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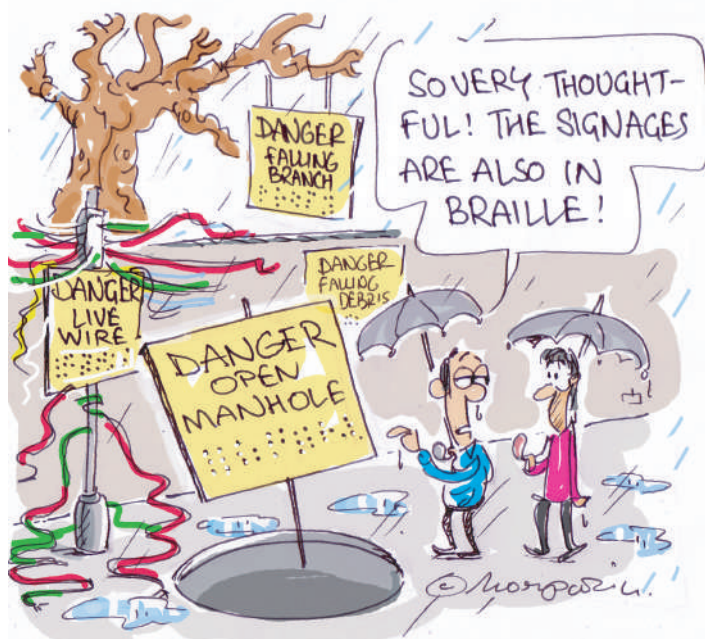
Exploring South Tamil Nadu

Of churches, poets and a fallen kingdom

FACE TO FACE

Akshay Borse

TOURISM IN THE YEAR 3018



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The significance of Indian festivals

Every festival we celebrate today in India, has a particular significance. Sadhguru reminds us about some important ones.



A file photo of Sadhguru (Source: Isha Foundation)

In the Indian culture, there was a time when there used to be a festival every day of the year – 365 festivals in a year. The idea behind this was to make our whole life a celebration. If today was ploughing day, it was a kind of celebration. Tomorrow was planting day, another kind of celebration. Day after tomorrow was weeding, that was a celebration. Harvesting, of course, is still a celebration. Today, due to lack of time, maybe only thirty or forty festivals, or even lesser, are celebrated. This article talks about the significance of a few important festivals like Makar Sankranti or Pongal, Mahashivaratri, Diwali, Guru Purnima and Dussehra.

Makar Sankranti

Between the 14th and 17th of January are the festivals of Makar Sankranti, or Pongal, as it is called in Tamil Nadu. There are different aspects to this festival. There is Bhogi, during which houses are cleaned, decorated, and in a way re-consecrated for the new year, using materials like mango leaves and the first cut of paddy to

enhance the vibrance in the house. In this season, all the unnecessary things in one's home are disposed of. You should make this clean-up an annual event. Even if some cleaning up is done on a daily basis, a few things pile up here and there without you being conscious about it. This piling up is not only of material things in our homes. Also in our minds, in our emotions, in our bodies, and in our consciousness, things pile up. This is the time to clean that up and start afresh in the coming spring, as spring is the best time to start life.

Apart from Bhogi, the Pongal celebrations also include Mattu Pongal, which honours all the animals that traditionally play an important role in agriculture. On this day, the bulls and cows that are at the centre of pastoral communities are decorated, pampered, and worshipped, as an expression of gratitude. On the next day is Kaanum Pongal, which is a community affair – this means going and seeing people.

So the Makar Sankranti or Pongal festivities have

various ingredients of cleansing, of appreciating and expressing gratitude to all the creatures that are involved in our lives. It is also about getting involved with the community, which means it also has a social connotation. It is a time of festivity.

Mahashivaratri

The fourteenth day of every lunar month, a day before the new moon day, is referred to as Shivaratri. On this day, there is a natural upsurge in the human energy system. The Shivaratri which falls in the month of Magha in the Indian calendar (February/March) is referred to as Mahashivaratri because particularly on this day, there is an assistance from nature to raise energies within the system. You should not be in horizontal positions, your spine, especially, should be in a vertical position so that the upsurge of energy is made use of for growth.

For people who live in family situations, Mahashivaratri is worshipped as Shiva's wedding anniversary. The ambitious in the world see it as the day Shiva conquered all his enemies. For the ascetics, it is the day he became one with Kailash, that is he became Achaleshwara and merged with the mountain. After millennia of meditation, he became as still as a mountain and became a part of it, merging and preserving all his knowledge in Kailash. So ascetics see Mahashivaratri as a day of stillness.

Guru Purnima

Over 15,000 years ago, a yogi appeared in the upper regions of the Himalayas. No one knew where he came from and what his antecedents were – and he did not introduce himself – so they did not know his name. So he is referred to as Adiyogi or the first yogi.

Guru Purnima is that full moon day when the first yogi transformed himself into the Adi Guru – the first guru. He turned south – which is why he is known as Dakshinamurti – and the transmission of the yogic sciences to the seven disciples began. Thus, the first full moon of Dakshinayana is Guru Purnima, the day the first guru was born.

Guru Purnima signifies one of the greatest moments in the life of humanity. This is about transcendence and liberation, a possibility that human beings never knew. It does not matter what your genetics are, who your father was, or what limitations you are born with or have acquired, you can transcend all of that, if you are willing to strive. This day was recognised as such, and was one of the most significant celebrations in this culture for thousands of years.

It is time that a holiday is a day that is significant for us. At least, Guru Purnima should be a holiday so that people know the significance of it.

Dussehra

Navaratri, culminating with Dussehra, is a cultural

festival of great importance and significance for all. It is a festival that is all about the goddess, or the feminine divinity.

The nine days of Navaratri are classified as per the three basic qualities of *tam*, *raja*, and *sattva*. The first three days are *tamas*, where the goddess is fierce, like Durga and Kali. The next three days are Lakshmi related – gentle, but materially oriented goddess. The last three days are dedicated to Saraswati, which is *sattva*. It is related to knowledge and enlightenment. Investing in these three will make your life in a certain way, you will be powerful in different ways. But if you go beyond all this, it is no longer about power, it is about liberation. After Navaratri, the tenth and final day is Vijayadashami – that means you have conquered all these three qualities. You participated in every one of them, but you did not invest in any one of them. You won over them. That is Vijayadashami, the day of victory. This brings home the message of how being in reverence and gratitude towards everything that matters in our lives, leads to success and victory.

Diwali

Diwali is celebrated for various cultural reasons, but historically, it is called Naraka Chaturdashi because Narakasura, a very cruel king, was killed by Krishna a few thousand years ago. But why do we celebrate that today? If a man was killed – however evil he was – so long ago, it should not be relevant to us. But the relevance of Diwali is that it is an important inspiration for us to remove the negativities in our lives. Only by removing negativity will new clarity arise. Only when there is clarity, there is a new sense of light.

It is in this context that Diwali is the Festival of Lights – every town, city and village is lit up with thousands of lamps everywhere. But the celebration is not just about lighting lamps outside – an inner light has to come. Light means clarity. Without clarity, every other quality that you possess will only become a detriment, not a gift, because confidence without clarity is a disaster. And today, too much action in the world is performed without clarity.

Like the dark clouds which brood in the gloomy atmosphere, not realising that they are blocking the sun, a human being does not have to bring any light from anywhere. If he just dispels the dark clouds that he has allowed to gather within himself, light will happen. The Festival of Lights is just a reminder of that.



Sadhguru is Founder, Isha Foundation.

India's harvest festivals

*In India's long list of festivals, the harvest festivals have a special place. **Dr. Rina Mukherji** chronicles the colourful harvest festivals, and the way they are celebrated all over the country.*



Gudi Padwa is a harvest festival celebrated in Maharashtra by hoisting the Gudi – a scarf wrapped on a bamboo mast

Being an agricultural economy, India has traditionally celebrated its harvests. The new year celebrations in various regions too, have been meant to commemorate the major harvests of the year.

The summer harvest festivals

Every harvest festival is basically a thanksgiving to the deity, as also the various entities that help the farmer grow his crop. It is also the culmination of his year-long hard work, and hence every such festival is a time to enjoy the best delicacies, sing, dance and enjoy. Thus, we have Baisakhi in Punjab, Ugadi in Andhra Pradesh, Gudi Padwa in Maharashtra, Poila Baisakh in Bengal, and Cheti Chand in Sind, Rongali Bihu in Assam, Pana Sankranti in Odisha to mark the summer harvest, when the major crops are ripe and ready for the market, or the beginning of the summer sowing season for farmers. Each of these celebrations have dance, music and delicacies to mark the festive occasion, which is, by and large, secular.

However, while prayers to the deity are common to all, there are specific rituals to every region, that are culturally significant. Take the case of Ugadi in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, which marks the first day of the Hindu month of Chaitra, or Chaitra Navratri. The

day is of both astrological significance for the farmer (as it marks the beginning of spring-summer), and historical significance, since it marks the first day as per the Shalivahana era that was started by Gautamiputra Satkarni, who ruled over the three southern states, and Sind, from his capital in Paithan, Maharashtra. On this day, obeisance is paid to Brahma, who is supposed to have created the universe on this day, following which neem and jaggery are partaken. Pachadi - a mixture that has all the different flavours, meaning bitter, sweet, hot, sour and salty, is served to all. This signifies the various shades of life that everyone must go through, and hence must be prepared for. Gudi Padwa in Maharashtra marks the very same day, probably because the region had also been ruled by the Satkarni dynasty. In Maharashtra too, neem and jaggery are partaken to mark the beginning of the day, followed by hoisting of the Gudi – a scarf wrapped on a bamboo mast, which is decorated with neem and mango leaves, and topped with an upturned pot. The Gudi is meant to mark the victory of King Shalivahana over the Huns. It also commemorates the victory of Rama over Ravana, and ascendancy to the throne of Ayodhya. In Maharashtra, a dish similar to pachadi, containing all the five flavours is eaten, along with local delicacies like shrikhand and puran poli. In Sind, the day is celebrated as Cheti Chand, which is venerated as the day of emergence of the saint, Jhulelal, and is celebrated

with delicacies like sai bhaji and sweetened rice.

Mid-April is the time marked for Baisakhi, Poila Baisakh, Vishu, and Rongali Bihu, Puttandu and Pana (or Vishuva) Sankranti celebrations. While Baisakhi, Poila Baisakh, Puttandu Pana Sankranti and Rongali Bihu mark the respective regional New Year, Vishu is solely a harvest/sowing festival in Kerala. However, all of these mark the beginning of the solar year, and the onset of summer, and the beginning of the sowing season for farmers. In Punjab, it has great religious significance for the Sikh community, since it marks the anointing of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singh, besides the beginning of the New Year, as per the Vikram Sanwat. Although Baisakhi as a harvest festival predates Sikhism, Gurudwaras in Punjab are specially decorated for the day.

In Bengal, Poila Baisakh is a secular celebration which follows a day after Baisakhi, and is special across all religious groups-Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Buddhist. For Bengali Hindus, the day begins with a ritual bath in the river, and drawing of alpana (decorative designs using rice flour) on the floor, and placing of a kalash with mango leaves to mark the onset of summer, following which the family prays to the deity for peace and prosperity. Traditional delicacies like puli and pithe mark the occasion, with songs, and dancing all through the day.

