018)

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was born in Gwalior on 25 December 1924, to Krishna Bihari Vajpayee, a school teacher. He had his early education in Gwalior, and graduated from the Victoria College in the same city. He completed his post-graduation in political science from the DAV College in Kanpur.

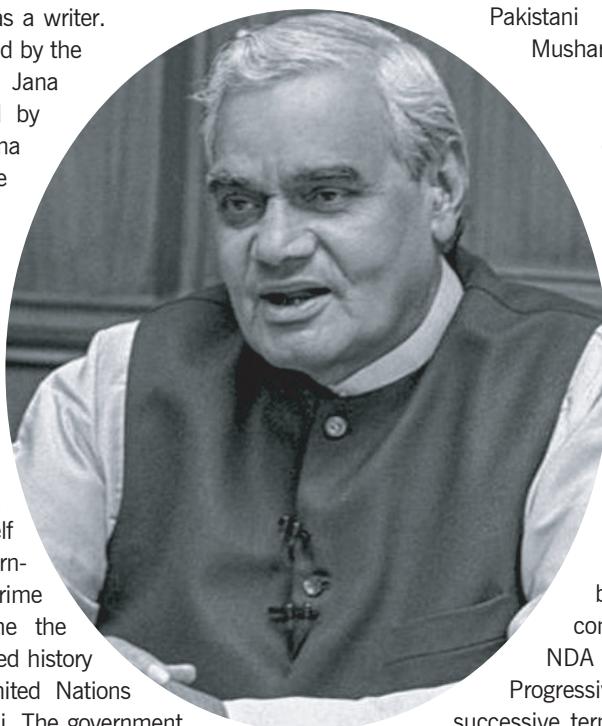
An activist from an early age, Vajpayee became a part of the youth wing of the Arya Samaj, and later came to be associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). His association with the journals run by one of the founders of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, Deendayal Upadhyaya, enabled him to hone his talents as a writer. Both the leaders were later deputed by the RSS to the fledgling Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Vajpayee was influenced by another senior leader Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, after whose demise he took over as the President of the BJS.

Vajpayee was one of the opposition leaders who was arrested by the Indira Gandhi government after Emergency was declared in 1975. After Emergency was lifted and Indira Gandhi was voted out of power, a hotch-potch coalition calling itself the Janata Party took over the government, with Morarji Desai as Prime Minister (PM). Vajpayee became the External Affairs minister and created history delivering an address at the United Nations General Assembly, in chaste Hindi. The government however was shortlived. This set the stage for the formation of a new political outfit, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which replaced the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and was registered in 1980, with Vajpayee taking over as its first President. The BJP managed to win just two seats in the 1984 polls to the Lok Sabha, but since then, its rise has been meteoric.

Vajpayee's first stint as PM lasted just 13 days after the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which had emerged as the largest coalition party in Parliament, failed to prove its majority in the house. A powerful orator, Vajpayee's address after submitting the resignation of his government in May 1996 still resounds in the corridors of the Lower House. The NDA was again voted to power in 1998, and this time Vajpayee's tenure

as PM lasted 13 months. It was during this time that India joined the nuclear club when it carried out the Pokhran tests.

Vajpayee once again assumed office as the PM after the NDA won a decisive mandate, winning as many as 303 seats in the 543-member house in the 1999 polls. Several epochal events took place in the country during the five years from 1999-2004 that Vajpayee was PM. A firm votary of peace with Pakistan, Vajpayee was always ready to walk the extra mile. He travelled by bus to Lahore in Pakistan to meet the Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif. Even after the Kargil war, he was willing to extend the olive branch to the then Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf.



Two other events of great significance were the attack on the Indian Parliament by terrorists which was foiled, and the Gujarat riots, which erupted in 2002 as an aftermath of the Godhra train incident, where two bogies of a train carrying 'kar sevaks' from Ayodhya were set on fire.

The ten time Lok Sabha MP and two time Rajya Sabha MP, dogged with ill-health, hung up his boots in 2009, and did not contest elections thereafter. The NDA lost in 2004, and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ruled for two successive terms with Dr. Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress as PM. Hailed as the 'Bhishma Pitamah' of Indian politics by Dr. Manmohan Singh, Vajpayee finally succumbed to the various age related ailments on 16 August 2018.

Vajpayee was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 1992, and the country's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, in 2015. He was not only a gifted orator, but was also an accomplished poet and writer, with several anthologies and books to his credit. The present Narendra Modi government announced that Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birthday on 25 December would be observed as 'Good Governance Day'.

C.V. Aravind is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.



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