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is to
live

THE ART OF TRAVEL

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

NAVIGATING A DELTA

KNOW INDIA BETTER

Varanasi and Sarnath:
Different moods of devotion

FACE TO FACE

Srinivasan Narayanan





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The art of travel

*Why do people travel? asks **Nikhil Katara**, as he describes a wonderfully curated festival called 'Sandscape' that he attended in the deserts of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan. Here, travel, folk music, and visual arts came together gloriously to create a most magnificent experience for tourists.*



Tourists at the unique Sandscape festival

Why do people travel?

It is a question that is, and forever, shall be intriguing. People leave their homes and go to places far away to seek what? Some people probably seek a new culture, one that they have never witnessed. Some people travel to learn new things, and expand on their knowledge, whereas others just travel to be alone, away from the lives that they've lived. Travel is that escape into the unknown that everyone is looking for, into beautiful sunsets, landscapes, and new realities. In this case, everyone is an 'Alice' looking for their own wonderland. Now, we don't really know what wonderland might offer, and when it surprises us with magic, we are happy to be surprised. One such unique escape is the Sandscape.

The Sandscape experience

The Sandscape is what the name suggests. It is a travel experience to escape into the dunes of Rajasthan, and even though the breathtaking beauty of the desert is enough for many to be speechless, the Sandscape is not only that. It is much, much more.

If one were to, in simple words try to explain to someone what it is all about, it would be difficult, because of the variety of experiences it provides. But the keyword here is amalgamation; a coming together of art, culture and tourism. Its founders are Indian and European artists who were interested in creating an experimental space where

music, dance, creative visuals and installation art become one living breathing person, all in the sands of Jaisalmer.

So when you pack your bags and leave your homes and travel all those miles to reach the desert, you might think that you have reached your destination. But that is precisely where you're wrong, because this is just the beginning of the rabbit hole, and wonderland is on the other side. When the music kicks in, you travel a little more with it, and when the dance kicks in, so does your imagination, and the installation art transforms the dunes into another world itself. Let's say even if you imagined these things right now, the wildest of your imagination can't take you to a world close to the one created by these artists.

When being quizzed about why they started this festival that combines music with travel and visual art, Nelson OJ, Head of sound and music at Sandscape, said, "Sandscape started from a dialogue between local cultural activists and backpacker artists. The general discussions were, and still are, around protection of the local artist communities, environment, and heritage. We also thought, what if we create a collaborative platform to experiment? What if we blend the local traditional art forms with contemporary global art? What if the local folk artists would get the credit of their hard work, worldwide? What positive impact would a festival have, if it is done with a respectful approach?" All these thoughts came together in the desert sands to create Sandscape.

The Tao of Travel?

In the book *The Tao of Travel: Enlightenment from Lives on the Road* author Paul Theroux quotes, “The wish to travel seems to me characteristically human; the desire to move, to satisfy your curiosity or ease your fears, to change the circumstances of your life, to be a stranger, to make a friend, to experience an exotic landscape, to risk the unknown...” All the curiosity that the mind has to offer needs to find a release somewhere. Some find their escape in music, some find their escape in travel, some find their escape in art, and some find their escape in stories. But what if there was one route to escape into all of them together? What if you could move, ease your fears, be a stranger, make a friend, experience an exotic landscape, see the unknown, all through music, art, and stories? Would that be a worthwhile travel experience? Would that satisfy the mind of the vagabond? Some people escape with traveling, some people escape with art, but what if you escape through travel and art together? Is it the ‘Tao of Travel’?

The mind of a traveler is that of a seeker, the one who is always ready to breathe in an air that will transfer a sense of relief to the traveler’s soul. The one where imagination has often promised, but reality is rarely delivered. The seeker is looking to gratify all the senses. The sense of touch, the sense of sight, the sense of taste, the sense of smell, and the sense of hearing. The more the seeker gets, the more the soul is satisfied, for it, even if ever so briefly, experiences what was once imagined. The Sandscape is that promised land. In the middle of the desert lives an oasis of music, art and humanity, which is so far away from the reality we inhabit, and so close to the dreams we dream.

A jugalbandi

The music itself is an amalgamation, the artists like to call it a ‘Jugalbandi’. Experiments, workshops and residencies have yielded a new form, where folk music, electronic art, alternative urban music acts, have all found a new rhythm that starts to beat when the sun sets, and goes on till the night has darkness in it. The artists who curate Sandscape also ensure that each folk musician gets the royalties they deserve for the music they create, this just adds that much more value in traveling into the dunes, because you know that the people who make the experience magical, the folk artists of the desert, are being respected, honoured, and paid, for the rare form of music that is found so specifically in this part of the world. At some points when you are in the dunes and your eyes wander, you see the moonlight and the many stars that stare down at you, and you wonder how can the night sky have so many lights. Then your eyes wander to the visuals that the artists have created around you, and you wonder, how do human minds create something so still, yet so moving. Your ears latch onto the music and the breath finds the same rhythm, and you do take a moment and say ‘Life is good.’

In that moment you forget bills, expenses, respon-



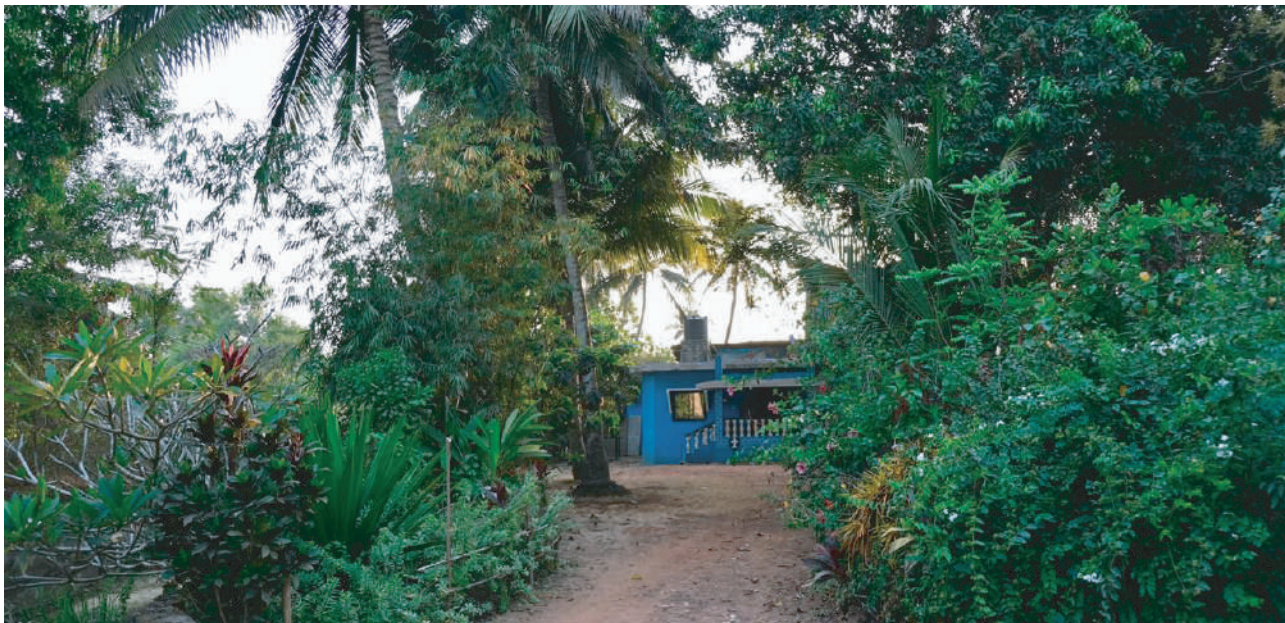
-sibilities, problems, inhibitions, and fears, for you are that little girl Alice, who went down the rabbit hole and found everything to be “curiouser and curiouser!” The definition of time alters in so many ways and the past is forgotten, the future hasn’t arrived and you live in the present, which seems like “now” for the first time. The Sandscape is that side of the rabbit hole that everyone should escape into once in a while, for the desert is all music and stories... once in a year.



Nikhil Katara initiated his journey as a writer with his own production titled *The Unveiling*, a science fiction drama in the year 2011. To strengthen critical learning he initiated an MA programme in ‘Philosophy’ at the Mumbai university with optionals in Kant, Greek Hellenistic Philosophy, Feminism, Logic and Existentialism. His play *Yatagarasu* opened at Prithvi Theatre in 2016. He is a consultant facilitator at J’s paradigm (a novel performance arts institute) and writes book reviews for the Free Press Journal.

State of siesta

*What is Goa but an idea, a state of mind, and a state of being in a world, where time slows down enough for us to actually note its passage, says **Shikha Balakrishnan**, who has been visiting Goa since many years.*



Goa is all about days elegantly blending into a continuous state of idyllic contentment

The afternoon air hangs low and heavy like thick incense, snaking its way through coconut fronds towards eggshell skies. In its muggy womb people retreat, waiting for the sun to lower its unblinking gaze towards the patiently waiting ocean, to come out and resume life and its everydayness. That people manage to get any work done in this time zone slowed by the sun, sea breeze and afternoon naps, is a constant source of amazement to me.

Not just the beach

Like almost everyone else I've known, for years I've come to Goa -- the beach. Unexpectedly, one summer, I found myself there with people who had made it their home eighteen years ago. I lived with them, ten minutes from a beach I didn't see; because for the first time I saw a Goa that was tucked between winding hillsides and swelling mangroves, hidden on a little island with a solitary bridge, a bar, and a 360 degree view of an inky twilight sky, bustling in the maze of lanes at the heart of Panjim, and expansive at the Promenade where people fished for mud crabs while the floating casinos slowly lit up for the night.

Idyllic, provincial, laid back, content, slow; in my curiosity to understand how locals and visitors see Goa, I have heard many words used to describe this 100 km long state. It certainly is many of those words and the feelings

they evoke, but Goa is also a state that has permeated its people. People who have delivered everything from mattresses to vegetables on the basis of a conversation and trust, instead of advances and agreements, cabbies who have shared a beer and college stories about drag bike racing through the fields and lanes, mothers who find the time to smile as they zoom past me in their scooter with two kids in tow and a waiting school bus on their mind, cashiers at stores who have asked me to put back the beer nearing expiry that I had picked up in favour of a fresher batch, friends who drive in to their homes in villages where they don't bother to lock the front door or gate...if it sounds idyllic, it is because it is.

Often when I tell Goans of my experiences in Goa, they caution me that the state is not all sunshine and susegad as I seem to think. They recount stories of everything from a recent chain snatching, to the mining that has impacted air and water quality, and the unchecked construction of hundreds of apartments, and the loss of trees to widening roads, and traffic jams that they have never seen before. It's the reality check I could do with, but Goa and its people have a way of reaffirming my faith in their quiet sense of priority, and determined need to nap for an hour in the afternoon.

Resolute in my desire to get past the initial euphoria and find out what lay beyond the rush of falling in love;



Goa is indeed a lot about beaches and swaying palms

euphoria and find out what lay beyond the rush of falling in love; I committed two months to an exercise in living alone in a village I had never been to in Goa, with no stated goal or intent. When I asked my neighbours if it was safe (for a single woman to live on her own in an apartment on a dark bend of road that ended in a cul-de-sac), they warned me – to keep the doors and windows closed between 6 and 9 p.m., against the mosquitos! Rank strangers have insisted on paying for my breakfast, invited me home, cooked for me when I was unwell, and have reiterated no-expiry invitations for chai, beer or good old chorizo-pao. In the two months I was there I lost count of the kindnesses and courtesies of the people I encountered, and went from being suspicious to overwhelmed, to starting to take it for granted.

Once the thrill of the new and unfamiliar had passed I settled into a routine not very different from the one I was used to. Practical challenges like the lack of a well-connected public transport system or the sheer impossibility of finding even the most basic household help notwithstanding, slowly, I found myself breathing in the same pace as everything around me, doing only the most essential things and saving the somnambulant daylight hours for vacant non contemplation. The air, the water, the church bells, the Saturday football game, Sunday fish market, and the all-pervading calm constancy of life in the village I called home for that time, is a place I keep going back to in my head.

I've met Goans in their early thirties coming back to a place they call home after having studied and worked everywhere in the world, and those who have lived there all their lives. When I ask them why they stayed or came back their reasons turn out to be the same that drive many of us,

family and parents, but they always end by asking me, "Why would I want to leave Goa?"

So they close their doors and windows to mosquitoes at dusk, reinforce their homes in reams of plastic yardage against the buffeting winds and all-pervading torrent of the monsoon, fuel themselves on kokum juice and urack to cheerfully make their unperturbed way through nine months of tropical vagaries, to enjoy three months of bearable weather.