Rongali Bihu of Assam follows a similar trajectory, with young girls performing the Bihu dance on this day. In Odisha, Pana Sankranti – the Odiya New Year, corresponds to Poila Baisakh, and marks the day the Sun is on the Equator (Vishuva). Since the day marks the onset of summer, a small canopy is made on the Tulsi tree in the courtyard, and a pot with water is placed on top of it. This pot has a hole through which water keeps dropping on the Tulsi plant, for an entire month. Pana, a sweet drink made of bel, mango, and grated coconut, is had on this day, as a thirst quencher for summer.

The Tamil New Year, Puthandu, also falls on April 14, and marks the beginning of the sowing season, or the first ploughing by the farmers. The Puthandu tray is an auspicious decoration made up of betel leaves, arecanut, coconut, three types of seasonal fruits, a mirror, gold and silver items, coins, and seasonal flowers, with an oil lamp. A mangai pachadi made using a sour mango base, with sweet jaggery, bitter neem, red chillis, and astringent mustard is served to all, signifying the variegated flavours of life that must be encountered in the coming year. The Puthandu tray is prepared on the eve of the New Year, and is to be viewed by the family members first thing in the morning on Puthandu day. The day is marked by car festivals in many major temples all over Tamil Nadu, as also exhibitions marking the beginning of the Tamil month of Chitterai.

In Kerala, Vishu is a day when families begin their day by sighting the Vishukanni – an auspicious decoration arranged around an image of Vishnu, and comprising an oil lamp, a mirror, a coconut, lemon, jackfruit, cucumber, betel leaves, arecanut, and seasonal flowers. To mark the

occasion, a typical meal called Vishu, which has all the



Bihu being celebrated in Assam

flavours – bitter, sweet, sour, salty and hot, is served. Vishu kanji, made of freshly harvested rice powder and coconut milk, and Vishu Katta – made of rice, coconut milk and jaggery are special delicacies to mark the occasion. The day is a solemn religious occasion to mark the beginning of the sowing season, but fireworks and merriment are also a part of this harvest festival.

So much for the summer harvest festivals. But given that India generally has two main crops – there are festivals celebrating the winter harvest too.

Winter harvest festivals

In Punjab, Lohri is celebrated a day ahead of Makar Sankranti, which is always on January 14 of the Gregorian calendar. Thus, Lohri falls on January 13, and marks the end of winter. Sugarcane, corn, and sesame being winter crops, their presence plays a big role in Lohri. In Punjab, children go around door-to-door collecting gajaks (made of sesame and jaggery), corn, sugar candy, and jaggery. These are then distributed to everyone, as people gather around a bonfire to sing folk songs and dance. Corn, sugar candy, and gajaks are also thrown into the bonfire, which signifies throwing out the old to begin anew. Makar/Til Sankranti in north, eastern, and central India, and Pongal in southern India are celebrated on the following day after Lohri. The day marks the sun's transit into Makara or Capricorn, and hence the beginning of Uttarayana, or the Sun's northward journey, and hence, the end of winter.



In Lohri festival, corn, sugar candy, and gajaks are thrown into the bonfire to signify ending of the old and beginning of the new

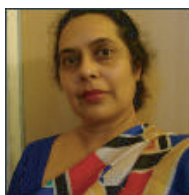
Sesame (til) and jaggery made out of sugarcane juice are an inherent part of winter, and sweets made of them are customarily had to warm up and prevent sickness. In North India, where winter rains are common, warm khichdi is had on this day. In Gujarat, Maharashtra and North India, kites are flown on this day. In Gujarat, undhiyo made of winter vegetables are typical of this harvest festival, while in Rajasthan, ghevar is a sweet particular to Makar Sankranti. In Bengal, Til Sankranti celebrations are spread over a week, during which various sweet delicacies using the khajur gur (date jaggery) and nolen gur (date treacle) typical of Bengal are consumed. The Magh mela, which culminates into the Kumbh Mela once every 12 years, is held during the period of Makar Sankranti. The snan (bath) on Makar Sankranti day, is considered especially auspicious. In Assam, Makar Sankranti corresponds to the Bhogali Bihu (Maag Bihu), which is a time of merriment, dance and song, besides feasting on sweetmeats and delicacies.

In the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, Pongal is celebrated to mark the winter harvest, and is celebrated on the same day as Makar Sankranti in the north. Pongal is spread over 4 days, with the first day termed Bhogi Pongal, confined to throwing out clutter, and old utensils. In their place, new clothes and utensils are bought for the home. The actual celebrations begin on the next day, called the Surya Pongal, when the Sun God is propitiated, and the Pongal dish – Venpongali - made in both the sweet and savoury versions, using dry fruits, jaggery and ghee, is offered to the Gods. Thereafter, it is distributed to all. On the third day, Mattu Pongal, the animals are given a bath, and worshipped by farm families. Birds are also fed rice. On the last day, Kattu Pongal, everyone steps out to meet friends and relatives. In short, Pongal is acknowledgement by farmers that growing crops is a joint effort, wherein animals, birds and humans play their respective roles.

In Bengal, the winter harvest is celebrated as the Nabanna (literally, new rice) festival, in the month of

Agrahayana (November-December). In rural Bengal, farmers offer the newly harvested rice to Laxmi, the Goddess of wealth and fertility. The day starts with worshipping of the Golaghar (storehouse) and offering rice porridge to the deity. Everyone enjoys a serving of the fresh milk and powdered rice preparation in the form of a thick drink. This day-long festival involves greeting the moon with lamps, giving gifts to children, and feeding crows with rice. Although it is a popular festival among Hindu farmers, Nabanna celebrations are common among non-Hindu agriculturists too. Muslim and Christian farmers too observe Nabanna in Bengal, treating it as a secular celebration of the winter harvest.

In the tribal regions of West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand, Tusu is a popular harvest festival celebrated during November-December, invoking the Sun God. Rice husks (tusu) are worshipped by placing them in a kulungi or niche in the wall. The last of the paddy husks left in the field, after everything has been harvested, is called dinimai. The head of the family brings home the dinimai, which is then established as tusu, for being worshipped. The tusu is only worshipped by the chaste virgin girls. Married women do not worship the tusu. During the month-long festival, rice powder alpanas are made, and flowers are offered to the tusu. The girls sing tusu gaans, which are folk songs dedicated to the tusu. At the end of the month, a choudal symbolising the sun, is made of jute sticks, inside which all the puja paraphernalia is placed, and carried to the river or pond to be immersed.



A senior journalist, Dr. Rina Mukherji specialises in all aspects of sustainable development, with special focus on the environment and climate change. She has been a UGC doctoral fellow, and holds a doctorate in African Studies, with specialisation in Third World conflict and developmental issues. She is currently an independent journalist based in Pune.

Understanding festivals, celebrating bonds

With the passage of time, are we forgetting the cultural relevance and folklore behind our festivals? Our festivals celebrate social bonds and relationships, says Ankur Khamesra, but laments that we are losing sight of these in our march into modernity.



Women worship the cow and the calf to celebrate Bachcha Baaras

One of the first things that come to mind, when someone thinks of India, is the reverence for culture and festivals. We have been taught to celebrate everything – from relationships, faith, nature, harvest, seasons, to every single moment we live, because life itself is a celebration. With this very idea, our culture celebrates various relationships that a person can have, not just to remind us of the importance of relationships, but also be thankful for them.

Relationships are the roots of this societal tree. A person's birth commences with his very first relationship – as a son or a daughter to a mother. Though there are many festivals dedicated to the celebration of feminine energy like Durgastami, Navratri etc., there exist a few which celebrate the beautiful bond between a mother and a child.

The maternal bond

Sheetala Saptami – a festival celebrated in north and some parts of the south of India is a festival dedicated to Goddess Sheetala Devi – the consort of Yama, the God of death. Mothers fast and pray to the Goddess for the safety and good health of their children from any epidemic (like measles and chicken pox).

Another festival celebrating this beautiful bond is Bachcha Baaras, which has an interesting story behind it. Mostly celebrated in Rajasthan, on this day women worship calves and cows. Though over the years, it has just turned into a meaningless ritual, very few know the significance of worshipping an animal and its offspring. The tale tells us of some indefinite time ago, about a newlywed woman who lived with her mother-in-law. They had a cow who had two calves named 'Gehula' and 'Johula'. One day the old lady took her cow for grazing. Before leaving the house, she asked her daughter-in-law to cook gehula and johula (meaning wheat and barley in local language), for dinner. The young woman out of her ignorance and innocence cooked the two calves for dinner. When the old woman returned home in the evening along with the cow, unable to find the calves anywhere nearby, the cow got restless. The old woman was horrified on hearing what her daughter-in-law had done to the calves. She buried the dead calves nearby and went to sleep with a heavy heart. When the cow's efforts at searching her offspring went in vain, out of desperation she started mooing. On hearing her moo, the young woman's maternal instincts kicked in, and she prayed to the mother Goddess to bring the calves back to life even if it meant her not being able to ever conceive. The next day when they both woke up, much to their astonishment they saw that the ground where the calves were

buried had been ploughed by the cow during the night, and both the calves, healthy and steady as never before, were drinking their mother's milk. The old lady and her daughter-in-law thanked the mother goddess for this miracle and performed a pooja of the Goddess along with cow and the calves, to celebrate the strength of motherhood. Since then, this ritual of worshipping the cow and calves has been carried out to celebrate the bond between the mother and her child. Childless mothers take part in this ritual to be blessed with children.

In India, there are many other festivals that celebrate relationships between siblings, a guru and a disciple, between couple, friends, and even with our ancestors. With the amalgamation of various cultures, modernisation, impact of westernisation and complexity of social norms, many of these festivals are not celebrated with the same fervour as they once used to be or are celebrated in their modern avatar as Teacher's Day and Valentine's Day. While Raksha Bandhan and Bhau Beej, which celebrate the beautiful relationship between a brother and sister, are celebrated throughout India, Guru Purnima, which celebrates the bond between a teacher and a disciple, is not so known. Many of us are not even aware of the significance of the many popular festivals like Mahashivratri, Holi, and Janmashtami, but blindly follow rituals.

Celebrating love

Mahashivratri is a festival of great spiritual significance, where many Indians observe fasting and meditate all day to please Shiva, but very few celebrate the divine love that this day symbolises. While Puranas mention Shivaratri as the day "Halahal Vish" (most lethal poison as per Puranic scriptures) arose as the result of the churning of ocean, and Shiva drank the lethal poison to save the world, another legend has it that Shiva got married to Parvati (Shakti's incarnation), on Mahashivaratri and hence this day is celebrated as the wedding anniversary of Shiva-Parvati. Not only does this festival help in connecting us with our inner self, it also celebrates the pure and occult relationship of the divine lovers. Though many of our culturally uneducated ringmasters get offended by the mention of "love", Indian culture has always celebrated love.

Another such festival that entails a love story is 'Holika Dahan' - celebrated as Holi throughout the country.

Whereas most of us are aware of the story of Prahlad and Holika narrated repeatedly, there is a tragic love story behind the tale. As the story goes, Holika was deeply in love with a man named Eloji. In fact they were supposed to get married on the full moon night of 'Phalgun'. But Hiranyakashipu, Holika's brother insisted that she sit with his son Prahlad in the pyre of fire. The fire that was supposed to destroy Prahlad, consumes Holika instead. When Eloji, unknown about the event arrived at the location

with the 'baraat', his beloved was already dead. On seeing this, Eloji tried to end his life by jumping into the fire, but the flames had almost extinguished. Eloji lost his mental stability and lived as a 'mad lover' for the rest of his life. Though this tale has a tragic end, Holika dahan is celebrated in many parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, where newlywed couples pray to Eloji for their love to last forever.



