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Fests: Reflecting India's Cultural Legacy



INDIAN FESTS INGRAINED, INCLUSIVE

VICTORY FESTS STITCH CULTURAL FABRIC

FABLED FIESTA WITH NATURE

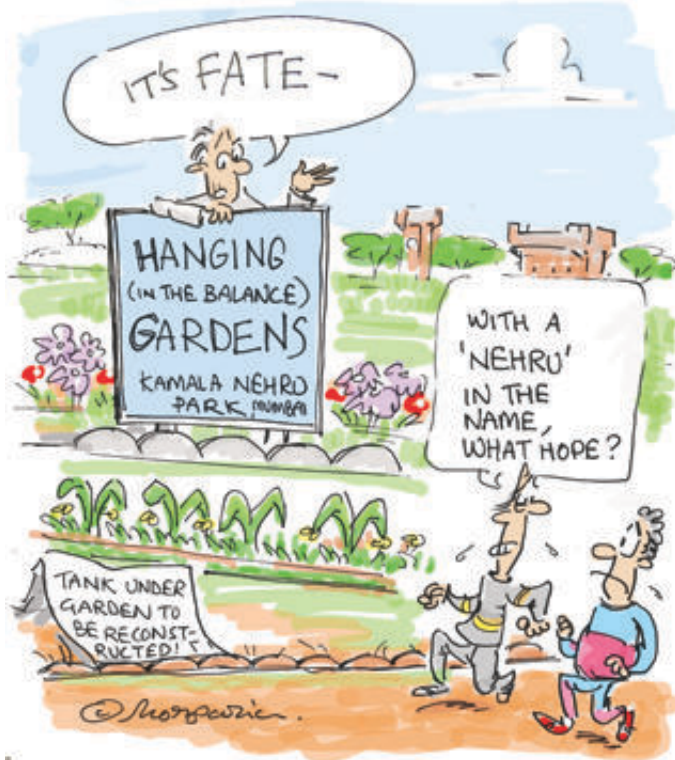
Know India Better

UTTARKASHI

UNFATHOMABLE CONFLUENCE OF
NATURE & DIVINITY

Face to Face

KARAN DEOGAONKAR



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Indian fests ingrained, inclusive

*Nature and its elements hold a significant place in the rituals and festivals. Living creatures and other entities like the sun, wind, rivers, mountains, etc. are also considered 'beings' that have a role to play in this universe and that maintain the balance that ensure life in this space and are worshipped in their original or a different form and as part of the many festivals, says **Nandini Rao**.*



One of the biggest festivals celebrated in Mumbai with the highest level of fervour and zest is Ganesh Chaturthi

The cultural heritage of Indian society is deeply intertwined with its profound mythology and history. It is safe to say that most festivals in India have a deep-rooted and logical connection with a mythological anecdote or character and this is what lends Indian festivals the deep connection and profound peace and happiness. The nationwide festivities serve as a strong reminder of the lasting influence of legends on the lives of its people.

The diverse cultural and geographical landscape of India significantly shapes how each festival is observed, including the associated rituals. Occasionally, even the narrative or legend undergoes slight variations, yet the essence and faith remain steadfast. So, for example, a festival celebrated in the same time

period may have a different set of ceremonies and customs from one part of India to another but has been derived from the same legend or scripture.

Just like mythology is closely associated with nature and environment with all its elements as one unit, several Indian festivals amplify the same concept and belief. Nature and its elements hold a significant place in the rituals and festivals – the trees, water, air, ether, fire and earth, living creatures like birds, animals and insects and other entities like the sun, wind, rivers, mountains, etc. are all 'beings' that have a role to play in this universe and that maintain the balance that ensure life in this space and are hence worshipped in their original or a different form and as part of the many festivals celebrated across India.



Bakri - Id or Eid-ul-Adha commemorates Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to make a supreme sacrifice. Muslims offering prayers at a dargah

Seeped in legend

Festivals that are celebrated across the length and breadth of India transcend religious and communal lines and the whole nation unites as one to be part of collective celebrations. For example, some festivals like Diwali, Christmas, Bakr-Id and others maintain a profound connection with folk traditions, religious beliefs and are passed down through generations.

Janmashtami or Gokulashtami that celebrates the birth of Lord Vishnu's eight incarnation, Lord Krishna, is observed with fervent devotion on the eighth day of the Krishna Paksha in the Hindu calendar month of Shravana (that typically falls in the months of July or August). As per legend, Krishna's birth was orchestrated or made possible to put an end to the ill-actions and misdeeds of his uncle Kansa, the king of Mathura, who was Devki's brother.

In Islam, Bakr Id or Eid-ul-Adha commemorates Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to make a supreme sacrifice. The commonly-accepted belief that is associated with this observance states that he was put to the test by God to sacrifice his only son.

Though Ibrahim was prepared to carry out the act, divine intervention led to the substitution of his son with a sacrificial lamb. And so, today, all over the world, Bakr-Id is celebrated as a symbol of this sacrifice and across Muslim homes celebrating it, lamb sacrifice takes place.

One of the biggest festivals that is celebrated with the highest level of fervour and zest is Ganesh Chaturthi – when Lord Ganesh descends from Kailash Parvat alongside his mother, Goddess Parvati or Gauri. It is also the most revered festivals nationwide. Traditionally, Vinayaka Chaturthi or Ganesh Chaturthi falls in the Hindu calendar month of Bhadrapada that falls in August or September and is the day when Ganpati sthapana is done and the idol of Ganesh is brought home. This is then followed by the popular 10-day-long Ganeshutsav culminating in the idol's immersion in a water body.

The social or Sarvajanic Ganpati mandals usually observe the ten-day long period before immersion. Families often keep ganpati for a lesser duration starting from 1.5 days to



Easter is one of the oldest and the most significant festival celebrated by Christians

three to seven days. However, there are some that keep Bappa for as long as a month in their homes, serving him, before immersing the idol in the water.

The high-pitched and extraordinary celebration of Sarvajanik Ganeshutsav can be seen in Mumbai, Pune and Thane and has now gradually spread to other parts of Maharashtra and neighbouring Karnataka and Telangana where earlier people would mostly keep Ganpati at their homes. In contrast, Maghi Ganesh Jayanti or Varad Chaturthi is observed in the Magha month and is celebrated by select communities in Maharashtra in the Konkan region and is usually a low-key affair.

Another huge festival where the passion and devotion of the devotees reaches unprecedented fervour is Maha Shivratri. It falls on the moonless fourteenth night of the new moon in the month of Phalgun that overlaps with the months of February or March. This festival signifies the transcendence of Lord Shiva. In Hinduism, the trinity of gods - comprising Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer - is sacred and is the core of the Maha Shivratri customs.

Joy and happiness

Christmas that is celebrated on 25 December every year is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and is an important festival for the Christians. However, it has also become more of a social event now and people from other religions also celebrate in other ways such as meeting friends and families, organising parties and other social events.

The annual festival of Christmas has legend to it as well. As per the Nativity of Jesus from the New Testament which is the traditional Christmas legend, Jesus was born in Bethlehem fulfilling messianic prophecies. Angels proclaimed the birth of Jesus Christ's birth to shepherds, who then spread the news. Although the exact date of his birth remains unknown, the Church fixed 25 December in the fourth century, aligning it with the winter solstice.

Another important Christian festival is that of Easter which is also the oldest and the most significant festival of the

Christian Church. It celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As per some Easter traditions, the name has originated from Ishtar, the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and fertility. Also from Eostre which is an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring.

Nature, the original source

Nature in various forms holds a significant place in the rituals and festivals of ancient civilisations. Elements of nature are widely worshipped and venerated through totems and festivals owing to the significance they hold in a community's or a tribe's existence. For them, like most tribal groups, religion is an extension of the environment they are living in.

In many parts of India, the Pola Festival is celebrated with great pomp and fervour. This festival too is a manifestation of gratitude human has towards a form of nature which in this case is the animal. Cattle are very important to the existence of man and have now been relegated to certain communities which are still heavily dependent on them.

On this occasion, the cattle are cleaned, bathed, adorned with embellishments and carried through the village or settlement with traditional and folk music playing alongside. Another important festival that celebrates animals is the Pushkar Camel Fair held in Rajasthan annually. It begins in the month of Kartik and concludes on Kartik Purnima.

The Vat Savitri festival that is observed on the full moon of Jyeshtha is an occasion when women fast and venerate the Vat vriksha (Banyan tree) to invoke growth and prosperity for their families and for the longevity and well-being of their husbands. The Vat tree, with its ever-spreading foliage and enduring lifespan, symbolises prosperity.

Nandini Rao 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.

Victory fests stitch cultural fabric

*Recalling the country's long history of war triumphs, **Nandini Rao** points out festivals celebrating victory reflect the rich cultural heritage and diversity of India. They not only teach us valuable lessons about life and morality, they also remind us to uphold our values and virtues against all odds. They come across as inspiration for us to overcome challenges and difficulties with courage and faith.*



Diwali and Onam are Hindu festivals that celebrate victory of good over evil

India, through the ages, has been the epicentre of battles starting from the epic Mahabharat. As a result, battleground and victory customs, before and after battles, form an integral part of the cultural ethos of India.

From the conquests of Ashoka to the Chola dynasty's maritime triumphs, India's history is punctuated by victories that continue to influence its cultural fabric. There are several festivals that celebrate victories and observe customs and rituals that have stood the test of time.

One of the longest epics of the world, Mahabharat narrates the events and aftermath of a war of succession that took place between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the battle of Kurukshetra. The battle was fought centuries ago but it greatly affected the collective conscience of the people in the subcontinent and set stage for a tradition of celebrating victories.

Triumph of good over evil

Diwali, the Festival of Lights, is perhaps the most renowned victory celebration in India. It commemorates Lord Ram's return after defeating Ravan, symbolising the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, and of knowledge over ignorance.

Deepavali or Diwali is connected to various religious events and deities but most popularly to the return of Ram to his kingdom after spending 14 years in exile and after defeating Ravan to bring back his wife, Sita.

The most important national festival of the year in India, Diwali tops all other festivals with its lengthy, large-scale, and multi-faith celebrations. It is observed in late October or early November, depending on the lunar calendar. People light up oil

lamps, candles and fireworks to symbolise the illumination of their homes and hearts. They also exchange gifts, sweets and greetings with their family and friends.

Diwali commemorates different historical and mythological events, such as the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after defeating the demon king Ravan, the killing of the demon Narakasura by Lord Krishna and the worship of Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity, and Lord Ganesha, god of wisdom and remover of all obstacles - the Vighnaharta.

Legends and belief

In Kerala, Onam is celebrated with great fervour and enthusiasm. The festival commemorates the return of the beloved King Mahabali and is a testament to the victory of benevolence and humility over pride and arrogance. Onam is celebrated in the month of Chingam and the ten-day festival starts from Atham and ends on Pongnam.

The festival is celebrated by everyone in the state, from different religions and communities. Onam is observed in late August or early September, depending on the solar calendar. Onam celebrates the homecoming of King Mahabali, a benevolent ruler who was banished to the underworld by Lord Vishnu in his Vamana avatar.

According to legend, King Mahabali, a demon king, was granted a boon to visit his subjects once a year during Onam. On this occasion, people decorate their homes with floral arrangements called *pookalam*, prepare a grand feast called *sadya*, wear traditional clothes called *mundu* and *kasavu saree*, play games and sports called *onakalikal*, and enjoy boat races called *vallamkali*. Onam symbolises the victory of humility over pride and generosity over greed.

Dussehra, also known as Vijaydashami, is a festival that celebrates the victory of the tenth day. It marks the end of Navratri, a nine-day festival dedicated to the worship of Goddess Durga and her nine forms. Dussehra also commemorates two epic events - the killing of demon Mahishasur by Goddess Durga and the killing of the demon king Ravan by Lord Ram.

Both these events signify the triumph of good over evil and justice over injustice. On this day, people perform rituals, offer prayers and burn effigies of Ravan and his brothers to celebrate their defeat.

Festivals and flags

Bonderam is a festival of victory that is celebrated in Goa, especially on the Divar Island which is located close to capital Panjim. It is also known as the Festival of Flags, as it involves the display and knocking down of colourful flags by rival groups.

The flag festival has a historical origin, dating back to the 17th century when the Portuguese ruled Goa and tried to settle the land disputes among the local communities by using flags as markers. However, this led to more conflicts, as the people would often destroy each other's flags.

To commemorate this tradition, Bonderam is celebrated every year on the fourth Saturday of August, with a lot of fun and frolic. People dress up in costumes, parade with floats, and throw berries or peppercorns at each other's flags using bamboo sticks called *fotash*. Bonderam is a festival that celebrates the spirit of unity, harmony and joy among the people of Goa.