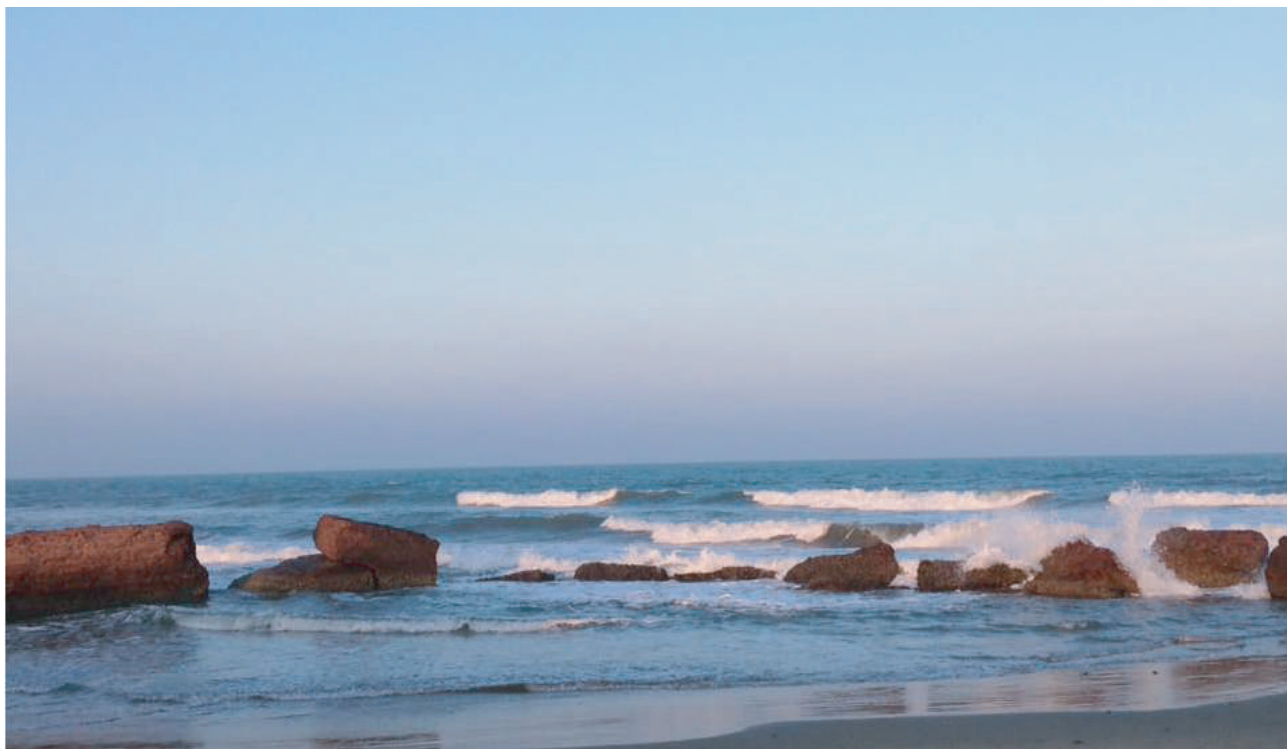
In this state where most street dogs look well fed, wear collars, and look about as content and carefree as its people, I, like many other people I know, have come looking for respite, and in its salty humid embrace have found home. Maybe not a place we can all permanently live in, but a place we can go back to in our minds and on long weekends, when tickets are cheap, and bosses benevolent. And for that brief while feel like it is possible to live a life that marches to a slower drum; where we can wake up with the sun and live and work, all the while being able to nap in the afternoon.



A master's from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Shikha Balakrishnan is an avid traveller and also is a candid wedding photographer. She quit her corporate career to follow her hearts calling and is a frequent figure at Goa's beaches.

The Danish town

*The Danish settlement of Tranquebar or Tharangambadi is not as well known as the other colonial settlements of the British, the French and the Portuguese. This little town, almost an outpost to European adventures in India, is reasonably well-preserved, and quite a gem, says **Sonali Pradhan**, who visited the town recently.*



The Tharangambadi beach beckons, but is not very safe to swim

Despite having lived in Chennai for half my life and having spent two years in Pondicherry while I completed my Masters, I had not heard of this quaint little town called Tranquebar (renamed 'Tharangambadi', the place of the singing waves).

Years after I left Chennai, while browsing for offbeat destination where I could spend a relaxed weekend, I came across Tranquebar. This is the only city that is a former Danish colony. While parts of India were colonised by the other European countries, the Danes were happy with this town.

Looking at the images of the sunrise, sunset and the only boutique hotel in the town – 'Bungalow on the Beach' (BoB), and I was sold. I was ready to pack my bags and head to spend the weekend in Tranquebar. A friend showed interest and we were all set to explore a new place. I was glad I had company as we could then share the expenses. BoB is a pricey accommodation, but well worth it. We caught the earliest flight we could at 5 a.m., and landed in Chennai well

before the restaurants opened their doors to serve breakfast. I miss this city, Chennai, if not for anything else, the 'sambhar' and 'ven pongal'! Thoughts of having breakfast at Saravana Bhavan, A2B, or Murugan Idli, were dashed, as we didn't want to waste an hour commuting in the city.

I asked the driver of the vehicle we had hired, to take the ECR (East Coast Road) route via Pondicherry. Driving past Marina beach, ECR evoked nostalgia, it was beautiful at that hour. The salty sea breeze, rows of casuarina trees framed against old, damaged boats moored on the sandy beach – it was a beautiful drive.

En route we stopped at Sangeeta's for breakfast and later at Auroville for the mandatory morning fuel. It was well into lunch time when we sighted the town gate of Tharangambadi; the gate badly needed a coat or two of paint. We were excited – both of us for different reasons. My friend was happy that she could stretch her legs and take a short nap before exploring the city, and I because the beach was calling to me.

While the hotel staff completed our registration formalities, we looked around, and were awestruck by the property. A bell boy saw our fascination and informed us that BoB was once the summer residence of the British collectors, that the Neemrana Hotel Group had restored into a boutique hotel. They have very few rooms – seven or eight across two levels. The rooms are spacious and very well maintained. When we entered the room allocated to us, we realised this was nothing like the typical hotel room. We thought each piece of furniture, bed, wall décor, bathroom, had been handpicked with great thought and attention to detail. The four-poster bed with lace curtains, the writing table with a chair, the window curtains, lighting of the room, décor – everything was tastefully done. Instead of the usual bedside table, there were barrels. We were told these were from the ships that made many voyages between the two countries – India and Denmark! The room had a view of the sea. Oh! what more could one ask for? There was another door that opened to a path that led to the swimming pool, restaurant, and one could take a walk within the hotel premises.

While the breakfast is included in the room tariff, lunch and dinner can be ordered from the limited a la carte menu. The options of dining out are limited. There are shacks that serve limited meals or “parotta”, and Chinese food, but you have to swat the flies that seem to be everywhere. It’s best to dine in, the food is tasty, and is hygienic.

Exploring Tharangambadi

Post lunch and a short nap, we decided to explore the town. We did not need a guide or our vehicle, as one can do a walking tour. We decided to visit the beach last so we could watch the sunset and the sky turn hues of orange and pink before it disappeared into the horizon. Our first stop was the ancient Masilamani Nathar Temple built in 1305. It is close to the beach and still bears the scars of the 2004 tsunami. We then headed towards the town gate (Landporten as the Danes called it). As we walked through the small town, we saw buildings from the colonial era, carriage porches, and stucco walls. Since the city has a small population, many of whom were either indoors or at the beach, we felt we owned the streets. We had multiple stops in the middle of the roads for numerous photo sessions. It didn’t feel like we were in India! We stopped by the majestic churches, each of which had a pristine white exterior. Walking past the Fort Dansborg, Dansborg Archaeological museum, the Governor’s Bungalow, we headed to the beach. The serene beach soothed our nerves, lulling us into a soporific mood. We took a leisure stroll along the coastline, spotting vendors selling their fare – chaats, ice creams, balloons, and other trinkets.

As the darkness grew, we headed back to BoB. We decided to eat at the restaurant – they have a small indoor restaurant, but we decided to take a table near the pool, on the verandah. A good choice. We had the view of the pool, the hotel and the sea. It was then we realised we were probably the only Indians in the hotel! Conversation flowed easily, and we were no longer strangers in the town! We got to know some of the other guests who were from



The Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health

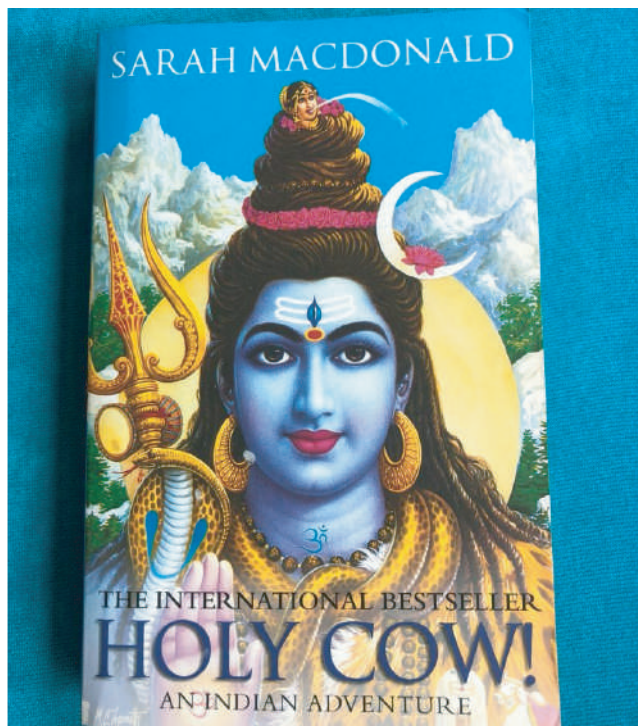
USA, Europe, and Japan. It wasn’t a surprise considering the not so budget friendly tariff of the property, many Indians prefer to stay in the nearby towns – Nagapattinam or Chidambaram – both of which are under an hour’s drive from Tranquebar.

The waves crashed against the rocks (so yes, the beach is not a safe place to swim!), and that sang us a lullaby as we drifted into a sound sleep. At the crack of dawn, we slipped through a side gate to the beach – it was a private beach at that unearthly hour! The rhythm of the waves can have such a calming effect on any stress one may feel. As the sun’s rays tried to slip through the dense clouds, we spotted a few fishermen cast their nets, a few joggers, and many like us – just watching the sunrise that did not happen, as it was a cloudy day.

(continued on page 14...)

Surrogate safari!

Travel doesn't always have to involve physical movement, one can be a vicarious traveller too, travelling far and wide through the pages of books, says Dr. Anitha Ramesh K. She reviews two travel books about India, and finds that each has its own, honest take on this country.



Paule Theroux has said that, “Travel had to do with movement and truth, offering yourself to experience, and then reporting on it”. The terrains we tread, the communities we interact with, the cultures that captivate, in no small way, enrich our understanding and knowledge of human life per se. That said about physical travel, I would like to talk about another way of travelling, a vicarious one. Travelling via your imagination through travel books is equally enthralling, what’s more, it’s easy on the pocket!

In recent times, I have been hooked on travel literature, and find it an attractive option to real travel, which requires planning and involves constraints. Paradoxically, the fallout of reading travel books is that you crave to visit those places you have read about! You realise what little you know about your own country! Two books which have been gathering dust on my book shelf, beseeching me to pick them up, are taken out, dusted and read! One is *Holy Cow! An Indian Adventure* (2002) by Sarah Macdonald, and the other, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* (1995) by Pankaj Mishra. The selection actually was based on quick availability, but then a certain rationale for the choice presented itself – the different nationalities of the authors and east and west encounters with India! So here goes!

These narratives are more than regular scenic sightseeing. They try to prise open the underbelly of the country, laying bare its convoluted, tangled, composite culture, which, for a foreigner at least, is incredibly mystifying. Much water has flown under the bridge since these journeys were undertaken, but they mark certain crucial periods in the country’s embattled journey through modernity.

Holy cow! This is India!

India is so kaleidoscopic, panoramic, almost bursting at the seams with its multilayered cultures, that somebody alien to its culture would have to go through a whole gamut of emotions – from bewildered bemusement through loathing, to understanding, and finally to a kind of transcendental love, a sublime union. The narrator of *Holy Cow*, who describes herself as an Alice in Wonderland that is India, does exactly this. From an outsider in an alien culture bothered by, the “hurricane fence” of taxi drivers at the airport, “death knocks” from beggars at traffic signals, “the roaring sea of traffic”, whole families on two wheelers, early morning wake up calls of a symphony of spitting, the morning bum salute, fly-infested restaurants, maddening driving, to an individual “warming to Indian exuberance”, and then to seeking transcendence through a spiritual experience, Sarah Macdonald goes through a transformational journey.