On Rakshabandhan, sisters tie rakhi, around the wrists of their brothers

Sharad Purnima is another festival that celebrates the divine love of Radha and Krishna. It is celebrated by performing 'Raas Leela' or the dance of passion on the full moon night, as it is believed that Lord Krishna had performed the raas with

the gopikas on Sharad Purnima. Janmashtami, is yet another festival that celebrates the friendship between Gopas and Krishna. While Janmashtami is celebrated as the birth of Lord Krishna, the ritual of 'dahi-handi', which falls on the next day celebrates the strong bond of friendship between the God and his childhood friends, the gopas, who helped Krishna in "stealing" makhan (butter) from the haandis (pots).

Remembering our ancestors

Not only do we celebrate these wonderful relationship and bonding with family and friends but we are also taught to be thankful to our ancestors for the wondrous life we live and the sacrifices they have made. During the month of Shradh or Pitru-Paksh, Hindus pay homage to their ancestors (pitras) by remembering them with gratitude and seek their blessings by offering prayers and food. It is the Indian way of Thanksgiving.



Ankur khamesra is an entrepreneur and an artist, who owns a digital marketing agency. He has particular interest in Indian mythology. He also loves to travel and photograph his journeys. You can contact him at :

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Celebrating Ganesha in the Sahyadris

*One of the most celebrated and looked forward to festivals every year, the Ganesh Chaturthi festivities in Maharashtra overshadows everything else. **Mamta Chitnis Sen** analyses the reasons for this phenomenon, especially in the rural belt of Konkan, where the Ganesh festival is a serious affair indeed!*



Ganesh visarjan in Konkan

Ganesh Chaturthi, the festival of the elephant god in Maharashtra, was, and continues to be, one of the grandest of festivals in the country. The 11-day festival stands out as one of the most visually appealing ones, especially in the cities of Mumbai and Pune, where it is celebrated with much pomp and splendour. High-profile Ganpati mandals in Mumbai and Pune such as Lalbagcha Raja, Dagadu Seth Ganpati, respectively, have over the years transformed themselves from small time entities into big budget powerhouses. The unveiling of their Ganpati idols is an event in itself meant to grab eyeballs, as well as revenue in advertising. Every year the festival has been known to get bigger and grander. It rakes in more money than ever thanks to the donations of the thousands of devotees who throng these mandals to seek Ganesha's blessings.

The festival in Konkan

While the festivities in cities continue to be a highly commercialised affair due to the big budgets involved, not to mention the growing celebrity presence, it is the celebrations in the rural belt, specially the Konkan region of the state, that are considered to be a phenomenal affair. If you haven't

seen the Ganesh festival of Konkan, you haven't seen anything yet. For Konkan and the many villages in this coastal belt, Ganesh Chaturthi festival is a religion in itself. For 11 days, this stretch of the Sahayadri belt which is known to start from Mumbai and extend upto Sindhudurg district, gets transformed into an area buzzing with crowds and chants in praise of Lord Ganesh. Devotees plan the festivities months in advance. Even the Indian Railways and Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) are aware of the 'Ganesh phenomenon' every year, and roll out extra services of trains and buses to avoid the overcrowding of the regular public transport.

The Ganesh festival in Konkan is serious business. Devotees from all over the world who have homes in the region, religiously trek to their villages with their families in tow, to bring in the elephant god into their homes. While many celebrate the Ganesh homecoming for one and a half-days, there are others who stretch the festivities to three, five, eleven, and even for as long as twenty-one days. Everyday, as long as Ganesh idol is at home, pujas and aartis are performed and unlike Bollywood songs being played loudly in cities, family members sing together all the Ganesh aartis with a lot of feeling and devotion.



Steamed modaks are offered to Lord Ganesha

Special dishes and sweets are made everyday as *naivedya* or offerings to the God, the steamed modak being the most popular sweet.

Mohan Keluskar, President of Konkan Vikas Aghadi, an organisation which has been working for the development of Konkan for over four decades, points out that there has been an increase in the number of Ganesh idols being brought to Konkan since the past few years. "The Konkan includes the districts of Mumbai, Mumbai Suburban, Palghar, Thane, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg. People living in the Konkan who have migrated to cities or other states for work, generally head to their villages during the Ganesh festival to celebrate the event in their native homes. With the growing population and even growing numbers of houses, there has been a rise in the number of Ganesh idols being worshipped. Today, every family in Konkan has a Ganapati idol in their home. It can be easily said that in Konkan alone there are over 15 lakh Ganesh idols of all shapes and sizes being brought into homes every Ganesh festival," he says.

Keluskar points out that the Ganesh festival is a good opportunity not only to reconnect with friends and relatives, but also soak in the festive atmosphere. "Seeing the growing crowd every year, the government too presses into services extra fleet of trains and buses to ferry in the devotees. Although the public transport system does witness a considerable strain on itself for 11 days, I believe it is worth it as we get to witness the festival at its best in the Konkan itself," he points out. Unlike Mumbai and Pune, commercialisation of the Ganesh festival has yet not reached Konkan. Many homes continue to practice the age old rituals of performing the pooja of the Ganesh idol practiced during the olden days. A large number of homes continue to bring in idols made of clay, unlike the idols created in plaster-of-paris which is largely available in the market today. The culture of having the 'green Ganpati' continues to be dominant in Konkan, unlike in cities.

Traditional Ganesh sculptors from many villages in Maharashtra make clay idols. These idols are mainly created using mud from the local rivers. The size of the clay idols begins from less than one foot, to a height of a maximum of 2.5 feet. Post immersion in the waters, the idols go back to their original clay form, and are hence known to be

eco-friendly. The village of Pen, for instance, is known to produce the highest number of clay idols every Ganpati season. The idols are transported from Pen to the other parts of the state a day or two before the festival begins, via trucks or trains, or even dropped off to the homes of devotees on prior order.

Renowned Hindu Scholar Ramesh Pratap Singh believes that unlike other regions of the country, Maharashtra and the southern part of India have a large number of devotees from the Ganapatya sect, and that is the reason why we get to see the glory of this festival in all its forms in Konkan. Followers of this sect worship Lord Ganesh as per the rituals laid down by the Rig Veda.

"Ganesh Upasana has been present since the time of the Rig Veda, and even today many devotees practice the rituals laid down then. These devotees are followers of the Navneet Ganpati Sampradayak, Sanatan Ganpati Sampradayak, and Swarna Sampradayak, which come under this sect. who pray to Ganpati before the start of any auspicious work. A large number of them hail from middle or lower middle class backgrounds. The Vedic rituals involve 16 steps of worshipping the idol by chanting specific mantras. It begins with invoking the God through Avahan Mudra. This is done by joining together the palms of the hands and folding both the thumbs inside followed by the offering of five flowers, worshipping the idol's feet, giving the idol a bath, adorning him with *vastra* (clothes), sprinkling of scented water lighting of incense sticks, *dweep* (oil lamp), and offering of *paan* and betel nuts and *prasad*. Family members then sing Ganesh aarti and seek blessings. The immersion of the idol called *visarjan* is a ritual that takes places on the last day of the festival.

Interestingly, there are other sects within the Ganpataya sect which worship Ganesha in his other forms. For example followers of the Uchchhishta Ganpati (a Tantrik aspect of Lord Ganesh) believe in offering alcohol and non-vegetarian as offerings to the idol which is mainly dark in colour and depicted with Shakti (or a female form) as its consort. "For them worshipping Lord Ganesh is all that matters. It is irrelevant on how big is the idol is, or how expensive are the decorations. What is relevant is the faith, and that is what makes the Ganesh festival in Konkan a legendary affair," he sums up.



A journalist for over 15 years, Mamta Chitnis Sen has worked with reputed publications in Mumbai, reporting on crime, politics, religion, art, community, human interest, and general news. She was Executive Editor of *Dignity Dialogue*, India's foremost magazine exclusively for the 50 plus age group. She presently handles Media Advocacy for Child Rights and You (CRY) – an NGO working for the rights of underprivileged children in India covering the states of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat. Mamta is also an artist and has exhibited in various group shows in India and abroad.

Fest and feast

*In India, festivals and food are inextricably linked. Every festival comes with its prescribed set of delicacies, prepared with much love and relish, say **Samit Ganesh** and **Eshna Chandak**, as they chronicle some of the lip-smacking dishes and recipes.*



India is globally recognised as the land of diversity, customs, traditions, culture, and festivals. We do not require much reason to celebrate – new harvest, change of seasons, victory of good over evil, solar and lunar patterns, events, small and big; and of course, devotion to a pantheon of gods and goddesses – all of these are reasons enough to celebrate. And the rituals and celebration too differ from state to state, region to region. Besides rituals, food is central to all festivities, with special delicacies prepared, characteristic to a particular festival, as offerings to the deities.

The ‘Shravan’ month

The beginning of ‘Sharavan’ or ‘Savan’ in the month of August ushers in a host of festivals like Nag Panchami, Ganesh Chaturthi, Janmashatami, Narli Purnima, Rakshabandhan, etc. People look forward to these festivals as it is not only a time for bonding with family and friends, but also an occasion where they get to enjoy and share some of their favourite delicacies.

Shravan is considered to be an auspicious month according to the Hindu calendar, where people observe fast on every Monday of the month, and worship Lord Shiva. While people abstain from non-vegetarian food, and even

onion and garlic on fasting Mondays known as “Shravan Somwar”, the ‘satvik’ (pure) food consumed on these days are nevertheless an interesting fare.. The meal may consist of sabudana (sago) ‘khichdi’, sabudana ‘vada’, ‘rajgira puri’, sweet potato (boiled), sweet potato kheer, ‘thalipeeth’, and a variety of fruits, milk, curds, and dry fruits.

Nag Panchami is devoted to the worship of snakes, which are a part of Hindu lore and mythology. Naga means snake, and ‘panchami’ is the fifth day of the lunar fortnight. This festival is associated with the great serpent Sheshanag, on whom God Vishnu is believed to recline during the intervals between the dissolution of one universe, and the creation of another. On this day, snakes are fed with milk and showered with flowers, and devotees pray for protection from snake bites. In Karnataka, as a part of the celebration, people prepare black sesame ladoos, and a special sweet dish called *patholi*, made with rice flour and a filling of coconut and jaggery mixture with a dash of cardamom, and steamed in turmeric leaves.

Ganesh Chaturthi is an important religious festival that is celebrated in the month of August/September with special enthusiasm in Maharashtra. On the first day, a clay image of Lord Ganesha is brought into the house amidst music and dancing.

SAFFRON & CARDAMOM PANNACOTTA

Ingredients

- 1 ½ cups cream
- ½ cup whole milk
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cardamom
- 2 ½ teaspoon gelatin or 'agar' powder
- A few strands of saffron
- 1/4 cup water
- 2 tablespoons milk (to soak the saffron)

Process

Soak the gelatin in water and let it bloom

Soak the saffron in milk.

Mix the sugar, cream and milk together in a heavy bottomed pan.

Heat it on a low flame stirring occasionally until small bubbles form around the rim of the cream. Take it off the flame and stir in the saffron, cardamom powder, and the gelatin mixture. Stir well, ensuring that all the gelatin is fully dissolved.

Pour the pannacotta mixture after it has cooled, into 4 greased ramekins or moulds. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours before unmoulding.

PANNACOTTA



VELLAI KOZHUKATTAI



VELLAI KOZHUKATTAI

Ingredients

For the outer cover

- 2 cups rice flour
- 3 ½ cups water
- 2 tablespoons sesame or groundnut oil

Filling

- 1 ¼ cups jaggery (coarsely chopped)
- 1 ½ cups grated coconut
- 1 teaspoon ghee
- 1 teaspoon cardamom powder
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds

Process

In a heavy bottomed pan, mix the jaggery and coconut together. Add two teaspoons of ghee and sesame seeds to it.