Holi, another popular festival in India that transcends communities, also celebrates the victory of faith over evil, as it is associated with the legend of Prahlad, a devotee of Lord Vishnu who was saved from his evil father Hiranyakashyap by the divine intervention of Lord Narasimha.

The demon king Hiranyakashyap won the earth and demanded everyone worshipped only him. His son Prahlad refused to do so as he was a devotee of Lord Vishnu. Angered by the defiance, the king tried to kill his son but failed each time. He then asked Holika, his sister, to enter a fire with Prahlad as she had a boon that fire won't hurt her. Prahlad kept chanting Lord Vishnu or Narayan's name and was unscathed with the fire. Holika, on the other hand, had to pay a price with her life as the boon worked only when she entered the fire alone.

The festival Holi is derived from the name Holika and celebrates the victory of good over evil. It is celebrated as the victory of a devout and teaches everyone that a true devotee can never be harmed.

Time-honoured customs

Some of the common features during such festivals are the intricate art work of Rangoli, adorning doorsteps as it symbolises victory, prosperity and the triumph of creativity over monotony.

The tradition of distributing sweets after a victory is a gesture that transcends generations, binding communities in the joy of triumph and is almost always a part of such festivals.

Festivals celebrating victory reflect the rich cultural heritage and diversity of India. They also teach us valuable lessons about life and morality. They remind us to uphold our values and virtues against all odds. They inspire us to overcome our challenges and difficulties with courage and faith.

Nandini Rao 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.

Fabled fiesta with nature

Ruchi Verma enlists the festivals celebrated round the year and says India pays homage to nature's gratuity through a spectrum of festivals. These celebrations are rooted in agrarian traditions, rain rituals and a deep-seated respect for the flora and fauna that sustain life. From the monsoon festivals that welcome life-giving rains to the harvest festivals that honour the fruits of labour, these cultural expressions mirror the intimate connection between humans and nature in India.



Nag Panchami venerates snakes as divine creatures. It is celebrated in Shravan by offering milk, flowers and sweets to snakes and worshipping them

India is a country that has a deep connection with nature and this is reflected in the many festivals that celebrate the elements of nature. Tales, folklore and mythology are filled with incidents and observances of revering and worshipping nature.

A land of diverse landscapes and rich biodiversity, India pays homage to nature's bounties through a myriad of festivals. These celebrations are rooted in agrarian traditions, rain rituals and a deep-seated respect for the flora and fauna that sustain life. From the monsoon festivals that welcome life-giving rains to the harvest festivals that honour the fruits of labour, these cultural expressions mirror the intimate connection between humans and nature in India.

Chhath Puja, celebrated in the northern and eastern

states of India, particularly Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and in Jharkhand and parts of Nepal, is dedicated to worshipping the Sun God and nature. It is a four-day festival that takes place in October or November and it involves fasting, offering prayers and taking a dip in the holy waters of a river.

The devotees worship the Sun God seeking his blessings for a healthy and prosperous family. The rituals of this festival have been mentioned in ancient scriptures including the Rigveda. There are references in Mahabharat also where Draupadi performs the Chhath Puja rituals.

Worshipping the tree

A key festival celebrated across the tribal state of Jharkhand in central India is Sarhul. It is celebrated in spring on

the third moon day of the Hindu calendar's first month. Participants pray to the trees during Sarhul, which marks the advent of spring. The festival is dedicated to celebrating trees and is a way of thanking nature for its bounty.

People start the celebration by gorging on sarai, a local wild fruit, as well as rice beer. They dance to the tunes of a variety of local musical instruments. This three-day festival is at its liveliest on the final day when tribals, and visitors alike, dance their way through the streets in a shobha yatra (grand procession) while singing and dancing to local songs. It's mainly the Oraon, Munda and Ho tribes of Jharkhand that observe this festival which usually falls in March-April when the Saal tree grows new leaves.

Interestingly, during this festival, all the rituals and the food is derived from or are a part of the trees. The prasad (offering to god) is prepared from tree leaves mixed with rice and water and is called a *handia*. Other food specialties include *pahan*, *khadi* and several fish preparations.

A countrywide festival that celebrates the planting of trees is the 'Van Mahotsav'. It is celebrated in the first week of July every year, and it was started in 1950 by the Ministry of Agriculture to create awareness about the importance of trees and forests. During this festival, people plant trees and take a pledge to protect them. The festival is celebrated across the country, and it is a way of promoting afforestation and environmental conservation.

Gauri and nature

Bathukamma, a festival celebrated in the state of Telangana, is dedicated to the worship of Goddess Gauri. Women make small idols of the goddess (boddemma) using mud and decorate them with flowers. After nine days, the idols are immersed in nearby ponds. This helps reinforce the pond and helps it retain more water. Certain flowers, when immersed in abundance, also are believed to purify the water. The festival heralds the beauty of nature and the collective spirit of women folks towards preserving the resources.

The colourful floral festival is celebrated before the onset of the winter season, during the lag end of the monsoon season. At this time, the most abundant flowers in the region are the gunuka, tangedu, banti, chamanti, nandi-varadhanam, etc., and are widely used in the festival.

Another important 'natural' food during this festival is the custard apple or sitaphal or shilpakka pandlu. The festival commences seven days before the *Saddula Bathukamma* which is two days before Dussehra. The *Bathukamma* or the floral arrangement of native flowers is offered to the family deity and worshipped. It celebrates human's inherent relationship with nature and earth.

It must be noted that during the ten-day Ganeshutsav that is a very popular festival celebrated pan India, there is one day dedicated to Gauri. In certain parts of India, especially in the Konkan region, on this day the women worship the tilda plant and its flower represents Gauri. The traditional customs of this festival are sustainable and environment-friendly in manner.

Karaga festival that is primarily celebrated in Karnataka is a unique blend of nature worship and mythology. It is one of the oldest festivals of Karnataka. Here, the deity of Draupadi, symbolised by an earthen pot adorned with flowers, carried by a priest on his head, is venerated. This act is a tribute to Mother Earth's nurturing spirit and serves as a reminder of our responsibility to protect and preserve the environment.

Karaga means a mud pot. The festival is integral to the Thigala community found in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and is an integral part of their cultural and religious heritage. The festival is derived from Mahabharat's episode where Draupadi was stripped by the Kauravas and celebrates her strength, the goddess of strength or *shakti*.



Chhath Puja celebrations

Nature's friends

Animals and birds are an integral part of nature and play an important role in maintaining ecological balance. They are also revered as symbols of divinity or as companions of gods and goddesses in Indian culture.

There are many festivals that celebrate animals and birds as well as raise awareness about their conservation. Some of these festivals are Nag Panchami, Ayilyam Mahotsavam, Velas Turtle Festival, Elephant Festival, Bird Festival, Jallikattu, etc.

The Bird Festival celebrated in Uttar Pradesh is dedicated to the appreciation of birds. With talks and nature events around the 500-plus bird species found in Uttar Pradesh and over 1,000 species in the country, this festival is a must-visit for both amateur birders as well as seasoned naturalists. The festival provides the perfect opportunity for wildlife photographers, nature and bird enthusiasts and naturalists to be blessed with sightings of stunning birds, both common and rare.

Organised by the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, this festival aims to create awareness about the wildlife - native and migratory birds that travel around the world to visit the various water bodies in northern India, promote eco-tourism and sustainable living practices for the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources.

Nag Panchami venerates snakes as divine creatures with mystical powers. It is celebrated on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Shravan. It is celebrated by offering milk, flowers and sweets to snakes and worshipping them. Ayilyam Mahotsavam is a festival that is dedicated to serpent deities. It is celebrated at the Sree Nagaraja Swami Temple in Kerala where special rituals are conducted to appease the serpent gods.

Velas Turtle Festival is celebrated in Maharashtra to spread awareness about the conservation of the rare Olive Ridley Sea Turtles. It is celebrated by hosting home stays with the villagers and releasing the turtle hatchlings into the sea.

Jallikattu is a traditional rural sport of taming bulls. It is celebrated in Tamil Nadu during Pongal, on Mattu Pongal day, where young men try to hold on to the hump of a bull as it tries to escape. It is also known as Eru thazhuvuthal or Sallikkattu or Manju virattu.

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.

Celebrating Devi's divinity

*Worshipped in myriad manifests, Goddesses in India are considered as supreme feminine power and are therefore fittingly celebrated through festivals. As a “Mother” associated with piety and virtues, she is regarded as a creator of universe and devotees pay obeisance, love and gratitude all through the year with colourful fervour and pomp, says **Kriti Kalra**.*



Durga Puja celebrations. *It is a festival that honours the nine forms of Goddess Durga, who represents the feminine energy of Shakti (power)*

Devi is the Sanskrit word for goddess, and it refers to the supreme feminine power or Shakti in Hinduism. Devi is worshipped in various forms, names and aspects, reflecting the diversity and richness of the culture of the region.

Devi is revered as the mother of the universe, the source of all creation, the protector of all beings and the destroyer of all evil. She is also associated with various attributes, such as wisdom, wealth, beauty, strength, compassion and grace. So, Devi is celebrated in many festivals across India, where her devotees express their deep love, gratitude and devotion to her.

The nine forms

Navaratri, meaning nine nights, is a festival that honours the nine forms of Goddess Durga who represents the feminine energy or Shakti. It is celebrated twice a year, once in spring and once in autumn. The autumn festival is also known as Sharad Navaratri or Mahanavaratri, which is the most widely celebrated one.

During this festival, people worship Goddess Durga and her different aspects, such as Saraswati (the goddess of

wisdom and arts), Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth and prosperity), and Kali (the goddess of power and destruction). Each day is devoted to a different form of the goddess. Intricate rituals, lively processions and exuberant dances characterise Navaratri.

The festival culminates on the tenth day with the celebration of Dusshera or Vijayadashami, which means “the victory of the tenth day”. The tenth day commemorates the victory of Durga over the demon Mahishasura, who had terrorised gods and humans. It also commemorates the victory of Lord Ram over Ravan, who had abducted his wife Sita.

Additionally, Durga Puja is a festival that celebrates the worship of Goddess Durga in her warrior form. It is mainly celebrated by Bengali Hindus and by Shakta Hindus outside of eastern and north-eastern states of India. It is observed in late September or early October, coinciding with Sharad Navaratri.

The Durga Puja rituals involve the installation of clay idols of Durga in homes and public places, which are adorned with flowers, jewellery and clothes. The idols depict Durga slaying Mahishasura with her ten arms holding various weapons. The idols are accompanied by her four children - Ganesha (the elephant-headed god of wisdom), Kartikeya (the god of war), Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (the goddess of learning).

The idols are worshipped for five days with elaborate rituals, music, dance, art and cultural programs. On the last day, the idols are immersed in water with a grand procession, bidding farewell to Maa Durga until next year.

Fierce and festive

Kali Puja, on the other hand, is a festival that honours Goddess Kali, who is considered to be the most fierce and powerful form of Devi. She is depicted as a dark-skinned woman with four arms holding a sword, a severed head, a trident and a bowl. She wears a garland of skulls and a skirt of severed arms. She stands on the chest of her consort Shiva, who lies on a cremation ground.

Kali Puja is celebrated on the new moon night of Kartik month (October-November), coinciding with Diwali in some regions. The devotees offer sweets, fruits, flowers, incense and lamps to Kali. They seek her blessings for protection from evil forces and liberation from ignorance.

Lakshmi Puja is another festival that worships Goddess Lakshmi, who is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is depicted with four arms holding a lotus flower, a conch shell and a pot of gold. People celebrate Lakshmi Puja in different ways across India, depending on their region, culture and tradition.

However, some common elements of the celebration include cleaning and decorating the house with rangoli, arranging flowers, lighting lamps and candles to welcome the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Other preparations include preparing a special altar or mandap for the goddess where her idol or image is placed along with other items such as coins, rice, fruits, flowers, incense and lamps.

Often devotees also perform a ritual or puja to invoke and worship the goddess, where hymns, mantras and prayers are recited and offerings are made to her. Some people also worship Lord Ganesha, god of wisdom and success, along with Lakshmi. The festival is complete with a feast of delicious food and delicacies prepared for the occasion.

Pure and blissful

Gangaur is a festival celebrated in Rajasthan and some parts of Gujarat, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. It is dedicated to the goddess Gauri, who represents purity and marital bliss. The festival is celebrated by women who fast and

pray for the long life and prosperity of their husbands. It is celebrated usually for 18 days, and on the last day, women dress up in their finest traditional clothes and jewellery and carry idols of Gauri in a procession to immerse them in water.