From Delhi, she takes off to Dharamkot in her quest for inner peace to the Vipassana meditation centre there, where she realises that brain enema is very difficult. Her brush with Sikhism in Amritsar exposes her to community cooking and warm camaraderie. Kashmir comes across as a paradise only in ancient poetry. Barricaded chalets with windows that are boarded up reveal the stark truth of militancy. The ubiquitous mutton dished up in various forms is to Kashmir what beer is to Australia. The Kumbhmela acquaints her with the idea of Karma and reincarnation. The sheer scale of the spectacle of mass bathing has a sobering effect, and Sarah becomes a vegetarian. Her next stop is Dharamsala, and Tibetan Buddhism enthralls, as does the Dalai Lama. However, realisation dawns later that the Tibetans are just a population of refugees facing problems of displacement, desperately resorting to tactics for survival. An encounter with Judaism through the Israelis in Dharamkot, and later with Parsees in Mumbai, and Velankanni and Mata Amritanandamayi in Kerala, rounds off the spiritual journey in India. She learns different things from all religions, from Buddhism on how to control the mind, from Hinduism to respect other paths, from Islam the power to surrender, Jainism to make peace with all aspects of life,

Sikhs, the importance of spiritual strength, and from Parsees, to touch nature lightly.

Discovery of the real India

Pankaj Mishra's is a journey through the small towns of India crisscrossing the length and breadth of India. He seems to subscribe to the view of Paul Theroux that, "Being alone, self sufficient and anonymous was necessary to the trip". Travelling by trains, buses and cabs, with an organised itinerary, with contacts in many places, he eavesdrops in on conversations to get the feel of the places firsthand. He seems disenchanted with the way modernity has slowly but surely crept in swamping heritage and a creative, indigenous way of life. The new rich have embraced Bollywood, Hollywood, and Western styles.

When not observing the people around, he is taken up by the stench, the grime, and the noise. He feels "like an imposter", amongst a crowd at a wedding in Muzaffarnagar, where the young men wore "silk Hawaiian shirts, gold chains worn over sacred threads, diamond rings, and pseudo Italian shoes". Here was a place which had not "a single bookshop or garden or park", and just a cheap tabloid for a newspaper. The "sudden plenitude of money" has trailed in its wake an aggressive individualism, and a sad lack of civic responsibility. All this in a nutshell spoke of "an untroubled confidence to deal with the larger world on its own terms".

The new provincial middleclass is dissected. It was from here that the idea of travelling around the small towns and cities of India germinated. Starting with Simla, where the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, which in colonial times had been the Viceregal Lodge, maintained its pure pedigree in the face of the architectural miscegenation of "new and ugly" Indian architecture, he takes us through Mandi, spread over two steep hillsides separated by the River Beas which had the largest concentration of pre-Muslim temples of India. The timidity of the people of Mandi is a fallout of the fact that it had been untouched by foreign invasions, and of the reality that no one other than natives of Himachal are allowed to own land in the state. The Gaddis, a nomadic pastoral population who shuttle between Kangra valley and the elevated Mandi, are the vestiges of a bygone culture which may soon be overtaken by the urban zeal for change.

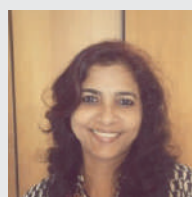
Narrowly escaping an attempt to get him hooked to a rich local business man's daughter at Ambala, Mishra reaches Rajasthan, another example of prosperity lowering living standards. The narrator idealises an India of yesteryears, passing judgement on present urbanisation everywhere. For him all changes are symbols of India's "shabby modernity", which jarred. There was even a thought to complain to higher authorities about such "aesthetic crimes". City Palace had a dish antenna and shabby kiosks in the courtyard. Pushkar introduced Mishra to two young hoteliers desperately trying to cash in on tourism to stay afloat. They didn't allow Indians into their guest house as they had filthy habits. The sweetshops there had an upmar-

ket look. The age-old corpulent halwai, churning some sweet concoction in full view of the public, had disappeared. The kitsch Muslim culture outside the Chishti Dargah in Ajmer catches his eye where tourists are conned into buying caps under threat of dire consequences if head is not covered.

South of Ajmer, the pathetic conditions of haveli owners in Ghanerao, an old frontier outpost of the kingdom of Mewar, are revealed in the way they are forced to convert portions of their homes into hotels, selling their jaded ancestry to foreigners. The foreigners he saw elsewhere had the eager satisfaction of having encountered the 'real' India – "broken roads, wandering cows, open gutters, low ramshackle shops, ground littered with garbage, the pressing crowd, the dust". The complacency of these tourists at having been proven right about India and its "poor, filthy, backward" state was evident. At Udaipur, the usual tourist haunts were visited – the City Palace, Jagdish Temple, Saheliyon Ki Bari, Lake Pichola – an encounter with Munna Yadav, a migrant labourer from UP throws up the hardships faced by those who venture out from their villages to eke out a living in modern India.

Down South, Bangalore is morphing into Los Angeles with its malls, American accents, and multicuisine restaurants. Trichur brings him in contact with an erudite medical representative who had read Borges, Calvino and Gide, and the best of European poetry. Backward Kottayam, touristy Kovalam, and Kanyakumari, "where India begins", are traversed. Travelling to Shimoga in Karnataka at the behest of U.R. Anandamurthy, Mishra is fascinated by the story of how the peasant revolution in the mid 1950s shaped the destiny of the then youth there in their twenties, breeding a swarm of writers and artists who achieved national fame. Benares Hindu University, corrupted by the rich upper castes and the new rich lower castes, has lost its earlier fame. Murshidabad in Calcutta (now Kolkata), the capital of Mughal ruled Bengal, has faded into insignificance. Bihar, the land of Buddha and Mahavira with an ambitious crop of youth hell bent on entering the Civil Services has deteriorated into a state of disorder.

Peppered with stereotypes of Indian delays, sexual assaults on white women and corruption, Mishra's narrative has an insider's matter-of-factness that fails to surprise. Sarah as a perplexed outsider, is harassed by the ordeals of travelling in India, but is fascinated by its religions and cultures. India transforms into a lotus from all that "muck".



Dr. Anitha Ramesh K, is a PhD, who retired as Associate Professor and Head of Department, The Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, Calicut. She is passionate about reading, travelling, and music. One of the benefits of retirement after thirty years is, she can indulge in all these pursuits.

A pilgrim's progress

*A journey to Mount Kailash proved to be the ultimate quest for God, and self, says **Reena Nair**, who trekked through uncertain weather, rough terrain, and the thinnest of air to complete this profoundly spiritual journey.*



A glimpse of the mystical Mt. Kailash

experience meeting them and proceeding towards a common goal.

The journey begins

With devotion and chants of “Om Namah Shivaya”, we began our journey from Kathmandu. The route that was planned for us was a new one. Starting overland from Kathmandu, we followed this route – Sybrubesi – Rusuwagadi – Kyirong – Saga – Mansarovar – Darchen. Little did we know that every day of our three week’s trip would be filled with challenges. The first one came immediately after we set off from Kathmandu, before reaching Sybrubesi. The road was washed away, and we had to take a chopper to cross over to the other end. The 20-minute chopper ride was an amazing

Our mind is sublime and seeks happiness. But what is happiness? A child who gets a gift feels happy. A parent seeing their child do well, feels happy. The degree and reason for happiness varies, but the feeling is the same. It is a state of mind. Attaining this happiness without depending on anything is, I guess spirituality, where you are forever in a state of bliss! Out of curiosity, seeking something beyond, in quest of the unknown, I decided to make a trip to Mount Kailash, popularly known as the abode of Lord Shiva. It is one of the holiest places for both Hindus and Buddhists, which is nestled amongst the Himalayan mountain ranges in Tibet, peaking at an altitude of 5,800 m.

Being physically and mentally fit is a pre-requisite for this sojourn. I started to prepare for my trip months ahead of the travel date with regular brisk walks, pranayama (breathing exercise), and turning completely vegetarian, including an attempt at maintaining positive thoughts. Being a corporate woman, the last one was not easy though.

Finally the day came, when I took my flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. I was taken to my hotel, which was booked by the travel agent, where I had to wait for a week for the rest of the group to join. One needs a Chinese visa, which is a group visa issued by the Chinese embassy in Delhi, as Tibet is an autonomous part of China. The group consisted of 45 members, most over 50 years of age. It was a pleasant

experience, as the pilot maneuvered the flying machine through the lush green mountains. Broken or washed away roads were a constant phenomenon we experienced through the journey. We stayed overnight at Rusuwagadi, which is on the Nepal-China border. From here, one has to cross the border by foot for almost around 2-3 kms. We were now in Tibet (the autonomous part of China). We visited a nearby Buddhist monastery and a few Chinese shops, where no one spoke the other’s language. The best part was, we were still able to carry out bargaining for some thermals, and convey to them what we wanted through actions. The night stay was at Kyirong.

Moving forward, there came a time where we had to trek a steep mountain. The trekking was challenging as we had to bank on any shrub, branches or rock to climb a mountain almost 1000 meters high. There was no path to walk on, with one side being a steep valley and the other one having huge boulders. Feeling dizzy mid-way, I was aware that a slip would mean toppling all those behind me to the base. Suddenly, a hand gripped my wrist, so tight that I winced. It was a girl in her late teens maybe. She never spoke a word, but kept guiding me on the stepping stones and pulling me upwards. Not having any choice, I blindly followed her instructions to the top where our bus was parked. No words to thank her, I bowed down to her in gratitude, and gave away my jacket and some Chinese yuan that I had readily available.



The ethereal Mansarovar Lake

It was a miraculous incident for me as I did not see the girl again. Where she came from, why she chose only me, still remains a mystery to me.

Saga at 4,600 metres was our next stop. Midway, our bus got stuck in a puddle, which seemed to be a “no man’s” land. During the wait, we got out of the bus and for the first time I realised what altitude sickness meant. The moment I set my foot on the ground, my head started to reel, it was as if the mountains were moving around me, the ground was swaying. A few steps, and it felt fine. But the others in the group had a tough time as some of them had nausea and started to throw up, while a few others had blood pressure swings. The wait was for over six hours till help arrived. En-route, as night fell, we drove through the uneven winding roads, which had boulders and muck from landslides. At a point, we saw gushing waters of the River Brahmaputra, over the road which was not visible. At this point we felt we would not survive. Finally, we reached Saga at 1 a.m., completely exhausted. We were given Diamox for altitude sickness. Thankfully, my oxygen levels were quite high, around 93, compared to the required reading of 60 and above. A few of the pilgrims had to return from Saga due to health concerns.

The pristine Lake Mansarovar

Early next morning, we started for the holy Lake Mansarovar, the highest fresh water lake, at an elevation of 4,583 meters. A few miles ahead, we again got stuck due to a washed away road. This time the wait was for 10 hours. We waited patiently, while the Chinese men worked their way to build a temporary road. We reached Mansarovar at 9 pm. It was still daylight as the Sun sets only around 10 pm

in Tibet. The sight of the beautiful, pristine lake made us forget all the hardships that we had gone through to reach there. As I stood by the crystal-clear waters of Mansarovar, the feeling was divine, no thoughts, no worries, just breathing the pure air, I felt overwhelmed with the calmness. Oblivious to anything around, as if the lake had embraced me. Tears trickling down my cheeks for no reason. Guess it was a state of Absolute Bliss! Bowing down, I started to pray and make some wishes, but my mind was blank! Filling my palms with the holy water, I splashed it over my cheeks. Until the next day morning, my cheeks had a tingling feeling of a soft touch. I was floating, with the sound of the water echoing in my ears, and a resonating feeling as if electric current was passing through my palms. I was on a spiritual high. I felt the ground moving under me, my head felt dizzy. It was magical! Later, at midnight, unfortunately, a lady (in her early 50s) from our group passed away. It was a shocking incident and left the group in depression. Her body was soon flown back. We performed ‘yagna’ (prayers) and proceeded to Darchen (Base Camp), where we shopped for trekking sticks, souvenirs, etc., and left for Yamadwar.