Cook on a medium flame stirring occasionally till the mixture thickens. Once the mixture stops sticking to the sides of the pan, take it off the flame and spread it on a lightly greased plate. Roll the mixture into small balls the size of a large grape, once it cools.

To prepare the outer cover, whisk the rice flour and water ensuring that there are no lumps. Add the oil and cook on a medium flame stirring continuously. It is important to keep an eye on the dough, as it tends to get lumpy very quickly, if not continuously stirred. The consistency of the dough should be smooth, and it should come together in one big ball.

Let the dough cool for a bit before you create the wrappers.

Grease your palms and break off a small piece of the dough. Flatten the dough on your palm making a small crater at the center.

Place a ball of filling (made above) in the center and cover it from all the sides gently, bringing the sides of the wrapper over the top of the filling. Pinch off the dough leaving a conical tip on the top of the ball.

Grease a plate and place the kozhukattai on it. Repeat with the rest of the mixture.

Steam the kozhukattai in an idli steamer for about 10 to 15 minutes. The kozhukattais are done when the cover turns slightly translucent and glistens a little.

Drizzle with ghee and enjoy it warm.

For ten days, the idol is worshipped with a great deal of festivity. The elephant-headed God of wisdom and prosperity is believed to love good food, and devotees lovingly prepare a variety of savouries and sweets like 'modaks' and 'ladoos', as offerings to the God.

Janmasthami or Gokulashtami, which comes in the month of August/September celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna, the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu. Devout Hindus fast all day and break it at midnight, the hour at which Lord Krishna is supposed to have been born. The celebrations are remarkable in and around Mathura where Krishna was born. Fresh home-made butter, curd, and a sweet dish made with puffed rice are a part of the delicacies offered as *naivedyam* to the Lord.

Raksha Bandhan, is another popular festival that is celebrated in the month of August. Traditionally a Hindu festival, it is also celebrated by non-Hindus because of its deep symbolic relevance to fraternal relationships. Sisters tie a symbolic amulet called a rakhi on their brothers' wrists. The rakhi is meant to symbolise a bond of love between the siblings, and is a promise of care and protection from all that is evil. There is an exchange of gifts between the brothers and sisters, and general merriment over good food. While there are no traditional dishes cooked on the occasion, sweets and desserts like *kheer*, *phirni*, *barfi*, *kaju katli*, etc., are prepared to mark the occasion.

There are several other smaller festivals in the month of Shravan that are celebrated, which are not very popular but important to individual beliefs.

The festival delicacies of Muslims, Parsis

Bakra Eid or Eid al Adha can be translated as Feast or Festival of the Sacrifice. The day is traditionally celebrated as per the Islamic lunar calendar, which is why it shifts every year as per the Gregorian calendar, but generally comes in July or August. While animal sacrifice is a large part of this festival, it is only one aspect. The sacrificial meat becomes part of the festive feast, along with other delicacies like stews and tajines, rice and couscous loaded with meat and veggies, and sweets like 'maamoul' and 'seviyan'. Parsi New Year (also called as Navroz or Pateti), is traditionally celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, which is usually in March. However, most Indians follow the Shahenshahi calendar, and therefore celebrate this auspicious day in August.

The New Year is to celebrate the arrival of the Parsis in their new homeland, and is said to have become a celebrated festival around 3,000 years ago. The festival includes rituals like visiting the venerated fire temple, growing wheatgrass, decorating the house with flowers and colours, dressing their best to visit relatives and friends, greet and eat. Traditional dishes include 'pulaos' (with generous toppings of nuts and saffron), non-vegetari-



an items like 'patra-ni-machi' (fish cooked in banana leaf), chicken dishes like 'farcha' and 'Sali', and sweets like 'sev', 'falooda', and 'lagan nu custard'.

The global twist to festivals

In the olden days, people largely prepared foods that grew in their own backyards, orchards, and fields. The choicest of these delicacies were selected as offerings to God during daily prayers and celebrations. Each region and state fed its unique fare, the very essence of the land, and shared its goodies with other states. With the advent of global trade, exotic nuts, fruits and vegetables became more accessible. Our recipes today celebrate both, our ancient traditions and modern, and global culinary influences, have made daily cooking and eating a festive celebration.

I would like to share a couple of recipes which are perfect for celebrating a festival or any happy occasion, with the readers (See page 14). For more recipes, check out our blog – The Hungry Indian Books.



Sometimes you meet someone you know you're going to be friends with. That's what happened with Eshna and Samita. What they didn't realise was that their mutual love for food would lead to a delicious partnership. One loves to play with spices, and the other loves to play with words. Together, the two are The Hungry Indian. Currently writing a food blog called [thehungryindianbooks](http://thehungryindianbooks.wordpress.com) (www.thehungryindianbooks.wordpress.com), the duo is excitedly exploring other channels to share their love of all things culinary.

The Northeast fiesta

*The Northeast of India is a splendidly endowed region, with beautiful vistas, vibrant culture, colourful and traditional attire and cuisine, and specific festivals which celebrate all that is best in the region, says **Shikha J. Hazarika**.*



Women in traditional costume at the Mopin festival celebrated by the Galo Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh
(Photo courtesy: Sanjay Mosing)

While one is aware of the pristine wilderness and diversity of India's Northeast (NE), few know about the rich cultural mosaic that makes this region stand out of the throng. Perhaps, this gives a strong reason to call Northeast India as an 'Unexplored paradise'!

It is a magnificent and tragic tapestry of people, events and nature. One can be touched by its rivers, rain and mist, overwhelmed by the seeming gentleness of its people, stirred by its powerful and evocative history. With not less than 220 ethnic tribes in the eight states of NE India, this region stood firm since ages in holding its own unique culture, folk forms, cuisines and crafts of each of these ethnic tribes.

And the variety of indigenous festivals belonging to these tribes has been a prominent representation of these people being deeply rooted to the soil and its traditions. Being an agricultural-based region, each of these festivals has a tale of its own, connected with cultivation, yet offering a colorful reflection of their land and traditional lifestyle. In fact, some of the states have come up with annual festivals which exhibit the indigenous culture, music, food, ethnic wear, sports,

lifestyles of their different tribes, under one umbrella.

Let's take a stroll of the region with a glimpse of some very popular and well-admired festivals of different tribes from different NE states.

Mopin

With the potential to absolutely dazzle you by their dance, folk songs and local brews, Mopin is an agricultural festival of the Galo Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, celebrating wealth and prosperity in the month of March or April every year. Where the Holi, is the festival of colour in the rest of India, the tribal groups smear the aura with rice powder. In this five-day long celebration, tribal people dazzle in their traditional costumes and organise the amazing 'Popir' dance, performed by the women. One key purpose behind organising this function is with a specific goal to head out the shrewd spirits, and to receive the blessing of God for universal happiness, as there are lots of traditional beliefs that still prevail among ethnic groups.

(continued on page 28...)

KNOW INDIA BETTER



Exploring South Tamil Nadu

Of churches, poets and a fallen kingdom

A trip to southern Tamil Nadu revealed a multicultural society, with its share of Dravidian legacy, Jain and Buddhist temples, churches, and Christian saints who visited and left behind a treasure trove of folklore.

Text & Photographs : Nivedita Louis



A view of the new fishing harbour at Vembar

When the husband suggested a trip down South, in the hot humid summer when the whole state was sweating and fuming, I was incredulous. Yet, the curiosity in me pushed me to take up on the offer with one condition – we would only stay at places that had air conditioning. When that was agreed to, we set off to Vembar, my in-law's village, some 500 km south of Chennai.

Vembar, a fishing village

Vembar is a quaint fishing village, on the border between the districts of Thoothukudi and Ramanathapuram. The belt is arid, dry, with sparse vegetation, but it is filled with warm memories, at least for me. This tiny village had a beach that was once our regular evening haunt, and we were super excited to visit the beach which we had been fairly warned about. "The old beach isn't there anymore. They have built docking yards and so you can't walk around much". The Government has been constructing new fishing harbours all over south Tamil Nadu. Though the new harbours are touted as 'development' by the leaders, environmentalists are crying foul over state negligence towards coastal regulation zone.



Santiago Matamaros mounted on his stallion, Mookaiyur Church

We were used to long walks by the beach in the evenings, and this time over, it was a walk along the wharf. Fishermen were busy mending nets in the vast halls that double up as auction centers during the early mornings. Easterly winds kept pushing the boats towards the wharf, and we could see many berthed further away, in the sea. "They rub on the wharf in tides and water gets in, at times one or two boats have had damage, and so we berth them far from the wharf", said a fisherman when asked. We watched the orange orb drop into the sea, and drove back home.

An abandoned Portuguese church

The next morning, we had planned a trip to a nearby, small fishing hamlet called Mookaiyur. I had read a couple of days ago in the newspapers about an abandoned old Portuguese church in the village, and we started early morning. The 'church' stands as a magnificent two-storey high edifice, said to have been built around 1715 CE. A mutual friend from Vembar, a teacher by name Christu Gnana Valluvan, gave us a contact of a person who could tell us more about the church. Glittus is a retired vice principal residing in the fishing hamlet. As I stood clicking pictures of the exterior of the church, with its Portuguese columns and design, Glittus showed up, and was enthusiastic in showing us around the crumbling church.



Mahavira, Kulathur with his caretakers



The Portuguese Church, built 300 years ago, Mookaiyur



Baobab tree, Melmandhai



Poet Mahakavi Bharathi's birth place, Ettayapuram

The church was built by the local people, with directions from the Portuguese, who were their allies during the initial period of European intervention in South Tamil Nadu. There are written records of Father Francis Vaiz performing mission work in Mookaiyur during 1708, in the book *Arch Diocese of Madurai- Origin and Development*. There is another historical reference that the old church was demolished in 1713 CE under orders of Kizhavan Sethupathi, the King of Ramnad, who was opposed to the spread of Christianity. The new church was built in 1714 and consecrated in 1715.

The village had people belonging to the fishing community, the Paravas, who sided with the Portuguese under Captain Joe Flores and fought the 14 Years War from 1528, against the Mohammadens. The main contention was rights for pearl fishing, the Paravas being expert divers, they were working under the Moors/Mohamadens along the coast from Kizhakkarakai to Kayalpatnam. The Portuguese emerged victors and so were the Paravas, who en-masse converted to Roman Catholic rite of Christianity.

The church has humongous arches and fine plastering work along the lintel. There are representations of fishes everywhere – on the main altar, the pedestal. It is astonishing to see the fine workmanship when there was no cement or concrete! The entire structure is supported by arches and turrets. The lime plaster had worn out and come off in some places, and hence the fear that the structure might fall any time. Beneath all the crumbling mortar, stands a fearless deity raising his sword, mounted on a white horse.



Ettayapuram Zamin Palace, façade

Santiago Matamoros or St. James the Moor-slayer stands in the rot, shining in his armor. The connect of a Spanish Saint to a tiny Tamil fishing village baffled me. Apostle James miraculously appeared in the legendary Battle of Clavijo, helping the Christians against the Muslim Moors, said to have happened between 5th century CE and 10th century CE, in Spain.

