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Spirit, essence of festivals have changed

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Face to Face

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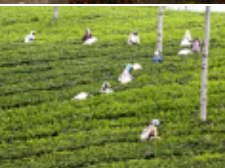
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LAND OF GALA
FESTIVITIES**



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FEARLESS NADIA



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Land of gala festivities

India's plural fabric is open to celebrate both traditional and modern festivals with equal zeal and devotion. The vast diversity of Indian states reflect the spectrum of tradition and customs that are widely appreciated. Manu Shrivastava takes a look at this colourful rainbow, most of them seen from the prisms of mythology and folklore.



Pookalam - onam decoration

Festivals are an integral part of the fabric of Indian society. It is through these festivals that India displays the diversity in culture, cuisine, art, dance, music, etc. Just like spices effuse aroma and flavour to Indian cuisine, it's festivals that lend character and flavour to the myriad cultures in the country.

In India, there's a festival for every occasion, important life events, harvesting seasons, arrival of monsoons, the millions of gods and goddesses, worshipping the elements of nature, protecting the environment, revering mythological characters and more. Ancient Indian civilisations, mythology, Vedic scriptures, epics and traditional knowledge are ripe with reverence for nature and its elements. Trees, water bodies, animals, birds, mountains, rivers, earth, fire, sun, etc., have been worshipped in different forms in India, for centuries. Even today, indigenous groups have customs and practices to protect nature, their ecosystem – land, water, trees, animals, birds, etc.

It's not just the traditional festivals that Indians celebrate with devotion, pomp and fervour, the new-age

festivals too are occasions for revelry and celebration. The beauty of India lies in its diversity. There are occasions where the entire nation comes together to celebrate festivals such as Diwali, Christmas, Van Mahotsav, Gandhi Jayanti, etc., and then there are regional or state-based festivals that are as significant for the locals as the ones with national presence.

Among the states too, there is a rich diversity of traditions and customs that take form of festivals such as the tribal festivals in the country's tribal belt comprising Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Smaller groups and communities have their unique festivals too.

Festivals derived from mythology and folklore

Most of us have grown up hearing fables and stories, from our grandparents, parents or an aunt or uncle, preaching a moral value or a life lesson. Others grew up reading story books such as Amar Chitra Katha, Panchtan-



Kite festival to celebrate Makar Sankranti

tra, etc. It's no secret that the cultural crust of Indian society has metamorphosed to its current form by the dynamic interaction of society with the land's rich mythology and history, over centuries.

Myriad festivals celebrated in India such as Diwali, Shivaratri, Janmashtami, etc., have a deep connection with mythology. Ancient Indian Sanskrit epic Ramayan, one of the largest in the world, written by Maharshi Valmiki in fifth century BC, describes the life of Ram, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. There are several festivals that commemorate events in the life of Lord Ram. These include Diwali – when Ram came back with Sita and Lakshman to his kingdom Ayodhya after 14 years in exile, Ram Navami to celebrate the birthday of Ram, Janmasthami to celebrate the birthday of Lord Krishna, etc.

Another epic and the longest epic poem known, Mahabharat, written by Ved Vyas, narrates the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The battle was fought at Kurukshetra, in present-day Haryana. Every year, during the month of December, Mahabharat festival is held at Kurukshetra where the battle was fought and the famous conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, one of the Pandava brother, took place that has been compiled in another scripture, the Bhagwad Gita. During this festival, various cultural programmes are organised including besides speeches and conferences, reading of Bhagwad Gita and other instances from the Mahabharat. Devotes also come to Kurukshetra at this time to take a holy dip.

Most festivals are deeply connected to the myths and legends of the land and passed down from generations to generations of believers, either through religious texts or through folklore and customs. Bakr-Id or Eid-ul-Adha honours the sacrifice made by Prophet Ibrahim – when he

was tested by God to sacrifice his only son. Ibrahim was ready to make the sacrifice but God intervened and a lamb was instead sacrificed.

Christmas that celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ is part of the traditional Christmas narrative or the Nativity of Jesus from the New Testament that says Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in accordance with messianic prophecies. So, when Joseph and Mary arrived, the inn had no room and the two were offered a stable where the Christ Child was born. At the time of his birth, it were the angels who proclaimed the news to the shepherds who then spread the birth of Jesus Christ.

Famous state-based festivals

The world is a smaller and highly-connected place today. People are living and working at places away from their hometowns. In India also, migration over the last few decades have led to urban centres becoming a homogenous mix of people. However, these people carry the flavour of their region or zone wherever they go.

Today, many state-based or community-based festivals are celebrated across India. A lot more people today know of the hundreds of festivals that they may never have celebrated themselves but their friends, colleagues, acquaintances do.

The Durga Puja celebrations are quite vibrant in the Indian states of West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Assam and Tripura. It's celebrated at homes and in public pandals where thousands of devotees gather to pay their obeisance to Goddess Durga. In these states, Durga Puja is synonymous with Navratri where Durga kills the demon Mahishasur and helps restore dharma and order in the world. The celebrations coincide with Navratri (nine nights) that is observed across India, to worship the diverse forms of Goddess Amba as she takes on new forms to defeat demons, culminating into Dussera.

Another popular festival, Lohri, is widely celebrated in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and in Jammu. Lohri is observed the night before Makar Sankranti and marks the end of winter and welcomes longer days with the movement of the sun. According to folklore, in ancient times Lohri was celebrated at the end of the traditional month after the winter solstice. It's also a celebration of the winter crop season in the region.

Lohri is celebrated with a bonfire as part of the tradition. The traditional sweet for the festival is jaggery. In



Republic Day Parade – A national festival

Punjab, the harvest festival Lohri is marked by eating sheaves of roasted corn from the new harvest. The fresh sugarcane harvest is celebrated during Lohri just like that of peanuts.

In Kerala, Onam is one of the most celebrated festival where streets are crowded with performances, elaborate feasts, etc. commemorating the homecoming of the righteous, mythical King Mahabali. On the auspicious day of Thiruvonam, houses are decorated in beautiful floral carpets called Pookkalam and traditional art forms can be seen everywhere. Vallam kali is a traditional boat race in Kerala also known as snake boat race that is conducted during the harvest festival, Onam.

Festivals unifying Indians

The fact that, in India, most festivals are social and celebrated publicly, they've been, through the course of history, utilised to further a social cause even to bridge the communal and caste-based gap within the society to fight against a common enemy.

It was freedom fighter Lokmanya Tilak who turned the private, household Ganesh Chaturthi celebration into the present-day exuberant and social Ganeshutsav. Today,

there are many festivals and events that bring Indians from all walks of lives, religions, communities together as one. The Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations that are observed in all education institutes, government departments, housing societies, etc., bring people together with the sole identity as an Indian.

There are festivals such as the Van Mahotsav where week-long events are conducted in schools and education institutes to further the message of saving trees and conserving forests. The Constitution of India's Directive Principle of State Policy have provisions that direct the State 'to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country' and urge the citizens 'to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.' There are several festivals that uphold these constitutional provisions and unite Indians as one.



Manu Shrivastava is a media legal researcher with DraftCraft International, and co-convener of 'The Woman Survivor' initiative that documents abuse of women and children within families.

Festivals as offshoots of mythology

*The cultural and geographical diversity in India has a role to play in the way a festival is celebrated and the associated rituals. Sometimes, even the story or the legend behind it changes a little, but the spirit and the belief remains the same, argues **Nikita Shastri** and buttresses it with ‘most festivals celebrated around the world are deeply connected to the myths and legends of the land passed down from generations to generations of believers.’*



Janmashtami and Ganesh Chaturthi are celebrated with great fanfare all over India, especially in Maharashtra

The socio-cultural fabric of the Indian society is closely weaved in with that of the land's rich mythology and history. The festivals celebrated across the country are a constant reminder of the role myths and legends play in the lives of the people. So, festivals like Diwali, Janmashtami, Ganeshotsava, Holi, Shivaratri, Christmas, Bakr-Id, etc., have a deep-rooted connect with mythology and folk lore which are passed down over generations.

Most festivals, across religions, derive their origin in this manner. So, Lord Krishna's birthday that is celebrated as the festival of Janmashtami is celebrated with devotion and fervour on the eighth day of the dark fortnight in the month of Shravana (July-August) in India. According to Hindu mythology, Krishna was born to destroy Mathura's demon king and Lord Krishna's virtuous mother Devaki's brother, Kansa.

On the other hand, Bakr Id or Eid-ul-Adha honours Prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice. It is believed that he was tested by God to sacrifice his only son. Ibrahim was ready to make the sacrifice following the command. However, God intervened and a lamb was sacrificed instead of Ibrahim's son.

The cultural and geographical diversity in India has a role to play in the way a festival is celebrated and the associated rituals. Sometimes, even the story or the legend behind it changes a little, but the spirit and the belief remains the same.

Ganeshotsava and its many forms

Ganesh Chaturthi celebrates the arrival of Lord Ganesh to earth from Kailash Parvat with his mother Goddess Parvati or Gauri. One of the most celebrated festivals in the country, Ganesh Chaturthi is marked with the installation of idols of Lord Ganesh or Bappa, as he is fondly called by the devotees, privately in homes and publicly too. It was Lokmanya Tilak who had initiated the public celebration of the festival in Pune in 1893 which went on to be known as the Sarvajanik Ganeshotsava celebrated in elaborate pandals.

Far from megacity Mumbai's raucous Ganpati celebration, in Goa, devout Hindu families celebrate Ganeshotsava with devotion and quiet faith. While Ganeshotsava is Maharashtra's most effervescent and most prized festival, the one celebrated in Goa dons a more sombre avatar.

Traditionally, Vinayak Chaturthi or Ganesh Chaturthi is observed in the Hindu month of Bhadrapada, that falls in the months of August - September), followed by the popular 10-day-long Ganeshotsava before culminating in the final visarjan or the immersion of the idol in a water body.

Alternatively, Maghi Ganesh Jayanti, Ganesh Jayanti or Varad Chaturthi is celebrated in the Magha month that falls in the Gregorian calendar months of January – February. Maghi Ganesh Jayanti is celebrated by a select few communities in Maharashtra mostly across the Konkan belt as Lord Ganesha's birth anniversary.

Ganeshotsava celebrates Lord Ganesh - the God of New Beginnings and the Remover of Obstacles i.e., Vighnaharta - as well as the god of wisdom and intelligence. It's observed in India especially in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh.

In devotion of the Hindu Trinity

The Hindu trinity comprises Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva (or Mahesh), the destroyer. The festival of Maha Shivaratri is celebrated across India among the devotees of Lord Shiva. During the festival, followers observe religious fasting and offer Bael (Bilva) leaves to Shiva. Shivaratri falls on the moonless fourteenth night of the new moon in Hindu month of Phalgun (February – March according to Gregorian calendar). Maha Shivaratri, or 'the great night of Shiva', commemorates the supremacy of Shiva.

The festival of Ramnavami is celebrated on the birth of Lord Ram. It's the day on which Lord Ram, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, incarnated in human form in Ayodhya. The emblem of righteousness, Maryada Purusottam, Ram's birth is observed on the ninth day after the new moon in Shukla Paksh (the waxing moon), which falls sometime in the month of April.