Yamadwar, is at an altitude of 4,860 m and holds a great significance in Hindu mythology. It is believed to be the gate to “moksha”, a Sanskrit word meaning salvation. One has to shake off all mortal bonds to be one with the lord as a pure being. This point holds great importance in the quest for spiritual salvation, and is also the starting point of the ascent to parikrama (going around) of Mount Kailash. The Chinese guide restricted our trek beyond Yamadwar, since it was snowing heavily on top, which was too risky. Only three of us out of the 45 group members, based on our oxygen levels and age, were allowed to proceed further. I felt fortunate to have been one of the chosen one, but felt equally

sad for others who could not go further. There were healthier and younger people in the group who could not go ahead. With all my devotion, I passed through the Yamadwar, and began my journey towards the abode of God, Lord Shiva.

Geared in layers of thermals against the freezing temperature, with a sherpa holding my haversack consisting of a fruit, hot water and a pair of clothes, I started my trek. Brisk walking, running, or talking are to be avoided, as the thin air could cause breathing problems. The link between our life and this world is our breath, something that we take for granted. We had two pit stops at the Tibetan tents, that kept us warm. The yak butter tea, looked and tasted more like a soup. Tibetans are very friendly. They live with just the basic necessities, yet have a smile on their face always. Another realisation dawned – It is so easy to live a simple life, yet we complicate it. Joy is within us, misery is only when we seek our happiness outside. Leading a carefree life is possible, if we make a conscious effort. What goes on in our mind is just what we allow to happen.

The divine energy

The energy amidst the mountains is beyond words. It echoed and felt as a vacuum. Nothing mattered anymore even if there was no one within visible sight. It was a different world, with nothingness. At this altitude, there is no hunger or thirst. After seven hours of trekking, we reached Dhirapuk, at an altitude of 5,200 m (the closest point to view Mount Kailash). Just before we reached our dorm, it started snowing, and within minutes the brown

rocky ground turned to white snowy terrain. The scene was mesmerising! Staring at the mountain, I sobbed like a child, who has a lot to say but was unable to speak. That night I was restless. We could not proceed to Dolma La Pass, which is the highest point of this trek at 5,600 m, as it was snowing. The return journey was equally challenging. Yet, it was a satisfyingly memorable trip that brought me closer to spirituality, which is nothing but seeking and nurturing the good within oneself. This trip taught me a lot through my experiences. Even today, I get teleported to those mountains and the sound of flowing rivers and waterfalls, I feel the wind, I feel nature, I see god in all small things, and I feel god within myself. A slice of the mystical surroundings that stayed within me and a part of me is somewhere in the untainted pure surroundings of Mount Kailash. To me it will always be the abode of God, that taught me to see things differently, and be conscious in subconsciousness.



A thorough Human Resources professional from the corporate world, Reena Nair loves travelling and going places which are scenic, with family, solo, or with friends. Of late, she has developed a new found love to see places that hold spiritual significance.

Socializing and meeting people, known and unknown, also interests her. She tries every moment to live life to the fullest by balancing work, family, and hobbies that includes classical dancing!

The Danish town

(continued from page 09...)

Post the breakfast, we checked if we could be shifted to a room on the upper floor for a better view of the sea. It was possible since there was a couple checking out. Shelling out a little more for a bigger room that had a better view of the sea, we dumped our backpacks and headed to explore the Dansborg Fort and the Archaeological Museum housed within it. If you have been to Rajasthan – do not conjure the images of those forts. In comparison, the Dansborg Fort is much smaller. It houses a collection of curios and artefacts from when the Danes ruled – coins, fish bones, porcelain, weapons, paintings.

While we were in there, a group of school students came in. As their teacher gave them a guided tour, we hung around to get a free lesson in history of the fort, the place and other trivia. The students were more curious to know about us than the museum! Since we both could speak the local language – Tamil, the kids were happy and asked us many questions. We were not in a hurry, and spent some time with them before heading to Velankanni. An hour's drive later we arrived at the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health, also

known as the “Lourdes of the East”. This time our driver acted as our guide and told us the miracle stories of this place. We also passed the mass burial ground, and it was a sad sight to see the tombs of the victims of 2004 tsunami.

Post lunch at one of the many restaurants, we headed back to Chennai to catch our flight home!



Sonali Pradhan when not at work, enjoys exploring places and interacting with the locals. She loves to binge watch crime thriller series and/or movies. Sonali is a memomagnestist - has over 900 magnets that she has curated from her travels and/or have been gifted to her.

Women going solo

Even after seventy years of Independence, and a booming tourism sector, Mamta Chitnis Sen tries to understand the reasons why solo travelling for women still remains a struggle in India.



I began solo travelling by accident almost two decades ago. What first started out as short official work trips — to metros, three-tier and two-tier cities, towns, and interior remote villages within and across India, have over the years metamorphosed into full-fledged soul-searching vacations. A solo trip abroad one summer, completely sealed the deal.

While honestly, I do find a joy as well as solace while travelling with my family of husband and two kids, or even with old and new friends, I must confess that it is solo travelling that I am hooked onto.

For one, there is a certain delight in the fact that you can create or uncreate your own itinerary or a to-do-list, and explore areas and places which you wouldn't be able to visit when travelling in a group of fussy travelers, (some who unfortunately end up being a nuisance rather than helpful

travel companions). Second, solo travelling acts as a catalyst in not only boosting your confidence, but making you much more aware of the limitations placed by your gender when travelling, and the various ways and means of navigating these limitations smoothly, yet firmly.

The world around you definitely tends to look different and more welcoming when out on your own. For a married woman, solo travelling is the perfect break to get away from it all, and refresh and rejuvenate yourself to come back and work harder.

Venturing out, solo

Solo travelling isn't for everyone. That said, of late, more and more women from diverse backgrounds and ages are discovering the joy of taking off on their own to explore the many landscapes and cultures that the world has to offer.

During my travels over the years, I have come across several women who have undertaken solo travelling, and seem to enjoy it too (Indian women though were rare to find, but that figure is increasing of late).

Like Natalia, a Russian entrepreneur who I encountered while on a train journey from Goa to Mumbai in the heavy monsoons. The thirty-something expat who was living in Mumbai at that time, had toured the world on her own. She shared with me her experiences of relaxing on the beaches of Bali, and why it was a liberating one. Natalia also gave me tips on using the many social media platforms available on the Internet that offer hosting for women solo travellers when abroad, and ways and means of screening the right ones to see that they are genuine and safe.

Similarly, I recall meeting Alya (name changed), a 28-year-old Algerian national settled in Paris, who over a cup of hot coffee at the Charles De Gaulle airport (airports are the best places to meet and make friends while waiting for delayed flights by the way!), claimed why she loved travelling so frequently to her favourite country Morocco and other African nations every time she got an opportunity to do so. An orthodox Muslim, Alya who works as a teacher in Paris (she saves up a small sum every year and makes it a point to travel to as many countries as she can), admitted that she never lets her hijab get in the way of her travel.

Another close friend Valerie Won Lee, founder of World Citizen Artists has travelled the world and worked abroad for 15 years. "I started travelling in 1997. I was 19," she recalls, adding, "Travelling was very different back then. We didn't have smart phones or tablets to check places before arrival. You'd go somewhere and find the available accommodations once you arrived at a destination. In places like South East Asia for example, at train stations and harbours, touts were always men, and as a woman travelling alone, I was usually perceived as if I was looking out for a local husband. So I would always make some western friends on trains and boats, so that I would look like as if I was travelling in a group. I travelled for over 15 years and as time went by, I became more confident and didn't mind as much about how people would judge me for travelling on my own. I actually enjoyed having a good debate with local men and make my point about the fact a woman could be alone and want to stay this way, and I'm still in contact with some of the people I met on my journey. I think women should take precautions and understand the culture of the country she's in, but it doesn't mean one has to be paranoid. There are good and bad people everywhere," says Valerie.

Indian women and solo travelling

Unlike the Western countries where a woman travelling on her own is socially accepted, the same cannot be said about India. The Indian mindset, I believe finds difficulty in trying to understand why a woman needs to vacation alone. Added to that are the age-old issues of safety and facilities for the lone traveller. Although the Indian woman is venturing out to discover the joy of solo

travelling, a lot many of them are unable to realise this dream due to several reasons. Of the women I spoke to, many pointed out that except for metros, a woman travelling alone within the country needs to lock down on several things before she attempts to venture out on her own. Safety in commute as well as availing of safe accommodation is on the priority list.

The Indian tourism sector is a booming one, including the market for women travellers, and in recent years one has seen a considerable rise in many travel operators offering a range of travel packages to women who want to travel solo, both in India and abroad.

'Women only' tours are a hit with many Indian women. Though a large number of them do sign up for it, they end up in the company of other solo women travellers, exploring and visiting places together in a group. Yet it definitely remains a task for any woman who does not want to travel through a travel operator, and instead on a budget. In the most picturesque places in India, asking for a 'women only' affordable accommodation is definitely a tall order.

Create safe spaces, help boost tourism

Creation of spaces for women who travel on their own will go a long way in opening up this market. India has a rising number of educated women today who are putting their careers first instead of marriage. These women not only work hard but party harder too, and are good spenders as well. They love travel and want to explore the unexplored on their own terms, and at their own cost. I know of several working women, (some married and who are mothers themselves), who take a sabbatical for themselves to travel abroad.

By creating such a platform for them here, it will not only go a long way in boosting this sector but also help in re-establishing brand India's image (which has taken a beating after many news reports of molestation and rapes against women), that the country is definitely a safe place for women who love to travel solo.



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 groups shows in India and abroad.



Varanasi and Sarnath

Different moods of devotion

Varanasi and Sarnath are cities of devotion and spirituality, one of Hinduism, the other of Buddhism. Yet, you can't visit one and ignore the other, even if they are opposites in terms of the frenzy of activities that surround them. Religious fervour comes in all hues, colours, and sounds, including that of peace and tranquility.

Text & Photographs : Gustasp and Jeroo Irani



The Dhamekh Stupa dominates the Deer Park

We sought a degree of relief from the sweltering heat in the benevolent shadow of Dhamekh Stupa, which stretched out across the green lawns of the Deer Park in Sarnath, 10 km from the temple town of Varanasi. We gazed up at the engravings that covered the lower half of the holy Buddhist shrine, and felt a comforting sense of all-pervading peace and wellbeing. It probably had to do with our awareness of the fact that the Deer Park was where Prince Siddharth, the Buddha, delivered his first sermon after he attained enlightenment under a peepal tree in Bodh gaya, 273 km away.

The ancient city of Varanasi

Fast forward! We were at the fabled ghats of Varanasi looking down at the sacred River Ganga as it flowed through the holy city, believed to be the oldest continuously inhabited human settlement in the world. The sun had set, but there was little respite from the heat. A palpable sense of anticipation crackled like a high voltage current across the bustling waterfront of Dasawamedha Ghat where devotees had congregated to witness the evening Ganga River 'aarti'. Boats were packed tight, hull to hull, as they jostled for strategic position on waters speckled with floating leaf-boats of flowers, smoking incense sticks, and flaming camphor. On cue, a battery of pujaris in crisp garments stepped up and onto a row of elevated platforms. With the practiced flair of



Fire lamp used during the morning aarti

well-rehearsed actors, they laid out the paraphernalia they would need for the ceremony and trimmed the wicks of multi-layers of oil lamps.

The tolling of bells, the chanting of 'mantras', the call of conch shells, emanated from the crush of temples that line the ghats. This was their moment of truth. The pujaris launched into a beautifully choreographed dance of fire swirling their flaming lamps in union. The pent-up sense of expectancy that hung heavy in the humid air finally found release. The atmosphere was thick with devotion, and we would not have been too surprised if Lord Shiva himself had gate crashed this chaos of piety and started to dance, dragging his adoring followers into a higher stratosphere of frenzy.

The sense of calm we experienced at the Deer Park earlier that day might well have happened eons ago, and on another planet. To imagine that in a single day we had occulated between two extreme expressions of devotion. We felt like trapeze artists flying through space laden with legend and piety. Though very different in mood and character, the twin cities of Varanasi and Sarnath furrow a common ground in that they are considered to be one of the most revered sights by followers of their respective religions: Hindus and Buddhists.



Devotees offer water to the sacred River Ganga after the morning aarti



Swirling their flaming lamps, the priests perform a beautifully choreographed morning aarti



Gilded Buddha on the main altar of the Sri Lankan Temple



Monks pray in front of the stupa at the Deer Park

Sarnath, where it began

Sarnath, where the Buddha is believed to have set the Wheel of Life in motion, is deemed to be one of the four most holy places on earth by the Buddhists, and a must see stop on their pilgrim circuit. The other three are Lumbini in Nepal where he was born into a royal family; Bodhgaya, where he attained Elightenment, and Kushinagar, where he surrendered his mortal body and attained Maha Pari Nirvana. According to legend, five sages had been the Buddha's faithful companions in his quest for the true meaning of life. After six years fasting and meditation, they finally abandoned him on the banks of a river and moved to Sarnath. But the Buddha had not forgotten them and he sought them out after attaining Enlightenment, and it was in the Deer Park that he honoured them by ensuring that they were the first to receive his message.