Observed on the first day of the Hindu calendar month of Chaitra, Gangaur celebrations comprise buying of earthen pots called *kunda* that are then decorated or painted in the traditional Rajasthani style known as *maandna*. Married women are given gifts from their parents or matrimonial home as a custom that are sent on the second last day of the festival. Women colour their hands and feet with beautiful and intricate mehndi or henna designs during Gangaur.

The festival of Bonalu, celebrated primarily in Telangana, is a unique tribute to the Mother Goddess, particularly the goddess Mahakali. Women offer cooked rice, jaggery and curd in earthen pots to the goddess, symbolising the nurturing aspect of motherhood.

Celebrated during the Ashaad month of the Hindu calendar that falls in July or August, Bonalu – meaning ‘meal’ in Telugu - involves prayers and puja for goddess Yellamma on the first and last festival day. Goddess Kali in her various forms such as Nookamma, Yellamma, Ankamma, Mysamma, etc., is worshipped during this festival.

The procession during Bonalu is characteristically marked by the performance of the Pothuraju – considered to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva. The performance is done by a man with turmeric on the body, wearing just a skirt-like dhoti and bells in the ankles performing to the sound of the drums played during the procession.

Goddess of knowledge

Vasant Panchami marks the arrival of spring and is celebrated in various parts of India. It is dedicated to the goddess Saraswati, who represents knowledge, wisdom and learning. The festival is celebrated by wearing yellow clothes, offering prayers to Saraswati even flying kites. In some parts of India, it is also celebrated as the birthday of the god of love, Kamadev.

In Tamil Nadu, Navaratri is celebrated with a unique twist. Known as Golu or Kolu, it involves arranging an eclectic display of dolls and figurines, showcasing various deities, mythological characters and everyday life. This ritual is an opportunity for families to impart cultural and spiritual values to the younger generation.

In Kerala, Attukal Pongala holds a special place in the hearts of devotees. Thousands of women gather to prepare a special offering, Pongala, for Goddess Attukalamma. The act of cooking the offering on open fires is considered highly auspicious and it is believed that the goddess herself partakes in the feast.

Kriti Kalra is an activist and field researcher with www.the-womansurvivor.com – an initiative of DraftCraft 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.

Celebrating multi-splendoured love

Anushka Singh observes that Indian festivals punctuated with tales and anecdotes of love, serve as a reminder of the intrinsic divinity that permeates all aspects of life. They provide an opportunity for devotees to connect with the sacred feminine energy. In their colourful rituals and fervent devotions, these celebrations echo the timeless wisdom that recognises the eternal presence of the Devi in the hearts of all.



Holi being celebrated in Vrindavan, UP. The festival signifies love, colour and fertility

One of the strongest human emotions is that of love and Indian mythology is full of tales and anecdotes of love -- romantic and devotional, both. Consequentially, Indian culture is ripe with festivals, especially those that celebrate love in its many forms. While some are traditionally derived from anecdotes and mythology, then there are others that are in sync with modern-day living or inspired from foreign cultures and communities.

One of the most famous festivals of India that is celebrated across India, in almost all parts of the country, and often called by different names in local dialects, is the spring festival of Holi. Holi is celebrated with an unmatched fervour and enthusiasm that infuses energy and passion in anyone participating in it.

Colours, flowers and lathis

Holi is known as the festival of love. On this day, people from all walks of life and from different strata of society, come together to celebrate the festival in unity and harmony. The festival commences on the evening of the full moon of the poornima of the Hindu calendar month of Phalgun.

Usually lasting for a day and half, the first day is observed as Choti Holi or Holika Dahan followed by the festive Holi celebration the next day when people greet each other and put colourful gulaal on one another. Holi signifies love, colour and fertility.

According to legend, Holi symbolises the immortal love

between Krishna and Radha. The festival celebrations in Uttar Pradesh’s Mathura, Vrindavan, Barsana, etc., are very popular where thousands gather to celebrate Holi in the most traditional manner, with lathis and flowers.

They say, during Holi, Lord Krishna who resided in Nandgaon would visit Radha who lived in Barsana, in Mathura, to celebrate the festival with her. Barsana is famous for its ‘Lath-mar Holi’ celebrations where women holding lathis playfully run after their men and hit them as part of the celebrations, as a way to punish them for their mistakes. The men, on the other hand, carry shields or dhal to protect themselves.

In Barsana, Mathura and Vrindavan, Holi celebrations begin on Vasant Panchami and go on for more than a month. The main Holi celebrations are held at Mathura’s Dwarakadeesh Temple and Vrindavan’s Banke Bihari Temple. In Vrindavan, the flower Holi is quite popular.

Beauty, love and devotion

The magnificent Devki Krishna temple in Goa’s Marcel is the venue for the exhilarating and vibrant festival called as Chikhhal Kalo. For those participating in it, it’s an unforgettable and a life-changing spiritual experience. This is a religious festival that is observed only by the locals of Marcel village. The festival is observed in the Hindu calendar month of Ashaad and is a one of its kind experiences.

Marcel or Mashel is a village, now a town, in North Goa’s Ponda zone. The temple, also known as Shree Devkikrishna Ravalnath Saunsthan, is located in Pandavada in Mashel. It is one of the oldest temples established by Goa’s Saraswat community. And, it is the only temple in the world dedicated to Devki-Krishna. The vast area of the temple premises are the perfect venue for this festival.

The story behind the temple itself is a tale of love. Krishna’s birth mother Devki had not seen her child since his birth and became anxious to see him. She travelled south to Gomanchal Parvat and encountered Krishna but failed to recognise him. A perplexed Krishna realised that Devki had seen him only as a child and she still carried the same image.

Leela Purushottam Krishna immediately appeared in the form of the small child his mother had last seen and embraced Devki, who, in turn, lifted him on to her lap. The beautiful tale of the mother-son love embodies the existence of this temple.

The traditional festival of Chikhhal Kalo is a tribute to Mother Earth. Earth loves, nurtures and protects all beings including humans like a mother does to her child. This festival is a celebration of the bond between Mother Earth and the farmers.

This festival is celebrated around the time when the soil of the zone has just the right amount of moisture. Chikhhal Kalo translates to ‘mud bath’. The festivities include dancing by the revellers and playing outdoor games that inevitably lead to participants slipping and falling and getting coated in mud. Local games such as *chendu fali* are very popular during the festival. Being covered in mud is an essential part of the festival that honours the bond between earth and farmers.

Fasting for love

Several communities in India observe a special day where married women follow a strict fast to signify their love for their husbands and for their long life. Karwa Chauth is followed by married women for their husband’s well-being, longevity and prosperity.

Karwa Chauth or Karaka Chaturthi is mostly celebrated by married women in North and Western India in the lunar month of Kartika. The fast is from sunrise till the time the moon comes out in the night. It is known by many other names in different regions of the country.

In Manipur, the festival of Yaoshang is very popular among the people. During this time, people from different groups, communities, etc., unite as one and partake in the celebrations. Thabal chongba is a local folk dance that is performed during this festival. It is the traditional dance of the Meitei people.

The five-day event is held in February or March and is



Kolu celebration during Navratri

celebrated by children, young and old men and women, which is the very basis of Yaoshang as it celebrates love among children, adults and the elderly. Boys and girls dance traditionally in a circle as part of the festival in an open ground where many other gather to participate in the festival.

Any mention of the festival of love is incomplete without that of Valentine’s Day. Historically a foreign concept and festival, today Valentine’s Day is celebrated with utmost fervour and passion around the world, including India, as a way to express one’s love for his or her love interest.

Also known as Saint Valentine’s Day or the Feast of Saint Valentine, Valentine’s Day is celebrated on 14 February every year. It was initially observed as the Christian day of feast commemorating and honouring a martyr who was named Valentine. Today, it has become the celebration of love and romance all over.

Divine love

In India, the celebrations of the Devi in her myriad forms are a testament to the deep-seated love and reverence for the feminine divine. Through festivals like Navaratri, Durga Puja, Kolu, Mahalakshmi Vrata, Attukal Pongala and Bonalu, the devotees pay homage to the power, grace, love and nurturing spirit of the goddess.

These festivals serve as a reminder of the intrinsic divinity that permeates all aspects of life, and they provide a profound opportunity for devotees to connect with the sacred feminine energy. In their colourful rituals and fervent devotions, these celebrations echo the timeless wisdom that recognises the eternal presence of the Devi in the hearts of all.

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 analysing sources of news.

Gala of harvest, prosperity

Nimisha Lakhia avers that festivals celebrating nature or its produce or harvest are not mere ceremonies. They are expressions of a profound understanding of the delicate balance between human population and the natural world. Through these observances and customs, one pays homage to the life-sustaining elements - the rain, the harvest, the crop, the wildlife, the rivers, the mountains, the plains and more.



Pola is a thanksgiving festival celebrated by farmers in rural Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh

India is a country with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, where many festivals are celebrated throughout the year. Some of these festivals are related to nature and crop harvests, where the beauty, bounty and balance of the environment are celebrated. These festivals are not only occasions of joy and gratitude, but also of learning and inspiration.

They reflect the deep connection and respect the communities have for nature and its various elements, such as water, soil, sun, animals, birds and others. Some of the important harvest festivals in India are Pola, Lohri, Baisakhi, Makar Sakranti, Onam, Bihu, Karam, Nabanna, Pongal, Vishu, Wangala, Nuakhai, etc., that are celebrated by different communities across India.

The festivals celebrating nature or its produce or harvest are not mere ceremonies; they are expressions of a profound understanding of the delicate balance between human population and the natural world. Through these observances and customs, one pays homage to the life-sustaining elements - the rain, the harvest, the crop, the wildlife, the rivers, the mountains, the plains and more.

They serve as poignant reminders of our interconnectedness with nature and the imperative to protect and cherish the planet that sustains us. These festivals stand as vibrant threads, weaving together a narrative of reverence, gratitude and harmonious coexistence with the natural world.

Rain and harmony

Monsoon is a season of rain, greenery and freshness in India. Water is the source of life and monsoon brings water to the parched lands, dried soils and emptied reservoirs. It is also a season of various festivals that celebrate the arrival and departure of the monsoon. Some of these festivals are Onam, Teej, Janmashtami, Pola, etc.

Onam is a traditional festival – cultural and harvest – that is celebrated by the people of Kerala in South India. It also celebrates the homecoming of King Mahabali who was a benevolent ruler but was banished by Lord Vishnu in his Vamana avatar. Onam celebrates the rice harvest which is very important for the people of Kerala.

Janmashtami is a festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna, who is considered to be the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is celebrated on the eighth day of the Krishna Paksha of the Hindu calendar month of Shravan, which falls in August or September. The festival is celebrated by fasting, singing, dancing and enacting scenes from Krishna's life.

Harvest and festivities

Harvest is a time of joy and gratitude for the farmers who reap the fruits of their hard work and for the people who enjoy the abundance of food and crops. It is also a time of various festivals that celebrate the harvest and thank nature for its generosity.

Pola is a thanksgiving festival celebrated by farmers in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh, to acknowledge the importance of cattle and their contribution to agriculture and farming activities. It falls on the day of Pithori Amavasya (the new moon day) in the month of Shravan.

In rural Maharashtra, the festival is celebrated by bathing the bulls and oxen, colouring their horns, changing the old ropes with new, tying new bells and decorating them with shawls and accessories. The decorated cattle are taken out on a procession to the fields, and on their return worshipped by the women of the house with aarti and application of vermillion and treated to traditional food including the sweet *puranpoli*.

In the north-eastern state of Assam the annual festival Bohag Bihu is celebrated with great enthusiasm as it represents the beginning of the Assamese New Year. During this festival, farmers rejoice and feast to their heart's delight. Also known as Rongali Bihu, this festival celebrates the beginning of the harvest season in the region.

Bohag Bihu is the most important Bihu festival among the three such festivals celebrated in the state. It is observed for a week and in the Hindu calendar month of Baisakh also known as Bohag locally which falls in the month of April. The other two are observed in Maagh and in Kaati (Kartik).

During the seven-day festival, all elements of the farming activity are celebrated and revered. On the first day, it's the cattle and other animals that help farmers in sowing and other activities. During the festival, these animals are given a proper bath with a paste made of local ingredients like black gram and turmeric. The customs that follow are a way to express gratitude to the animals for their help in farming that result in a good harvest.

The other days of the Bohag Bihu festival are dedicated to human, known as Manuah, and God, known as Gosai. The

farmers worship their deities and pray for a prosperous year ahead and a bountiful harvest. They wear traditional clothes and dance together on folk songs.

Traditional food from fresh harvest

Another important harvest festival in India is the four-day (uttarayan punyakalam) Pongal that is celebrated primarily in Tamil Nadu in South India. It signifies new beginnings as it marks the end of winter and beginning of the summer season. Observed between January 15th and 18th, it's the time when the solar equinox happens i.e. henceforth days will be longer and nights shorter.