Another festival celebrating the life of Lord Ram is Diwali or Deepavali. Diwali is the day when Lord Rama, wife Sita and brother Lakshman returned to their homeland in Ayodhya after spending 14 years in exile and defeating Ravana. The festival is celebrated as the victory of good over evil.

On Krishna Janmashtami, Lord Vishnu is invoked in his human incarnation as Krishna. Men and women fast and pray and temples and homes are decorated with flowers and lights. In Uttar Pradesh's Vrindavan, where Krishna is believed to have spent his childhood, the festival is celebrated with utmost extravaganza and fervour. A colourful 'Rasleela' is performed to recreate incidents from the life of Krishna and to commemorate his love for Radha. This festival is also known as Krishnashtami or Gokulashtami.

At midnight, an image or idol of infant Krishna is

bathed and placed in a cradle amid chanting of devotional songs. In Maharashtra, the celebration of Janmashtami dons a completely different and exuberant form especially the Dahi Handi celebrations where Krishna's childhood endeavours to steal butter and curd from earthen pots beyond his reach are imitated. A matka or an earthen pot containing these is suspended at a height above the ground and groups of young men and children form human pyramids to try and reach the pot and eventually break it.

Myths and legends of Christmas and Easter

Easter is the most important and the oldest festival of the Christian Church, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's held on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the northern spring equinox. Some Easter traditions connect this name with Ishtar, the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and fertility, or Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. The Easter bunny, often considered a part of Easter, has an origin in mythology as Eostre is said to have been accompanied by a hare.

The annual festival celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, Christmas, is observed on 25 December primarily. The traditional Christmas narrative or the Nativity of Jesus from the New Testament says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in accordance with messianic prophecies. So, when Joseph and Mary arrived, the inn had no room and the two were offered a stable where the Christ Child was born. At the time of his birth, it were the angels who proclaimed the news to the shepherds who then spread the birth of Jesus Christ. The exact date of his birth are unknown but the Church in fourth century fixed 25 December as the birthday, corresponding to the date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar.

Most festivals celebrated around the world are deeply connected to the myths and legends of the land passed down from generations to generations of believers. It's these traditions that add colour and flavour to the mien of the land. Retaining these myths, legends and folklores has been a regular attempt by historians, academicians and nationalist politicians, but for the son of the soil usually called the native, it comes naturally and is intrinsic to his very being.

Nikita Shastri is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – a DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

Paying obeisance to Nature

*Indians have honoured nature in various forms and traditional practices and those of indigenous groups continue to be in close harmony with the environment. The conservation rituals and practices are an extension of their duties or dharma and not separate acts to 'save the environment'. For them, religion and environment aren't disjoint...they're two inseparable parts of their existence, observes **Ruchi Verma**.*



Pola Festival

Nature and its elements have been a significant part of the rituals and festivals in most ancient civilisations. Trees, plants, the five elements of nature, animals, birds and other creatures have been worshipped in different forms in cultures and groups around the world.

In India, the earth, sun, trees, wind, sea, rivers even mountains are worshipped. Many tribal communities in India such as the Bhils, Bishnois, etc., have rituals and practices to protect the forest, land and water i.e., their own ecosystem. The conservation rituals and practices are an extension of their duties or dharma and not separate acts to 'save the environment'. For them, religion and environment aren't disjoint...they're two inseparable parts of their existence.

Trees integral to Indian festivals

Indians have honoured nature in various forms and traditional practices and those of indigenous groups continue to be in close harmony with the environment. In the tribal state of Jharkhand, the Sarhul festival is celebrated during spring season when the Saal trees bear flowers. The tribals

pray to the tree during the festival. Sarhul translates to worshipping of trees in the local language. The festival marks the beginning of their new year and is primarily celebrated by the Oraon, Munda and the Ho tribes of Jharkhand. During the festival the worshippers consume rice beer and sing and dance during the procession carried out through the streets.

One of the biggest festivals, the Van Mahotsav or the 'Festival of Forests' is celebrated in the first week of July pan India. The aim of the festival is to spread mass awareness regarding the importance of trees in human lives and that of conservation of forests in maintaining the delicate ecological balance. It was started in 1950 by the-then Union Minister of Agriculture and Food Dr K M Munshi. He conceptualised the festival to raise environmental awareness among the people especially towards forest conservation.

As part of the festival, tree plantation drives are organised at schools and community gardens, grounds, etc. Along with walks, seminars, exhibitions, etc. The term Van Mahotsav originated in 1947 during a tree plantation drive in Delhi in which national leaders such as Dr Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru participated.



Nagaland's Amur Falcon Festival

Worshipping the sacred tree

The Vat Savitri Vrata is observed by married women who, having fasted for three previous days, worship the vata or the bargad tree by circumambulating around the tree while tying a sacred thread around it. Another festival called the Sravana Krishna Ekadasi involves the ceremonial offering of water to the bel tree.

Vat Savitri falls on the full moon of Jyeshtha month - around June in Gregorian calendar. Women fast and worship the Vat tree to pray for the growth and prosperity of their families. The Vat tree's sprawling foliage and the fact that it goes on to live for centuries is a symbol of prosperity. The women also offer sweets and flowers to the tree. The observance derives its origin from mythological character Savitri and the many legends surrounding her life. According to one legend, princess Savitri fell in love with prince Satyavan, the son of a blind king in exile. Savitri was told she would die within a year of marrying Satyavan but still marries the prince. Known for her dharmic wisdom, Savitri even brought back her husband from the hands of God of Death - Yama himself through her devotion and wisdom.

Bird festivals for awareness

In India, there are several festivals where either a bird is worshipped or an endangered bird is celebrated to ensure its protection. The Bird Festival of Uttar Pradesh that started in 2015 has become extremely popular. Celebrated in a place called Bah near Agra, the festival marks one of the largest gatherings of bird lovers and ornithologists in India.

Nagaland's Amur Falcon Festival is one of its kind.

In 2018, at Wokha, situated 25 km from Kohima, the first ever Amur Falcon festival was held. Following the mass culling of these birds in 2012 by poachers in Nagaland's Pangti village, wildlife activists and the state government got together to protect the falcons and the festival is celebrated in the same spirit. The festival entails awareness workshops on the migratory patterns and conservation of the falcons, nature photography, bird-watching, etc. over three days. The festival is increasing becoming popular among the tourists too.

In February 2021, a first of its kind bird festival was held in Palamau Tiger Reserve in Jharkhand recording the presence of 169 species of birds. The festival saw the participation of school children, locals and bird lovers.

'Divine' animals worshipped

Hinduism attributes divinity to animals and all living creatures. Animal and bird gods and deities are therefore integral to the religion. Lord Shiva's entire clan is replete with ecological symbolism. Most Hindu gods and goddesses are associated with an animal or a bird. Bull is the vehicle of Lord Shiva and tiger the vehicle of Goddess Durga. Mouse is the vehicle of Lord Ganesh. Indian Eagle Garuda and peacock are considered as the sacred bird of Hindus. Even today, animals hold a special place in the Indian society.

Nag Panchami is observed on the fifth day of the bright half during the month of Sravan (July-August) and involves the worshipping of the snake. Offerings of milk, sweets, and flowers are made on idols of Nag deities made in silver, wood, stone and bathed with water and milk. The observance is believed to protect one from the fear of snake bite.

Snakes are often considered a symbol of healing. Vishnu reclines on the serpent Shesh Nag or Ananta eternally. Several groups in Kerala worship the snakes as guardians of their homes while in Bengal, Goddess Manasa is a divine Nagini (female snake) and worshipped for her powers to eliminate illness.

Hanuman Jayanti is a festival celebrating the birth of Lord Hanuman who is part monkey and part human and known for his extraordinary feats and loyalty to Lord Ram. Lord Hanuman is worshipped to attain victory against evil and provide protection. On this auspicious day, devotees celebrate and seek his blessings.

Modern-day animal fairs and festivals

The Velas Turtle Festival celebrated in March every year witnesses gathering of thousands of people on Velas beach in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra to see the hatching of the Olive Ridley turtle's eggs.



Wildlife conservationists play an important role in preventing the eggs of the vulnerable species from getting crushed by placing baskets over them. Upon hatching, nature lovers help usher along the new-born turtles towards the ocean.

The Pola Festival also expresses gratitude for

animals. Celebrated in Central India, the festival involves cattle who are worshipped as an expression of gratitude and dignity. The cattle are bathed and adorned and taken out in processions across the village accompanied by the drumbeats and music.

The famous Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan also known as Kartik Mela is one of the largest such fair in the world. The annual festival is a place for traders to show their livestock and celebrate local traditions. The fair starts in the Hindu calendar month of Kartik ends on the Kartik Purnima, which typically overlaps with late October and early November in the Gregorian calendar.

The fair attracts over 2,00,000 visitors who come to see the beautifully adorned camels, horses and cattle. Apart from the livestock trading, Pushkar is an important pilgrimage for Hindus who come to the Pushkar Lake.

Ruchi Verma is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

WHO AM I?



Binding forces and lessons

*Festivals are not just religious congregations. They are harbingers of good deeds, peace and harmony. In India, where every festival is celebrated with gusto and fervour, there is also an element of life lessons that emphasise one's roles and responsibilities in the society. **Anushka Singh** makes out a case that they afford a chance to the common man to comprehend religion and its teachings.*



(Left) Ramadan prayers offered at a mosque; (right) A scene from Kumbh mela

Apart from their religious associations, most festivals are also associated with a cause or a good deed. In India, there are several festivals across religions that are celebrated for social good – for awareness on issues plaguing the society, to maintain peace and harmony in the community, to keep away from bad habits, to ensure social evils are tackled in the right manner even ask for forgiveness for the sins one has committed.

There are many festivals that even preach life lessons and teach how one should conduct himself in the society. Then there are those that promote stronger cultural understanding and give the common man a chance to delve deeper into the intricate teachings of the religion s/he follows.

India's culture and practices have often been misunderstood or even projected wrongly by those who are in a position to 'inform' or 'influence' the masses. The cultural practices are often labelled orthodox by those who do little or nothing to understand the actual purpose of a ritual or a practice. It's important to understand the true meaning and purpose of a festival, religious practice or a social custom before drawing conclusions.

Festivals for stronger cultural understanding

The 'world-famous' Kumbh Mela is the largest religious gathering in the world where millions of Hindu pilgrims gather to bathe in a holy river for purification from their sins. The ritualistic dip in the waters of the holy river is a way to atone for any wrongdoings in the past. The Mela is held every 12 years at one of four pilgrimage sites, each located along a holy river – at Prayagraj at Triveni Sangam which is the confluence of the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical river Saraswati; at Haridwar along river Ganga; at Trimbak in Nashik along river Godavari; and at Ujjain along the river Shipra.

Each time, the festival lasts about two months and witnesses millions of pilgrims and tourists, domestic and international, who make a beeline to the holy sites. In 2019, 240 million people visited Prayagraj during the 49-day Kumbh Mela. The Kumbh Mela in 2019 also welcomed approximately 1.03 million foreign tourists.