Today the lawns of the Park are dusted with the excavated ruins of an ancient monastery; a towering stupa; the broken stumps of an Ashoka Pillar – the crown of three lions is in amazingly good condition, and housed in the archaeological museum across the road – a few orange robed monks, and a scattering of tourists.

We took time out to meditate in front of the stupa, then reached out to touch one of its sun-baked stones. Was it our imagination or did it really happen: a flash of energy like an electric current sizzled our palms. We like to believe that the Buddha reached out to us through the centuries. We drew our hands away, reassured by the comforting knowledge that we were blessed.



Monks walk single file past small shrines outside the Sri Lankan Temple

We walked around the larger-than-life statue of the Buddha and the five sages outside a Sri Lankan temple, and set off for Varanasi, a city laced with narrow winding streets that throbbed like a heart in distress. However, it was at the ghats of the river that Varanasi started to assert her distinctive personality. The waterfront greeted us with a kaleidoscope of sounds and sights that were as old as the city, yet laced with the fresh interpretation with every rendering.

A blend of devotion, rituals, and the crafts

We blended in with the sea of people, pilgrims and tourists, that milled across the steps that led from the chaos of temples and shrines, down to the river. An orange robed sadhu with elaborate caste marks smeared across his ample forehead invited us to take his photograph, and then demanded to be paid for it. An elderly man sat patiently at the base of banyan tree and waited for the gods to provide. A pilgrim dropped a coin into his begging bowls and notched up good karma. Kids splashed happily on the water's edge. A barber shaved the head of a pilgrim with a cut throat razor. Pujaris performed sacred ceremonies...



Cycle rickshaws are the way to go around in the city



Ornate doorway leading to a mansion

Our first task, as is required of most people who visit Varanasi, was to pay our respects to the presiding deity of Varanasi – Lord Shiva, whose lingam is enshrined in the Kashi Vishvanath Temple. The Lord may dwell in Mt Kailash in the Himalayas with his wife Parvati, but it is in Kashi (as the city was known in ancient times) that he mingles with his devotees. To reach the temple, we walked down a maze of narrow streets which assailed our senses with a bouquet of aromas: incense, spices, flowers, ghee, sweets and other unmentionable odours...signboards advertised astrologers, yoga centres, meditation classes, music schools...

After our Lord Shiva darshan we set off for the weavers colony to admire and maybe even purchase the exquisite Banarasi saris they fashioned. We walked down narrow streets that chorused the clickity-clack song of looms. Weavers invited us into their simple homes and unravelled saris for us to admire. The ploy worked, and we found ourselves saddled with silk fabric we would probably never gift to the relatives and friends they were originally intended for.

There was enough time to refuel with a glass of Varanasi's creamy 'lassi' and munch on the city's fabled 'paan' before we set off to witness the evening river 'aarti' which proved to be a dramatic final curtain to an eventful day that spiralled to a crescendo of orchestrated devotion.



Devotees take a dip in the holy river as a priest performs rituals under an umbrella



A sinking temple at a ghat

One would imagine that we had enough of river aartis after that performance; but no, we had to have more. So we were up at the ungodly hour of 4.30 am the next morning and reached Assi Ghat, the first of 80 that line the west bank of the riverfront, just in time to see a battery of pujaris step up to perform the sunrise Ganga aarti. While the morning ritual may have lacked the frenzy of its evening counterpart, it was equally graceful.

As the first rays of the sun fired up the clouds hovering above the eastern horizon, we set off on the long-awaited river cruise. The ghats of the city unravelled like a roll of film, each frame capturing its different moods. Dhobis laying out clothes like patchwork quilts on the steps; buffalos wallowing in the shallow waters; a stairway going nowhere; fortress-like walls flexing their muscles behind temple spires; murals of gods; holy men washing their orange robes; the minarets and domes of a mosque... The murmur of a prayer caressed our lips as the boat cruised past the city's burning ghats which were blurred behind a veil of smoke. They say a dip in the Ganga at Varanasi washes away all one's sins. To die and be cremated here, however, releases one from the cycle of life and death. And there it was: a temple that tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.



Relief of a lion on the wall of a south Indian temple



Boats provide an arena for the devotees to watch the famed Ganga aarti

Pujaris in temples across the ghats were waking the gods and preparing them to receive their worshipers. It promised to be a hectic day ahead of them, and they would only get to rest late at night when temple bells fell silent and peace returned to an agitated city: a moment of time when the gods of Varanasi took their cue from the Buddha in Sarnath 10 km away.

File Facts

- Varanasi and Sarnath, 10 km apart by road in Uttar Pradesh, are well connected with the rest of the country by air, rail and road.
- The temple towns, and more so Varanasi, have a wide selection of accommodation from five-star hotels to budget lodges.
- For more information visit Uttar Pradesh Tourism at <http://uptourism.gov.in>



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

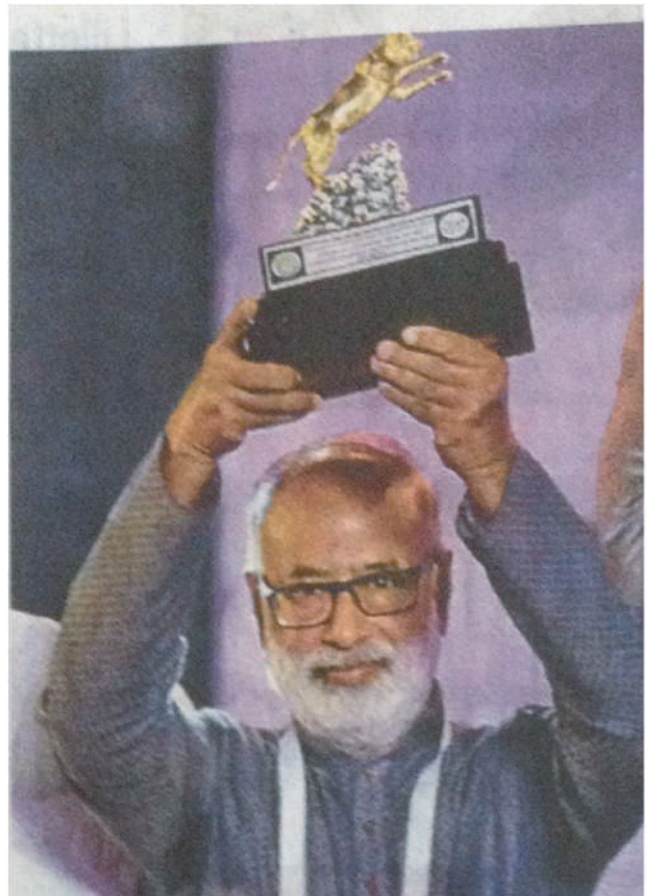
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“I really feel sad to communicate that a film cannot be included in a festival. I won’t call them rejections.”

Srinivasan Narayanan, the film connoisseur and feisty former Festival Director of MAMI (Mumbai Academy of the Moving Image) from its inception in 2008 till 2014, is now the Film Director for the 3rd Singapore South Asian International Film Festival. In a career spanning about four decades, Narayanan has worked with every aspect of international film festivals and business of film; as festival programme-director, international film distributor, journalist, producer, and administrator. He is in conversation with **A.Radhakrishnan**.



Describe your career spanning four decades with films?

As one of the liaison officers in the jury of the IFFIs (International Film Festival of India), when I was with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in the late 1970s, my interest in understanding films began. I started watching and talking about films with jury members who were greats like Grigory Chukhrai, Marta Meszaros, as also my mentor M.V. Krishnaswamy, the Jury Secretary those days and later, Director of IFFI.

What is a film festival?

It is a celebration of films, screening the best crop of the year from all over the world for the audience to enjoy. The personalities attending the film festivals also influence the youngsters through their master classes, workshops and interactions; an academic activity that brings the latest trends in film

making, the new techniques, and the new film making idioms.

Are film festivals gatekeepers ‘who add a layer of curation assuring audiences and distributors that they have found the cream of the crop’?

Film Festivals are curated according to the vision of its directors. It covers the best crop of world cinema for that year, but can also be on subjects and personalities. Distributors and producers serve as launching pads for new film makers.

How are films vetted?

A group of people knowledgeable about cinema form a ‘Selection Panel’ to shortlist the best of the films submitted. Then comes the Festival Director/Artistic Director’s stamp, by way of final selections.

Can you learn film making from film festivals?

They provide an opportunity to understand films worldwide, how stories and subjects are treated and the techniques and technologies trending. It makes a person enthusiastic enough to think, if this film has been successful, why not my idea and my film?

How do you work towards remaining open and objective about every film, and avoid being too tired to give a film a fair share?

I keep emptying my mind. Watching good films is a sheer experience of joy, even if the film is a tragedy. It affects me and stays with me. The best film would be screened, for it is not the topic, but cinematic language that is the criteria for deciding selection.

Are you humane with rejections?

I really feel sad to communicate that a film cannot be included in a festival. I won't call them rejections. The worse scenario, is when some wonderful films do not make it to the list, and some not-so-good films manage to participate in various film festivals.

Describe the audience which attends film festivals.

They are first and foremost film lovers, film buffs and a discerning audience who look for quality in film making. Art house films survive due to them. They are looking for alternate cinema from all over the world as against the commercial, mainstream films with star cast which only find release in theatres.

What did you do before joining MAMI?

A bureaucrat to begin with, I moved to the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF) as Deputy Director from 1983 to 1989, and then D.G.M., NFDC, in 2001. Opting for voluntary retirement, I founded my own production and distribution company IN2 INFOTAINMENT INDIA, through which I exported Indian films, imported foreign art house films and television serials for distribution in India, and produced documentaries.

Recall your experiences at the Directorate of Film Festivals?

DFF was my alma mater. Trained and honed as a film festival administrator, I was emotionally and passionately involved. Though under NFDC then, we coordinated with the Ministry of I & B for the National Awards, Indian Panorama, and all the film components of the cultural exchange programmes. We mounted the huge Film India Projects in France and USA, and I was the nodal officer for striking and subtitling more than 100 films in French and English in a short span of four months or so. Many rotting negatives were given a new lease of life as a result, then.

I quit when the Government, implemented the Ashok Mitra Committee report, and decided to take back DFF from NFDC,

and make it a pure Government of India department. To me, DFF, controlled by the Iron Frame would be a disaster, as organising festivals is the job of the Festival Director and his team. Hence I reverted to NFDC, where I learnt the business of cinema.

Then why did you quit NFDC?

NFDC those days was dominated by a Board of Directors of eminent film makers, like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, etc., who guided it in the right direction, supporting young directors, importing good films which had recovery potential, supporting construction of theatres all over the country, etc., and took a firm stand and even fought with the Government.

Mistakes were corrected and grievances heard. Over a period of time, when the Board came to be peopled by unconcerned non-entities and a section of the Iron Frame, I was witness to how a beautiful organisation was emasculated. A time comes in everyone's life when he or she has to take some decisions on principles.

Can you give a brief history of MAMI?

Film personalities led by the late Hrishikesh Mukherjee founded MAMI so that the film capital of India would have its own film festival. Unlike Government funded film festivals, it faced financial problems from day one. The second edition could not be held due to funding problems. But it survived due to the philanthropy of many, mainly, Manmohan Shetty of Adlabs, till it passed on to the safe hands of Reliance Entertainment, and now to Reliance Jio.

How is MAMI different from other film festivals?

It was one film festival in India which was not funded by Government. Hence it enjoyed tremendous independence in programming and organisation. From a modest Film Society type of event, it managed to emerge as the most important and respected film festival of the country in ten years.

What were the challenges? Did they differ from year to year?

The challenge was always to innovate and keep the festival relevant to its audiences and industry, especially film makers and producers. Within this framework, the festivals metamorphosed in different ways.

For instance, as there was no permanent venue, every year we had to reinvent the festival, depending on the available screening venue and the festival hotel. The whole logistics had to be worked out. If you look at the first 16 editions of the Festival, we moved from the north to the south, and back to the north of Mumbai.

Why is there a plethora of film festivals? Will not a cohesive one do?

There used to be video store in Lokhandwala which had a tag line, 'curate your own film festival.'
Aspirants to be directors of film festivals are many and need

opportunities. Seriously, I support film festivals in every district headquarters. Mumbai Film Festival catered to Mumbaiians and the film enthusiasts / professionals who travel to Mumbai during that period. How can people in Pune, Kolhapur, Nashik or Aurangabad watch these wonderful films, if there are no film festivals there?