The cult of Santiago spread to the neighbouring Portugal, and through them to the fishing hamlet in Tamil Nadu. The Tamils used to their worship of guardian deity "Ayyanar" on horseback, took to Santiago on horseback easily! The 300-year-old church has been abandoned and left to rot, simply because the Parish priest there thought it was cheaper to construct a new church than repair and renovate the old one! I was not sure if I would ever see the church again, and with heavy hearts, we bid our goodbyes to Glittus. Our next search was for a tree!

The search for the mighty baobob

The mighty baobob trees are endemic to Africa, and have a peculiar upside-down shape. But they have been reported all across India, mostly in West Indian states like Gujarat and Maharashtra, and also along the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. They are also found along the Pearl fishing coast of Tamil Nadu. We stopped at a place called Melmanthai, a few kilometers from Vembar, and enquired about the

tree. I was skeptical that a villager would know about the tree, but the moment we enquired with an elderly man about 'pappara puli' tree, he started directing us with earnest eagerness. The giant tree stood barren, with no signs of life in a vast tract of equally barren land. There were a few palmyra trees though, a dash of green to the eerie blackness around. *Adansonia digitata* can grow up to a height of 20 to 80 feet, and can have a girth of about 30 to 40 feet! These are also called monkey bread trees, as monkeys are quite fond of the fruits, that when burst open look like bread! The tree can save up to 1.5 lakh gallons of water in its trunk. Said to have anti-pyretic properties, the fruits of these trees have been eaten and its juice used as a syrup to treat chest and lung infections.

Probably it was this property that brought these trees from Africa to India. The African labourers working for their Portuguese masters had treated their liver/lung ailments with this juice, and it is said the Portuguese, or the African labourers might have brought these trees here. However, the oldest such tree in India is at Golconda Fort, and it is about 430 years old! We couldn't ascertain the exact age of this tree that stood desolate, but we were happy to see a few leaf buds along the dry branches. Hopefully the tree must have sprung back to life by now. After a swift lunch and a short nap, we headed to Thoothukudi where we had planned to stay the night. Right on the route to Thoothukudi is Kulathur, another small village where I had seen the yellow Jain board.

The Jain boards, and a palace

Anyone touring parts of Tamil Nadu must have seen the bright yellow board placed on roadsides, mentioning proximity to Jain heritage sites. The Madurai Jain Heritage Centre has done this commendable job of marking important Jain sites in the state. We roamed a little bit in the village looking for the next sign board, and found one bang in front of the Government School. When asked, we were directed into the dusty by-lanes. "Oh! you are looking for the Buddha?" the curious onlookers commented as we asked for directions. Finally, I spotted Him seated in the middle of a narrow street. He had no roof and protection from the sun and the rains. Yet, he was seated majestically on Padma Peetah. The Simha Lanchana shows him as Mahavira. He sits with his eyes closed in Ardha Paryankasana posture, arms placed over his lap, the Chamardaris flanking him on either side with their fans. A small crowd of women gathered around me and bombarded me with questions.

"Can we worship him? Is it safe? Why is his face defaced? How do we worship him?" I tried to answer them patiently on the religious politics of how Jainism and Buddhism waned due to the onslaught of Saivism in the state, and they seemed to understand. Most Jain images in Tamil Nadu are excavated from near water bodies, with their faces smashed or bodies mutilated, the effect of royal interfer-

ence in religious affairs. We reached Thoothukudi to a warm home, the city's famed 'poricha parottas' and 'pichi pota chicken' (shredded chicken).

The next morning, we travelled towards Ettayapuram, a town which was once the capital of Ettayapuram Zamin. We first reached the humble abode of Mahakavi Bharathiyar, the famed poet who wrote fiery verses, spearheading the literary attack against the British during India's freedom struggle. A tiny door at the entrance led to the room where the poet was born. There are manuscripts he wrote in English and Tamil, on display, along with a few worldly possessions like his walking stick. The old house is being maintained in a pristine condition, the antiques sparkling. There were also pictures of the poet, his Guru Sister Nivedita, his close friends Tila,k and Somasundara Barathi.

Our next stop was the dilapidated Ettayapuram Palace. Once a Zamin that had ruled the roost for a few centuries, the Zamins were great patrons of art and literature. The most notorious among them was poor Ettappa Nayak, the Zamindar who is said to have betrayed Kattabommu, the Panchalankurichi King, spilling his whereabouts to the British who were baying for his blood. The betrayal still haunts the Zamin, the Zamindari Act imposed having left him in penury. Even now, betrayal in Tamil society is addressed with the anecdote "ettappan mathri" (like Ettappan).



Umaru Pulavar, the Muslim poet's resting place with lamps



Holy Family Church, Vadakankulam

The 'palace' cannot be accessed, and so we had to settle for a look at the exterior. The exquisitely carved window panels, ornate pillars, the mythical 'yazhi' figures carved on them, the fine lime mortar flowers and leaves etched on the walls, is proof enough of a grand splendour that was once the Zamin.

Next to the palace was the abandoned stables where there is a lone chariot placed. The entrance to this was through a small moat that was probably constructed to contain the horses. Just at the entrance were two nondescript plaques in English and Tamil, erected to commemorate the construction of a bridge across Chitra Nadi river at Gangaikondan, a town that was once part of the Zamin. Interestingly, the plaque mentions the bridge was constructed with private money of the same Ettappa Zamin! The execution of construction was by the famed British Engineer Lt. W.H. Horsley, after whom the Horsley Hills of Andhra Pradesh are named!

Our next stop was Islamic poet Umaru Pulavar's Mani Mandapam, his burial place. Umaru goes by the citation "Amudha Kavi", meaning his poems are as sweet as ambrosia! He lived in the 16th century CE in Ettayapuram, his seminal work being Seera Puranam, the Tamil epic

depicting the life of Prophet Muhammad (Sal). The place is maintained by Muslims living nearby, who light the "kuthu vilakku" Tamil lamps. The state government built a memorial called "Mani Mandapam", which is maintained well. They also say the annual "Sandhana Koodu" – the Urs festival is celebrated for the poet during his birth month.

A church that St. Francis Xavier visited

Our travel took us to the Our Lady of Assumption Church in Kamanaickenpatti, about 30 km away from Ettayapuram. It is said that St. Francis Xavier visited this village in 1544 CE. This is one Church that has seen the most popular European Tamil scholars like Roberto De Nobili and martyr John De Britto in 17th Century CE, Veeramamunivar at Constantine Beschi in 18th Century CE, serve as priests. The church itself was constructed in 1679, when John De Britto converted people of this village. The large teakwood cars of this church were built by Veeramamunivar. It was at this very church that he also wrote the epic Thembavani and his Paramarta Guru fables. The church is a magnificent piece of architecture, with multiple arches and high ceiling. The Mother is decorated typically in Tamil style, sporting earrings, lots of jewelry, and donning a silk saree!



Inside the Holy Family Church, Vadakankulam

We had a quiet lunch at Tirunelveli and headed to the last stop of our trip – Vadakkankulam Holy Family Church. Called the "Trouser Church" and resembling the shape of half trousers, with two diagonal wings, this church was constructed in 1872 CE. The caste dispute of this village which led to the shape where one caste need not see the other, made headlines in 1916 CE, when the caste Vellalas sued the Bishop and Adi-Catholics, demanding separate entrances be maintained for the different castes. The case was decided against the segregation by local court and appeal in Madras High Court upheld the same. The wall segregating the castes was pulled down earlier, and the case was lodged to challenge breaking the untouchability wall in the church!

The old church, built in typical Dravidian style during 1779 CE, with stone pillars and carvings, houses possessions of martyr Devasahayam, who was killed for professing Christian faith. His belongings are preserved in this old church and displayed. It is widely believed that the

statue of Mary kept in the old church opened its arms and shed tears in 1803 CE. The exterior of the old church is however a mix of Gothic and Dravidian architecture. I could climb up the church and see the curved roof and tiles stuck on it.

The trip was short, and I was sad it was over too soon. But it was indeed a refreshing and eye-opening trip, as I could see the multi-cultural Tamil society seeped in religious plurality. That is the essence of our country – a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic!



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.

Our Last Six Issues

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“One third of the food that we consume is due to the pollination carried out by the bees.”

Beekeeper Akshay Borse (25) of Pune, is Director, APJS BEES. Bee-keeping is his passion and his profession, though in an earlier avatar he was a sailor with the merchant navy. Here he is in a candid conversation with A. Radhakrishnan.

What made you become a bee-keeper?

I was a sailor with the merchant navy, having done my diploma in nautical science. As my father was a veterinary doctor / Colonel in the Indian Army, I travelled throughout India, and always felt close to animals and insects, and hence my proclivity. This spurred me to become a fulltime beekeeper. Armed with a beekeeping course from the Central Bee Research and Training Institute, Pune, I became a beekeeper. Post training, I spent time with beekeepers in Rajasthan, learning commercial bee keeping, and applying scientific methods to uplift my beekeeping practice.

Is it costly to set up an apiary? Isn't it the least labour intensive farming activity?

Apiary refers to the location where one sets up the bee boxes for honey production or pollination. So 'costly' is a very relative term. Bee keeping is the least labour intensive in other countries, as there is less migration, but in India, a beekeeper does a minimum of 7-10 migrations a year. It can be anything from a single bee box to a few hundreds or thousands, but honey extraction and migration are labour intensive tasks, and we have a deficiency of skilled labourers.

Can beekeeping become a profession, or can it only be a hobby?

A person becomes a beekeeper even with one hive of bees. It totally depends on the scale of operation one wants. Hive inspection is carried out twice a week and takes around 10-30 minutes. For me, it's a profession, as I aim to increase my hives manifold, as this in turn, helps farmers and the environment, due to increased pollination.



Why do you find bees fascinating?

Bees are fascinating in terms of how they work and live. They start working for the hive as soon as they are born. Every age group of bees has a defined work profile, varying from cleaning, guarding, feeding, gathering of food and scouting, required for the hive's proper functioning. Bees never stop working, and always help other bees of the colonies, if need arises. Hence the phrase, 'as busy as the bee'. They don't sleep or rest. They keep working in rotation, and depending on the amount of work, their lifespan also decreases.

Why are bees important for the ecosystem? With their numbers declining globally (with several on the endangered species list), what is your advice?

One third of the food that we consume is due to the pollination carried out by the bees. Without them, there will not be cross pollination, and the quality of crop yield will go down and with time, all plants depending on it for survival will die, leading to high shortage of food products in the market.

Awareness at root level like schools is required to save them, and also apiary visits must be made compulsory for youngsters.

How many types of bees exist? Where did you get your bees and gear from?

There are the Apis Dorsata, Apis Florea, Apis Cerana,

Trigona and the Apis Mellifera, which I prefer, due to their high yield and relatively easier maintenance. I got my bees and gear from the Honey Mission started by the GoI (Government of India), issued by CBRTI, Pune. It can even be sourced from beekeepers.

How do bees recognise their hive? Do bees from the same hive have different temperaments like humans?

Through the smell of the Queen and the location of the box, but they never recognise the beekeeper. Based on their job description, they are aggressive or docile, but when the guard bees sense danger, a signal is sent all over the hive, leading all of them to become defensive and aggressive in nature.

Where are your apiaries located? How many colonies do you manage?

My bees migrate throughout the year and change location around 8-10 times, depending on the flowering seasons in the states of Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana, Punjab, MP, and Rajasthan. I don't own land for this, but set it up on land of farmers who don't grow the same crop. I have 200 colonies purchased from active beekeepers, a list of which is available at CBRTI.

How many types of hives are there?

Traditional types are found in many countries, where they use hollow tree trunk, pots or any other confined space to rear bees, but these are very hard to manage and need to be destroyed for honey extraction.