The word 'kumbh' originates from 'kumbha' which means a 'pitcher' in Sanskrit. According to a legend,

there was a pitcher of amrit i.e., an elixir of immortality that was produced by the gods (deva) and the demons (asur) together. Soon enough, they started fighting over the elixir and the battle went on for 12 years. During the fight, drops of the nectar of immortality fell on earth at four places which is where the devotees gather today to 'cleanse' themselves.

Lent prepares for repentance

One of the most important observances among Christians in India, Lent is a period of 40 days of fasting and abstinence - beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending approximately six weeks later. The purpose of Lent is to prepare one for Easter through prayer, repentance of sins, almsgiving and simple living. It's the season of reflection and preparation before the Easter celebrations.

By observing 40 days of Lent, they replicate Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days. Today, Christian churches use Lent as a time for prayer and penance. Only a few followers fast during the entire Lent period, mostly observing fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Often, believers give up a particular indulgence such as a favourite food as a test of self-discipline and as a reflection of Jesus Christ's deprivation in the wilderness.

In Jewish-Christian scriptures, 40 is a significant number in Genesis, the flood which destroyed the earth was brought about by 40 days and nights of rain and Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry.

According to a Cochin-based homemaker Sharon D, "We do three main things during Lent – pray more, fast and give alms. A lot of people choose to 'sacrifice' a certain food or drink during 40 days of Lent. They are expected to abstain from meat, alcohol during Lent."

In February 2021, the Archbishop of Bombay, Oswald Cardinal Gracias, urged Catholics to 'go back to the traditional practice of abstaining from meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays of Lent.' He also suggested other modes of penance such as 'limiting one's carbon footprint by reducing consumption of electricity, watching less TV and using cell phones sparingly.' He recommended 'visiting the sick and donating blood' too.

All religions inspire to introspect

Several 'festivals' across other further the same cause. In Jainism, during Paryushan, followers say Michchhami Dukkadam to each other which translates to 'my bad deeds (with you) be fruitless.' It means, if I have done any harm to you, knowingly or unknowingly, through mind, thoughts, actions or speech during the past year, then those bad deeds to be forgiven (be fruitless).

In Islam, Ramazan or Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar observed by Muslims as a

month of fasting, prayer, reflection and community service. The annual observance of Ramadan is regarded as one of the five pillars of Islam and lasts about a month from one sighting of the crescent moon to the next.

In Hinduism, during the holy month of Saawan, also known as Shravan maas, devotees worship Lord Shiva and observe a strict fast. All Mondays which fall during this month are considered highly auspicious for fasting and known as Shravan Somwar. Many devotees observe sixteen Mondays or Solah Somwar fasting from the first Somwar of Sawan month and continue for the next fifteen weeks. Married couples too keep the Solah Somwar Vrat for a blissful married life.

Ganeshotsava stirred patriotic fervour

One of the most popular festivals, Ganeshutsav, was not always a 'public' event like today. It was freedom fighter Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak who initiated the public celebration of Ganeshutsav which went on to be known as the Sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav. He turned a private, household Ganesh Chaturthi celebration to a grand public event.

Lokmanya Tilak realised that unlike most gods and deities, Lord Ganesh was considered 'the God for every man' and was celebrated by one and all and took it as an opportunity to unite the masses to fight against the British. He popularised Ganesh Chaturthi as a national festival to bridge the gap.

In 1893, he organised Ganeshotsava as a 'social' and religious function. The festival served as a meeting place for common people of all castes and communities at a time when public social, political gatherings were banned by the British. A visionary and a natural leader, Lokmanya Tilak's idea not only brought Indians together but resulted in a festival that has become one of the most celebrated event of millions of Indians.

And, not just Ganeshotsava, several other festivals teach life lessons. Diwali is the festival of light and observed for happiness and prosperity. Dussera signifies the victory of good over evil. Jewish New Year celebrated in September-October is a pious season for self-assessment and judgment. Like, the Day of Atonement that follows the Jewish New Year and is considered the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar for the lot of Jews who live in India.

Anushka Singh works with DraftCraft International as a Media Researcher and writes mostly on issues affecting the Fourth Estate. She likes reading contrarian literature and analyzing sources of news

Spirit, essence of festivals have changed

*India has always been known for its traditional festivals, but their hues and contours have undergone mutation with the passage of time. Modern-day living and commercialisation have put a lot of unnecessary stress on people's lives, changed the family structures and consequently the way festivals are celebrated now, points out **Kriti Kalra**, with case studies.*



Celebrating Eid and Holi together

India is a land of festivals where there's a festival for every occasion. Not only is the country rich in traditional festivals, observed over centuries, its home to several new ones too that have been launched keeping in mind the need of the day and time. Over the years, the way festivals are celebrated has changed in more ways than one – some for better and others for worse.

Festivals are social events and as societies transform over time, the way festivals are celebrated, their significance, relevance even feasibility change. With technology and extensive internet penetration, today, people have higher exposure to other groups, communities and societies and geographical boundaries are of little or no consequence. That, and with an increasing number of people travelling, observing sometimes even absorbing other customs, the way festivals are celebrated is changing too.

Modernisation a contributing factor

"Ab tyoharon mein who baat nahi rahi...jab hum chhote the tab alag hi maza aata tha (The festivals are not like before anymore...we used to have a lot of fun then)," says Mumbai-based Septuagenarian Vimla Parekh who lives with her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren

in an upscale apartment in Worli.

"Even though we had limited means back in those days in the village, festivals are some of my fondest childhood memories," she adds. Vimla misses the warmth, the presence and the physical interaction of family members and relatives that was integral to any festival then. "The women would be occupied in the kitchen cooking sumptuous meals, delicacies and sweets while the men would sit and chat. The entire family, even those members living really far, would come together to celebrate festivals especially Diwali as one big family. Children had the most fun as they would just eat and play around till it was time for the pooja," she chuckles recalling her childhood days at her village in Gujarat.

Modern-day living and commercialisation have put a lot of unnecessary stress on people's lives, changed the family structures and consequently the way festivals are celebrated now. "One of the most significant change has been that today, in most cases, families don't celebrate the festivals together. Earlier, a festival, just like a wedding in the family, was an occasion for the members to come together and spend time with each other. That's not the case anymore," feels Hyderabad-based senior IT profes-

sional Nisha Advani who, owing to professional commitments, doesn't get to visit her elderly parents in Faridabad during festivals or otherwise.

"Today, I can afford a last-minute, expensive flight ticket but my work doesn't allow me to take a long leave. I have been contemplating relocating and living with my parents and will do so once I get a good enough opportunity. Till then, I try to visit them whenever possible, if not during festivals."

Ironically, despite the myriad modes of transportation available that are much faster and even cheaper and uncountable communication channels present, physical connectivity has suffered immensely.

Technology and its effect

Earlier, festivals were synonymous with feast, fun and frolic. Families would come together to buy new clothes, shop for the house, feast together and just be together. A neighbourhood was like an extended family. "I used to live in a chawl where families from other religions resided as well. We all used to celebrate Gudi Padwa, Pongal, Diwali, Baisakhi, Holi, Christmas, Id, New Year, etc., together. Today, I may receive just a WhatsApp forward from those people, not even a call," says homemaker Jaya Dixit who relocated from Mumbai to Vasai after marriage a decade ago. Even with limited means, earlier, sharing was rampant and festival celebrations were very inclusive and innocent.

"My son who studies in Gurugram is just happy to talk over a video call. I have to plead with him to visit home over Christmas to celebrate the festival the way it's supposed to be," offers Mangalore-based social worker Mary Coelho. Technology has 'conveniently' transformed human relationships and interactions that is reflected in the way festivals are celebrated too.

Diwali too effuses aroma of change

One of the most popular festivals celebrated in India, Diwali, has gone through changes too. In most homes, Diwali preparations would begin at least a month in advance of the festival day with cleaning of the house, buying new clothes, shopping for the house, preparation of sweets, writing letters to relatives, performing the pooja, etc.

As the day would approach, families would start lighting diyas at the house and children would start bursting crackers. In older neighbourhoods, families would visit each other with sweets and other home-made snacks. "I remember my mother putting diyas outside a neighbour's house who would visit his parents for Diwali every year. She'd say that every house should be 'lighted' on Diwali," recalls Jodhpur-based teacher Namrata Singh.

Today, whatever people do, they are the most

concerned with what they'll upload on social media. Their energy and resources go in what they're going to wear and where'll they shoot to get the best 'content' for their social media followers. Everything from what they're eating, where they're shopping, how they're doing the pooja, etc., is uploaded in the virtual space.

Gifts are ordered online, like sweets and food and bursting of crackers is becoming less popular every year. Hectic lifestyles and the fact that today many people work and live away from their hometowns mean it's difficult to visit 'home' for Diwali.

The essence of festivals must remain

Spiritual guru Sadhguru says, "In the Indian culture, there was a time when there used to be a festival every day of the year – 365 festivals in a year – because a festival is a tool to bring life to a state of exuberance and enthusiasm." With time, festivals, in sync with transforming societies, have changed – in a good way and bad way too.

There are many for whom a festival is just an occasion for an ugly display of wealth or power. However, today, there are many people who are aware of their surroundings and sensitive towards the environment and make sure festivals are celebrated for the right reasons and in a responsible manner. During many social festivals such as Ganeshotsava or Christmas, groups and volunteers collect funds which are then distributed among the needy or used to buy food, sweets and clothes for those who cannot afford during the festivals.

"I feel, the spirit of a festival must remain intact even if the way it's celebrated may change. The COVID-19 crisis has taught us all to be grateful for life. Today, it's even more important to spend time with your family and loved ones and festivals are a great excuse to do so – even if you don't celebrate the festival traditionally but sit at home and binge on a web series with your loved ones," maintains Indore-based businessman Nikhil Jain.

Even though times have changed, and modern-day living poses new challenges to traditional festivals, it's important to ensure that the spirit of a festival remains intact.

Kriti Kalra is an activist and field researcher with www.thewomansurvivor.com – an initiative of Draft-Craft International to protect and empower women by bringing on one platform the latest on rights and issues, strategic case studies, state initiatives and informed legal opinions

Festivals and slugfests!

The legal position on the use of loudspeakers by mosques, churches, temples, political parties, partying parties et al., in Mumbai, is clear as crystal. The High Court has already laid down that citizens can claim compensation if their complaints about noise pollution are ignored by enforcement authorities. However, the bone of contention is what is construed as communal and/or an expression of free speech, says Gajanan Khergamker.



Use of loudspeakers during festivals – a bone of contention

The use of loudspeakers and amplifying instruments during festivals has been a bone of contention for years together. It may be recalled that Sonu Nigam's comment on 'azaans' being played out on loudspeaker fetched brickbats. "He should stick to singing songs instead of talking about a subject he has no idea about," had said a Grocery Stall owner outraged by Sonu Nigam's most recent and controversial comment.

After all, he was a righteous Muslim, a self-proclaimed liberal one, yet upset with "Nigam's needless needling" that kicked up a storm in the news. "He seems to have done it on purpose," he said. That the crux of the matter was a legal one and ought not to be construed as a communal view because anyone, irrespective of a religious identity, could be seriously bothered with noise. However, soon the reasoning was quashed by the barrage of abuses by friends, unanimous in their disdain towards Nigam's tweet.