The Sun is worshipped during Pongal, as the life force behind every living being on Earth. As offering to the Sun, rice is prepared with milk and jaggery in earthen pots. Pongal translates to 'to boil or overflow' and during this festival there is a lot of significance given to rice, turmeric and sugarcane that grow extensively in the region.

On the first day which is the main day, customs are performed to thank the god of rain i.e. Indra for his benevolence. Family members clean up the house thoroughly and get rid of unused items for fresh beginnings. Rangoli or floor design made from white rice paste called as kolam adorns all houses during the festival and then the Pongal is prepared in the earthen pot.

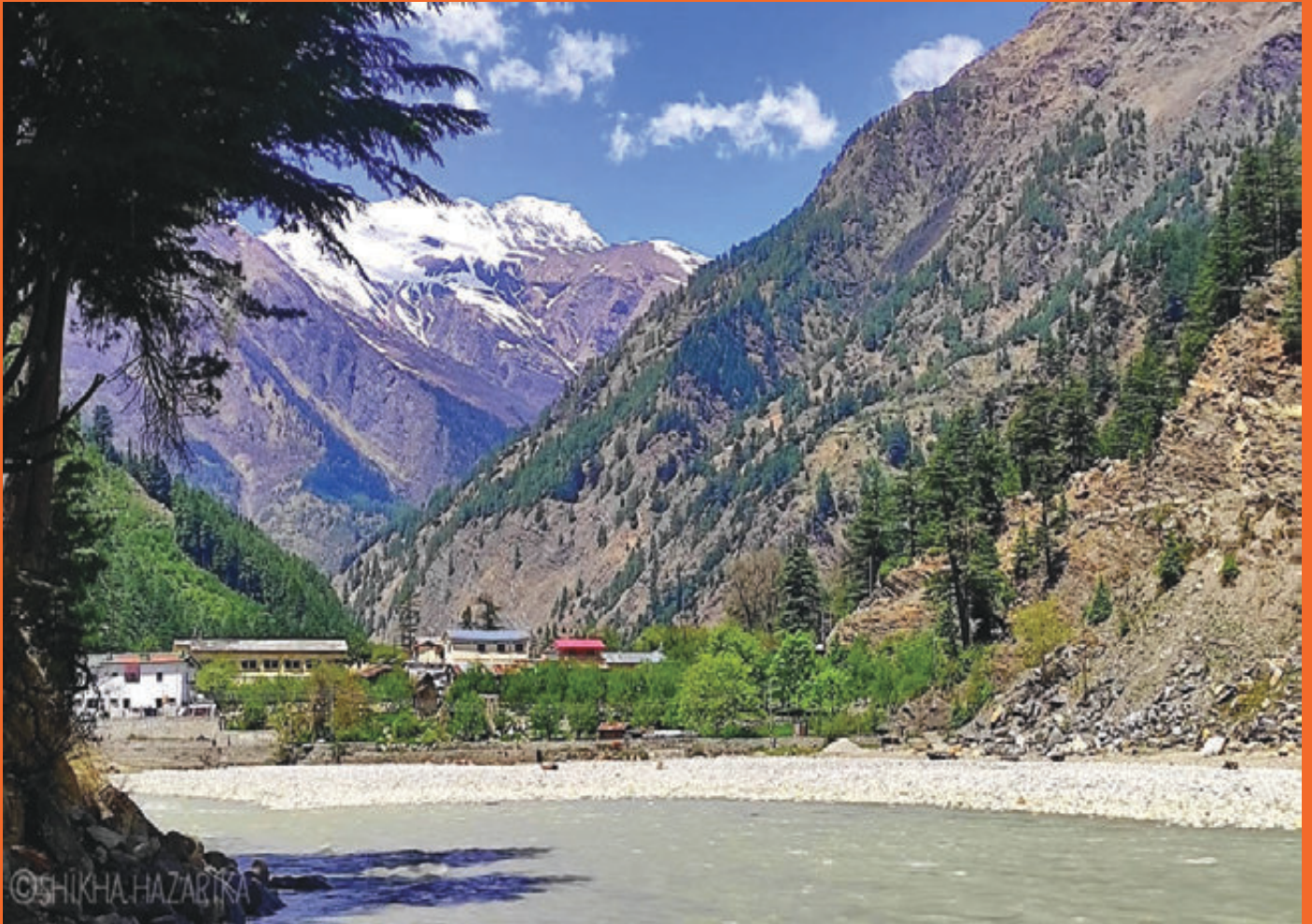
Pongal's North India counterpart is Makar Sankranti that marks the transition of the sun into the zodiac sign of Capricorn or Makar. People celebrate by flying kites, taking holy dips in rivers and exchanging sweets made from sesame seeds and jaggery called *til ka laddoo*.

In Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, on the eve of Makar Sankranti, Lohri is celebrated by lighting bonfires, singing folk songs, dancing bhangra and gidda and eating peanuts and rewri, all signifying gratefulness for the fresh harvest.

For the people of Punjab and Haryana, a very important harvest festival is Baisakhi festival aka Vaisakhi when they get an opportunity to thank the divine for a good harvest. On this occasion, people wear colourful clothes and traditional attire, sing folk songs, play the dhol and dance to the rhythmic beats of the dhol.

During this festival, melas or Baisakhi fairs are organised that are a huge hit especially among the young. In the fair, there are myriad activities ranging from wrestling, acrobatics, etc. and often there are wrestling competitions between rival clubs. In these colourful fairs, people from villages and towns come to celebrate, shop, eat and revel. Women can be seen performing gidda and men doing bhangra on folk songs. People can also be seen playing the traditional instruments such as *algoza* and *vanjli*. These harvest festivals celebrate the bounty of nature that sustains human life. They also celebrate the seasons that bring change and renewal to nature and humans.

Nimisha Lakhia is a trainee with DraftCraft Media Network - an initiative of DraftCraft International – a platform for media students, experts, and professionals to quash populist trends and help create unbiased and independent news.



Uttarkashi

Unfathomable confluence of nature & divinity

Known as the gateway for the 'Chota Char Dham', Uttarkashi, a picturesque town resting in the pristine Garhwal Himalayas, is a place abounding in stunning beauty. Visit to this virgin destination offers an opportunity to experience its mystical presence. Famous for its religious heritage, this exclusive destination is preferred by thousands of tourists to spend their leisure time. The majestic mountains, breathtaking valleys, serene lakes and rivers, dense forests, beautiful temples and more, make Uttarkashi a perfect place for trekkers and nature lovers to explore.



Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi

‘Kashi’. The utterance of this one word carries a mysterious yet peaceful vibrations that touches a chord in my heart and I’m sure this happens with every individual who believes the sense of connection to something beyond self. They say, the city, known as ‘Varanasi’ today is older than the civilisation itself and that Lord Shiva himself dwells here.

And then, there is this place called ‘Uttarkashi’ (North Kashi), a town and headquarters of the district of the same name in Garhwal division of Uttarakhand. This place is also popular as ‘Saumya Kashi’ and ‘Shivnagri’. But, have you ever wondered why this place is called ‘Uttarkashi’? Well, apart from the mythological beliefs, here’s an interesting geographical fact behind the names in common. The land between the confluence of Varuna and Assi with Ganga is known as Varanasi. There are only two places on earth where this geographical phenomenon takes place – one is Kashi, also known as Varanasi (Banaras) and the other is Uttarkashi (Kashi of North).

Situated on the banks of Bhagirathi, this holy town – Uttarkashi is most popular as the gateway for the ‘Chota Char Dham’, the small Hindu pilgrimage circuit of four abodes/seats: Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri, established by the great Hindu philosopher, sage and thinker, Adi Shankaracharya. Also, this sacred town of natural beauty is the headquarters of the

district of the same name.

Uttarakhand also called *Dev Bhoomi* (Land of Gods) is undeniably a perfect pilgrimage destination but with the bonus of nature as a treat to the eyes and the inescapable adventure! So, buckle up for these amazing sites in one zone that will leave you enthralled.

Road trips to the mountains are always thrilling and one will never regret experiencing it when a place like Uttarkashi at an altitude of 1158 m above sea level will drive you crazy with its captivating views. Also, here I need to mention that I have been fortunate enough to visit this place in two different seasons, beginning of winter and spring. The snow-capped peaks, pristine rivers, and lush green valleys make this place no less than a paradise for travelers seeking an unforgettable experience.

This mesmerising place as a district is a land of geographical contrast with the majestic mountains, valleys, meadows, hiking trails, lakes, rivers, forests, temples etc., making it an explorer’s hub. However, during my first trip to this zone, I was totally clueless about the hidden gems. After reaching Rishikesh, it was a random decision to take the route towards Uttarkashi and find out what could be worth exploring.



Serenity around Harsil Village

Monastery of the mountaineers

So, having travelled nearly 168 kms from Rishikesh, Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) which has produced numerous stalwarts who have conquered some of the world's highest peaks was my first halt. Perched atop turtleback hill on the east bank of the river Bhagirathi, this institute stands as a beacon for adventure enthusiasts and aspiring mountaineers.

This is also the second oldest mountaineering institute in India and one of the premier institutes in Asia. Founded in 1965, NIM was established in honour of India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Its inception aimed to foster the spirit of adventure and instill mountaineering skills among the youth.

Surrounded by mountains and river Bhagirathi gushing on one side, NIM campus has all that can be called a scenic view. It

is a beautifully constructed and meticulously planned campus that maintains all its flora and fauna in the area by being a home to several species of birds and beautiful Himalayan garden with plants that grow at high altitude. Gadgets required for trekking and mountaineering can be hired here. Since, I had a chance to stay at the guest house of NIM, I feel the need to mention here that the warm hospitality and food made my stay perfect. There are also many other alternatives of accommodation including Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam, forest and PWD guest houses besides the private hotels. A walk through the campus and a visit to the museum are activities that one should not miss. Unquestionably, the rich history, comprehensive training programmes, and the breathtaking beauty of Uttarkashi make it a must-visit destination for anyone with a penchant for great outdoors. My stay at NIM also gave me a chance to figure out my next destination.



Spring in Harsil valley

Raj Kapoor's love story

My next halt was the spectacular Harsil Valley. Raj Kapoor's superhit film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* was extensively shot here. It is said that the film thespian was so mesmerised with the panoramic views of the valley during an earlier visit that he decided to shoot his next film with his son Rajiv Kapoor and actress Mandakini here. People also believe that since Raj Kapoor wanted to shoot the film in Harsil is why the story of the film developed as such and named after the River Ganga that flows through the valley. Interestingly, the Post Office of this village that was featured in several scenes of this movie released in 1985 has today turned into a centre of attraction for tourists. Set up in a rented house in 1960, built of wood and local materials, this post office is the sole connection of the locals and neighbouring villages with the outside world.

Tucked away amidst green valleys, sleepy meadows the beauty of the place is unmatched with never-ending views of apple orchards, dense jungle, the meeting of Bhagirathi and the Jalandhari rivers, and the scenic backdrop. The quaint village Harsil lies at an altitude of 7860 feet and is located 70 km ahead

of Uttarakashi and 23 km before Gangotri on the Uttarkashi – Gangotri Highway. It is also an army cantonment area with only a few houses, guest houses, small market and local *dhabas* (wayside eateries).

When you're in Harsil, you'll come across this renowned property called 'Wilson House'. The story behind this cottage is also legendary. Raja or *Pahadi* Wilson is one name in this locality that is familiar to every resident. In 1864, Frederick. E. Wilson who deserted the British army and escaped into the Garhwal mountains where he met the king of Tehri and sought shelter. However, the king refused so Wilson move to this remote village where he fell in love with a local *Pahadi* (mountain) girl from a nearby village Mukhba. They married and settled in Harsil village. Without the knowledge of the king, he started his business here by selling deodar trees/wood to Britishers by floating them in the river. This was sold for railway construction.

By selling these rail sleepers he became so rich and powerful that he started his own currency coins which were even available with the locals till the 1930s. But later, he



Bhagirathi river flows in the snow covered Harsil valley

acquired a lease from the king and started sharing the profits. Notably, the revenue of the king of Tehri went up ten times. He also built a 350 ft long suspension bridge over *Jadganga* for the local people. Unfortunately, today only the traces of this bridge remain. He also built his own mansion in the village which later on caught fire and turned into ruins. The cottage has been restored by the Forest Department and converted into Forest Guest House. Wilson also introduced the villagers to apple cultivation and gradually became popular among the locals as 'Pahadi Wilson'.

After so many decades, be it through the popular tales of Pahadi Wilson or Raj Kapoor's superhit film, Harsil valley continues to retain its charm, beauty, and vitality. In fact, the drive through valley left me yearning for more. I fulfilled this deep desire by visiting the valley again in the next spring.