Your experience as Director of MAMI?

I thoroughly enjoyed my years in MAMI. We became strong, weathering challenges. We had a great team, totally dedicated and passionate. During periods of financial problems, the team went without pay for months, and many times I pulled money from my personal account to pay their rent and salaries. Fortunately, it was a lean team.

Why did MAMI suddenly lose its sponsors?

When the film industry celebrities, read 'actors' do not consider it worthy to participate in the festival activities and the newspapers and channels do not cover it, why should any sponsor support any event, leave alone film festivals? The sponsor is there for publicity and if a festival does not ensure that; after some time he will vanish.

How did this idea of crowd funding come up?

Desperation. Many hard working and enthusiastic youngsters in the team were disappointed and sad that the Festival may not happen. Satyen Bordoloi started this movement with his article, 'Mumbai's Five Crore Shame', and youngsters like Sanjay Ram, Priyanka Shetty and others orchestrated this. Many more film personalities joined the movement and consolidated that in that particular year. That is why we adopted Phoenix as our logo for the 2014 edition.

Why was it so successful? Will future film festivals also abhor sponsorships?

It was not wholly successful, but gave the initial momentum after which others joined to financially support it. The film industry also started looking at the need of the Festival in a different way. No festival can survive without funding from either govern-

ment or business houses. It should be considered cultural investment. If the royals and the rich had not patronised art and architecture, we would not have been left with our cultural heritage. A Film Festival is also a movement in that direction.

How did MAMI help young cinephiles?

The target audiences were the youth – students. Towards this end, we provided them concessions in delegate fee and two sections - Mumbai Young Critics and Dimensions Mumbai - were specially targeted to train youngsters. Some of them are now professional film journalists and professional film makers.

Do you believe in censorship of films?

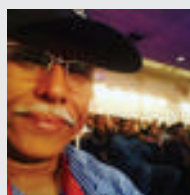
Censorship is a colonial mindset. Now we need only gradation. CBFC is not a homogeneous organisation, but has its own whimsicalities depending on its members. When a film can be blocked by hooligans and governments from being screened even after certification by CBFC, what is so sacrosanct about it? CBFC provides publicity even to worthless films when they refuse to certify a film or demand cuts, beyond the understanding of anyone.

How did you get involved in your new role as Festival Director of the 3rd edition of

the Singapore South Asian International Film Festival slated from August 30 to September 7, 2019?

I accepted the offer from the organisers. My aim is to streamline the way it is organised, present the best possible films from this region, and value addition with personalities who will participate in the festival.

I thoroughly enjoyed my years in MAMI. We became strong, weathering challenges. We had a great team, totally dedicated and passionate. During periods of financial problems, the team went without pay for months, and many times I pulled money from my personal account to pay their rent and salaries. Fortunately, it was a lean team.



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

Navigating a delta

*A group of senior citizens undertook a very interesting trip into the Sundarbans delta, navigating its waterways and its dangers, while taking in its interesting jungle lore and folk tales. **Shoma A. Chatterji** gives an account.*



The Bali Village, where the writer and her group stayed

We, a group of six soon-to-be senior citizens, travelled to the Sundarbans some years back. It has been one of our most cherished trips to a natural reserve that falls partly in India, and partly in Bangladesh.

A luxury car arrived early in the morning to pick us up from our doorstep and take us to the Gadkhali Ferry Ghat in Basanti Island, a four-hour drive along rough roads and heavy traffic. We boarded a motorised boat named Baba Nobin, christened after the father of the captain who owned the boat. We sucked in the cool, salty breeze, free of the polluted air from car and bus exhausts on busy Kolkata roads. We were served a very tasty, hot, Bengali lunch of chicken curry and rice cooked in the lower deck of the boat, while we sailed across, drinking in the beauty of the islands around us, trying to catch a glimpse of a crocodile on the banks, or a water monitor, or a little doe playing hide-and-seek behind the trees in the forests beyond. We saw dolphins and baby sharks jump up and down the river waters and even the pug-marks of a tiger that might have come to the banks to drink water the night before, but no tiger. We “took time to turn at Beauty’s glance, and watch her feet, how they can dance”.

(Courtesy – William Henry Davies)

Prowling the delta

We had booked three cottages at the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve and Sundarban Jungle Camp in Bali Village. The cottages, each named after a mangrove tree, were designed to match the huts in the village though the interiors were equipped with modern facilities. No radio, no tape recorder, DVD player or television were permitted in the Sundarbans for fear of disturbing the animals. You will most often, not find a signal on your cell, nor can you approach a phone booth because there are none. There is no ATM booth except in the nearest island towns of Basanti and Gosaba. Placed in a different world, you do not miss these everyday mandates in the lap of nature. No one is permitted to sail before dawn and after sundown, because the Royal Bengal Tiger might be on the prowl and attack as a defence strategy and not, as is popularly believed, to kill. Groups of deer are released in the core areas for the tigers as feed. The tigers swim across the sea when humans are not around. The Sundarbans are also famous for many amphibian animals, reptiles and mammals besides boasting a bird population spanning 180 bird species.



The entrance to the Sudhanyakhali Tiger Reserve

The Sundarbans is home to one of India's most iconic wildlife species – the Royal Bengal Tiger. A tiger census is carried out from time to time and at last count, it was around 250. Among the endangered species are the tiger, the estuarine crocodile, river terrapin, Olive Ridley turtle, the Gangetic dolphin, the ground turtle, the Hawks Bill Turtle, and king crabs.

Formed by the confluence of the mighty rivers – the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna – the Sunderbans are a part of the world's largest delta situated on the lower end of the Gangetic West Bengal. It is also the world's largest estuarine forest criss-crossed by hundreds of creeks and tributaries, intersected by a network of tidal waterways, small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests and mudflats. The interconnected network of waterways makes almost every nook and corner of the forest accessible by boats or rafts, making it one of the most attractive and alluring places on earth, and an undiscovered paradise. The islands are also home to 64 plant species that are acclimatised over time, climate and the environment to withstand estuarine conditions and saline inundation resulting from tidal effects. Whichever way you throw your glance from the sailing boat, you can see the mangroves kissing the sky, feel the peaceful waters without realising the dangers they might bring to the villagers at night by washing the villages away.

We were not scared of the tiger because the villagers who work in the resort as cooks, bearers, washermen, and housekeeping staff, kept our fears at bay by putting on a real jatra performance on the legend of the Bono Bibi – the Goddess of the forests they worship as a family deity who they believe, takes care of them and protects them from wild

animals. Bono Bibi is a secular Goddess who keeps the Hindus and Muslims in harmony. “We are united by our devotion to Bono Bibi, by our fear of tiger attacks, and the fear of losing our homes any minute, any second through the erosion of the banks all the time,” says Alipada, one of the four brothers who works at the camp, while two of his brothers run the two steamers named after their parents.

Sundarbans is named after the Sundari trees that grow in large numbers filling the landscape and the riverscape. It is the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is marked as a Biosphere Reserve. The Sundarban forests span around 10,000 sq.km, of which a major portion is in Bangladesh, while the Indian portion is estimated at around 4,264 square km.

The tiger is not the danger here

“The biggest fear we live in is about the entire village getting sucked into the waters of the sea because the shores are breaking all the time. It is not the tiger we fear, but the tides that spell death everyday,” says Alipada. The southernmost inhabited islands that form the active delta change shape almost every day, no thanks to the most unpredictable changes in the river channels. Add to this the tidal waves that keep eroding the land from one side and build sandbanks everywhere. River belts swell because of heavy deposits of silt. According to a study by the Jadavpur University, the sea levels in the Bay of Bengal are rising at the rate of 3.4 millimetres per annum due to global warming. Two islands have been completely washed away into the sea, and a third, named Ghoramara, is sinking too. The island dwellers suffer from stress, insomnia, and other chronic mental ailments resulting from this fear.

Apurba Chakraborty, our naturalist and bird-watcher guide, escorted us to some of the important reserve spots at different points of the group of islands. Notable among them are Sajnekhali Watch Tower, Sudhanyakhali Watch Tower, a watch tower at Dobanki, Netidhopani, Burirdabri, Kumarmari and Jhingakhali. The watch tower at Sajnekhali has collapsed and has not been reconstructed yet. But there is a mangrove interpretation center that throws up a world of information on flora, fauna and the village life at the Sundarbans. At Sudhanyakhali, we climbed atop the watch tower, but could only glimpse a couple of deer and some wild boar in the distance, and our cameras clicked in chorus. Time did not permit us to visit Buridhabri, Kumarmari and Jhingakhali. The reserve camps were very clean without any food stalls or cold drink outlets. The Sundarbans is a ‘no-plastic’ zone, yet one can spot plastic bags floating across the waters cast away by unthinking tourists.

Of the 102 islands that make up Sundarbans on the Indian side, since 60 percent now lies in Bangladesh, only 54 are inhabited by some five million people, of whom around two million live in the active delta. The local villagers are honest, simple and straightforward. They are fisher folk, farmers, honey collectors, boatmen and frail women, who catch prawn seeds in waist-deep waters, ignoring the danger from crocodiles, sharks, and the occasional tiger.



Bono Bibi, the Goddess of the forests

Climate

October to February — winter, cold and temperate
 March to May — summer, hot and humid
 June to September — the monsoon season, wet and windy
 Monsoon cruises are spectacular.

How to reach the Sundarbans

Air:

The nearest airport is the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Airport at Kolkata (112 kms). It takes around three hours of road journey and two hours of boat ride to reach Sundarbans.

Rail:

Local trains to Canning are available from Sealdah (South) at regular intervals and takes about one and half hours. Local shared vans are available from Canning to Godkhali Jetty, the starting point of your boat journey to the Sundarbans.

Road:

Sundarbans is about 110 kms from Kolkata. Road transportation is also available from Kolkata for Namkhana (105 km), Sonakhali (100 km), Raidighi (76 km), Canning (64 km), and Najat (92 km), which are all near the Sundarbans and have access to the riverine waterways.



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

WHO AM I?

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



Earth...



The lotus blooms again

In an acrimoniously fought general elections, India has voted the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance back to power. In its second term, the Modi government should provide an inclusive administration, taking all sections of society along, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, writes C.V. Aravind.



The runaway success of the BJP has been the hallmark of the 17th Lok Sabha elections

The elections to the 17th Lok Sabha has been done and dusted, and the voter has delivered his verdict in a clear and unambiguous manner, leaving little room for debate or any kind of interpretation. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and its main constituent, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had secured a comfortable majority in 2014, have in 2019 bettered their own performance, going past the 350 mark with the BJP alone accounting for 303 seats, vis a vis the 282 that it clinched in 2014.

If the runaway success of the BJP has been the hallmark of this election, on the other side is the decimation of the entire opposition including the Indian National Congress which had to settle for just 52 seats, a mere addition of eight seats from the all-time low of 44 that it chalked up in 2014. The only parties that survived the BJP onslaught were the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the BJD in Odisha, the YSRCP in Andhra Pradesh, and the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti in Telangana. While the BJP as expected swept

across the Hindi heartland, it ventured into uncharted territories and gained significant victories in West Bengal (18 seats as against 22 for the TMC), and Odisha (10 seats).

Modi struck a chord

More than anything else, this election turned out to be a referendum not just on the performance of the NDA government, but on the acceptance or otherwise of the Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. Strangely, he was not only the main focus of his own party and its coalition partners, but for the opposition as well. Crisscrossing the country, clocking more than a lakh and a half kilometers and addressing around 125 rallies, the PM campaigned with a great deal of zeal and vigour, not only espousing the ideals of his party and highlighting his government's achievements in the five year span, but also tearing the opposition parties to shreds, picking holes in their performances when they were in power. The PM whose monthly talk over the radio Mann Ki Baat had been a huge success and had enabled him to

strike a chord with the voter at large not just in cities and towns, but also in the remotest hamlets of the country, raised his oratory to the optimum, to convey to the entire country that their interests were safe with him and his party. The BJP President Amit Shah played a very significant role in churning public opinion in the BJP and NDA's favour.

One factor among a host of others that worked to the advantage of the BJP was the entry into the electoral mainstream of millions of new voters who instantly placed their faith in Narendra Modi, as they believed in his administrative skills, fierce sense of patriotism and pragmatism, his grit and determination to take bold decisions even if they were initially unpalatable, avowed intention to tackle terrorism from across the border, and his vision of an India that would be a global power on par with the advanced countries of the world. His identification with the common man on the street whose welfare ranked paramount in his government's priority list was another trait that endeared him to the voting masses.

Welfare economics was in fact the cornerstone of the Modi administration in its first innings, and a plethora of schemes to benefit those below the poverty line. The 'Jan Dhan' scheme wherein it was envisaged that every family in the country would have a bank account was an outstanding success, and also paved the way for the direct transfer of funds under various schemes like MNREGA to the respective accounts.

The Ayushman Bharat Yojana scheme brought medicare to the doorsteps of the poor and the down-trodden who derived direct benefit through medical insurance, and for the first time had access to hospitals. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan which aimed at a clean, disease free India witnessed among other things the large scale construction of toilets across the length and breadth of the country. Cent percent electrification of all the villages was another achievement that added a feather to the government's cap. Provision of cooking gas, monetary assistance to the agrarian sector, too went a long way in providing succor to the underprivileged section of society.

What worked for the NDA

On the external affairs front the government worked extensively to foster better relations with all countries, and the Prime Minister's trips abroad to market the country to the world with a slogan 'Make in India' too had a positive effect on the electorate. The muscular response to the terrorist attack at Pulwama came in the form of the surgical strike at Balakot in Pakistan where Indian fighter jets razed terrorist camps in a short but highly successful operation. This proved in ample measure that the Modi government was committed to ending extremism from across the border. The lack of even a murmur of protest for the strike from countries across the globe was an indication that the world stood as one in India's fight against terrorism.

The opposition parties on the other hand cut a sorry figure and the only other national party in the fray, the Indian National Congress ran a highly

negative campaign with party President Rahul Gandhi's continuous refrain Chowkidar chor hai alleging that the 'chowkidar' as PM Modi christened himself had indulged in corrupt practices in the Rafale fighter jet deal with France to help his capitalist cronies, turned into a cacophony of sorts. The ultimate reversal for the party was however the defeat of Rahul Gandhi in the party pocket borough Amethi, at the hands of the feisty and hardworking union minister, Smriti Irani. Amethi had been a Congress bastion for three decades.

The NDA and the BJP have their work cut out for them for the next five years, and there should be a marked emphasis on tackling unemployment, attending to agrarian distress, streamlining of the GST, tackling terrorism, restraining the fringe elements, etc.

His decision to fight the election from Wayanad in Kerala proved to be a wise one, as he romped home quite comfortably. In fact, the only two states that the Congress tasted success in large measure were Kerala and Punjab. The party's only solace in the state of Uttar Pradesh was the victory of its Chairperson Sonia Gandhi who retained her Rae Bareilly seat. The nomination of another Gandhi scion, Priyanka as a party General Secretary and her intensive campaign thereafter, fetched the party no dividends whatsoever.

The coming together of two caste based outfits, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj in a mahagathbandhan was expected to significantly impact the BJP and reduce its tally from 71 in 2014, but the move met with little success with the BJP ending up with 61 seats. The complete sweep in the states of Rajas-

than, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar, Maharashtra and in smaller states like Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and the NCR Delhi too, boosted the BJP and NDA's tally. Ironically, the Congress which is in power in Rajasthan drew a blank in the state, and managed to win just a solitary seat in Madhya Pradesh, where too its government is holding office.

The task at hand

The election campaign for the 17th Lok Sabha was highly acrimonious, and no party was above board when it came to indulging in calumny, name calling, vilification of the dead, some of them martyrs, dragging in the armed forces and so on. The Election Commission which initially turned a Nelson's eye to the repeated transgressions of the Model Code of Conduct had to be goaded by the Supreme Court to initiate action. Here again, the opposition parties raised Cain, alleging that the EC's acts of omission and commission clearly betrayed a deep rooted bias towards the ruling party. Even the staggering of the election through seven phases came in for criticism from former Election Commissioners who opined that the whole exercise could have been wrapped up in three phases.

The NDA and the BJP have their work cut out for them for the next five years, and there should be a marked emphasis on tackling unemployment, attending to agrarian distress, streamlining of the GST, tackling terrorism, restraining the fringe elements, etc. Prime Minister Modi in one of his post-mandate addresses has observed that there are only two castes in the country, the poor and those who wish to serve them. The government should provide an inclusive administration taking all sections of society along, irrespective of caste, creed and religion.



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

Aadhe Adhure: Timeless Classic

The play Aadhe Adhure, which deals with the topic of dysfunctional families in urban India, is more close to reality than we can imagine, says Prof. Avinash Kolhe. It is very much a modern classic, and very relevant to our times, he muses.



A still from the play *Aadhe Adhure*

The Jeff Goldberg Studio, Khar, is a unique Mumbai-based theatre group that manages to mount productions of the latest plays like *The David Coleman Headley Story*, as well as modern classics like *Sakharam Binder* and *Aadhe Adhure*. Last week, an outstanding performance of *Aadhe Adhure* was put up at their Khar Road intimate theatre.

The late Mohan Rakesh was the leading light of a new wave theatre that hit India in the swinging 60s. *Aadhe Adhure* was written in 1969, and this year happens to be its golden jubilee year. The play is still, or is perhaps, even more relevant today.

Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) was a multi-talented writer who moved easily between different genres like novels, plays, and short stories. He taught Hindi literature for a while and edited *Sarika* for some time. His first modern Hindi play *Ashad Ka Ek Din* had won a competition organised by Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1958. In *Aadhe Adhure*, Mohan Rakesh narrates a story of a family caught in the web of destitution. It is a family of five members, husband (Mahinder), wife (Savitri), elder daughter (Binny),

son (Ashok) and youngest daughter (Kinni).

The plot

The play opens with a 'man in a black suit' whose face is hidden in darkness. He does not want to face light as he represents the middle-class Indian of the urban India of the 1960s when women had just stepped into the job market. He tells the audience that he is one of the millions whom we meet on the road every day. He has no claim to fame, and is trying hard to make both ends meet. His diction is barely audible as it also represents the voiceless Indians.

The entire story takes place in the untidy drawing room of Mahinder's home. This untidiness parallels the lives of the members of Mahinder's family. At the extreme left corner Mahinder sits with no hope in life, and Savitri walks in, tired after a day's hard work at office. She expects somebody to greet her with a glass of water, and perhaps a cup of hot tea. Since no one is home (so she feels) she helps herself, but slowly realises that there is Mahinder in the drawing room, Ashok is in the bedroom, and yet nobody extends

this simple courtesy towards her. Irritated, she fires the first salvo. This verbal duel that follows between Mahinder and Savitri conveys to the audience that this is an everyday affair in this family. It also brings to the fore the fact that this is a completely dysfunctional family where nobody talks to each other, and when they do, they draw blood!

Savitri is completely frustrated with her husband and other family members. For her, Mahinder is an utter failure who has lost everything in business, and is now good for nothing. Savitri's meagre salary is the only source of income for the family. She tries all possible ways to set her son up in a good job. With this intention she invites Singhanian, her boss, home, with the hope that he can use his contacts to get Ashok a good job. Ashok cannot stand Singhanian and is contemptuous of his many habits. Nothing works for Savitri, adding to her frustrations. Add to this the fact that her recently married daughter Binny spends much of her time with her, as she hates her husband. The youngest daughter Kinni is on the verge of puberty and is keenly interested to know more about man-woman relations.

The entire family seems to be caught in a tangle from which nobody can escape. All they can do is to hurt each other continuously, and regularly. Savitri cannot take this anymore. She decides to elope with her old boy friend Jagmohan, but cannot muster up the courage. She continues to sulk and live the same life with no end in sight.

Mohan Rakesh's play is tautly written, and dialogues are hard-hitting. There is constant tension among the members of the family who at times get physical. This creates a high drama that lasts for over two hours.

(continued on page 35...)

The art of begging

We may pity beggars or be repulsed by them, but the fact of the matter is, begging can be very lucrative! A. Radhakrishnan cites instances of beggar millionaires, and analyses why begging is such a part and parcel of the Indian society.



India has a record number with beggars, which is an organized industry

I know that a man who shows me his wealth is like the beggar who shows me his poverty; they are both looking for alms from me, the rich man for the alms of my envy, the poor man for the alms of my guilt. - Ben Hecht

Of late, begging, has become an art form. With a large populace which wants to earn and roll in money without working for it, I would not be surprised if in the years to come, even MBA courses in begging are offered by universities! Begging is the oldest universal profession and beggars have existed since before the dawn of recorded history. It has also been called panhandle, perhaps from the notion of an arm stuck out like a panhandle. It is the practice of imploring others to grant a favour, often money, with little or no expectation of reciprocation.

Espied in public places, transport routes, urban parks, near busy markets, rubbish dumps, road sides, traffic lights, under flyovers, and wherever tourists abound; the frail,

crippled, and the mentally challenged, share space. Beggars have different methods of pulling at your heartstrings. They peer into taxi windows, bedraggled, haggard, and breaking into a sudden smile when a few coins are dropped into their palms, perhaps out of exasperation or a momentary flash of pity. Often quite persistent, they won't take no for an answer. They, including children, can be very deceptive.

A lucrative business

Rough estimates put beggars in India, at around five lakhs, despite the fact that begging is a crime in most states. According to a 2016 report, at 54%, India has the highest multidimensional poverty, thanks to abject poverty, distress migration from rural villages, unavailability of employment, an outcome of physical disability, mental illness, and drug addiction. A multi-million organised business controlled by human trafficking cartels, run by dons who kidnap and maim children; an estimated 300,000 children across India are drugged,

beaten and made to beg every day. For the privilege of begging in a certain territory, each beggar hands over their takings to the gang's ringleader, who keeps a significant share of it.

Mumbai is home to an unverified three lakh beggars, worth Rs.180 crore business annually. A small percentage of 39% of beggars suffer also from one or other psychiatric illnesses. Renting babies who are drugged and getting people to buy milk powder from particular shops which charge more, and sharing the excess, are some scams. Traditionally in India, giving alms to the needy is built into the social fabric. We can ignore beggars, but then emotion and sensitivity tugs. Can we ignore a paralytic person crawling on the ground, or not give to an old man with a deformed foot limping through the streets, or suffering from leprosy, or comfort a blind man singing on a train?

The legal angle

There is restriction, prohibition or criminalisation of begging at various times and for various reasons, with an aim to preserve public order or to induce people to work rather than to beg for economic or moral reasons, like the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (BPBA, 1959). This law enables officials of the Social Welfare Department assisted by the police, to conduct raids to pick up beggars who they then try in special courts called 'beggar courts'. If convicted, they are sent to certified institutions called 'beggar homes' or 'Sewa Kutir' for a period ranging from one to ten years for detention, vocational training, and employment. Such beggars who have spent years on the street find it very difficult to live in confined, abysmal living spaces.

Nutan, a detainee at the Beggars Receiving Home in Yerawada

hired a lawyer for ₹2,500 to return to her comfort zone for survival. She didn't want to spend time learning skills like making broom and baskets, when she could make more through begging. A change in attitude is called for as our beggary laws are a throwback to the centuries old European vagrancy laws, which instead of addressing the socio-economic issues, makes beggars criminally responsible. India, as a nation, needs to have a comprehensive programme and reorientation of the existing programmes. There should be therapeutic and rehabilitative replacement of the philanthropic approach.

Ironically, there is the Mangal Bank at Gaya in Bihar, India's first co-operative bank run by beggars, and for beggars, who depend for survival on alms from the temple Maa Manglagauri Mandir. They can open an account and save the alms they receive, get loans and help without appropriate proof of identification. We may not recognise it, but beggars by living their torturous lives, are emotionally attaching themselves as part and parcel of our society. They have an identity, when we call them 'beggars'. They are not stealing nor are they depending on us for our mercy. They are giving us a chance to participate in charity and tap the soft corner of our heart, says one school of thought.

The government has to

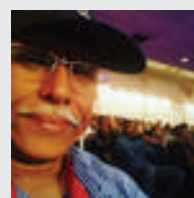
actively create jobs, have tough penalties for child labour and abuse and rehabilitate every, not only disabled beggars. By raising awareness about not giving into charity, we can strive for a long term solution.

Case studies aplenty!

Let's end with a list of a few of the new breed of professional 'rich' beggars in India, who own apartments, properties and a huge bank balance, but yet are content with begging. Bharat Jain (49), India's richest beggar mostly works in the Parel region of Mumbai. An owner of two 70 lakh apartments, he rents a juice shop for 10,000 monthly rent. Earning approximately ₹60,000 per month, he lives with his father, wife, brother and two schooling sons. Krishna Kumar Gite begs near Charni Road, Mumbai and owns a flat worth ₹ five lakhs at Nallasopara where he lives with his brother. Sarvatia Devi, from Patna is the most famous female beggar of this country, paying ₹36,000 as insurance premium annually, and even got her daughter married. Sambhaji Kale, is through begging, a flat owner, owns two individual houses and a piece of land in Sholapur, Maharashtra, and has huge investments in the bank.

Massu/Malana (60), is the coolest. Dressed in spotless clothes, he takes an auto-rickshaw to high-end

Lokhandwala, Mumbai, frequented by Bollywood, every evening. He changes into his beggar attire and during his working hours, has a complete sway over the area, with no other beggar in his vicinity. He begs from 8 pm to 3 am, and takes an auto back home. With assets worth ₹30 lakh in properties alone, he earns ₹1,000 to 1,500 per day. Home is a one bedroom apartment at Amboli in Andheri (west). He owns another such apartment nearby at Amboli, which he has rented out for ₹8,000 per month. He shares the apartment with his wife, two sons, and a daughter-in-law.. He has substantial bank savings, but doesn't reveal details. This concept of people living a dual life, both of a beggar and a rather well-off member of the society is not a new phenomenon, though. In 1891, author Arthur Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes based short story Man with the twisted lip had written about a journalist, who became a temporary beggar in order to research for a story. But after earning a lot of money during that time, which eclipsed his newspaper earnings, he decided to make it his permanent vocation!



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

Aadhe Adhure: Timeless Classic

(...continued from page 33)

Komal Chhabria (Savitri) gets under the skin of the character right from the word go, and continues to hold the audience under her spell. Komal has played this role as if it was written just for her. She has managed to convey the frustration of a woman married to a failure, frustrations of a mother who cannot get her children onto the right path, the frustration of a lover who cannot gather the courage to elope with her boy friend.

Ashok Pandey has directed the play as well as played the half a dozen characters effortlessly. He is Mahinder, Juneja, Singhania, and

Jagmohan. Of all these, Ashok slips into the character of Mahinder smoothly. His drooping shoulders, his slow and defeated diction, tells us everything about this unsuccessful man. These two main characters are ably assisted by Arjun Tanwar (Ashok), Afshan Khan (Binny), and Urvazi Kotwal (Kinny). Amit Patil has handled the lights and sounds for this play, and Raj Chhabria has designed the set.

I had seen this play about 25 years ago in which the late Dinesh Thakur and Sunila Pradhan played the main characters. I thought to myself then that such dysfunctional families

would be rare. Today when I sat through this show, I felt that every second family in urban India resembles the family of Mahinder and Savitri. So much frustration, so much angst. No wonder Aadhe Adhure is rightly hailed as a 'modern classic'.



Mumbai.

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

T.M. SOUNDARARAJAN

A most versatile playback singer (1922-2013)

TM. Soundararajan, popularly known as TMS, was an Indian Carnatic musician, playback singer in Tamil cinema, and actor from 1946-2013. Born in Madurai in a poor Sourashtrian Brahmin family, at age seven he began by studying Carnatic music from Chinnakonda Sarangapani Bhagavathar, and later, from Arayakkudi Rajamani Iyengar.

Married, and badly needing the income, he started accepting small concerts from the age of 23, and sang in the voice of the then-famous classical singer and actor M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar (MKT). His first major Carnatic musical concert was at SathGuru Samajam, Madurai, in 1945, with violinist C. R. Mani and mridangist S. S. Vijaya Ratnam. He emulated MKT for voice modulations; K. B. Sundarambal for perfect pronunciation; M. S. Subbulakshmi for bringing emotion to the voice, and Madurai Mani Iyer for the easy flow of song. The uncrowned king of playback singing of Tamil film industry spanning over six and half decades, TMS recorded film songs in 11 languages, including Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, and Malayalam. His repertoire included over 10,138 songs from 3,162 films, including devotional, semi-classical, carnatic, classical, and light music songs.

The trademark vibhuthi on his forehead with vermilion at the centre was always intact. The only singer in the Tamil film industry who could pronounce the Tamil words with perfection, he abhorred remix as retrograde, but enslaved all by his entrancing voice and singing. He created emotional dramas through his eloquently emotive singing style. An expert in bringing out the bhavam in a song, be it any mood such as comedy, pathos, love, angst, anger, and pining, or philosophical; nava rasas came to him naturally. Versatile, he modulated his voice to suit the stars perfectly; a listener could identify the star in the film through his songs even without watching the movie! Initially rejected by music composers and recording technicians, it was S.M. Subbaiah Naidu who in 1946, gave TMS an opportunity to sing five songs in the style of M.K.T for a film by P.V. Narasimha Bharathi, *Krishna Vijayam*, which released in 1950.



In 1954, A. Maruthakasi recommended TMS to sing in Aruna Pictures's *Thookku Thookki*. When Sivaji Ganesan doubted the suitability of the voice of C.S. Jayarmanan, his normal playback, TMS offered to sing three songs free. Studying the voice of Sivaji he sang *Sundari Soundari* and *Eraatha Malaithanile*, closely imitating him. *Koondukkili*, the only film where MGR and Sivaji acted together, was under production, and TMS who originally was slated to only sing in a chorus, was given a full solo, *Konjum Kalian Pennai* under K.V. Mahadevan's composition for Sivaji Ganesan. MGR heard it and wanted TMS to become his permanent playback singer. In 1955 Sivaji too insisted on TMS who then ended up the playback mainly for the superstars MGR and Sivaji. He worked in all, with 74 music directors ranging from S.M. Subbaiah Naidu to A.R. Rahman, but most of his hit songs were composed by music directors M.S. Viswanathan, K.V. Mahadevan, and the Vishwanathan-Ramamoorthy duo. Though TMS-Ilayaraja duo had given hit songs like *Andhapurathil Oru Maharani*, etc., their relation was fraught with misunderstandings and differences. Ilayaraja's arrival signaled the end of the TMS era. He also acted in Tamil films, such as *Pattinathar*, *Arunagirinathar*, *Kallum Kaniyagum* and *Kaviraja Kalamegam*. Among the many awards and honours included the Padma Shri in 2003. The Government of India released a memorial stamp for 10 legendary singers of India, including TMS.

TMS lived in Chennai for many years in practical oblivion. In June 2003, it was reported that he attempted suicide by drinking acid due to acute mental depression, though his family said it was accidental. He passed away on 25 May 2013 at his residence in Mandaveli, Chennai, due to illness, aged 91 years. He is survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter.

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

MANOHAR PARRIKAR

A spartan, dedicated politician (1955-2019)

Manohar Parrikar, who succumbed to pancreatic cancer after bravely fighting the disease for over a year, was a value-based politician and a workaholic, who had admirers across parties. His invaluable contribution to his home state Goa, which he served as Chief Minister (CM) four times, and his handling of the Defence portfolio which he was entrusted with after the NDA came to power in 2014, came in for much praise from all quarters.

Parrikar was born on the 13 December 1955, in Mapusa, Goa, and had his early education in the Loyola High School in Margao. Later, Parrikar graduated in Metallurgy from the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai in 1976. Quite early in life he was drawn towards the ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and served the organisation in various capacities as Mukhya Sikshak (Chief Instructor) and as Sangchalak (Local Director).

Parrikar was later deputed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by the RSS, and he first tasted success winning an assembly seat in Goa in 1994, proceeding to function as the Leader of the Opposition in the legislature from 1994-1999. His maiden stint as Chief Minister of Goa lasted from October 2000 to February 2002, and in 2002 he was re-elected as CM and served till 2005. Parrikar was again sworn in as CM in 2012 and demitted office in 2014 after he was summoned to Delhi to take over the Defence ministry. His final stint as the CM was from 14 March 2017 till he died in harness on 17 March 2019. Ironical as it might seem, Manohar Parrikar never functioned as a CM for a full five year term. He however had the distinction of becoming the first IITian to hold the high office of Chief Minister and Defence Minister.

Although he was quite reluctant to leave Goa, a state that meant the world to him, he was persuaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to join the union cabinet in 2014, and was entrusted with the vital portfolio of Defence. As he had not contested the elections to Parliament he was elected to the Upper House, the Rajya Sabha, from Uttar Pradesh. However,

he could not serve a full five year term as cabinet minister as political exigencies in Goa forced his party to repatriate him back to the state to head a coalition government there. This was largely because the coalition partners, the Goa Forward Party and the Maharashtra Gomantak Party, and three independent MLAs, offered their support to the BJP, setting a condition that Manohar Parrikar should take over the reins as the CM.

During his tenure as the Defence Minister, Parrikar oversaw the surgical strike in 2016. Incorruptible as he was, Parrikar introduced a great deal of transparency in defence deals and purchases, and there was not even a whiff of a scam or a scandal anywhere, and unlike his predecessor A.K. Antony who preferred to deal with Public Sector Undertakings, Parrikar threw the door open for the private sector, exercising due diligence and caution, thereby ensuring that there was no opacity in any of the deals. Even after he was diagnosed with a highly virulent form of pancreatic cancer in 2018, Parrikar strove hard to fulfill his obligations to the state. Even though he was in and out of hospitals and was even flown for treatment abroad, he discharged his responsibilities, often clearing files from his hospital bed.

A man of simple tastes and spartan habits, Parrikar was verily the odd man out in Lutyen's Delhi, with his bush shirts and Kolhapuri chappals. He epitomised the spirit of simple living and high thinking, and his focus on issues that would affect the common man on the street never wavered. Glowing tributes were paid to his memory after his untimely death. Leading the mourners, President Ram Nath Kovind characterised him as an epitome of integrity and dedication in public life, and added that his service to the people of Goa and to India will not be forgotten. PM Modi was no less eloquent and hailed him as an unparalleled leader, a true patriot, and an exceptional administrator.

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HAVILDAR HANGPANG DADA, AC

Soldier with unflinching courage and grit (1979-2016)

Havildar Hangpang Dada was born in Borduria village of Trap District in Arunachal Pradesh, on 2 October 1979. He joined 3 Parachute Battalion on 28 October 1997. He was transferred to Assam Regiment and joined 4 Assam on 24 January 2008. He was posted to 35 Rashtriya Rifles in March at his own request, as he wanted to serve on the front line.

Rashtriya Rifles is a force composed of personnel from all the states, and is committed to counter-insurgency operations. He was stationed at the 13,000 feet high Sham-sabari Range in North Kashmir near the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. The annual snow fall in the place is about 20 feet. It is avalanche prone and remains cut off from the world for more than six months a year. The nearest road head is five hours away, and the network is erratic. Most of the time, infiltration occurs when the weather gets warm and the snow starts melting, exposing boulders, sometimes as big as a room. Maintenance of morale in such area calls for superb qualities of leadership.

The post is usually commanded by a JCO. Dada had a pleasant disposition and led by example. He was affectionately addressed as Dada by his teammates. He was in-charge due to confidence in his tactical skills and high state of physical proficiency. He always volunteered for any task, big or small. He did not care about rank or risk. He would take the initiative to communicate with team members even in the presence of senior officers. The officers appreciated his commitment. While serving with 4 Assam, he was often the first one to check for homemade explosive devices and homemade bombs. He was the first choice for patrols and ambushes. The officers liked to interact with him, and for this reason he was made in-charge of the mess.

He had been serving at this post for more than six months when on the morning of 26 May, he and his team observed some suspicious looking men moving about in the area. Four armed militants had crossed the ceasefire line and were trying to infiltrate into the area of his post. He waited

patiently for them to come close enough.

Opening fire from a distance would have driven them back, but he wanted to capture or eliminate them. His initial burst of fire killed two militants, and the others took cover behind big boulders. Dada charged at them and shot the third militant before he could take cover. He was hit by a bullet in the neck, but he continued to charge and wounded the fourth terrorist. His teammates closed in and killed the last intruder. Even in death, Dada was holding on to his AK-47 weapon.

Dada passed away on 27 May 2016. He is survived by his wife Chasen Lawang, daughter Roukhin and son Senwang. He had displayed raw courage, unflinching grit and presence of mind by charging at the heavily armed terrorists. His timely action saved the lives of his comrades and pinned down the intruders. He was awarded the Ashok Chakra posthumously.

His body was taken to his village where he was buried with full military honours. The Governor, J.P. Rajkhowa said that the death of Dada reminds all of the sacrifices made by the people of Arunachal for the security of the nation. A large number of people were present at the funeral to convey their regards and appreciation of his heroic deed.

Chief Minister Kalikho Pul who was present at the ceremony deeply mourned the demise of Hangpang Dada and expressed his sincere solidarity to the bereaved family and to the Army for the loss of their brave man. He announced ex-gratia grant of ₹20 lakhs to the family. He directed the district administration to erect a memorial as a mark of respect to the brave soldier. The Chief Minister also decided to name a government institution or a public infrastructure after him so that he would be immortalised forever.

- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)





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