That Indian playback singer Sonu Nigam's public tweet deploring the use of loudspeakers for 'aazan' by mosques, loud 'aartis' in temples and gurdwaras was met with incensed rage by irate Muslims was a given. Much on the same lines were expected the overwhelming responses of

the liberal 'fence-sitter' even from the Hindi film industry who refuses to 'judge' despite overwhelming evidence yet openly flays and castigate statements as the one made by, this time around, Sonu Nigam! And, once again, the law on the situation is given the convenient miss. It just isn't glamorous to see things in black and white as the law is.

Law on the use of loudspeakers

The legal position on the use of loudspeakers by mosques, churches, temples, political parties, partying parties et al., in Mumbai, is clear as crystal. After the

Bombay High Court directed the civic body BMC to demarcate Silence Zones in 2009, the same were notified for Mumbai city and boards, announcing the same, put up at each location.

The civic body also uploaded maps that identified 1,503 Silence Zones, which comprise areas within a 100-metre radius around hospitals, educational and religious institutions. A division bench of the Bombay High Court consisting Justice Abhay Oka and Justice Ahmed Sayed said citizens can claim compensation if their complaints about noise pollution are ignored by enforcement authorities.

Now, by the logic and the letter of the law, it is clear that all religious institutions in Mumbai are categorized as Silence Zones and have to abide by noise pollution rules. Sonu Nigam's tweets have been construed as an attempt to wedge disruption in 'the peace', which is actually convenient acquiescence to the 'anomaly in law', the extraneous use of loudspeakers in a mosque or any other religious institution being outright illegal.

(continued on page 30...)



MANDU

The city of joy and unrequited love

Mandu, with all its pristine trappings and peaceful enough where you can hear the grass grow, is a trophy in Malwa's showcase. With a throbbing, pulsating history behind it, this plateau town punctuated by a plethora of monuments and maintained under the watchful eyes of the ASI, is a pleasure to behold. Little wonder then, it lives on its past prime – triumphs and sorrows.

Text and photos : Gustasp and Jeroo Irani



Ashrafi Mahal

The historic town of Mandu shimmered in front of us like a mirage in the fevered imagination of a parched Bedouin, lost in a desert. The former capital of mighty kings ensconced in 45 km of battlements rides the crest of a spur jutting out of the Vindhya range in Madhya Pradesh. Our entry after a long bus journey, however, wasn't as dignified as that of kings and important dignitaries who entered the medieval city, punctuated with 12 gateways, on the howdahs of richly caparisoned elephants.

Spread-eagled on a plateau, 2,000 ft above sea level, Mandu is surrounded by chasms and ravines on one side and the rolling Nimar plains on the other. Pristine with green grass and peace, the hill fort seems to hold itself aloof from the frenetic towns in the plains. Originally the fort capital of the Parmar rulers of Malwa, Mandu came under the sway of the Sultans of Malwa towards the end of the 13th century, and was renamed Shadiabad or The City of Joy. The time-scarred citadel would remain the seat of the Malwa sultanate till it was captured by the Mughals in 1562. By then, the medieval outpost had become a showpiece, for the sultans had adorned it with exquisite palaces like the Jahaz and Hindola Mahals, ornamental canals, baths and pavilions which even today give one the feeling of a place that lives in the past tense.

For the Mughals, Mandu became a pleasure

playground, its lakes and palaces, the scene of spectacular festivals and events. It is said that when Emperor Akbar led his all-conquering troops into Mandu, he was so bewitched by the beauty of the city that in a spasm of jealous rage, he ordered some of the monuments be razed so as to make the city less attractive. His son and successor, Emperor Jehangir, however, was hopelessly charmed and was believed to have declared: "What words of mine can describe the beauty of the grass and wildflowers...I know of no place as pretty as Mandu during the rains." Unfortunately, his successors cared little for Mandu and gradually the hill fortress slipped into oblivion.

Plethora of monuments

Today, the plateau town is dotted with 75 monuments scattered over 12 sq km and is maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The graceful and solid edifices are located in three main clusters – the Village Group, Royal Enclave and Rewa Kund complex. In the lively centre of town, banyan trees with roots hanging like a hippy's dreadlocks rise next to plump baobab trees reportedly brought to the country by the Abyssinian slaves of the sultans.

And nowhere is Mandu more alluring than around the Jahaz Mahal or Ship Palace, the showstopper of the

Royal Enclave – and especially so in the rains. The levels of the lakes on either side of the Ship Palace start to rise and the 120-metre-long building appears to hover like a stranded pleasure craft on the waters. With its open pavilions, overhanging balconies and an open terrace, the Jahaz Mahal is a riveting sight. Ghiyas-ud-din Khilji, the sultan who built the Ship Palace also constructed the adjacent Turkish baths, the Champa Baodi, a subterranean escape hatch for women and the harem which housed 15,000 beauties. A religious man who never missed a namaz nor touched alcohol, Ghiyasuddin, however, loved the presence of women. Even during ceremonial occasions, 1,000 Turkish and Abyssinian women posing as armed guards flanked his throne.

Yet this elegant edifice is cloaked in an aura of tragedy. And our guide whispered to us eerily that on full moon nights, the tormented cries of the women who spent their entire lives in the loveless harems of the sultans can be heard wafting above the Jahaz Mahal. Many jumped to their deaths from their gilded ‘cages’ to escape the gnawing loneliness of their lives, which had just one high point – the occasional visit of the sultan!

Two other monuments that stand out in the smattering of ruins around this lake palace complex are Hindola Mahal which gets its name from its massive, inward sloping pillars that suggests a swing and Taveli Mahal - once a stable converted into charming guest house with its share of ghost stories. Guests who had stayed there in its avatar as a guest house claimed that they heard the sound of girlish laughter and the tinkle of



Hindola Mahal



Hoshang Shah Tomb



Jahaz Mahal - lawns and lake

ghunghroos mingling with the pitter-patter of raindrops on dark monsoon nights.

The most striking monument in the Village Cluster is the all-marble mausoleum of Hoshang Shah (1405 AD to 1432 AD), believed to have inspired the Taj Mahal. For a 1659 inscription records the fact that Emperor Shah Jahan sent his team of royal architects to study the beauty of this edifice.

The grand Jami Masjid, inspired by the great mosque of Damascus, was built by Hoshang Shah who shifted the capital from Dhar to Mandu. The mosque's grand contours highlight its simplicity and here too, the past is palpable. Paradoxically, the best photograph of this mosque can be clicked from the Ashrafi Mahal across it.

Today, the Ashrafi Mahal is frayed but it has a charming backstory. Apparently, Emperor Jehangir, during one of his sojourns here, had placed an ashrafi or gold coin on each of the steps leading up to a victory tower within the palace complex. It was a game to cajole his pregnant wife Noor Jehan to lumber up to its summit! Which she did!

Rani Roopmati's pavillion

One evening, we climbed up to the breath-taking Rani Roopmati's Pavilion in the Rewa Kund complex, beyond



Jami masjid - through an arch of Ashrafi Mahal



Jahaz Mahal - hallway of pillars

the town centre. The view from the pavilion poised on the edge of a cliff was compelling. To the west the land fell away to the Narmada Valley, the river barely visible as a smudge of blue in the evening haze. To the east, the domes and turrets of the many ancient monuments scattered across Mandu were bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun. Shepherds herded in their cattle across the pasturelands.

The pavilion broods over the 16th century palace of Baz Bahadur, Rani Roopmati's consort. The balladeers of Malwa still sing about the romance of this royal duo whose tragic lives have inspired several celluloid versions of their love story. Our guide recounted how Rani Roopmati was once married to a Rajput prince. A devotee of the Narmada river, she would eat only after she had splashed around in it and worshipped it. She spent so much time praying and singing on its banks that her husband abandoned her and married another woman.

The centre-piece of this magical setting was Baz Bahadur's palace. Centuries ago, the noble sultan would step out onto the terrace of the building each evening and serenade his lover Rani Roopmati who resided in the pavilion palace above. According to local folklore, his ragas were so melodious that they would flit through every house-

hold in the kingdom and set alight the diyas.

Their love idyll was fractured by Adam Khan, one of Emperor Akbar's generals, who spearheaded the Mughal attack on Mandu. Baz Bahadur fled to nearby Dhar. Khan in turn asked the queen to marry him. Preferring death to dishonour, Roopmati killed herself by swallowing a cache of ground diamonds. We left the pavilion, our ears ringing with whispers from the past. Or was that just the sigh of the wind rustling through the trees, echoing in a sense the theme of unrequited love that runs through magical Mandu?



Gustasp and Jeroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth; sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in HongKong, 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.



Kurumbadi: A Scenic Secret

A hidden gem nestled in the sublime locales of the Nilgiris, this unsullied locale beckons in all earnestness. Its virgin beauty amidst the quaint topography tells an arresting story of a place once inhabited by native tribals. One cannot soak in enough of its mystique and allure. It can be aptly termed as an eco-warrior retreat.

Text and photos : Gustasp and Jeroo Irani



View of a tea plantation

An over-riding love for discovering the unexpected and the unspoilt had propelled us on a lifelong search to ferret out the hidden gems in India. And so, when someone suggested Kurumbadi in the Nilgiris, 14 km from Coonoor in Tamil Nadu, we needed little persuasion to head out there.

From Coimbatore airport, we drove across mountains cloaked in glistening green to arrive at our haven, the Kurumba Village Resort. The resort unfolds artfully across 10 acres of a former spice plantation. The cottages, reception area and swimming pool have been built without violating the landscape or felling a single tree. Jacaranda, jackwood and rosewood trees stood tall like eco warriors on a mission to save the earth and its forest cover. And a dense forest, fringed by the Nilgiris, girdled the resort protectively in a green embrace.

A picturesque retreat

We opted for cottages close to the open-sided thatched dining area and reception, enveloped in a mint-green haze, as the more distant suites including the Jacuzzi Suite, were occupied by honeymooners seeking to cop out of a frenetic world. Much of our time was spent on the balcony of our cottage inhaling the scent of fresh soft

mountain breezes even as bird watching became our de facto pastime.

The cluster of cottages and suites which seemingly yeast out of the earth follow the topography of the land. Local material and motifs are woven into the decor and in this, the land of the Kurumbas, the adventurous may even get to savour a tribal meal in the resort's thatched open-sided restaurant.

The Kurumbas, we were told, are one of the five ancient tribes of the Nilgiris (like the Todas, Badugas etc) and the ones who felt an intimate connection with nature. For centuries, they lived off the forest which sustained them – roots of wild yams and honey and the few animals that they occasionally hunted for food. Indeed, the Kurumbas love the forest and know it like the proverbial back of their hand and many work in the resort as wait staff and as forest guides.

In this picturesque retreat, the Nilgiris filled our line of vision and the viewfinder of our cameras – sometimes they were mere blue smudges on the horizon and, at other times, their serrated contours stretched across the skyline like abstract art. The main hump of Pukka Suran mountain haunted our imagination as in its ancient folds rises an impregnable fort built by Tipu Sultan. More scary, perhaps, was the legend of a demon lurking in its stony depths.