The celestial flow

During my first visit in November, I had made an attempt to reach Gangotri, which was not a good idea as the area had witnessed its first snow shower a few days before my arrival. Also, by this time of the year, there are restrictions in tourists' movement further from a point called Bhaironghati which is 19 km ahead Harsil. I had to return from the parking lot of the temple which was completely snow covered and deserted making it appear like a ghost town.

As they say, whatever happens, happens for good! So, was it in my case because my next visit during spring, unclogged such sites which were no less than unexplored gems. So, this time right after a halt at Harsil village for few hours, I headed straight to Gangotri Temple, which is 25 km from the village. On



The famous Post Office of Harsil

the way lies Dharali (about 6 kms from Harsil) which is also famous for its apple orchards and Bhairav Temple at Bhaironghati. It is believed that Lord Shiva appointed Bhairav to safeguard the region.

The ride to Gangotri Temple was really beguiling as the road is well developed offering stunning views of the coniferous forests and grand mountains. The excitement to see the highest temple located at an altitude of 3048 metres was at peak and having parked the vehicle, I hurried towards the temple. Gangotri legends, history, and significance are as fascinating as they are mysterious. This picturesque pilgrimage in the hinterlands of the Himalayas is the most sacred spot where Ganga, the stream of life, touched earth for the first time.

This ancient narrative revolves around King Bhagirath's relentless pursuit to bring the divine River Ganga down to earth to absolve his ancestors' souls. A tale of devotion, determination, and divine intervention, it showcases the pivotal role played by

Lord Shiva in ensuring the successful arrival of the sacred river on earth. When Lord Shiva opened his matted hair, releasing a torrential flow of Devi Ganga, she cascaded from the heavens with tremendous force, her cascading waters threatening to engulf the entire earth. But Lord Shiva, with his divine presence, skillfully captured Devi Ganga in his matted locks, channeling her immense power through his tresses. It is said people have been immersing the ashes of their departed ancestors in the waters of this holy river even since.

In another legend, Ganga was a beautiful living woman born in the kamandalu (water vessel) of King Brahma. Notably, the actual origin of the river is at Gaumukh in the Gangotri glacier, 19 km away from Gangotri and is accessible by trekking. After it originates from Gaumukh, the river is known as Bhagirathi and it acquires the name 'Ganga' after the river Alaknanda merges into it near the town of Devprayag. The temple was erected in the 18th century according to the Katyuri architectural style, common in Nepal and its surroundings, by a



The 18th century Gangotri Temple made of white granite stone

Gurkha Commander Amar Singh Thapa. The area has several hotels, guest houses and food points for tourist to have a comfortable stay. Gangotri becomes a bustling hub of devotees during the Char Dham Yatra season and it is in the month of May when the deity of Ganga is brought back from the nearby Mukhba village after the temple is reopened for the tourists. Soon after Diwali when the temple is closed during winter, the deity is taken to this village which is considered as Ganga's maiden home.

In Gangotri you can also walk down along the river into the Cedar forest to visit the famous *Pandav Gufa* (Cave). The cave is located opposite to the bus parking on the main road. It is said that the cave is naturally formed and served as residence of Pandavas during their ascent to heaven.

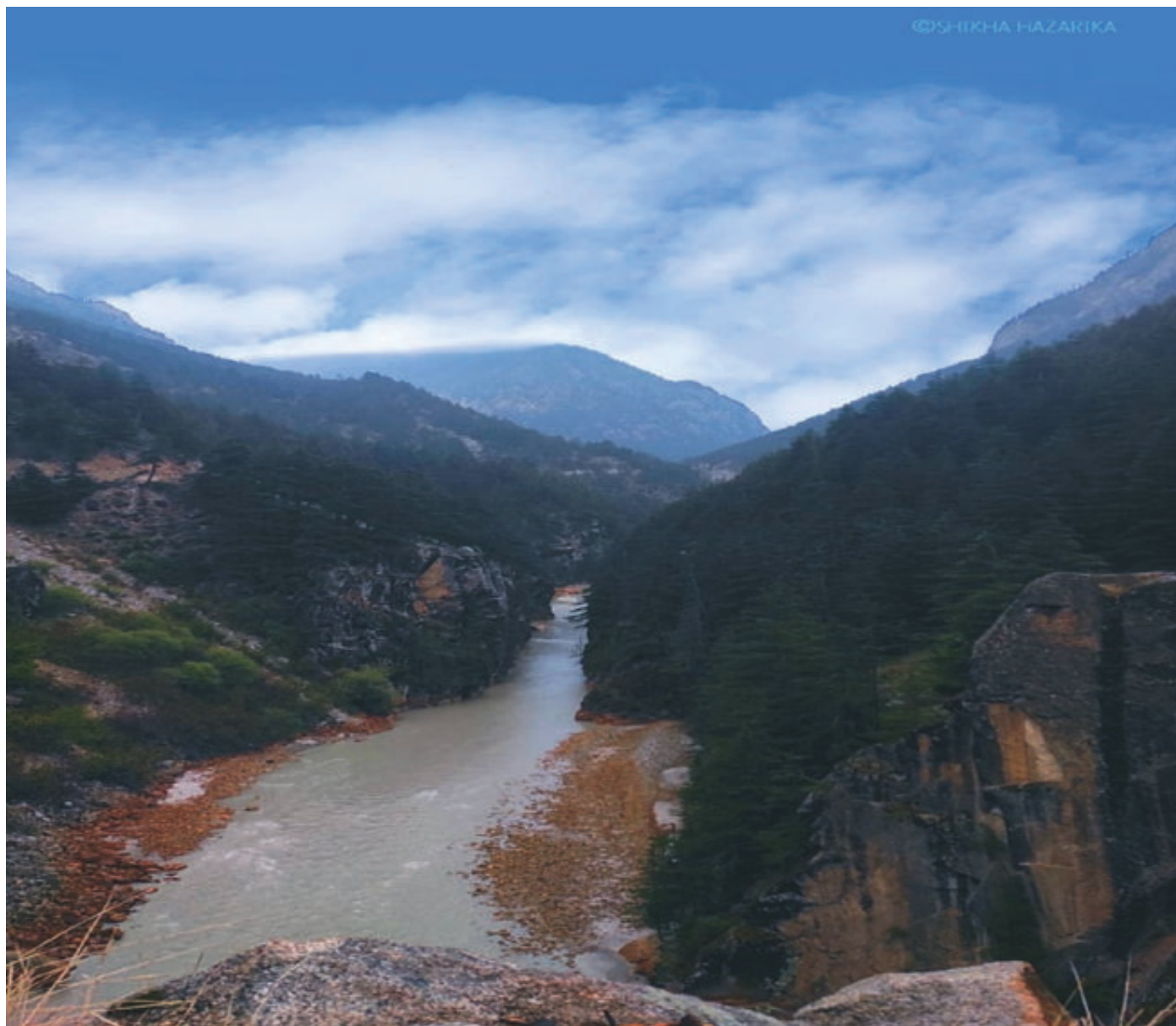
Mini Ladakh in Uttarakhand

After the divine darshan of the Goddess at Gangotri, my next stop was *Nelong Valley* called the 'Mini Ladakh of Uttarakhand'. Considered to be the best kept secret of Uttarkashi, I had been

longing to visit this place. Least explored by tourists in that zone because it's located on the Indo-China border and remained closed for the civilians after the 1962 war until 2015.

The valley is a charming treat for nature lovers and adventure enthusiasts alike. The cold deserted mountain area of Nelong Valley looks like a mini replica of Tibet. The terrain is very much like Ladakh.

At a height of 11,000 feet, this valley actually offers a 360-degree clear and surreal view of the Tibetan plateau. The minimal human interference has helped in maintaining the mystery and appeal that raw nature holds. Long before Tibet was occupied by China, Nelong Valley was a bustling trade route between Tibet and India. In fact, the place has a rich history and culture which is lost in political unrest and border conflicts. The villages in the valley were vacated in 1962 during the Indo-China War. Since then the historic valley is occupied by endless army camps. The valley is also connected to the Gangotri National Park and you can get to see the endangered



The Jadh Ganga river gorge on the way to Gangotri

animals like Himalayan Blue Sheep, Snow Leopard and Musk Deer.

The valley is also known for its high-altitude lakes such as Khatling and Masar Tal, which are popular trekking destinations. The valley is surrounded by the Bandarpunch and Swargarohini mountain ranges, and visitors can enjoy trekking, camping, and hiking in the area.

Before the Chinese aggression, Jadhong was the last village in this area with almost 70-80 households and this village served as a pitstop on the old trading route. The indigenous population living in the valley known as Rongpas or Bhotiyas, were later forced to migrate to Bagori village. Locals shared that each house in the village had beautiful wooden carvings; even the stones had carvings on them.



Baba living inside the Pandav Gufa (Cave)

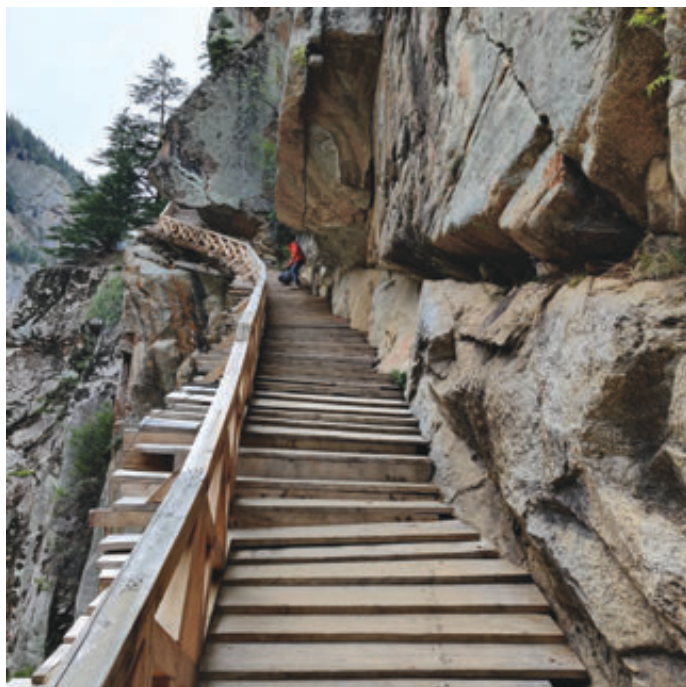


The mountain desert view of Nelang Valley

The wooden skywalk

The antiquity connected to the Nelong valley also brings one closer to another master piece of its time - the over 150-year-old trek route street, which is a rare path made by cutting huge mountains, which is known as *Gartang Gali*. This used to be the trade between China and Barhat Market, Uttarkashi which also shut down completely after the war. It is said that the Pathans,

who came from Peshawar to Gartang Gali, built this difficult bridge 150 years ago at an altitude of 11000 feet. About 150 meters long stairs of Gartang Gali are now visible in a new colour and form with its wooden-lined staircase. The stairs of Gartang Gali, built at an altitude of 11,000 feet, are considered to be a unique example of engineering. This is a summer trek where you'll get a combination of both greenery and snow, which



Wooden Staircase of Gartang Gali

makes the trek spectacular.

Even though travel to Nelong involves a great degree of planning, it is an experience that shall manage to enchant all visitors in its surrealistic charm.

And with many other destinations yet to be explored in this mystical land of Uttarkashi, it was time for me to wrap up this part of the super exciting expedition. And like every destination leaves its own unique memory, I too carried with a bag full of mixed emotions to last a life time!



Shikha J Hazarika is a seasoned communication professional, avid traveller, nature enthusiast, photographer and someone who thrives in making destinations desirable through the sights and stories she captures during her travel. She hails from one of the most picturesque states in northeast India- Assam and her interest lies in exploring the offbeat places, knowing the local people, learning about their lifestyles, culture and relishing the cuisine. A zeal for exploring the nooks and new tastes is what keeps this writer going!

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“You need a lifetime to master one raag”

At 17, **Karan Deogaonkar** is still in his teens, but has already made a mark as an upcoming Hindustani classical vocalist from Pune. Music to him means the entire Universe. His hobbies include cooking, cycling and travelling. In fact, he has the timetable of numerous trains at the tip of his tongue.

The teenaged prodigy does not prefer to be confined to any one particular school of music although his ‘sur’ have unmistakable strains of the Patiala Kasur Gharana. As someone who believes that Hindustani vocal music is all inclusive, he opines that a good audience is a key aspect of every performance. He feels grateful that Bharat is blessed with a wonderful audience, different in every city. For aspiring musicians like him, he feels motivated on receiving suggestions for improvement from them.

Karan Deogaonkar in conversation with A. Radhakrishnan

What does music mean to you?