Scientific Langstroth hives have been designed, keeping in mind the integration of bees and humans and therefore, it's reusable and easier to maintain and migrate.

How must one maintain and care for a beehive?

Online videos is one way to go about it, but initially a beekeeper can make you comfortable around a hive and teach you better ways to care for it. Hives need to be visually inspected regularly for pollen and nectar load, wax moth, infection, attack by other predators, etc.

What are the effects of pesticides on bees? Have bee mites devastated other bee colonies?

Pesticides make bees die a painful death and lead to colony loss. Mites are easy to deal with, but their sighting is important. The treatment is formic acid fumigation during night, when all bees are back in the hive.

What sort of attacks occur on hives?

Weak colonies are affected by wax moth, ants, bee eaters, termite, crazy ants, mites, and bee diseases. So it is very important to manage the hives and remove excess frames on time, and check the reason for the fall of colonies. A strong

colony can easily fight off attacks and seal all entry points of these pests. As attacks are common, one should conduct regular inspections to avoid it.

Why it is important for beekeepers to know that his bee colony is swarmed?

Swarming is a tendency of a hive, when due to overcrowding or lack of resources, the colony decides to split into two or more parts, leading to group of bees leaving the box.

It generally takes away the mated Queen and lots of foraging bees. What is left is sometimes a very weak colony and therefore, one needs to check if the Queen is available in the hive or not, is she mated, and what is the overall condition of the hive, to decide further course of action.

What is the role of beekeeping in the development of rural areas?

A beekeeper can bring in millions of pollinators to a village and help increase production of the farms, without the use of any pesticides or growth enhancers for the plants, due to cross pollination by bees.

How do bees make honey? How to store it? How much honey do you produce and sell?

Bees collect nectar from flowers and store it in the hexagonal cells of the hives, where they reduce its moisture by fanning. Stored in glass airtight bottles, away from sunlight, approximately 10 tonnes a year is produced.

How many varieties of honey do your bees make? How much of honey is produced?

Depending on the flowering, there are different types of honey. India produces around 25 plus flavours. All have different properties, taste, and texture. I have recently started my own brand Indihive, and produce White Cream Mustard, Acacia, Ajwain, Moringa, Sidr, White Cream, Coriander Honey and Eucalyptus honey.

Apis Mellifera can produce up to 50 kg of honey per year, depending upon the flowering in the area of their apiary. I want to bring this natural sweetener to as many as possible.

What are some of the health benefits of honey?

It lowers blood pressure, helps control cholesterol, lowers triglycerides, heals burns and wounds, improves digestion, is a natural sweetener, reduces weight, helps better metabolism, improves the immune system, and helps good sleep.

Why does honey not get spoilt? Is honey superior to refined sugar?

Due to its low water content at 17% and acidic nature, it's hard for any bacteria or fungi to grow. Yes, it is not empty calories like refined sugar. Honey is natural sugar and has a



lot of micro nutrients and bee enzymes, which make it very healthy for consumption. Due to the high amount of sweetness, quantity required is very low to achieve refined sugar sweetness.

What does artificial ripening of honey mean?

For a bee to convert nectar to honey, it requires a lot of time. To cut this time short, nectar is extracted before it's sealed by the bees, which is then heated to reduce moisture to convert it into honey.

How do you harvest the honey?

Once the frames are full of honey, we uncup the wax caps. These frames are then put into the honey extractor, where centrifugal force pushes the honey out of the cells.

What other byproducts are got through bees?

Apart from honey, we get bee wax, propolis, pollen, royal jelly, and bee venom. India doesn't have a big market for this. Home apiary is good for local environment.

What are the challenges and rewards? Any specific advice to beginners?

Migration and site selection for an apiary is the biggest challenge, with around 8-10 migrations yearly. It's tough and expensive, involving huge losses, as it only happens at night. It implies shifting the whole apiary to another location as the flowering of current location is over. Spending time

with Nature and being around bees, are my rewards.

Lack of adequate research on bees impedes fighting diseases, and finding solutions. There is also scarce market awareness on how to export good honey. Also, one should work under active beekeepers for a few years, gain experience, and only then start a business. The don'ts are never travel solo with the bees, and have sufficient man power to handle issues. Don't dive in directly based on mere online knowledge.

Where are the future commercial business prospects?

Business, though limited, is expected to grow slowly due to the Honey Mission by the Govt, boosting it into a new era, helping beekeepers to grow and adopt more scientific methods.

I wish to expand in all metropolitan cities where health conscious individuals can avail of this natural miracle. This, in turn, will help me grow my numbers of hives and help the farmers increase their crop yield.

Akshya Borse can be contacted on instagram: [indihive](#) / facebook: [indihive](#), Ph: 8788746286/8237887031, and Email: indihivehoney@gmail.com



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

The Northeast fiesta

(continued from page 16...)



Lossong

'Lossong', an ethnic Sikkimese harvesting festival, is celebrated with traditional enthusiasm and fanfare in Sikkim. Earlier confined only to the Bhutia community of Sikkim, Lossong, which is also known as 'Namsong', gradually spread to the Lepchas, and now, it is also celebrated across other minor tribes of not only Sikkim, but also Darjeeling and Nepal. This four days celebration is

held at the Rumtek and Phodong monasteries mainly, marking the end of the Tibetan lunar calendar, and beginning of the New Year. The colourful Cham dance performed by monks wearing traditional attires and masks, accompanied by traditional instruments, is the prime attraction. It undoubtedly makes for a great retreat, offering an unmatched spectacle of other traditional folk dances, religious rituals and ceremonies, and of course, a lifetime opportunity to gorge on the delicious Sikkimese cuisine.



Wangala

Famously known as the 100-drums festival of Meghalaya, Wangala is celebrated by the Garo tribe, which is the second largest tribal community of the region, the Khasi being the first. A harvest festival celebrated during the month of November, it is basically done to offer gratitude to Misi Sajong (The Sun God) for blessing the region with good harvest. The music using 100 drums (Nagras),

where men gather with their drums and create a harmonious rhythm that is followed by the dance moves, gave it an alternate name – 'The 100 Drums Festival'. Meanwhile, young men, women and old people dress in their colourful garments (Dokmanda or Gando) and feathered headgear, and dance to music played on the drums. Drinking Chu (rice beer), and also setting up stalls to sell goods that are made out of fish scale, wooden pieces, and other things, bring more colour to the festival.



The Hornbill festival of the Naga people (Photo courtesy: Haren Gogoi)

Hornbill

Naga people have a rich tradition of maintaining their unique heritage and customs, and the much awaited 'Hornbill Festival' celebrated from December 1st to 10th every year is a defined form of it. Named after Hornbill, one of the most venerated bird species in the state, and also known as the 'festival of festivals', the Hornbill Festival showcases a melange of cultural displays of traditional dances, indigenous sports, and the folk songs of the various Naga tribes, under one roof. In the meantime, one can also get to see a colorful and vibrant celebration of a culture that's so mystic and intriguing that includes the warrior log drums, the colourful headgear, the soulful war cry, the exquisite costumes, etc., and are simply remarkable in their own ways. The chief purpose of the festival is to revive, protect, sustain, and promote the richness of the Naga heritage and traditions. Being held in Kohima, the biggest rock event is also a part of the vibrant celebrations. Apart from this, an adventure car rally and various other contest and events are organised during this festival. Among other attractions, the pork eating contest, the king chilly eating contest, etc., create massive enthusiasm among the visitors.

Sangai

A world-class festival that celebrates the culture and tradition of Manipur, the Sangai festival is one of its kind, where it features the best of what the state brings to the table, as far as workmanship and culture, handloom,

handiworks and expressive arts, indigenous games, foods and music, eco products, are concerned. Named after the popular brow-antlered Sangai Deer, this festival is celebrated all across the state with an aim to spread awareness and educate the thousands of visitors about the rich cultural heritage of Manipur. Breaking boundaries, this fiesta has been witnessing participations from various other countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Cambodia, Zimbabwe, etc. Among other unique events of this carnival, the adventure sports include kayaking, water trekking, and other adventure sports that have their origin in Manipur, are most popular.



The Sangai festival of the Manipurese



Chapchar Kut

Mizoram comes into its full glory when it is time to celebrate the Chapchar Kut festival, the annual harvest festival of the state. A celebration held in March annually in anticipation of a golden harvest is seen to hold together people from various Mizo tribes on one ground. The sight of men and women in colourful traditional attires is truly hypnotic, and the assemblage of people for a huge community fest to sing and dance to the tune of flute, cymbals, drums and gongs, makes it spellbinding. Northeast India being resourceful in bamboo cultivation, the Mizo community during this festival is found making the best use of bamboo for a dance form called Cheraw, which features men tapping the bamboo sticks according to the rhythm of the dance, and women adjusting their dance moves in time with it. Notably, history says that this was the time that the bamboo forests were cut in order to provide space for seasonal farming. The word 'Chapchar' refers to the drying of bamboo sticks, and 'Kut' means 'festival'. One unique feature of this celebration is that those who take part in it are seen barefoot.

With such exceptional features, these vibrant and colourful festivals exude a great sense of mysticism and cultural euphoria, tempting anyone to be a part of it. These festivals are just a slice of the entire region and its richness, because each of the states with so many tribes and culture, alongside the breathtaking beauty, has a bag full of festival flavours to offer.



Shikha J. Hazarika who hails from Assam in Northeast India, is a Communication Specialist by profession and a hardcore travel propagandist, who has a wide reach across Northeast India. Writing and photography being her passions, she is also keenly associated with the communicative works development sector, and is presently working as a Senior Officer - Media & Communications, with Bitchem Asphalt Technologies Ltd., a company carrying out a green roads mission using coldmix for paving of roads. Besides, she has worked for many international events like the 12th South Asian Games, Guwahati International Film Festival, etc.

Restored to tell tales

*With its beautiful and imperial bonedi or aristocratic buildings, Kolkata, long projected as a derelict city, is trying to reclaim some parts of its past glory. Metcalfe Hall on Strand Road is the latest in the series, reports **Manjira Majumdar**.*



A view of the museum hall

With several of its imperial buildings, churches and other iconic structures restored, or in the process of being refurbished, attempts at preserving Kolkata's heritage deserve mention. Various walks conducted by heritage groups, new museums, new and old exhibits and food festivals, the city's rich cultural past is painstakingly being kept alive, even as more and more landmark buildings come under the bulldozer. Students of history and anthropology, conservation artists and designers, and even ordinary citizens, are receiving practical exposure by being associated with these archival projects and in raising awareness, the first step towards preservation. In many cases, it is revenue-earning as well.

The Dalhousie area long

christened BBD Bagh (named after three revolutionaries of Bengal who fought the British!), grew as the administrative part of the city under British rule. This important hub of governance and trade resulted in a clutch of stately buildings such as Writer's, the General Post office, Currency Building, Raj Bhavan (the Governor's residence), Town Hall, among others. Due to trade and businesses, a number of grand mercantile houses, banks and treasures came up in this very area as well. The majestic Town Hall became a centre of social events right through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Once under the state government, maintaining these heritage sites became costly, but Town Hall since restored, already hosts a number of

important functions related to the arts. Close by, another majestic white building overlooking the famous Dalhousie Square – the Currency Building, recently renovated, has been turned into an exhibition hub. The first ever public event, a national jute and silk exhibition, was held within its halls in January this year; more shows are to come.

The story of the Metcalfe Hall

Yet, Metcalfe Hall on the crossing of Strand Road, which runs parallel to the River Hooghly and Hare Street, remained grossly neglected.