A range of gourmet Nilgiri teas



Coonoor Tea Nest - Sims Park

The next morning, we were woken by the tuneful whistle of the whistling thrush, so apt in a natural environment where a jangling alarm would jar! Soon we were off on a forest trek with our resort guide, and inhaling the fragrance of wild flowers, craning our necks to watch the swoop of a Great Indian Hornbill and delighting in the antics of a bush-tail Giant Malabar Squirrel. Our guide pointed out fresh elephant dung left behind by a herd that had passed that way early in the morning.

Our forest walk took on a menacing turn as a couple of huge muscled gaur (Indian bison) loped into view and casually crossed our path to the other side. Our guide had seen them before we spotted them and pulled us behind a thick-trunked tree even as the mass of rippling hide and muscle strolled past us and melted into the jungle.

Our senses had been strummed to high alert and we were tuned to every breath that the forest took - the creaking of giant stands of bamboo; the rhythmic tap-tap-tap of a woodpecker on a tree bark; sweet bird calls; the grumbling of a fast-flowing stream... Colourful wild flowers nodded in the caress of a now bright sun whose rays filtered through the outspread branches of trees. This is where Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, from 1876 to 1880, had exulted as he described the Nilgiris or Blue Mountains to his wife



Coonoor Tea Nest

in a letter: “It far surpasses all that its most enthusiastic admirers and devoted lovers have said about it. The afternoon was rainy and the roads muddy but such beautiful English rain, such delicious English mud...”

Exploring the mystique

Despite the allure of our delightful lodgings, we decided to explore our environs – Coonoor, where tea plantations glowed like a green carpet drying in the sun. The town’s colonial hangover was palpable especially in vantage points with names like Dolphin’s Nose, Lambs Rock, Sim’s Park, and quaint churches, and other colonial remnants of an era long gone. But it was at Tranquillitea, a tea lounge, where we rubbed shoulders metaphorically with the ghosts of the British Raj. We sipped a range of gourmet Nilgiri teas on the lawns of a white-washed colonial cottage where the stiff upper lip of our colonial masters might well have quivered with nostalgia and pride.

Two more days slipped away at Kurumbadi, like kites in flight. On our last day, we had lunch at six-room Tea Nest in Upper Coonoor. An exclusive home stay studded with working fire places and elegant period furniture, Teanest is located in an 1800s mansion which was once a favourite bolt hole of many British aristocrats as well as an international tea school.



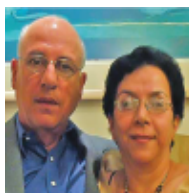
Coonoor Church



Sunset over tea plantation

Women with baskets propped on their backs, clipped two leaves and a bud in the neighbouring plantation, while on the other side, two planters' cottages seemed to cower under their eaves as though shielding themselves from a gusting wind. In Teanest's colonial style dining room, we savoured a tea-based menu for lunch - tea-flavoured mushroom soup, tea-infused pasta, fish grilled in tea leaves and even a tea-tinged soufflé...

However, Kurumbadi wasn't done with us. Back at Kurumba Village Resort, we were served a romantic dinner in a tree house on the property even as a velvety night sky glowing with twinkling stars formed a canopy overhead.



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 HongKong, 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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“Bollywood is a good place to be.”

He has been a film journalist for 49 years and has edited general and trade film magazines besides doing cameos in Hindi and Marathi films and serials. K.A. VENKATESH alias Jyothi Venkatesh, ironically was interested in Arts, but ended up doing Science and got a Commerce job. Jyothi is his pen name and incidentally his wife is also named Jyoti. In a chat with A. Radhakrishnan, Jyoti looks back on his stellar film journalism.



Jyothi Venkatesh

Why did you take up film journalism and not general subjects? Who was your inspiration?

It was thanks entirely to my father K. V. Ananthanarayanan, a Times of India group employee, that I was able to devour all its publications, week after week, like Filmfare, Femina, Youth Times, Science Today, etc. I took up film journalism because most middle class families then frowned on it. They thought films were a waste of time.

How many interviews have you possibly published in print medium? Major magazines, print and online, you have written for? Any shows you have done in the digital space?

Till date, I must have done almost a lakh of print medium interviews both for mainstream newspapers and magazines (some defunct now), like The Hindu, Free Press Journal, Indian Express, Asian Age, Sunday Observer, The Telegraph, The Afternoon Despatch & Courier, Mid-Day, Cine Blitz, Illustrated Weekly of India, The Daily, Jee (Marathi and Gujarati), Femina, Filmfare, Star & Style, Eve's Weekly, Stardust, Chitralekha (Gujarati & Marathi), Anandalok (Bengali), Filmidum (Mauritius), Mathrubhumi (Malayalam), etc. as well as on internet sites. For the digital space for ET TV, I anchored and scripted a 13 episode film-based talk show called Jawab Do, where I interviewed celebrities almost three decades ago. I also wrote the anchor script for Filmi Baatein on ETC and the screenplay for one episode of Yaala Jeevan Aise Naao, (Marathi serial).

Which are the film and technical stars you have enjoyed interviewing? Do you treat newcomers differently from established stars?

I have enjoyed interviewing everyone – film stars, directors,

playback singers, music directors, etc. It includes Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, V. Shantaram, Sultan Ahmed, Sivaji Ganesan, Gemini Ganesan, MGR, Sanjeev Kumar, Raaj Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, Shatrughan Sinha, Saroja Devi, Rajnikant, Mohanlal, Mamooty, Kamal Haasan, Dharmendra, Jeetendra, Madhuri Dixit, Dada Kondke, Mukri, Mohan Choti, etc., and also the present entrants. I have never differentiated between newcomers and big stars. Even when I rang up established character actors, I used to enquire if they had time to grant me an interview and never condescended to meet them.

Are interviews with stars PR-driven?

I would say that mine depended upon magazine to magazine. If I did the interview for film trade weeklies, obviously the interviews were more on films and if it was for fan magazines like Stardust or Cine Blitz, it would be film-driven but never PR-driven.

What has been your experience as an editor? Is editing trade magazines, festival bulletins, etc. more interesting than editing general film magazines?

You cannot differentiate between editing a trade magazine, a fan magazine and a festival daily because each is as different as chalk and cheese.

Editing dailies for Film Festivals like Goa International Film Festival, MAMI, MIFF, PIFF, or Cochin International Film Festival was a different experience altogether since I had to concentrate on promoting the films entered in the Festival and not the stars.

Trade magazines I edited include Trade Guide, Film Information, Super Cinema, Complete Cinema, now defunct Complete Television, Film & TV Trade Preview, Entertainment Trade, Film Street Journal, and Box Office. I have also edited the film weekly Film Bazaar and have



(Left) A young Jyoti with Kamal Hasan; (right) Jyoti with Salman Khan

been the editor for the defunct film monthly OOPS, as well as Celeb B and the film fortnightly Cinebuster. I was the senior correspondent for the now defunct trade weekly Blockbuster too.

What is your frank opinion on the film industry, especially Bollywood? Is it a dangerous or wonderful place? Have you made friends in filmdom? Or are most self-serving?

Bollywood has been a wonderful place where your love and respect is reciprocated. It is a dangerous place if you have motives. If you enter it just for quick money or rub shoulders with influential contacts, you remain a non-starter. I have made many friends in Bollywood, but never strove to build friendships. They just happened as a byproduct of journalism.

Which are the major Hindi films and TV serials you have acted in? Have you also forayed into regional films and TV serials?

I have done many cameos but no major roles because that was never my aim although a few journalists ended up as good actors too. Ananth Mahadevan was one. My Hindi films include Traffic Signal, Page 3, Ram Avtar, Aaj Ka M.L.A., Parivaar, Sankalp, Police Force, Vidroh, Devyani, etc. Hindi TV serials include Dum Dumadam, Shapath, Jaan, Hum Paanch, Sparsh, Saturday Suspense, All the Best, Kahiin Kiisi Roz, Lavanya, Malini Iyer, Rajni, Taarak Mehta Ka Oolta Chashmah, Jaan, Kahin Kiisi Roz etc., besides the Marathi serials Yaala Jeevan Aise Nao and Jibhela

Haad Kaay.

What has been your experience as a Censor Board member and a film jury member?

Great and educative. I was a member of the Advisory Panel of the Censor Board from 1990 to 1994 and 1996 to 1998 in Mumbai after actor – politician Raj Babbar recommended me for the post.

I was a jury member on the panel for selection of films for the Indian Panorama for The International Film Festival in Hyderabad in 1986.

Currently I am a member of the NFDC Script Committee.

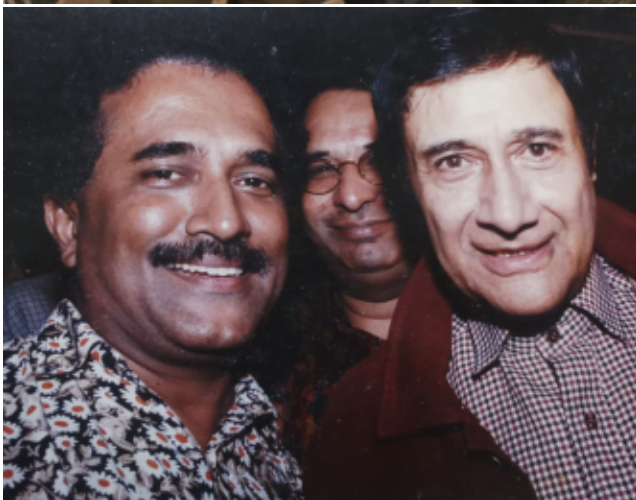
What is your opinion on film festivals? Do they serve any purpose?

Film festivals benefit film buffs worldwide. They opened my eyes to World Cinema.

I'd say the more the film festivals, the better, though people poke fun the way they have mushroomed in India and abroad. In fact, there is even a Kalyan Film Festival, Ambarnath Film Festival, and Lonavla Film Festival!

Is gossip sometimes also manufactured by film folk? Have you broken an important gossip? What do you feel about Devyani Chaubal?

Gossip does get manufactured but you should discern what is true and what is fictitious. I would not like to say that I have broken important gossip, because in the first place I consider them as news scoops not gossip, though at that



(Top) Jyoti with Vidya Balan; (bottom) Jyoti with Dev Anand

time people presumed they were otherwise. Devyani Chaubal, the doyen of film gossip is irreplaceable. I'd call her my guru jisne mujhe meri ungli pakadke sikhayi thi.

Does gossip reportage encourage unabashed voyeurism? Does it also end up slandering the subject?

Gossip, intended to malign or cause damage, is bad. I do not endorse it but if it is healthy, it helps you to drive away your blues. Only where there was fire, did I smell gossip.

Has film journalism in India today been reduced to gossip, sensationalism and hype? Is most content manipulated and controlled by rivals?

I would not agree because 99% of the print media is now

almost extinct and big media houses are selling space for revenue.

Gossip, once called the scourge of film journalism has now spread to social media. It is becoming decadent by the day and crossing limits of decency – enough to attract lawsuits. Content cannot be controlled any longer by rivals because everything costs big money these days and tell me who has the lucre?

How did you break into film reviews? What are the qualifications to be a good film critic? Are most reviews a farce with badly written plot summaries with a few comments about song, dance and costumes?

I was content as a freelancer doing just interviews of stars, but it was Rita Mehta, Editor of Cine Blitz who suggested in 1977 that I try my hand at film criticism and asked me to review Amar Akbar Anthony. I did and never looked back again.