I see music as the entire universe.

One finds reference to music as the union of three art forms *Gayana* i.e. Vocal; *Vaadan* i.e. Instrument and *Nritya* i.e. Dance. They are like the 3 major oceans of music. Music is always unending. The deeper you go, the more you will realise that there is a lot more to be explored. Many aspects of life starting from expressions and thoughts that a person has to various metaphors of life and death, to love and devotion towards God are covered here. It is a field not bound by religion. E.g. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb is a composer of Todi *bandish Allah Jane Maula Jane* as well as the *bandish of Bhupali Prabhu Rang Bhina*. Music basically connects humans to humanity.

What were your early musical influences?

My first love towards music germinated in the form of nursery rhymes. It has since always expanded. When I was 4-5 years old, two of my most favourite songs were *Baglyanchi Maal Fule* and *Pal Pal dil ke Paas*. My father I am told was learning violin one day and I picked up the song in the correct pitch and the correct note. Thus began my training under my first guru Smt. Supriya



Karan Deogaonkar

Is your singing inborn or are you trained? Can we call you a prodigy?

Singing is always inborn, but to identify it and make it bloom, training is required. After training with Smt. Supriya Prani for four years, I started learning under the guidance of Pt. Amol Nisal and later from Pt. Shaunak Abhisheki and Smt. Aparna Kelkar and got ample guidance from Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty, Vidushi Sawani Shende and Shri Meher Paralikar.

Which gharana do you belong to?

I strongly believe that music should not be bound much by *gharana*, but due to what my *taleem* is, my voice quality and whom I mainly listen to, my *gayaki* is inclined to the *Patiala Kasur gharana*. However, one can find influence of other *gharanas* too.

How many years does one need to learn classical or Hindustani singing.

One needs an entire lifetime (a minimum of 24 hrs a day) to master one *raag*. Hindustani classical music has its roots in *sadhana*. The deeper you look into your inner self, the more you will discover. Once your inner self is content, stable and happy, you



Karan performing at a Rotary Club event

will be able to enjoy the unending learning process.

What is included in Hindustani vocal music?

Hindustani vocal music is all inclusive. The experiences that one has encountered, the emotions one has had, the joy in the learning process etc., the better you express it, the easier it will be for the audience to connect to you. The attractive *sargams*, high speed *taans*, and huge vocal range are aspects that help make your music more interesting, like the *abhushans* of Hindustani music. Kishori Tai (Kishori Amonkar) always said, “sing to express and not to impress”.

What are the difficulties one faces in this genre.

The crucial thing here is time. In today's busy lifestyle, taking time out for music is a challenge. Music as a career option is highly uncertain. Just like any art form you are never content with your performance. There's always room for improvement. In our country, music has always been considered a hobby and never been a part of curricular activities. Even though we say that Hindustani music does not demand a huge audience, unfortunately it has not gained the required amount of popularity. It is also unfortunate that many people from my generation are unaware of names such as Pt. Jitendra Abhisheki, Amir Khan Saheb, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Shri Vasant Rao Deshpande, Smt Kishori Amonkar etc. They are unable to identify many of our musical instruments like the *tanpura*, *santoor*, *sitar* etc. The influence of western music on our generation is pretty high.

Who is your favourite classical singer and why?

Not one, but I have many favourite classical singers and those from other fields of music as well, like Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb. Every time I listen to a clip there's something that I always end up learning.

How do you describe the audience at concerts. How do you energize a tired audience?

A good audience is a key aspect of every performance. Fortunately, Bharat is blessed with a wonderful audience, different in every city. For aspiring musicians like us, points of improvement are also something we receive from them.

The audience is always pleased by unexpected elements. From the *raag* we choose to the *laya* in which we sing, all are crucial to energise the audience. The stage habits of a person are also important.

How to develop good gayaki?

The key to develop a good *gayaki* is by letting music happen

through you and never copy anyone's style. One particular *gayaki* is not suitable for everyone. A guru first analyses and then trains you in various aspects to help you adopt the *gayaki* that you want to pursue. If your love, *shraddha* (dedication) and *sadhana* (devotion) towards music and your guru are visible through your music, then you need not develop a good *gayaki*... it will automatically start sounding good.

Importance of low swaras.

The best example is that of a toy car. The more you push it backwards, the further it will move ahead. Practicing the lower *swaras* in the morning will enhance the vocal range, make your voice more open and improve its flexibility. To master the ability to do *alaap* in any *raag*, one should have his/her voice in his/her own control. Morning *riyaz* helps. Person specific though, for me the lower notes just hit differently than the ones of *taar* and *madhya saptak*. The resonance achieved by the lower notes always makes a place in one's heart. Mastering the lower notes is something a Hindustani musician cannot avoid.

How to master laya?

Well, *laya* is something that unfortunately cannot be mastered externally. It's an inbuilt understanding of the cycle of the *taal*. The better one is acquainted with the *taal*, the easier it is for the musician to analyse the distance between the two *matras*.

What is the process of singing a raag?

You can relate a presentation of any *raag* with the act of buying something from a shop. The shopkeeper here refers to the performer and the buyer as the audience. Just like the shopkeeper tries to win over the mind of a buyer by telling all the interesting features of the product, similarly an artiste tries to tell the audience the speciality of the *raag* that he/she is presenting. First with the *aalap*, what are the main *swaras* of the *raag*, the *chalaan*, the *bhaav* etc. Then the *bandish* in which with the help of words slowly and steadily you reach the upper *sa*. Then the *taar saptak*, *laykari* comes into picture. Then *taans* and *sargams* which make that *raag* engaging and intriguing until finally you win over the minds of the audience. However, as I said earlier just a single *raag* has its reach far more than just performance.

Have you participated in any reality TV programmes? Or won an award for your performance?

I am mainly focused on the learning process, so I've not yet participated in any TV/ reality shows.

However, in an all-India Shribahinisahib classical music competition, I was fortunate enough to be among the top 12 finalists pan India. Every programme that I give, every competition I've participated in has turned out to be a memorable experience.

Describe yourself.

I'm a social person, always excited to try something new. Not being in my comfort zone is actually my comfort zone. I struggle to give time to music as well as studies. I'm fond of travelling as well as teaching. I am a student of Class 12 and studying Science in Pune. I wish to pursue a bachelor's degree in engineering and masters in music. But I will keep on learning and plunging deeper and deeper in the oceans of music.



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

Celebrating sibling bonding

*Festivals are not merely about merriment. In India, they are also celebrated to uphold and respect familial ties. They are actually sacred platforms for expressing love, gratitude and protection where families come together, strengthen connections. **Ritika Seth** says sibling relationships hold a special place in Hindu mythology, offering profound insights into the dynamics of familial love and support.*



Raksha Bandhan is a celebration of the bond between brothers and sisters

Among the many festivals celebrated in India are those that venerate the sacred bond between siblings. These occasions not only strengthen familial ties but also provide a platform for expressing love, gratitude and protection.

Raksha Bandhan, often referred to as the 'Rakhi Festival,' is perhaps the most widely celebrated festival honouring the bond between brothers and sisters. This festival typically falls on the full moon day in the Hindu calendar month of Shravan, usually in July or August.

The highlight of Raksha Bandhan is the tying of the sacred thread, known as the rakhi, by sisters on their brothers' wrists. This simple yet profound act symbolises the sister's love and the brother's vow to protect her. Following the tying of the rakhi, brothers typically present gifts to their sisters as a token of their affection.

The day begins with a special puja, a prayer ceremony

that sets the tone for the festivities. Sisters invoke blessings for their brother's well-being, reciting prayers that encapsulate their hopes and wishes. With reverence, they tie the rakhi around their brother's wrist, a gesture that transcends the material thread, representing the unbreakable ties of love and protection. Brothers reciprocate with promises of support, and often, they offer gifts and a token of money, symbolising their commitment.

Raksha Bandhan brings families together in an atmosphere of warmth and affection. The exchange of gifts is accompanied by shared laughter, reminiscences and expressions of gratitude. In the spirit of togetherness, meals are prepared and enjoyed collectively, fostering an atmosphere of unity and joy. This day serves as a reminder of the strength that comes from the love and support of family.

Another important festival that symbolises the strong bond between a brother and sister is Bhai Dooj, celebrated on the second day after Diwali, marking a special day for brothers

and sisters to come together. This typically falls within the embrace of the autumn months, October or November. While akin to Raksha Bandhan in essence, Bhai Dooj unfolds with regional nuances that paint it with a unique cultural palette.

On this auspicious day, sisters perform a ritual that involves applying a ceremonial tika on their brother's forehead, followed by prayers for his well-being. This signifies the sister's blessings for her brother's prosperity and longevity. In Maharashtra, this festival holds a lot of significance and is known as Bhaubeej. It is also extensively observed in Gujarat and Goa.

Kaumudi Puja, celebrated primarily in the state of Odisha, is a unique celebration of sibling love. On this occasion, sisters light lamps in honour of the moon god, Chandra, seeking blessings for the prosperity and well-being of their brothers. This ritual is accompanied by prayers and the exchange of sweets, fostering a sense of unity and love within the family. Also known as Kaumudi Utsav, the rituals are observed on Sharad Purnima or the Full Moon Day in the Ashwin month.

Sibling love of gods, goddesses

Sibling relationships hold a special place in Hindu mythology, offering profound insights into the dynamics of familial love and support. The stories of gods and goddesses are replete with examples of divine siblings who exemplify loyalty, camaraderie and mutual respect. While some are celebrated as a festival or a tradition in Hindu homes, others form folklore and legends that are passed from one generation to the next.

In the pantheon of Hindu deities, Lord Ganesha with his distinctive elephant head and Lord Kartikeya, also known as Murugan, stand out as divine siblings born to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Their story of a celestial competition to circumambulate the world showcases the essence of their bond. Lord Ganesha, symbolising wisdom, chooses to circle his parents, signifying profound understanding, while Lord Kartikeya, representing valour, sets off on his peacock. This tale underscores the complementary nature of their strengths and the importance of recognising and valuing diverse talents within a family.

In the epic Ramayan, Lord Ram and his younger brother Lakshman embody the epitome of fraternal devotion. Lakshman unwaveringly supports Rama during their exile and in the battle against the demon king Ravan. Their relationship transcends the realms of duty, symbolising selfless service, loyalty and the unwavering support that siblings can offer one another.

Goddess Lakshmi, the bestower of wealth and prosperity, and Goddess Saraswati, the patroness of knowledge, arts and music, are revered as twin sisters or elder and younger sisters in Hindu tradition. Their union signifies the harmonious coexistence of material abundance and intellectual prowess. The juxtaposition of their domains illustrates the importance of balance and complementarity in achieving holistic success.

The story of Lord Krishna and his younger sister Subhadra is a luminous gem in Hindu mythology. Their adventures in the city of Dwarka and their playful camaraderie exemplify the joys and complexities of sibling relationships. Subhadra's grace and wisdom, coupled with Krishna's protective affection, create a tapestry of familial love that endures through time.

Lord Yama, the god of death, and his sister Yamuna, the goddess of the sacred Yamuna River, symbolise the delicate balance between mortality and the eternal flow of life. While Yama oversees the transition from life to the afterlife, Yamuna nurtures the lands along her banks, sustaining civilisations. Their intertwined energies emphasise the cyclical nature of existence and the interdependence of life and death. Their intertwined energies emphasise the cyclical nature of existence and the interdependence of life and death.

The tales of sibling love among Hindu gods and goddesses offer timeless lessons in loyalty, mutual support, and the celebration of diverse strengths. These stories resonate across cultures and serve as a testament to the enduring power of familial bonds. Embracing the unique qualities of each sibling, these divine relationships enrich the fabric of human existence.

Celebrating familial bonds

While not strictly a festival for siblings, Jamai Sasthi is a unique celebration in certain parts of India particularly in West Bengal, where sons-in-law are honoured. On this day, sons-in-law are invited for a sumptuous meal, to acknowledge and appreciate their presence in the family. Predominantly a Bengali festival, here the mothers-in-law worship Goddess Sasthi to seek her blessings to bring prosperity and good fortune of their daughters and sons-in-law. The word Jamai means son-in-law and Sasthi is the sixth day of the month.

According to tales in mythology and folklore, there was once a greedy woman who would keep eating everything she could lay her hands on. And she would blame this on a cat who, in turn, complained about this to Goddess Sasthi. The goddess heard the cat and punished the woman for her wrongdoing by taking away her children.

The distraught woman sought forgiveness from the goddess who told her to perform certain rituals to atone for her actions so she could get her children back. These rituals were to be performed on the sixth day of the auspicious month. And, since then goddess Sasthi is being worshipped by the women to seek long life and well-being of their children.

This festival is observed in the month of June, on the sixth day of the Hindu calendar month. The festivities are complete with rituals, home-cooked traditional food and delicious sweets. This festival emphasises the significance of harmonious relationships within extended families.

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

Restrained, subtle and talented!

For Waheeda Rehman, the Dadasaheb Phalke Lifetime Achievement Award may have come a day too late but there is little doubt that she belongs to the rare breed of actresses who blended beauty with the virtuoso of an accomplished performer. **Shoma A. Chatterji** takes a look at her career graph that meandered through myriad roles and did justice to each of them.



Waheeda Rehman

Born on 3 February 1938, Waheeda Rehman has been working in the Indian film industry since 1955, when she made her debut as a dancer in the Telugu social drama *Rojulu Marayi*. In her biography, *Conversations with Waheeda Rehman*, author Nasreen Munni Kabir writes that the film's song 'Eruvako sagaro ranno chinnanna' became a rage, and Rehman became as famous as the film's leading stars, Akkineni Nageswara Rao (ANR) and Sowcar Janaki. It is a wonder that no journalist has cared to explore her work in films in South India, especially in Telugu films.

Her very first Hindi film CID (1956) produced by Guru Dutt in which Dev Anand played the hero opposite Shakila and Waheeda Rehman played a dancing vamp, became a box office hit

setting her off to a very successful career in Hindi cinema. The very sensual song number in CID picturised on Waheeda Rehman namely Jaata kahan hai deewane, sab kuch yahan hai sanam was beautifully choreographed on Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman. However, the story goes that this song number was later deleted from the film because it was felt that the lyrics were both titillating and filled with double entendre though it was not. The lyrics were by Majrooh Sultanpuri, music by O.P. Nayyar and the song was belted out by the then very young Geeta Dutt.

Despite her many critically acclaimed performances that have stayed on in audiences' memories, she won the Filmfare Award for Best Actress only twice in her career-- the first time for

Guide (1965) and then for *Neel Kamal* (1968). She also won the National Award for Best Actress for *Reshma Aur Shera* (1971). It was Guru Dutt who watched her dance performance once in Hyderabad and asked her to come to Bombay. She got a supporting role in his film *C.I.D.* and the film became such a big hit that she became famous as a star.

But CID was practically a 'rehearsal' Dutt had taken to prep her for the role of a prostitute in *Pyaasa*, her next film in which Dutt played a failed poet who Gulabo fell in love with. The hallmark of her performance is an element of dignity and respect that she brings to any character she plays, be it Rosie, the daughter of a devdasi in *Guide*, or Jaba, the impish Brahmo girl living within a feudal set-up who falls in love with the naïve Bhootnath in *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*, or a prostitute who loves poetry in *Pyaasa* or the once-successful film star in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* who loses all sense of reason when she discovers that the man she loved fails/refuses to vocalise his feelings for her. She played a sixteen-year-old girl who runs away with a diabolic man out to con her in *Solva Saal*. She played a psychological nurse in *Khamoshi*, a pretty young girl forced to play a ghost in *Bees Saal Baad*, a young bride coerced to imitate her husband's dead first wife in *Kohra* and many more. She is subtle, even now, in senior roles, always in control and tends to underplay which makes her unique in a world filled with melodrama and loud acting. Just remember her work as the old Daaji in Yash Chopra's *Lamhe*. Or, the worried grandmother in Aparna Sen's *15, Park Avenue* and the message will get across.

In Gulzar's *Namkeen*, Rehman played Jugni, the matriarch of a small family in rural Himachal Pradesh. Through her spirited performance, Rehman showed how women can be self-sufficient and how often wives have to struggle against their husbands to protect their children from hardships — like the ones they have experienced. But of course, she could not save her three daughters' lives in the end but her portrayal was beyond compare.

Many have not watched a significant film of Waheeda Rehman titled *Neel Kamal* for which she won the Filmfare Award for Best Actress. *Neel Kamal* was a reincarnation drama starring Waheeda, Raj Kumar and Manoj Kumar. Interestingly, it is Waheeda who gets top billing ahead of her two male stars in the opening credits of the film, a testament to her star power. Adding to this is the fact that the movie is titled after one of her characters— she played dual roles, starring as princess Neel Kamal and also Sita, a modern-day reincarnation of the royal.

Her films are also famous for the wonderful song-dance numbers she performed. *Guide* alone has songs that are still heard again and again over YouTube and other music channels. Among these are – *Aaj phir jeena ki tamanna hai* (*Guide*), *Paan khaye sainyan hamaro* (*Teesri Kasam*), *Kahin pe nigaahen kahin pe nishana* (*C.I.D.*), *Jaane Kya Tune Kahi* (*Pyaasa*), *Waqt ne kiya* (*Kaagaz Ke Phool*), *Rimjhim Ke Taraane* (*Kala Bazaar*), *Rangeela Re* (*Prem Pujari*) and more, harking back to the golden era of Hindi cinema where music, dance and romance interacted with one another to produce incredible cinema fit for the archive forever.

In Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1965) she essayed the difficult role of the many-hued Rosie, the most liberated and empowered young woman who walks out a bad marriage, builds up a successful career as a dancer and then, leaves her lover Raju too when she discovers that he has cheated her which is not exactly the case. "Waheeda will be my only heroine in *Guide*" insisted Dev Anand when roles were being discussed because both directors Chetan Anand and Raj Khosla did not quite approve of Waheeda for Rosie's character. But Dev Anand was firm and turned to his brother Vijay Anand to direct the film which became a grand success.

For Rosie, in *Guide*, dance is a spontaneous expression of pure ecstasy as the snake charmer dance number reveals so beautifully. The trance-like state in the end when she falls into a faint does not appear either melodramatic or artificial. It is inserted at the right time and place and in the situation appropriate to reveal a not very well-known facet of Rosie's character, as much to the audience in the theatre as to Raju who is the audience-within-the-film.

The Dadasaheb Phalke Award was constituted in 1969, to commemorate the contribution of filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke to Indian cinema. Phalke directed India's first full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, in 1913, laying the foundation of the biggest film industry in the world. The Award comprises a Swarna Kamal (Golden Lotus) medallion, a shawl, and a cash prize of Rs 10 lakh and used to be personally presented to the awardee by the President of India. Waheeda Rehman is perhaps, one among the most deserving names among the awardees among who are Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Ashok Kumar, Prithivraj Kapoor, Asha Parekh, Sridevi, (posthumous) and many others.

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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.

K S Chithra: Velvety voice that lingers

*A prolific singer from down south, Chithra was hailed as a worthy successor to the legendary S Janaki, a singer whom she claimed to have always idolized. The singer who has been conferred with Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan and recently turned 60, has had a thorough grounding in Carnatic music as well that has stood her in good stead while singing songs in various raagas, says **C V Aravind**.*



K.S. Chithra

One hot summer day in 1986 in Madras (now Chennai) a 23-year-old girl accompanied by her father walked up the steps that led to the recording theatre of maestro Ilaiyaraaja, the uncrowned king in Indian film music. Raja had managed to convince the young singer who was pleading her inability to attend the recording (as she had to sit for her music exams back home in her native Kerala) that her future hinged on her lending her voice to his tunes and that she could sit for her exams later.

The girl, K S Chithra recorded two songs that day for the film, a musical, 'Sindhu Bhairavi' directed by the acclaimed auteur K Balachander. The two numbers 'Paadariyen Padipariyen' and 'Naan Oru Sindhu' turned out to be instant chartbusters and Chithra was on cloud nine when she received the news that she had bagged the National Award for Best Playback Singer for her mellifluous rendering embellished by

Ilaiyaraaja's lilting tunes.

Since then, Chithra has never had to look back and in a career spanning over four decades, the Nightingale of South India has lent her voice to as many as 25000 songs. And unbelievable as it may sound, she has sung in all Indian languages and in foreign tongues like Malay, Latin, Arabic, Sinhalese, English and French. Recently she added another feather to her cap by recording a single in the Banjara language.

A Malayalee by birth, Chithra has been prolific in Malayalam and was hailed as a worthy successor to the legendary S Janaki, a singer whom Chithra has admitted in her interviews has always been an inspiration. Chithra's second national award came to her for the song 'Manjal Prasadavum' from the film 'Nakakshathangal' with Bombay Ravi wielding the baton. The late Bombay Ravi again used Chithra's voice for the

soothing number ‘Indu Pushpam Choodi’ in the mythological film ‘Vaishali’ and this number fetched her a third National Award. In all Chithra has won six National Awards and ‘Manamadurai’ (A R Rahman), ‘Payalee Chum Mun (Annu Malik) and ‘Ovvoru Pookalume’ (Bharathwaj) were her other winning numbers.

Chithra was introduced to films in 1979 by the late composer M G Radhakrishnan, brother of popular Malayalam singer M G Sreekumar. Radhakrishnan spotted her talent and recorded her voice for a few films and private albums as well. Chithra who holds a Bachelor’s degree in Music passed her exams with flying colours securing a first class first position in her music college. She has a good grounding in Carnatic music as well and this has stood her in good stead while crooning intricate songs in the various raagas.

While it would be impossible task to recount all her hits, a few songs that revealed her versatility and range included inter alia ‘Aayiram Kannumai’ ‘Chinna Kuyil Paadum Paattu’ ‘Ninnu Kori Varnam’ ‘Kannalene’ ‘Uyire’ ‘Anjali Anjali’ ‘Malargal Ketten’ ‘Vaan Megam’ and ‘Kehna Hai Kya’ (in Hindi). Chithra has rendered around 200 songs in Bollywood films and most of them were well received. The silken timbre of her voice and her capacity to effortlessly grasp and render even complex songs with intricate alaaps have turned her into a peerless singer who has honed her talent over the years with hours of regular practice.

Affectionately hailed as ‘Chinna Kuyil’ by her legion of admirers in Tamil Cinema, Chithra has the distinction of having worked with almost all the top music directors in the industry: Ilayraaja, A R Rahman, Jerry Amaldev, Bharadwaj, S A Rajkumar, Keeravani, Hamsalekha, Anu Malik, M G Sreekumar, Johnson, Ouseppachan and Jayachandran. She has regaled audiences across the world and has been a part of tours where legends like K J Yesudas and S P Balasubramaniam have participated. She has also been an integral part of duets with both Yesudas and SPB and most of these numbers have scaled the popularity charts.

The singer has also been an integral part of several albums some of them devotional and one of them was a tribute to Bharat Ratna, the late M S Subbulakshmi, who had a great influence on her.

Chithra who turned sixty recently is a regular participant in reality shows organised by various TV channels and has been a very popular judge in music contests at both the senior and junior levels. Her bonding with young kids who look up to her with awe have won her a host of admirers.

A bubbly soul with a charming, winsome smile and humble to a fault, Chithra was shattered when her only daughter, Nandana, an eight-year-old with special needs drowned in a swimming pool on the 11 April 2011 in Dubai while she was participating in a concert with A R Rahman. The singer who was devastated, retreated into a shell and took her time before resuming her career. Chithra has created endowments in her daughter’s memory. An NGO started by Chithra in association with a TV channel, ‘Sneha Nandana’ caters to indigent, old singers who have been pushed to penury due to lack of opportunities or failing health.

The versatile singer has not only won six National Awards but has also won over 36 awards instituted by various states and nine Filmfare Awards as well. The Government of India honoured her with a Padma Shri in 2006 and a Padma Bhushan in 2021. Greatly admired for her talents and for her graceful demeanour, Chithra continues to be a force to reckon with in the Indian music industry.



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





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C R RAO (1920-2023)

Statistician par excellence

Indian American mathematician and statistician Calvampudi Radhakrishna Rao, C R Rao for short, was born in Bellary in Karnataka in a Telugu family as the eighth of ten children. After pursuing his early education at Vizag, he obtained a Master's Degree, MSc in Mathematics from the Andhra University and an MA in Statistics from Calcutta University. Later he secured a PhD from the King's College, Cambridge University and also added a DSc degree from the same University.

His abiding interest in Statistics led him to the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta which had been established by the legendary statistician P C Mahalanobis. Rao had an opportunity to work with him as a Professor at ISI from 1948. He rose to the Director's post in the Institute in 1964. C R Rao spent 40 years at the ISI till his retirement in 1982 after which he emigrated to the US.

Rao's tenure at the ISI was extremely fruitful and his seminal contribution in the designing an experiment for efficient extraction of information and testing scientific hypothesis using the results of the experiment was great. At the ISI, he mentored students who later on carved their own niches in mathematics and statistics. He enjoyed guiding the students and often lavished praise on them for their projects and thesis.