In addition to trade and commerce, the British were helping to create a multifaceted society, where learning, love for nature, the arts, and other pursuits, were gradually taking



Interactive boat to know a slice of Bengal

shape in the local cultures. Metcalfe Hall, named after Sir Charles Metcalfe, has a very interesting history. Sir Charles was an administrator of British India between the years 1822 and 1845. For a year, 1835 to 1836, he was the acting Governor-General of India, but today is more remembered as someone who worked for a free press. So the first public library was housed here before it was shifted to Belvedere House in Alipore, the current location for the city's famous National Library. Rare books, documents, photographs, works of art, still languish for want of restoration and space.

The majestic Metcalfe Hall, therefore, is a tribute to learning and free speech. According to Manish Chakraborty, architect and conservationist, who is closely associated with renovation of several historical buildings, "Metcalfe Hall was where the Indian Horticultural Society was headquartered, in addition to the imperial library, before both shifted to their respective addresses in Alipore."

The imposing Corinthian columns of Metcalfe Hall have an interesting architectural history, representing imperial architecture at its best. Similar to the Greek temples in

Athens, notably Temple of the Winds, the columns add a very special grandeur. The Town Hall renovated by the Public Works Department, on the other hand, followed the Roman Doric style of architecture.

Today, Metcalfe Hall with its commanding open doors and windows, the wooden floors and staircases that resound with footsteps, remind us that the Hall has sprung back to life with the help of the Archaeological Society of India. In order to attract footfalls, an exhibition titled *Ami Kolkata* (I am Kolkata) has been mounted inside Metcalfe Hall. Very well curated, with exhibits that capture the quintessential spirit of the city, a sense of nostalgia grips you the moment you enter. It simultaneously reminds you that this sort of a museum is a welcome addition to the city space, to remind you of things that are fast vanishing or have indeed vanished from the cityscape.

From the alpana at the entrance depicting certain motifs of gas lights, stained-glass type windows, to stylised Bankura horses and dholak, images collide to put forth the spirit of the city that chance found.

The three-storied interiors

are sparsely spread out, which gives a sense of not only space, but time as well. There is an interactive installation placed inside a boat. Visitors can get a brief blurb on some aspects of Kolkata's history, such as the rise of babu culture, the Bengali renaissance, Bengali sweets, and so on, by the touch screen method.

Posters of well-known films - art-house and commercial, covers of books and 3-dimensional rare photographs besides artefacts, are exhibited such that it is not cluttered or too crowded. The craft of shola, which plays a very big part in Bengali rituals, is explained with exhibits. The Kolkata life and culture, which included several communities who came from outside the country, are depicted through photographs.

There were several confectionaries in old Calcutta, but Nahoum's continues to be the most iconic; or a picture of the Chinese lady selling noodles, tea, etc., in old Chinatown.

The changes in the city landscape are not difficult to miss. The once laid-back graceful first city of the Empire gradually grew with teeming millions, to bring us to today's times; when blue and yellow buses ply, than the red double-deckers of yesterday, and a newer riverfront. Yes, the exhibits do include the usual stereotypes of *rossogolla*, *puchka*, the rickshaw, Chinese families, famous faces modelling against the background of Victoria Memorial. There is a lot that perhaps could still be accommodated, but overall, a certain civic spirit has been captured. Let us celebrate that.



Having worked as a full-time journalist, Manjira Majumdar today is an independent journalist

combining writing with part-time college teaching and media advocacy. She is also the author of 3 children's books: Ten of Us, The Story of Anjana and Ghost Stories from Bengal & Beyond.

Kaumudi, the theatre conundrum

A depiction of theatre within theatre, Abhishek Majumdar's new play *Kaumudi*, addresses the relationship between a father and son, as well as other philosophical questions, says **Prof. Avinash Kolhe**.



A still from the play

A new play by Bangalore-based Abhishek Majumdar (1980) is always eagerly awaited, and his new offering *Kaumudi* (moonlight) lives up to expectation. The play was recently performed in Mumbai. Abhishek has written 14 plays in English, Hindi and Bangla, and has also directed some 16-odd plays. Some of his well-known plays are *Harlesden High Street*, *Thook*, *Djinns of Eidgah* and *Treadmill*.

Kaumudi has been influenced by texts such as Anand's Malayalam novel *Vyasam Vigneswaram*. Abhishek says that the idea of a conversation between Abhimanyu and Ekalavya emerged from this novel. Then there is Jorge Luis Borges' essay *Blindness*, which talks about the author's experience of losing his eyesight.

Kaumudi is quite an ambitious play as it blends the grandeur and travails of theatre with India's well-known epic Mahabharat. And like all epics, *Kaumudi* is multi-layered, yet seamless. The two distinct themes come together and create a unique whole.

The plot

Kaumudi narrates the story of a senior thespian Satyasheel (Kumud Mishra), Allahabad-based theatre artist who is ageing, and losing his eye-sight. His portrayal of 'Ekalavya' has earned him name and fame. He is about to retire from stage. When the play opens, he is to give his last performance. To match his acting ability, the theatre company has invited an equally known young actor from Banaras Paritosh

(Sandeep Shikhar) to play 'Abhimanyu'. As per the transition plan of the theatre company, Paritosh will play Ekalavya once Satyasheel retires. Till then he will play Abhimanyu.

The audience notices the high levels of hostility between the two as they rehearse for the play. Slowly it is revealed that they are not strangers to each other, but are father and son, separated years ago due to an unfortunate incident. Back then, a playful evening at sea-shore took an ugly turn, and Satyasheel (the father) had to choose between saving his wife or his little son. He chose his son (Paritosh), but the son never forgave his father for killing his mother, and in anger, shifted to Banaras.

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Blues, Hues and All Things Wonderful

By Rashmi Oberoi

Sanbun, New Delhi, 2019

Rashmi Oberoi has led a quiet, itinerant childhood and youth in colonial, leafy cantonment towns /old boarding schools of India owing to an army upbringing, and that is quite apparent in her sensibility. Cosmopolitan, but understanding cultural diversity, with an intimate feel for pan-Indian local milieus. The constant refrain of rootlessness is adequately compensated by a rich tapestry of lived experiences, shuffling dozen friendships in a year, and an equal number of schools through her student life. It imparts a certain resilience, adaptability and openness that one embraces as a strength, as one enters the real world after the glass menagerie of cantonment life comes to an end. It perhaps also signifies all that was right with a certain educated, urban, liberal-minded class in India that was ensconced in national service, and through myriad postings, got a feel of what “real” India is all about. Or maybe ‘real India’ is a chimera, your India is not mine, and mine has nothing in common with yours. Nowhere else does the postmodern fluidity of meaning apply more.

Oberoi’s peripatetic life has brought her face to face with a multitude of individuals, and she does come across as a people’s person who writes about them with good humour and sympathy. Blues, Hues and All things Wonderful is a collection of middles and short pieces on a variety of subjects. Some of these have been earlier published by her in national magazines and newspapers where she is a regular contributor. This is her third book - earlier two having been published by Writer’s Workshop: My Friends at Sonnenshine and Cherie: The Cocker Spaniel, the latter of

which is a children’s book. She vouches for friendships across differences and in “Of Friendships and Holiday Cheer” displays a fauji grit in tracing down a friend from Tibet she had known in youth and lost touch with. The reunion is typically cathartic, drowned in bowls of thupka and momos.

Oberoi is quite clearly a foodie and a travel junkie, a fact that is quite palpable in her writing. The pieces, which are otherwise disparate, can be read in conjunction with these interests of her life. She plays quite the connoisseur with her discretionary powers when it comes to describing food. So there are pieces on North-eastern food, mangoes, chillies and “Kalari”- a special cheese from Jammu, etc.

She of course, eventually connects the gastronomical with the humanistic. Her warmth with the friends of her youth is reminiscent of the pre liberalisation ‘Mills and Boons-fed, many secrets sharing, 3 am marathon phone call, you-will-always-have-my-back girl friendships’ that started in the school dorms and carried on to giving you counsel through the tough times of your adult life. The real flesh and blood friendships when hours did not matter, and you chose to see the world together through rose tinted glasses.

She has several real life travelling anecdotes which come in all kinds of after taste: So she is delighted at some, and sorely disappointed at others. She meets interesting people in her journeys, like in “Of Chance Meetings and Learnings” set largely in an airport, she bumps into this quasi researcher woman working on solar



dryers, proceeding to Bhopal to learn classical music, her long cherished passion. So it is typical of Oberoi, in her spirit to delve deeper, and as an aside, to give an anecdotal but well informed low down on solar dryers and how it benefits the fisherman community, particularly not very affluent ones. Like it is a virtue of a novelist to be able to procure nuggets of information about the subject at hand, she does inform you about common as well as esoteric subjects, whether it is varieties of really hot chillies found in India, or it is a vehicle called ‘segway’. That is the delight of the pieces and also a use.

The pieces are succinct and sparkling with wit - they are frothy and make for smooth reading. It’s the kind of book you could take on a vacation with you and read spread-eagled on a Pacific beach! It’ll give you the chuckles, while you’ll get to know a thing or two. Primarily, it boils down to this; a sympathetic understanding of the world is as important as a strident confrontation.



Sakoon Singh is a recipient of the Fulbright Fellowship and currently teaches at DAV College, Chandigarh. She read English Literature at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Panjab University. She can be reached at: sakoon.n.singh@gmail.com

Kaumudi, the theatre conundrum

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After a gap of few years, they come face to face with each other. Paritosh is an accomplished actor too who has not learnt anything from his father. As the play progresses, the parallels between the actors' lives and that of the characters they portray, become sharp. This on-stage drama is full of philosophical issues and debates.

At one level the play is about the tensions between an ageing father and his young son, and at another level, it is about injustice meted out to Ekalavya, machinations of Lord Krishna and guru Dronacharya to ensure that Arjun retains the title of 'all-time great practioner of archery'. At one point of time, Satyasheel tells Paritosh that he will never be able to do justice to the character of Ekalavya. Abhishek's play takes the (controversial) position that Lord Krishna pondered over the fact that Abhimanyu could be saved. He faces

the ghost of Ekalavya, who reminds him that there are can never be two great archers. And if there has to be only one, then you will sacrifice Abhimanyu to keep the honour with Arjuna, as Dronacharya got me to offer him my thumb so that Arjuna does not face any challenge! This indeed stuns the discerning members in audience. Parallel to this, off stage, Paritosh accuses Satyasheel of letting him go, of sacrificing his son for himself and for his art.

In addition to these two levels, the play also has one more layer and it is about the very nature of theatre as an art form. What is the truth in theatre? Is truth a lie here, or is the lie the truth? Where does one draw the line?

Kaumudi is an eminently watchable play. Here, the set is a simple pandal in the centre, a rug spread out, and green rooms of artists with mirrors and lights. The

performances are compelling. This must be Kumud Mishra's finest performance so far. I was reminded of Balraj Sahani who moved in front of the camera with ease. Kumud moves equally effortlessly and shifts from one role to other with tremendous confidence. The hidden, suppressed anger about his son is well expressed. Sandeep Shikhar is joined by Gopal Datt and Shubhrajyoti Barat in making this a wonderful play with their top-class acting. All the four actors play two, and some time three roles, and bring comic relief from time to time. *Kaumudi* is an outstanding piece of fine, thought-provoking, theatre.



Prof. Avinash Kolhe retired as Associate Professor in Political Science from D.G. Ruparel College,

Mumbai.

WHO AM I?

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



Earth...