I feel the only qualification that a film critic ought to have is love for cinema besides of course a good command over written English. It is not easy to be one, but barring a few, I would not deem all reviews a farce with a few nasty personal comments about song, dance and costumes.

What do you think of the plethora of awards instituted by film magazines? Are they mere TRP generating spectacles? Do you think awards are bought or are deserved?

I will be blunt. With the exception of the National Awards instituted by the Government of India, none of the awards instituted by film magazines are genuine.

Only a few awards deserve the winners. Majority of them are bought. Sometimes a star in the running is given the award in lieu of his performance on the stage that night.

What do you feel about journalism ethics?

Journalists continue to respect ethics, but they must adapt themselves to the changing times, or they could perish. Producers footed my bill to cover the location shootings at places like Mauritius, London, besides award nights at Dubai and Malaysia, but by no means could they be called bribes.

Are there any plans to publish books?

Yes. If I get the right publishers, I am ready to come up with my collection of interviews with eminent directors and actors, besides my personal memoirs of stalwarts, both living and departed.



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

Media's duplicity on Nationalism

(...continued from page 16)

Curbing one's Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression

Syed Sha Atef Ali Al Quaderi, vice president, West Bengal Minority United Council as quoted in a report had spewed, "If anyone can shave his hair, put a garland of old torn shoes around his neck and tour him around the country I personally announce an award of Rs 10 lakh for that person. I would have reacted the same way if one had talked ill about the sound of bells coming from a temple as well. If we all become so intolerant about each other's religions, we will soon have a bunch of atheists in our country. People like Nigam should be driven out of the country."

Now, that squarely comprises an attempt to curb one's (Sonu Nigam's) Freedom of Speech and Expression as guaranteed by Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. However, few would, at this point of time, stand by Nigam's Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression.

Azaan, particularly during festivals, summons the faithful to peace and tranquility but when made through loudspeakers turns into a cause of concern and is objected to by several quarters. Why, Navi Mumbai resident Santosh Pachalag had earlier petitioned, in 2014 through a Public Interest Litigation, the Bombay High Court against 'illegal use of loudspeakers' by mosques in his area.

An RTI plea revealed that 45 of 49 mosques in the area didn't have permission to use loudspeakers and, on the petition, the Bombay High Court directed the police to remove 'illegal' loudspeakers from mosques. Also, in a heart-warming gesture, many in the Muslim community too welcomed the verdict. Several religious institutions, in violation of the Noise Pollution (Control and Regulation) Rules, 2000 have used loudspeakers much above the permissible decibel levels (50 dB during day and 40 dB at night for Silence Zone and 55 dB during day and 45 dB at night for Residential Areas).

Earlier, in 2005, the Supreme Court had issued guidelines that included restrictions on the use of loudspeakers in public spaces at night to bring down the decibel levels. The-then Chief Justice of India RC Lahoti who headed the bench banned the use of loudspeakers between 2200 and 0600 hours in public spaces. The court also issued guidelines to the police on how the same should be implemented.

The guidelines included restrictions on the use of loudspeakers in public spaces and norms for the use of high-volume sound systems, generators and vehicles. There was a ban on the use of noisy firecrackers late at night during festivals like Diwali and a ban on using loudspeakers

between 10 pm and 6 am.

The CJI, writing for the bench, also said the decibel level of megaphones or public address systems should "not exceed 10 dB (A) above the ambient noise standards for the area, or 75 dB (A), whichever is lower." In *Om Birangana Religious Society ... vs The State And Ors.* on April 1st, 1996, Judge Bhagabati Prosad Banerjee had elaborated, "So far as right of religious organisations to use loudspeaker or amplifier is concerned that right is not an independent right under Article 25 of the Constitution of India. Article 25(1) of the Constitution of India provides that subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part, all persons and equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion."

"It is a matter to consider whether the public are captive audience or listeners when permission is given for using loud-speakers in public and the person who is otherwise unwilling to bear the sound and/or the music or the communication made by the loud-speakers, but he is compelled to tolerate all these things against his will and health. If permission is granted to use microphones at a louder voice, such a course of action takes away the rights of a citizen to speak with others, the right to read or the right to know and the right to sleep and rest or to think any matter."

The judgment clearly details the reach of Freedom of Speech and Expression as guaranteed under Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution of India, which is invoked each time one resists noise or cacophony generated for religious, personal, professional or political reasons.

Judge Banerjee said, "Freedom of Speech and Expression includes, by necessary implication, freedom not to listen and/or to remain silent. One cannot exercise his right at the cost and in total deprivation of others' rights. A right cannot be conferred by the authorities concerned upon a person or a religious organisation to exercise their rights suspending and/or taking away the rights of others."

Sonu Nigam, meanwhile, two days after the controversy over his tweet, a police complaint and being branded as anti-Muslim, shaved off the hair on his head saying, "Everyone has a right to his opinion and I only spoke about loudspeakers. I said it for temples, gurdwaras and mosques, why is it so hard to comprehend?" It evidently is, isn't it?



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Carnivals, fiestas across the globe

*Festivals are integral to the very existence of humans. **Ruchi Verma** looks at the phenomenon with a world view. She lists how Western nations too have festivals commemorating national leaders, historical milestones such as a day of independence, celebrating crop harvests, etc. How they also have fairs and festivals organised by the community to promote small home-based businesses and as an occasion to socialise and enjoy.*



There are many descriptions that define a festival. For example, festivals are a way of expression to celebrate something special or glorious such as the culture or traditions of a region. By another definition, a festival is an event celebrated by a community focussing on a peculiar or special aspect of the community, the religion or rich heritage.

Countries with a rich history and heritage often have festivals that have been celebrated for decades, even centuries. Most festivals derive their roots from religious traditions, mythology and folklore. Western nations also have festivals commemorating national leaders, historical milestones such as a day of independence, celebrating crop harvests, etc. They also have fairs and festivals organised by the community to promote small home-based businesses and as an occasion to socialise and enjoy.

Traditional festivals of the West

Apart from the religion-based festivals celebrated in the West such as Christmas, Lent, Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, etc., there are a few festivals that have religious origins but have taken a more secular tone and are celebrated as national festivals. One such festival celebrated widely in USA and Canada primarily and also in

Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Liberia is Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving Day, is an annual national holiday in the United States and Canada celebrating the harvest and other blessings of the past year. Thanksgiving is celebrated on the second Monday of October in Canada and on the fourth Thursday of November in the United States.

In USA, Thanksgiving traditions are more symbolic and legend-based. They believe that their Thanksgiving originates from a 1621 harvest feast shared by the English colonists (Pilgrims) of Plymouth and the Wampanoag people (the natives).

Thanksgiving Day became a national official holiday only when the Northerners came to dominate the federal government. It was during the civil war when on 3 October 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving to be celebrated on Thursday, November 26. Today, Thanksgiving is a popular festival when American families come together for the Thanksgiving meal comprising typically of turkey, potatoes, breads, pumpkin pie, etc. Thanksgiving is also one of the busiest times of the year in terms of air and road traffic movement.

In Canada too, Thanksgiving originated during the colonial period, from the European traditions displaying

gratitude for bountiful harvests, peace and safe travel expeditions. It was during an expedition in 1578 led by Martin Frobisher from England, in search of the Northwest Passage, when Thanksgiving was celebrated first during a ceremony in present-day Nunavut. In 1879, the Parliament declared national Thanksgiving Day on November 6. Since 1957, Thanksgiving Day has been celebrated in Canada on the second Monday in October.

Other Thanksgiving festivals

In Germany, Japan and the UK, there are similar festivals celebrated. In Germany, for example, Erntedankfest is a popular Christian festival celebrated on the first Sunday of October. The harvest thanksgiving festival, also celebrated in Austria and Switzerland, witnesses processions, churches being decorated with autumn crops, church services and country fairs. It's organised by the Protestant and Catholic churches in cities.

Another harvest thanksgiving festival with religious roots in the UK is celebrated near the Sunday of the harvest moon that occurs closest to the autumnal equinox. It's celebrated at the time when the Saxons would 'offer the first sheaf of barley, oats, or wheat to fertility gods.' After collecting the harvest, communities would come together for celebrations and feasts. The Harvest Festival is celebrated by schools and churches with hymns, prayers and dances. Baskets are decorated with fruits and food to celebrate a good harvest that are then offered to the homeless.

Country festivals celebrated globally

Just like with most migrant communities, they take their traditions and cultural practices with them wherever they go. Indians have done the same over centuries. Even today, in the remotest part of the world where Indians were taken as slaves by the colonists or much later when 'free' Indians travelled overseas for education, work or business, they took their festivals with them. Today, Diwali and Holi are global festivals celebrated all over.

Similarly, Saint Patrick's Day or the Feast of Saint Patrick is celebrated on 17 March in several parts of the world with a significant Irish population. Celebrated on the traditional death date of Ireland's foremost patron saint, Saint Patrick (c. 385 – c. 461), it's a popular cultural and religious celebration among the Irish community. It's observed by several Christian denominations and is celebrated by way of large public parades, social gatherings, wearing of green attire or shamrocks, etc. It is customary to wear shamrocks, green clothing or green accessories on Saint Patrick's Day as the saint was believed to have used the shamrock, a three-leaved plant, to explain the Holy Trinity to the pagan Irish.

Saint Patrick's Day is a public holiday in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador and the British Overseas Territory of Montserrat. It's also widely celebrated in the UK, USA, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand, especially amongst Irish diaspora and is celebrated in more

countries than any other national festival. There are several other country or region-specific festivals that are celebrated globally, in particular by the diaspora of that country to keep the traditions alive.

Carnival festivals in the West

Mardi Gras, French for Fat Tuesday, is a carnival celebration that begins after the Christian feasts of the Epiphany (Three Kings Day) and culminates on the day before Ash Wednesday also known as the Shrove Tuesday. The carnival reflects the practice of the last night of eating rich, fatty foods before the ritual of Lenten season of fasting and sacrifices begin.

There are several legends associated with Mardi Gras. According to one, it may be linked with the ancient Roman pagan celebrations of spring and fertility dating back to 133–31 BC and honouring Saturn, the god of agriculture. It was before the sowing of winter crops and was a week-long festival when all work would stop and schools, other places of work would close.

Today, Mardi Gras is celebrated the world over in Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, Sweden, USA, etc. The festival season varies with each country. In New Orleans, Louisiana in the US, Mardi Gras is hugely popular and stretches to the entire period from Twelfth Night (the last night of Christmas which begins Epiphany) to Ash Wednesday. There are parades, feasts, celebrations and lately it has become a popular tourist attraction too. Carnival is an important celebration in Catholic European and Anglican nations.

Independence Day celebrations in the US

In USA, the 4th of July is a big event, a national holiday commemorating the nation's Independence Day. Today, it's celebrated widely as a festival on 4th July every year as an anniversary of the Declaration of its Independence. It's a social occasion when American families gather in neighbourhoods and at designated locations for celebrations involving barbecue, fairs, fireworks, parades, concerts, etc.