In the US he established a centre for Multivariate Analysis at the University of Pittsburg. Rao worked as a Professor Emeritus in the University of Pennsylvania State University and also at the University of Buffalo. His sphere of work was not just restricted to Statistics and his discoveries had far-reaching implications on several other streams like Economics, Genetics, Anthropology, Geology, Biometry, Differential geometry and Medicine. Rao's discoveries included the Cramer-Rao bound and the Rao – Blackwell theorem. His work in the field of estimation theory won him laurels from universities and organisations across the world.

Prof Rao was awarded as many as 38 honorary doctoral degrees from Indian and international universities and the American Statistical Association hailed him as a 'Living Legend.' Rao published hundreds of papers which he presented in India and abroad. He also authored several books and also co-authored books with several statistical experts. Many of

these have been prescribed in the study courses colleges all over the world. He published his last scientific work at the ripe old age of 100.

He was a recipient of US National Medal of Science and the International Prize in Statistics considered the equivalent of the Nobel Prize. In the citation for the International Prize the authorities had cited his contribution to statistics including his pivotal role in conducting of various research and inventions which are powerful in the field of science, even today. Incidentally, Rao was also once nominated for the Nobel Prize in Mathematics as well. Among the several honours that came his way was the Government of India's National Award for Statistics presented under the aegis of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Apart from prestigious awards like the S S Bhatnagar Prize, Rao was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1968 and the Padma Vibhushan in 2001.

He established the C R Rao Advanced Institute of Mathematics, Statistics and Computer Science at Hyderabad in 2002 recognised as one of the finest in the country. The Pennsylvania State University instituted the C R and Bhargavi Rao Prize in Statistics in honour of C R Rao who had served the University for a long period after his retirement from the ISI.

Rao who was revered for his contributions in the field of Statistics and Mathematics breathed his last in Buffalo in New York on the 22 August 2023 at the age of 102 a month shy of his 103rd birthday. Glorious tributes were paid to his memory by people from all walks of life and by his innumerable students as well.



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

AJIT NINAN (1955-2023)

His cartoons needed no caption

Legendary Indian political cartoonist and illustrator Ajit Ninan was multi-faceted. Born in Secunderabad, he studied at Madras Christian College, Chennai, before moving to Delhi to pursue his interest in cartooning. Self-taught, he developed his own style.

As a student, his first cartoon was printed in the now-defunct political satirical magazine Shankar's Weekly. Before joining TOI (Times of India), he worked with well-known English-language newspapers, including weeklies.

He was the famous cartoonist Abu Abraham's nephew. While Abu had a minimalistic style, Ninan's cartoons were visually exuberant with crisp lines and stinging sarcasm to tell powerful stories about current events.

Ninan flourished in the 1980s against a backdrop of revolutionary favourable circumstances when printed words were frequently subordinated to illustrative news and commentary. More of a social cartoonist who liked to make social commentary than an editorial cartoonist, his artistic ability put him in a completely different league. Among the print journalists to emerge from the Emergency's censorship era, he led the movement in the early to mid-1980s moving visual journalism from black-and-white to colour reproduction.

Using the Rotoring pen, he sketched with extraordinary clarity and control. He coloured his sketches with watercolours, frequently delegating the colouring task to an art school graduate. In the early days of television, colour magazines became a great way to boost advertising income. The publisher was now required to focus more on the publication's appearance than on its content. With the advent of image setting technology, Ninan could now colour swiftly, thanks to Photoshop's multiple undo options.

He had always had a lighthearted yet incisive perspective on politics and society. His subtle impactful remarks about society, without adopting a hostile or confrontational style, had a profound impact on the reader. His hilarious and even provocative caricatures had readers in stitches.

Even on stressful days, he kept everyone at the office in high spirits by telling jokes all the time. He gained popularity by scribbling caricatures of colleagues on the back of thrown-away printouts or whatever scrap of paper that happened to be lying around.

A timekeeper in addition to being a cartoonist, his four decades of work serve as a reminder of various times in our individual history. He was sort of a visual historian of emotions related to the nation and the individual.

It was amazing how Ninan could pack so much drama and life into one frame. It was the result of years of consistent drawing, astute observation, and a sense of humour. Sadly, his abilities were underutilised because cartooning in India is associated with a very limited range of political cartoons, as opposed to the West, with famous cartooning media like New Yorker, Punch and Mad.

Among his popular cartoons were *Ajit Ninan's Funny World*; *Just Like That!* Like That Only! (with Jug Suraiya); *Centrestage*; *Ninan's World*; *Poli Tricks*, a series of cartoons during the 2009 Indian general elections and *iToons*: a single panel cartoon strip (with Sunil Agarwal). The most enduring for readers of all ages were *Detective /Jasoos Moochwala* and his dog *Pooch* featured in the 1980s among the thousands of characters that came to life at his hands. His books included *Ajit Ninan and Jug Suraiya* (2007). *Like That Only*. Ninan, Ajit, and Sudeep Chakravarti (Eds.).

The India Today Book of Cartoons. In Aug 2022 he was awarded the Barton's Lifetime Achievement Award by the Indian Institute of Cartoonists.

Aged 68, Ninan exited life unexpectedly after a severe heart attack at his Mysuru home.

Survived by his wife Elizabeth, two daughters, and two grandchildren, he has left a legacy of cartooning and descriptive art and will continue to be the industry benchmark, and serve as a point of reference.



A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, poet and short story writer, who when not enjoying his favourite cup of coffee, loves to keep people happy.

CAPT TUSHAR MAHAJAN SHAURYA CHAKRA (1989-2016)

The braveheart of Udhampur

The J&K's (Jammu and Kashmir) Udhampur railway station has been renamed to 'Martyr Captain Tushar Mahajan Railway Station.' The decision was taken to remember and honour the late Captain in the Indian Army.

Captain Tushar Mahajan was born on 20 April 1989 to Dev Raj Gupta, an educationist and Asha Rani, in Udhampur, J&K, India. He completed his schooling from Happy Model Higher Secondary School. "When he was asked to write an essay in the class, he wrote that his aim was to join the Army and kill terrorists. That was the time when his other classmates did not even know what terrorists or the army was," his classmate and childhood friend Sushant had said while paying tribute after Capt. Tushar was martyred.

Tushar Mahajan joined the National Defence Academy (NDA) in 2006. He was appointed as 'Divisional Cadet Captain' of his squadron, a coveted position to hold during NDA training. He passed out of NDA in June 2009 and thereafter went to the Indian Military Academy (IMA) Dehradun for further training. Captain Tushar was one of the two officers and ten other soldiers to join 9 Para (Special Forces) in 2010 out of 100 probationers.

In 2012-2013, he served in Ladakh and became part of many reconnaissance and surveillance operations. Many a times he assumed the role of a covert operative and gathered valuable information about terrorists' activities, the terrain, the demography, needed to conduct various military operations. He also became a combat diver after successfully completing the three-month tough course at INS (Indian Naval Ship) Venduruthy. As a diver and leader, he thereafter undertook many underwater rescue operations in J&K region.

During the year 2016, Captain Tushar's unit was deployed in J & K area and was undertaking counterinsurgency operations on a regular basis. On 20 February 2016, militants entered the nearby multi-storeyed Entrepreneurship Development Institute (EDI) at Pampore in Pulwama district, about 15 km south of Srinagar city. The police and security forces evacuated more than 100 people.

Capt. Tushar was tasked to lead, plan and execute the building intervention operation to eliminate the terrorists. EDI was a modern building sprawling over 10,000 square feet and having four floors with tens of offices, rooms and halls. His

plan included placing snipers all around targeting the windows and entering in two teams. The teams began securing it floor by floor and room by room. It was a very risky operation as the well-positioned terrorists were heavily equipped using programmed weapons and projectiles.

Capt. Tushar's squad while approaching the third floor, came under attack from one of the rooms. Undeterred, he lobbed grenades and cleared the room. As the squad was advancing further, it was pinned down by fire from another room. Realising the gravity of the situation, Capt. Tushar advanced further while firing and lobbing grenades simultaneously. However, while doing so, he was struck by a hail of fire in his legs. Despite being wounded and bleeding profusely, he returned fire wounding the terrorist and received another shot, injuring him severely.

Displaying remarkable courage and gallantry, Capt. Tushar even in that injured state charged at the terrorist and eliminated him instantly before collapsing. He had been hit by four bullets. He was evacuated for medical treatment, but he succumbed to his injuries and was martyred.

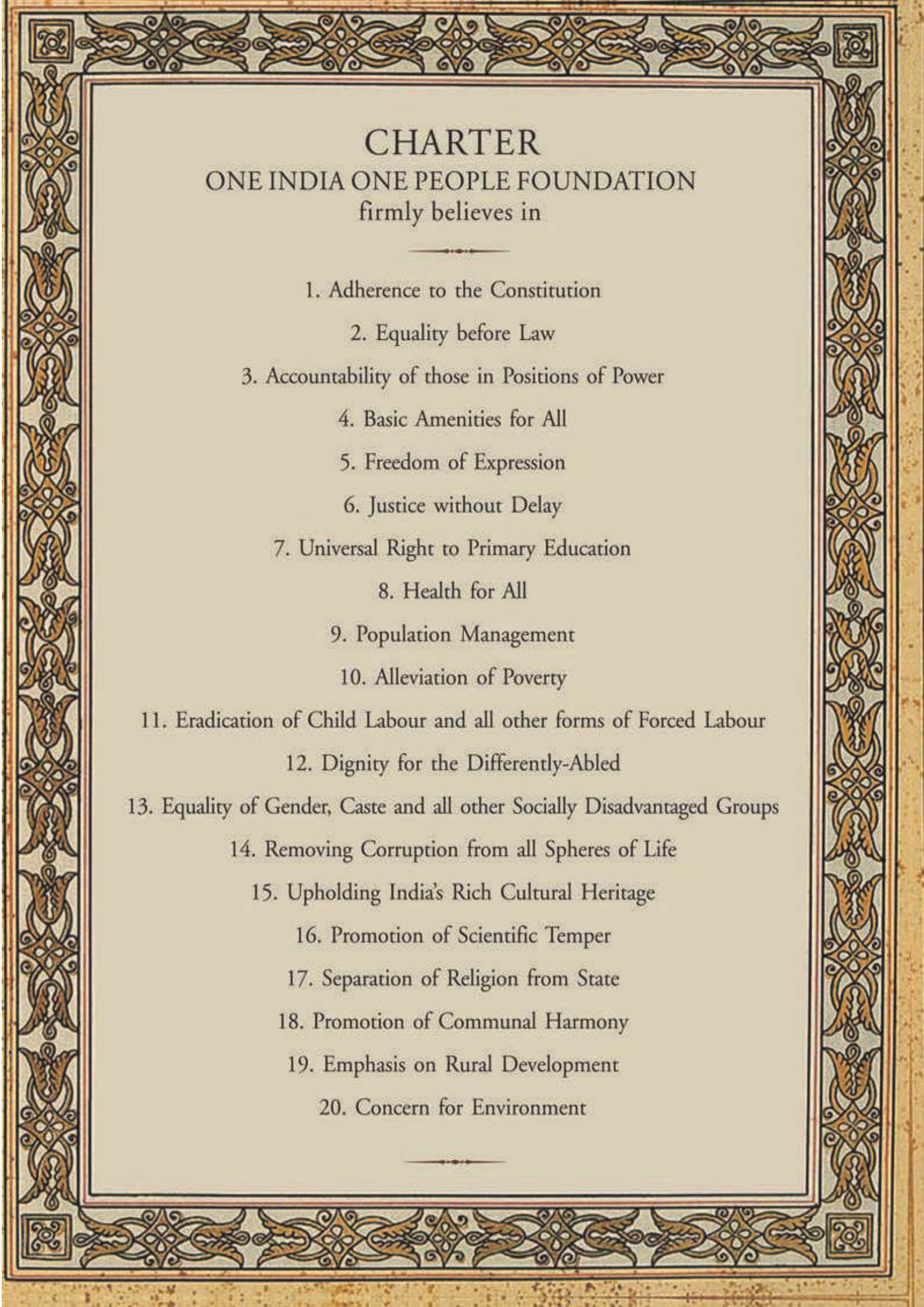
Capt. Tushar Mahajan displayed exceptional courage and fighting spirit during the operation and led from the front like a true military leader. His sacrifice paved the way for subsequent coordinated assault wherein all the militants were successfully neutralised.

He was given the gallantry award "Shaurya Chakra" for his bravery, unyielding fighting spirit, and supreme sacrifice.

Capt. Tushar Mahajan is survived by his father parents and brother Nikhil Gupta. His statue was unveiled at the 'T Morh' on Udhampur on his birthday in 2017.



Contributed by Renu Prakash from the data bank of Late Brig. Suresh Chandra Sharma.



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
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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