T.N. SRINIVASAN

Internationally acclaimed economist (1933-2018)

Thirukodikaval Nilakantha Srinivasan, the acclaimed economist who breathed his last on 11 November 2018, did his Masters in Mathematics, and given his penchant for statistics, aimed to become a statistician. He even completed his BSc. (Honours) and post-graduation in Maths from the Madras University, and also had the benefit of training in Statistics at the Indian Institute of Statistics, Kolkata.

However, he turned into a full-fledged economist after acquiring a PhD from the reputed Yale University in the US. In 1980, he migrated to the US, and since then had been working and teaching there. His tenure as an understudy to Prof. Koopman who later won the Nobel Prize, enabled him to get a good grounding in subjects like Operations Research and Linear Programming. He also taught at various prestigious institutions over a period of four decades, and these included MIT, Stanford University, and statistical institutes in India. But for a major part of his long career, he was involved with Yale University. Srinivasan was a visiting fellow at the Centre for Research on Economic Development and Policy Reform at Stanford, and was also a Fellow of the Econometric Society, American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the American Philosophical Society. Another feather in his cap was his appointment as a Special Advisor at the Development Research Centre of the World Bank from 1977-80. He was also an Emeritus Samuel C. Parks Jr. Economics Professor at Yale University.

Srinivasan made significant contributions in several fields including economic growth and development economics, and was equally proficient in the sphere of international trade as well. He was also active in policy debates concerning India, and along with other renowned economists like Jagdish Bhagwati and Padma Desai, was actively involved in laying the intellectual groundwork for India's economic reforms.

Srinivasan who also served as a foreign associate of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA, was the Founding Editor of the Journal of Development Economics, World Economic Review, and the Journal of Quantitative Economics. He was a prolific writer as well, contributing to various journals

on diverse subjects like econometrics, world trade and developing country economics. Many of the books that he co-authored with other writers were best sellers and these included inter alia, *India's Economic Policy* (with Jagdish Bhagwati) and *Re-Integrating India with World Economy* (with Suresh Tendulkar). Srinivasan's other works like *Growth, Sustainability and India's Economic Reforms – 2011* and *Economic Reform in India: Challenges, prospects and lessons*, too were authentic treatises on the subject concerned. A four column handbook of Development Economics that Srinivasan authored in collaboration with

Hollis Chenery, is considered a landmark on the subject. Bhagwati and Srinivasan also brought out another book *Indian Foreign Trade Regimes and Economic Development*. This work was commissioned by the National Bureau of Economic Research, New Delhi, and the tome contains a storehouse of information for policy makers, analysts, and others.



Srinivasan's outstanding scholarship and his principled belief in growth, free trade, and multilateralism, made him a force to reckon with in the field of world economics. An unassuming individual who never craved for public recognition, Srinivasan was a guru and mentor to a number of budding economists, one of them being former Governor of the RBI, Dr. Urjit Patel. A Padma Bhushan awardee (2007), Srinivasan who passed away at the age of 85, has left behind a rich legacy of outstanding scholarship, principled belief in growth, free trade, and multilateralism. A regular participant in conferences and seminars across the world, he also regaled his contemporaries with his sense of wit and humour. In an eloquent tribute, his alma mater hailed him as a vital and influential voice for Indian economic reform. Through his intellect and his passion he helped shape economic policies that improved the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Verily, his entire lifetime was spent productively and was studded with prolific contributions to knowledge and policy making that are certain to stand the test of time, and serve as a beacon to economists across the world.

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

DINYAR CONTRACTOR

Theatre legend (1941-2019)

Dinyar Contractor was a theatre legend, actor par excellence, writer, director, comedian, and TV and Bollywood actor, whom the audience will remember for a long time.

With his roly-poly looks, his ability to tweak both ears and other acting skills, he never failed to amaze with his comic timing and powerful acting. His trademark dead-pan style of dialogue delivery brought the house down. Best known for his comic roles, he lit up the screen and our lives with his wit and charm, evoking bursts of laughter wherever he went. His own Dinyar Contractor Productions continued the laugh riots that made him a household name in Parsi homes, a torchbearer of Parsi Gujarati comedy.

He will be remembered as the moon-faced comedian. Yet, behind the laughs lay a virtual encyclopedia of theatre, a hawk eye, and a nose which could smell a plagiarised play at a distance, and call out its adaptor who claimed it to be original.

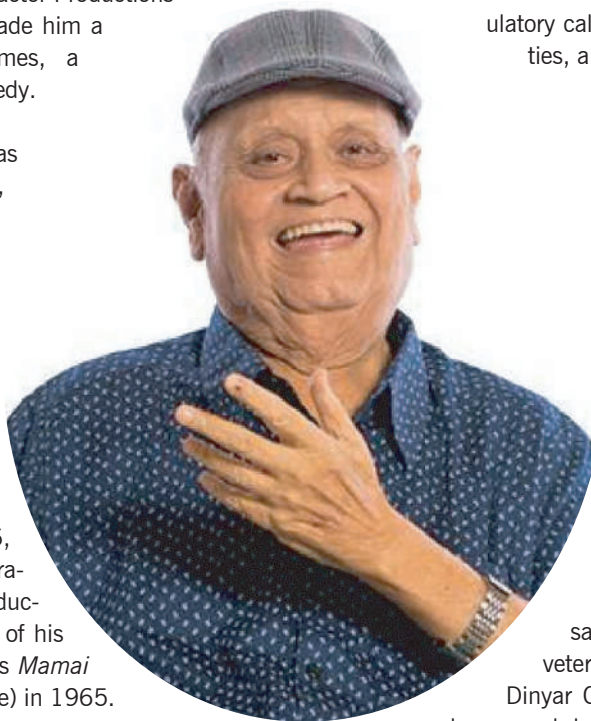
Dinyar started acting in school and began his professional acting career on stage in 1966, and made a mark in several Gujarati, Hindi and English stage productions, devoting over five decades of his life, beginning with Eruch Pavri's *Mamai Ni Musaafri* (an old Parsi fairytale) in 1965.

He started working on television programmes with *Adi Marzban* when Mumbai Doordarshan launched the DD-2 channel in Mumbai with *Aao Marvao Meri Saathe*, a Gujarati programme, and became a household name. His evergreen show, *Hum Sab Ek Hai* has left behind many memories.

He has worked and gained popularity in Bollywood films like *Baazigar*, *Baadshah*, *36 China Town*, *Khiladi*, *Khichdi-the movie*, *Daraar*, *Jhankaar Beats*, *Mujhse Shaadi Karogi* and *Jawab*. But it is on television that he was more prolific. Some of his better-known works include *Hum Sab Ek Hain*, *Do Aur Do Paanch*, *Khichdi*, *Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah*, *Dil Vil Pyar Vyar*, *Karishma – the Miracles of Destiny*, *Dam Dama Dam*, *Hum Sab Baraati*, *Teri Bhi Chup Meri Bhi Chup*, *Kabhi Idhar Kabhi Udhar*, *Shubh Mangal Savadhan*, and *Aaj Ke Shrimaan Shrimati*. And also stage

shows like *Carry On Papa*, *Carry On Frying* and more.

The actor was awarded the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian honour on Republic Day in January 2019, by the President of India, Ramnath Kovind. Recovering from a spine ailment, as excited as a child, he had said, "I'm elated to receive this honour and have been flooded with congratulatory calls since it was announced! I am thankful to God and to all my well-wishers. I've never worked for awards. When I got the call from Delhi, I thought it's not genuine - someone's just playing the fool. But I realised it's the truth when I started getting numerous congratulatory calls from distinguished personalities, and it sunk in."



Contractor died due to old age related health issues on 5 June 2019 in Mumbai, aged 79 and was cremated at Worli prayer hall in Mumbai for Parsis. The Gujarati theatre fraternity arrived in strength for the funeral and condolences poured in on social media from different sections of the society.

On Twitter, Prime Minister Narendra Modi condoled Contractor's death, saying he is 'saddened' by the veteran actor's demise. 'Padma Shri Dinyar Contractor was special because he spread lots of happiness. His versatile acting brought smiles on several faces. Be it theatre, television or films, he excelled across all mediums.'

Union minister Smriti Irani tweeted, "He brought bursts of laughter with him wherever he went, and he lit up the screen and our lives with his wit and charm."

Unfortunately, Dinyar Contractor could not complete his wish of hosting a huge, mega, magical show. A bachelor, he leaves behind four siblings, two of whom live abroad and two are settled in Mumbai.

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

CORPORAL JYOTI PRAKASH NIRALA, AC

Exceptional bravery and gallantry (1986-2017)

Corporal Jyoti Prakash Nirala was born on 18 November 1986 in Balwadih village in district Rohtas in Bihar, and joined the Indian Air Force (IAF) in 2005. During 12 years of service, he served in various Air Force stations across the country. He was the only son of Tej Narayan Nirala, and had four sisters, one of whom was married. The father had a small one bigha farm. Jyoti Prakash was supporting the education of his three sisters. In 2010, he got married to Sushma from Barun village in Aurangabad district.

He was a member of the Garud Commando Force. After the attack on the Air Force base in Pathankot in 2016, it was decided to train the Garuda Force along with the Army units in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), and Nirala was attached to 13 Rashtriya Rifles (RR) in Jammu and Kashmir under the aegis of Operation Rakshak. Operation Rakshak had been launched as a counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operation during the height of violence in J&K in June 1990. The operation adapted itself from being merely a "show of strength", and achieved good results. The security forces had also incurred casualties. Attachment with 13 RR was part of on the job training for IAF commandos. On 18 November 2017, specific information was received about the presence of six terrorists in village Chanderger in Hajin area of district Bandipura.

Nirala joined the cordon and search operation along with the army personnel on 19 November 2017. They covertly approached the target house where the terrorists were suspected to be hiding, and laid an ambush. Nirala led from the front. Armed with a light machine gun, he took up a position close to the approach of the suspected hideout, thus cutting off their escape route. Laying ambush at such close quarters demanded a high degree of courage and professional competence. The militants rushed out firing and throwing grenades. Nirala killed two terrorists and injured two more in the exchange of fire. He was hit by a volley of fire. He was reported to have been shot thrice by the terrorists, but he kept on firing. All the six terrorists were eliminated. They were the top leadership of the local Lakshar-e-Taiba (LeT). The nephew of Pakistan based operation chief of LeT,

Zaki-ur-Rahman, the master mind of the 26/11 Mumbai attack, was one of them. It was said to be the most successful operation of 2017. Jyoti had shown exceptional courage, undaunted by the danger he faced.

He displayed exceptional gallantry, and was awarded the Ashok Chakra posthumously, the highest honour in peace time. He is the second airman to receive this award, the first one for action on ground. He is survived by wife Sushma and a four year daughter, who live in Chandigarh, while the rest of the family lives in the village.



His body was taken to Chandigarh airport where senior officers conducted a wreath laying ceremony and paid floral tribute. The body was then flown from there to Bihta airport near Patna, by the IAF. It was taken to his village after a salute by the IAF guard at the airport. As it reached the village, hundreds of people from the nearby villages also assembled at the funeral site shouting slogans, "Jyoti amar rahe" and "Pakistan murdabad." Jyoti's parents, siblings and wife were grief-stricken. After a salute by the guard of honour, his father Tej Narayan Singh performed the last rites.

The chief minister of Bihar announced a grant of eleven lakhs and the cheque was handed over to the family by the District Magistrate of Patna. In his condolence message, the chief minister said that the country would remember the sacrifice of this brave son of Bihar. The President presented the award to Jyoti's wife Sushma and mother Malti Devi..

- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)



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