The tradition of Independence Day celebrations goes back to the 18th century and the American Revolution. On 2 July 1776, the Continental Congress voted in favour of independence and two days later, on 4 July, delegates from the 13 colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson. Since then, the day is celebrated as the birth of American Independence.

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Breaking the glass ceiling

*In a city where theme-based pujas pandals are a rage, the organisers have decided to smash gender inequality and celebrate women empowerment in the true spirit of the festival. A group of women in Kolkata is set to break into a male bastion and create history during the upcoming Durga Puja in Kolkata. **Shoma Chatterji** dwells on how women are breaking patriarchal norms and says it could well herald a truly egalitarian society.*



Kolkata's famous Durga Pooja will have four female priests worshipping the Goddess for the very first time

In Hinduism, puja is done on a variety of occasions, frequency and settings. It may include a daily puja done in the home, or occasional temple ceremonies and annual festivals. In other cases, puja is held to mark a few lifetime events such as birth of a baby or a wedding on death and post-death rituals, naming and thread ceremonies and many more such as opening a shop or beginning a business to seek the blessing of Gods. There are larger functions that are collective festive occasions such as Ganpati Pooja in Maharashtra, Navratri in Gujarat and Durga Pooja in Bengal among many others that make priests mandatory for ritual practices.

Though in the privacy of the home, the daily puja is performed mainly by the women of the household, the bigger pujas, at home or in the

public domain, is the exclusive platform for men and women are not permitted to participate in performing pujas and rituals. Poojas in temples are mostly a daily affair and here too, these are exclusively the male domain.

Women priests to perform Durga Pooja

In this scenario, it comes as a pleasant surprise that women priests this year will be performing the Durga Pooja in four big pujas in Kolkata. A group of women in Kolkata is set to break into a male bastion and create history during the upcoming Durga Puja in Kolkata. The group led by priestess Nandini Bhowmick and her colleagues – Ruma, Semanti and Paulami – will be responsible for all the rituals in the five-day festival at 66 Pally. With the message, 'Maa Durga

will be invoked by mothers', a popular south Kolkata puja committee is ready to set an example in the long history of the annual festival in the city.

In a city where theme-based pujas pandals are a rage, the organisers have decided to smash gender inequality and celebrate women empowerment in the true spirit of the festival. This isn't the first time the puja committee is bringing forward a unique concept. For years, 66 Pally is known among pandal hoppers for its innovative themes. The puja committee will kick-start its 2021 puja preparations through 'khuntipujo' on August 22.

Pradyumna Mukherjee, one of the officials of the committee, talked about their special theme of worshipping the goddess by mothers. "There are four priestesses who are in-charge

of puja this year. The festival will be conducted following all the traditional rituals. The main purpose of this puja is to bridge the gender gap. Maa Durga is worshipped by everyone, so why should there be any gender inequality in it”.

The first known marriage rituals to be headed by a woman priest in Kolkata happened when actor-director Aparna Sen's elder daughter got married around 25 years ago. Sen belongs to a conventional Brahmo family but her daughter was marrying a Brahmin boy. Rituals and religious practices differ between Brahmins who are Hindu and Brahmos who are a rebellious offshoot of Brahminism. Aparna wanted a Brahmo marriage but the boy's side insisted on a Hindu wedding. She relented but on one condition – the priest had to be a woman. And so it was – they went around scouting for a woman priest and finally landed one.

Why are women proscribed from performing poojas at religious festivals? The reason forwarded is that since women menstruate for three or four days every month, they cannot perform rituals and religious ceremonies. The second reason is that women get pregnant and how can pregnant women be permitted to perform poojas on a regular basis? The third reason is that all mantras need to be pronounced in an order of increasing and decreasing voice (swara) that sometimes demands the holding of breath to complete a mantra precisely and accurately, failing which, the rituals and the poojas may not be pure and perfect. This holding of breath places pressure on the stomach - the garbha or uterus which may create trouble later on for young women within the fertility age group. The fourth is that Brahmin women do not have the “thread” ceremony that is a sanctioned ritual to declare a person as being a “Brahmin.”

These “rules” descend from rigid patriarchal norms in general and religious heads of the Hindus, temple priests and Brahmins of a high order in particular. These physical taboos do not stand the test of logic because menstruation, pregnancy etc are a

biological reality for every female that cannot be changed or used as an excuse to keep women away from priesthood.

Women priests made headlines in August 2014 after a 900-year-old temple in Maharashtra's pilgrimage city of Pandharpur appointed one, breaking its centuries-old tradition of a male Brahmin priest leading ceremonies. Local Brahmin families claimed ancestral rights over the temple but in January 2014, the Supreme Court stripped their right to appoint priests and collect and keep donations. The state government then set up a managing committee, which interviewed 129 candidates from all castes before appointing a woman.

Schools for training women priests

Pune has a special school to train women as priests which has around 200 students studying the Vedas, Sanskrit mantras, and detailed rituals for every Hindu ceremony. They learn to recite ancient Sanskrit scriptures - a skill that is helping them challenge male supremacy in conducting religious ceremonies. Varanasi too began a school on similar vein. At the Pune-based Udyan Mangal Karyalaya, meaning “the garden of good”, women are given formal training in priesthood. Here women priests study the Hindu philosophical texts in Sanskrit and learn to recite them.

Panini Kanya Mahavidyalaya Gurukul in Varanasi also has a training scheme for girls to be ordained into priesthood. They not only learn to recite the Gayatri Mantra that girls were not allowed to learn or chant but are also trained in traditional martial arts besides learning the Vedas and from other Hindu scriptures. Those who have graduated, perform weddings, naming ceremonies, thread ceremonies, annaprashanas, death rites and funeral rites. It is run by the Arya Samaj. As they are trained in music, they sing in chorus which adds a new dimension to every ceremony they conduct. They work in singles and in groups while there is one priestess who conducts the main rituals. They also have another school in Mumbai at

Kakdwadi and Acharya Nandita Shastri is their principal.

V.L. Manjul, research scholar and chief librarian at Pune's Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, estimates that India now has around 1,600 women priests. In Maharashtra alone, “some 600 women have been trained as purohitis (priests),” he says. Pune-based Shankar Seva Samiti and Jnana Prabhodini are two leading schools that formally began to train women to conduct rituals, prayers for initiation, engagement, marriage, conversion, house warming, ancestor worship and last rites 16 years ago. Women here undergo the grind of studying Sanskrit, learning by heart all the verses from ancient texts that are necessary to conduct ceremonies.

Arya Joshi is a teacher in a priesthood course in Pune and a Sanskrit researcher herself. She did her doctorate on Hindu ancestral worship. In an interview, she pointed out that Hinduism had never barred women from performing religious rites. There is even mention of them in ancient religious writings. But later, men came to dominate the profession. They declared that priests could only be male and that thinking prevails till today.

Let us hope this bold step will change this pattern to make it gender-neutral, democratic and egalitarian.



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.

FEARLESS NADIA

Fearless, in letter and spirit (1908-1996)

Mary Ann Evans, popular as Fearless Nadia, was a successful Australian origin Indian actress and stuntwoman, who ruled the Hindi marquee changing the definition of women roles. Born in Perth, Western Australia, she came to Bombay in 1913 aged five with her father Herbert Evans, a British Army volunteer. The family moved to Peshawar in 1915, after his untimely death. Athletically inclined, natural performer Mary took control of her life and by her mid-twenties trained herself in horse riding, gymnastics, tennis, tap dance and ballet.

In 1928, she returned to Bombay with her mother and a son, Robert, through an earlier liaison, and performed with an European dance troupe pan India; later learned stunts as a circus performer with the Zarco Circus and eventually, returned to full-time dancing, performing to Bollywood songs. Introduced to J. B. H. Wadia and Homi Wadia, the brothers who owned a major production house Wadia Movietone, changed her life. Impressed by her physical strength and bemused by her insistence on being an actress, she was given a cameo as a slave girl in the film *Desh Deepak*, in 1933 and later as Princess Parizaad in *Noor-e-Yaman*.

The blue-eyed blonde actress was given her nickname Fearless by Homi after she sportingly jumped off the roof of a studio set during a shoot. Nadia proved a huge hit, whereupon, the brothers took a gamble and offered her the lead role in *Hunterwali* (The Lady of the Whip) in 1935, which became a rage. Her moniker 'Hunterwali', ushered in the Nadia craze and was affixed by many brands of belts, bags, shoes and clothes. Among the highest paid actresses, she was flamboyant and high-spirited. She emerged as the game changer, a hero in a male-dominated bastion. Blazing onto the screen in leather shorts, a mask, and cape, she swung from chandeliers, sprang from speeding trains, tamed lions, threw herself into raging waterfalls, leapt off cliffs, jumped from horseback onto ladders dangling from airplanes, juggled whips, swords, guns, and even pummeled villains with her bare hands. She made the audience laugh, clap, think and made them sit tight in their chairs.

Her strong body was her language and identity. Her dialogues were a bare minimum because her Hindi was limited. The authenticity of the carefully choreographed stunts and violence delivered a punch that audiences knew was 'real' and magical.

Nadia starred in over 50 films, her fever continuing well into the 1940s. Her other films included *Miss Frontier Mail*, *Lutaru Lalna* (Dacoit Damsel or The Dacoit Girl), *Punjab Mail*, *Diamond Queen*, *Bambaiwali* (The Girl from Bombay), *Jungle Princess*, *Muqabala*, *Hunterwali Ki Beti*, *Mauj*, *11 O'Clock*, *Dhoomketu* (The Comet), *Toofan Queen*, *Fighting Queen*, *Jungle Ka Jawahar* (Hero of the Forest) and *Jungle Queen*.



She retired in the 1950s, but made one last hurrah at 59 years in 1968 aptly code-named *Living Fireball* in a Bond-style extravaganza titled *Khilari*. Past her prime, she still maintained a hectic social life indulging in her passion for race horses.

Her legacy lay buried for decades till it was rekindled through her great grandnephew, late Riyad Vinci Wadia's 1993 documentary *Fearless: The Hunterwali Story*, screened at global film festivals and which won many Filmfare Awards. A feminist, she was her own one-woman tour de force, at odds with many aspects of contemporary Indian womanhood like wearing risqué costumes and even pulling off a nude bathing scene in *Hunterwali*.

Nadia and Homi's love story was bitter-sweet. As his mother was against him marrying a non Parsi, they tied the knot in 1961 after her death, by which time it was too late for them to start a family. Homi eventually adopted his stepson. Nadia also featured in a Google Doodle, on her 110th birth anniversary.

She died at 88 in Mumbai.

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

MILKHA SINGH

Truly 'The Flying Sikh'! (1929-2021)

One of the finest athletes that India has ever produced, Milkha Singh, was born on the 20 November 1929 in Govindpura. Very early in life he had the misfortune of witnessing the brutal slaying of his parents and three of his siblings in the bloody partition riots. A badly traumatised Milkha Singh had to bear the scars of the tragedy right through his life. One of his elder brothers took the initiative to enlist Milkha in the Indian Army and it was while serving at the Electrical, Mechanical Engineering Centre at Secunderabad in Andhra Pradesh that he first developed a passion for athletics. The lean and wiry Sardar soon began to concentrate on the sprint events and the rest as they say is history. As his career blossomed he evolved into a superb athlete, his forte being the shorter sprints, the 200 and 400 metres.

It did not take long for Milkha to establish his credentials in the sporting arena and he was soon to set National records in the 200 and 400 metres run that would stand the test of time. He won the Gold Medal in the 400 metres in the 1958 and 1962 Asian and Commonwealth Games and his timing of 45.73 seconds in the 400 metres stood as a national record for 40 long years. In the 1962 Asian Games held at Jakarta Singh also anchored the Indian team to a gold in the 4x400 metres relay as well. Pakistan Prime Minister General Ayub Khan who witnessed the glorious sight of Milkha scorching the tracks and staving off a spirited challenge from Pakistan's famous sprinter Abdul Khaliq promptly christened him as 'The Flying Sikh' and ever since the sobriquet has stuck to him.

Milkha Singh represented India in the 200 and 400 metre sprints in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne and the 1960 Games held in Tokyo. His finest moment came at the Tokyo Olympics where he secured the fourth place in the 400 metres missing a medal by a whisker. This was the greatest achievement by an Indian athlete at that time and was equaled by India's greatest woman sprinter P T Usha in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics where she too finished a creditable fourth missing a medal by 1/100th of a second. After he hung up his boots Milkha Singh served as an administrator and was a Director of Sports in the Punjab govern-

ment's Ministry of Education from where he retired in 1998. A true patriot and nationalist Singh donated all the medals and trophies that he had won over the years to the Indian government.

The ace sprinter was awarded the Padma Shri in the year 1958. He collaborated with his daughter Sonia Sanwalka to pen his autobiography, the bestseller 'The Race of my Life' which was published in 2013. Bollywood director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra based his 2013 blockbuster 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag' on the autobiography and the film which had Bollywood actor director

Farhan Akhtar in the title role of Milkha Singh immortalised the exploits of the athlete on the silver screen.

Milkha Singh battled Covid 19 for a considerable length of time before succumbing to the virus on 18 June 2021 at the age of 91. His wife Nirmal Saini who captained the Indian women's volleyball team predeceased him, losing her life to Covid on the 13 June 2021. Milkha Singh's son Jeev Milkha Singh is one of India's most famous golfers.

Handsome tributes were paid to the memory of the genial athlete and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his twitter message led the mourners. "In the passing away of Shri Milkha Singh we have lost a colossal sportsperson who captured the nation's imagination and had a special place in the hearts of countless Indians. His inspiring personality endeared him to millions," wrote Modi. Neeraj Chopra, Javelin thrower who won the Gold in the recently concluded Tokyo Olympic Games said: 'We lost a gem. He will always remain an inspiration for every Indian.'

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



CAPTAIN KAPIL KUNDU

A life big, but not long (1995-2008)

Kapil Kundu was born on 10 February 1995 as the only son. The family lived in Rasika village in Pataudi district, Haryana. Kapil lost his father when he was 15. Amongst the first batch of Divine Dell International School, Pataudi, he was brilliant in studies and particularly proficient in mathematics. He would solve the problem even before the teacher could write the formula on the board. He had told the principal that one day he would be a general. He was the youngest of the siblings, two being married sisters. He liked to read newspapers and books on general knowledge.

Expectedly, Kapil qualified for the National Defence Academy (NDA) and joined the army. Mahender Singh, a retired army person and Kundu's neighbour, said the captain was a brave soldier who never shied away from challenges. "His first posting was at the Army supply unit. He refused to take the posting and requested his senior officers to transfer him to the front. Seeing his courage, he was immediately sent off to Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir." Singh claimed.

He was transferred to J&K Light Infantry known for its gallantry. He was promoted to the rank of captain in January 2018.

Kapil was particularly inspired by the feeling of patriotism and sacrifice. His hobby was to write poems in Hindi and English. 'Life must be big, not long', (dialogue from the film 'Ánand) was what he would love to share. He even had posted it on the door of his bunker.

His unit was located in Rajouri district in J&K. India and Pakistan share a common cease-fire line there. It was negotiated in 1948 after the 1947-48 War and since, has seen several adjustments. The cease-fire has often been violated and compounded by infiltrators to abet militancy. Small detachments were deployed to neutralise them. Captain Kundu along with three soldiers – Rifleman Ramavtar Singh (28), Subham Singh (22) and Havildar Roshan Lal (42) was on such counter-infiltration duty. They came under heavy artillery fire. The Pakistan army fired five

or six anti-tank guided missiles and at least one hit the bunker in which the soldiers were positioned. The shelling took place in Bhimber Gali sector on a day when cease-fire violation occurred in Poonch sector too. One mortar shell apparently struck the bunker occupied by the Indian army detachment and killed the occupants on 4 February 2010. Captain Kapil had planned to come home for his 23rd birthday on February 10. He did, five days earlier but in a coffin, wrapped in the Tricolour. It was a heart-rending scene at the Palam Air Base, as an emotionally distraught sister of Captain Kapil Kundu clung on to the coffin of the martyred officer. After defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman and army chief General Bipin Rawat had paid homage to Kundu, the family brought the coffin home.



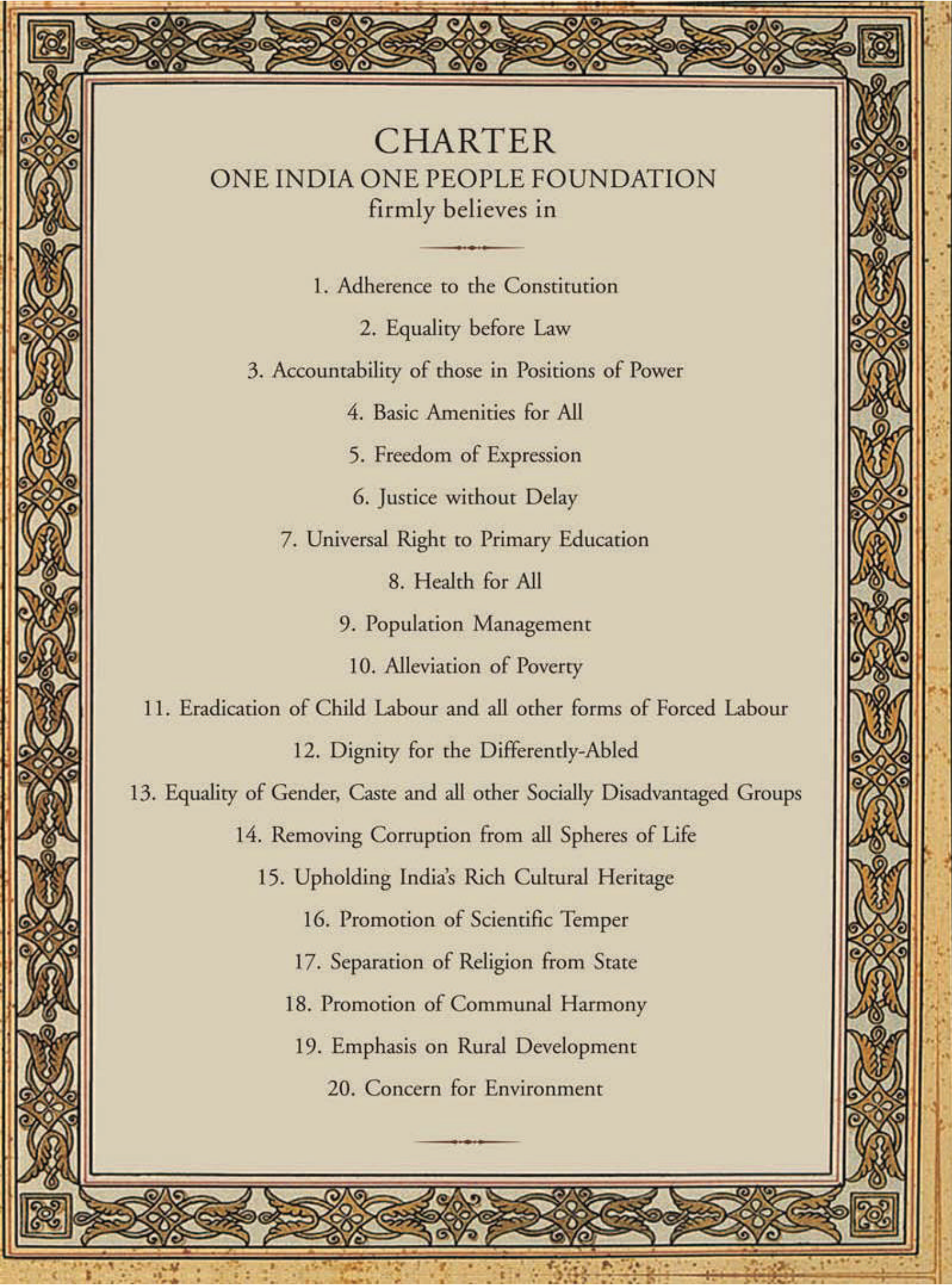
Around 2,000 people attended the funeral. His Facebook page intro speaks volumes about his incredible spirit: "Life should be big instead of being long." "If you cannot run, walk. If you cannot walk crawl but do not give up."

Mother Sunita, struggling to hold back tears, said "I had sent him off with my head held high. Now I will smile to bid him the final goodbye. If I had another son, I would have sent him to the army too. Had my son lived for another 15-20 years, he would have done more for his nation. I believe his life will not go waste."

A line from Kapil's last poetry, perhaps referring to Kashmir – "Like moths drawn to a flame, martyrs have soaked the valley with their blood, not for nothing is this valley called heaven."

Captain Kapil Kundu's last rites were performed at a park near his home with full military honours.

– Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)



CHARTER

ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE FOUNDATION

firmly believes in

1. Adherence to the Constitution
 2. Equality before Law
 3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power
 4. Basic Amenities for All
 5. Freedom of Expression
 6. Justice without Delay
 7. Universal Right to Primary Education
 8. Health for All
 9. Population Management
 10. Alleviation of Poverty
 11. Eradication of Child Labour and all other forms of Forced Labour
 12. Dignity for the Differently-Abled
 13. Equality of Gender, Caste and all other Socially Disadvantaged Groups
 14. Removing Corruption from all Spheres of Life
 15. Upholding India's Rich Cultural Heritage
 16. Promotion of Scientific Temper
 17. Separation of Religion from State
 18. Promotion of Communal Harmony
 19. Emphasis on Rural Development
 20. Concern for Environment
-

WHO AM I?

Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?

Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?

Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?

Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?

Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?

Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?

Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?

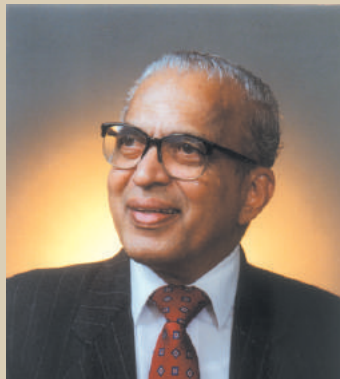
Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?

Am I a supporter of any 'ism' first or an Indian first?

Am I a white-collar/blue collar worker first or an Indian first?

Am I a youth/senior citizen first or an Indian first?

In all cases you are Indian First, Last and Always.
Be a Proud Indian. Make this country Great, Strong and United.



Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor
(October 9th 1930 – February 23rd 2007)
ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE