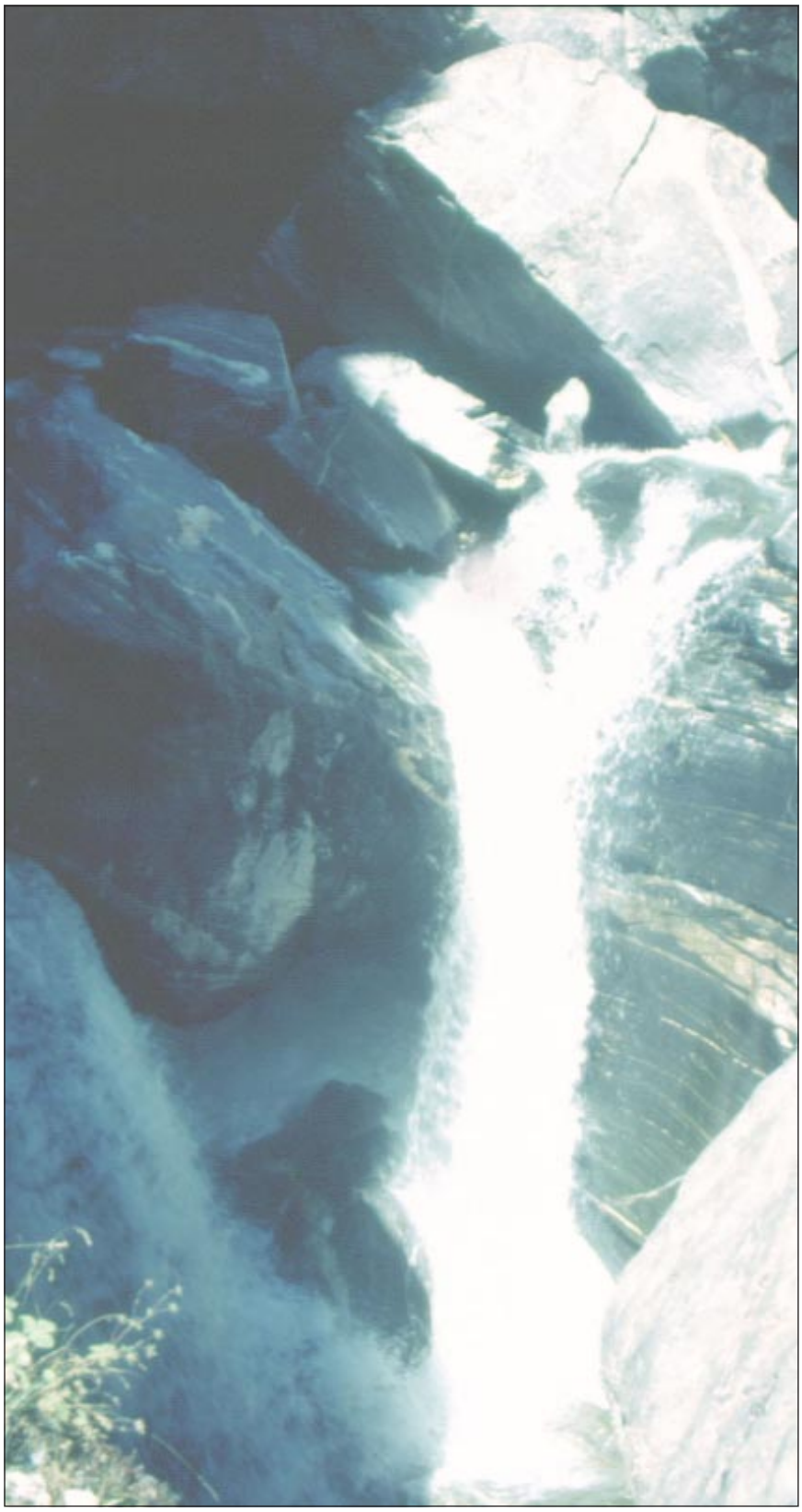

Tracking the Supreme Saraswati

Text & Photographs: KUMUD MOHAN

"Bharat ki akhri chai" read the banner on a dilapidated tea stall beside a footpath leading uphill, There was nobody behind the counter, so we just took a breather on a boulder and trudged on towards the *gufa* (cave) of Vyas Muni – the same legendary Vyas who will be remembered eternally for writing the *Mahabharata*.

But Vyasji had a problem. He could not concentrate – with a frothing, foaming, furiously gushing river within hearing range. So, he prayed fervently to Mother Saraswati, begging her to calm down and assist him in his creative persuits. Lo! The river Saraswati changed her course and were underground, only to emerge hundreds of miles away at the *Sangam* (confluence) at Allahabad, as goes the legend.

Vyas Muni's hallowed cave was barely 100 sq. ft. in area. At one end was a rounded stone with faint markings, described as "3,000 year old inscriptions" by the local guide. We paid obeisance to the great saint and walked down the rough pathway towards the waterfall. On the way was *Bhim Pul,* a 20 ft. wide bridge standing on a huge one-piece boulder. According to legend, Bhim (one of the five Pandava brothers) with his unparalleled might had rolled this stone over to form a passage for

The "Saraswati" in all its splendour (left) and the Badrinath peak (facing page).

the Pandavas on their journey to heaven. (There was actually a snow-covered peak in the vicinity known as *"swarg aropan",* meaning stairway to heaven, which only the truly honest Yudhishthir – the eldest of them – is believed to have conquered).

As we crossed the *Bhim Pul,* we were struck by the rocky wall of the deep chasm facing us. The crevices of the rock-face were dripping with diaphanous veils over fresh green flora.

A hundred feet further we came across the most awesome sight ever. Powdery sheets of pure white emerged from the mouth of a dark cavern, to cascade down a hundred feet into a swirling, churning mass on shining black boulders, before disappearing somewhere deep down below. We dared not peep too far beyond the protected precipice, as we'd been warned by the locals that some years ago a photographer had vanished there forever while trying to get better pictures.

The Saraswati waterfall lies at 10,000 ft. above sea level, about four km from the holy shrine of Badrinath. It is very close to the Indo-Tibetan border.

Was this indeed the legendary Saraswati river, believed to have been borne of Brahma the Creator Himself, to descend from the celestial ocean to purify and fertilise the earth below?

(In the ancient Aryan culture, characterised by a stable agricultural society, rivers – which nourished and enriched land so that it could produce food and fodder – performed an important role in sacred rites and were therefore worshipped as holy incarnations).

The original concept of Saraswati was therefore of a feminine water deity. The Vedas describe Saraswati as supreme amongst rivers, distinguishing "herself" by her splendour and sublimity, glory and majesty. At times she is compared to an ocean, "so large, so mighty, so strong and swift in its current that it evokes fear in one's heart".

In contrast, the personified, deified image of Saraswati evokes serenity and asceticism by her dignity and grace. According to one *shloka* (couplet), she is the experience of

Above: The "Vyas Cave" where *Mahabharata* was conceived 3000 years ago. Facing page: "Vyas Shila" – a 3000-year old inscription found inside the Cave (top) and a marble icon of Goddess Saraswati from Rajasthan (below).

bliss, fulfilment of all desires and gladdening of the soul. The word "Saraswati", as derived from Sanskrit, stands for an ever-flowing, ever-affluent sheet of pure and clean water, as also for the clarity of speech arising from gracious thought.

Commanding a unique solitary status amongst female deities for embodying spiritual perfection, Saraswati is worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer), as well as several other deities in the Hindu pantheon. She is credited with having invented for mankind reputedly the first known language, Sanskrit, as well as the script, Devnagri, in which it is written.

Saraswati is manifest wherever human culture exists. Representing the peculiar human ability to think, which sets the human race apart from all other creatures and gives it dominion over them, inspiring and embodying both the arts and the sciences, she symbolises the greatness of human civilisation in all its richness and diversity.

After the Vedic era, the importance of Saraswati the river was increasingly overwhelmed by her image as the Goddess of speech, learning, literature, culture, wisdom and eloquence. Hymns describe her as the inspiration of all pleasant songs and pious thoughts.

In the classical era, Saraswati became the essence and epitome of Hindu thought and culture. She is variously described as *Vagdevi, Vageshwari* (Goddess of speech),

Sharada (dweller of snowy abode), *Gyanashakti* (power of knowledge), *Vidyadaani* (bestower of education), *Buddhishaktisvarupini, kalpanashakti, pratibha* and *smritishakti* (embodiment of the powers of intellect, imagination, intelligence and memory), as well as *Vedagarbha* (the womb or the source of the Vedas), *Sarvavidyarupini* (embodiment of all education) and *Sarvashastravasini* (one who dwells in books).

The blessings of Saraswati are invoked at the commencement of education of children. Particularly on *Basant Panchmi,* the first day of Spring, all aspiring students of the sciences and fine arts enthusiastically worship Saraswati along with their books, pens, musical instruments and other equipment.

Stone sculptures of Goddess Saraswati from the medieval period onwards depict her with four arms carrying a pen and a book (knowledge and intellect), a rosary (asceticism) and a pitcher of nectar (source of blessing). Clad in glowing white garments, the fair Saraswati astride her divine vehicle, a swan, suggests a dimension of existence that transcends the physical human world. When at leisure, she plays the veena, the progenitor of all stringed instruments, seated on a lotus – signifying purity, divine aspiration, and the ever-renewing beauty and freshness of Creation – and raising her above the muddy imperfections of a mundane world. To ever strive for the

unattainable must remain the motto of the true devotee of Saraswati.

And her devotees are to be found wherever followers of Indian culture have left their mark: be it Buddhism, Jainism or Shaivism. An exquisitely painted scroll of Saraswati with European facial features occupies a place of pride in the Aginsky monastery in Siberia. Some 30 years ago, Raga Saraswati, an amalgamation of *ragas* reminiscent of the strength, security and serenity experienced by her blessed devotee, as well as the lifting beauty of her white waterfall, was composed as a homage to Saraswati.

In all this imagery, one wonders what exactly happened to Saraswati, the river?

According to the analysis of ancient data available, a mighty river arising in the heart of the Himalayas and traversing the western desert did exist in the Vedic times. Some time later, cataclysmic changes forced it underground. Modem interpretation of satellite images by the Bhaba Atomic Research Centre have revealed buried courses of the river Saraswati running between north-east and south-west Rajasthan. The study shows that the area through which the river-bed is traced supports vegetation round the year even when there is little or no rainfall.

There is also archeological evidence to suggest the existence of planned and fortified habitations covering over 1,200 kms along the Saraswati basin. Some 300 mature sites have been

The *Bhim Pul* (left) and the *Swarg Aropan* (facing page).

discovered so far, some being full-fledged cities with elaborate water management systems. A highly evolved culture is believed to have flourished here between 3,500 BC and 1,500 BC.

Recently, new hopes were raised when a 100 km long and 80 metre wide fresh water river sprang to the surface in the arid and saline region of the Rann of Kutch after a devastating earthquake that shook Bhuj in Gujarat on January 26, 2001. The energy released by the tectonic upheaval at that time was equivalent to 224 hydrogen bombs, according to a senior scientist from the National Geophysical Research Institute, Hyderabad.

Although science has yet to reach a satisfactory conclusion about the antiquity of the water, the devout would like to believe that the Supreme River Goddess Saraswati has come back to the earth for the beneficence and solace of mankind.

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The author is a noted freelance writer.

TERRACOTTA

CLAY CREATION

Text & Photographs: JITENDRA SINGH

Terracotta or clay craft symbolizes one of man's first attempts at dabbling in art. This is borne out by the fact that not only in India but also in different parts of the world beautiful earthenware found in excavations are stored and displayed in some of the best museums of the world. In the Indian subcontinent, vessels, toys, coins, terracotta jewellery and the idols of deities of the Indus Valley civilization remind us of our glorious past.

Though there are many techniques to prepare clay articles, but the potter's wheel is the most commonly used all over the world. With his bare hands, the potter creates a variety of forms. The articles and toys made with clay find different manifestations in different regions of India on account of local cultural influences and availability of certain type of clay. In some regions the process involves making of clay items which are later baked in fire, whereas in other regions they are dried in the sun and painted without being baked in fire. Mother clay

is used for making kitchenware, both big and small, for storing grain, water, buttermilk, curd and utensils for cooking and eating. Idols of gods and goddesses, variety of folk toys and different types of earthen lamps are also made.

Barielly in Uttar Pradesh is famous for wheel toys. Mathura and Agra are known for very light-weighted paper mache' or clay toys. These are very colourful and artistic. The clay toys of Lucknow reflect the highest order of excellence in this field. Gorakhpur is famous for its elephants, goddess Durga mounted on a tiger, horses, bulls etc. Azamgarh is world famous for black pottery.

The potters belonging to Golpara, Assam, are famous for creating the image of mother and child. Bankura in West Bengal is widely known for Bankura Horse and Kishannagar for clay models. Though millions of potters in the rural and tribal areas still use the potter's wheel and prepare articles in the age-old style, but modern designers are now using modern methods of moulding, baking, coluring and creating abstract and decorative designs. ◆

The author is a freelance photographer.

LOWER HAFLONG
WELCOME
TO
HAFLONG

Rail to Haflong

THE BAMBOO COUNTRY!

Text & Photographs: SANDEEP SILAS

Somehow the awesomely male river Brahmaputra had always managed to throw up a wall to my rail journeys beyond Guwahati in Assam. The centenary celebration of the Lumding-Badarpur Hill Railway and a commemorative run in its honour negotiated for me an expert passageway.

'Amar sonar harin chai / tora je ja bolish bhai / amar sonar harin chai', a musical composition of Rabindranath Tagore (I want my golden deer, whatever you say brother, I want my golden deer) became the wings of my fancy on this journey. The melody celebrating childlike insistence was henceforth both, my companion and temptress. Large open spaces, huge ponds and small hills overtook the landscape as the cement buildings of Guwahati dwindled.

Old banana leaves had become shrivelled by the attack of the winter sun. The brown earth looked eager to welcome these limp and exhausted soldiers back in its folds. The regenerative process was on. Only, precious time was flowing by, never to return. Even endearing melody could not hold these moments in its passionate embrace. Paddy shoots braved the water in which they stood. It was mid-February. They could never hope to gain the length of neighbouring bamboo groves. But the grain, which they would yield, was destined to become a symbol of

The Lower Haflong station.

Shadpliang dance – balancing of plates (top); the bamboo tea cups (above) and the famous bamboo dance (facing page).

prosperity and also the staple diet of local people. Unlike the long bamboo, usually employed to hold a thatched roof or stand guard in a fence.

Tagore's *'Klanti amar khama karo prabhu / Pathe jadi pecheye, pecheye pari kabhu'*. (Forgive me O lord, if I deviate from the path of righteousness / If in this tired age I drift, forgive me O Lord) on the audio system of the train broke my reverie. And the train to Lumding continued to thunder on smoothened tracks. At least this one knew its charted course!

The brightness of the sun was diminishing. Birds had started to fly back to their nests. The train was in a hurry. Guwahati to Chaparmukh railway line came up in 1899 AD and was extended to Lumding in 1900 AD. Ahead is the Lumding-Badarpur Hill Section connecting the enchanting valleys of Assam, Brahmaputra and Barak, running over 73 major bridges and negotiating 37 tunnels. Jatinga is the highest station situated at 2157 feet above sea level and the train touches 32 stations, located at a height ranging from 336 to 1886 metres. The longest tunnel is 587 metre long. The north-eastern States of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura are connected by this line with the web of other railway network. Survey for this line was completed in 1887 by Mr. John Buyers, the then Chief Engineer of the Indian Public Works Department. A company was formed in London for construction and labourers were brought from as far as Persian Gulf and Afghanistan! Supplies from base camps came up on camel and elephant back. The railway line was fully opened for use in February, 1904, by Lord Curzon.

The dawn greeted us at Lower Haflong railway station. All around stood the high North Cachar Hills with a playful river Dyang in lap. A fabulous site far in the valley was

of the Dyang Railway Bridge built on a curvature. It bridges a river, then pushes the train into a tunnel, before it allows it to emerge out again on the hilly track. Haflong appeared untouched by hand. There were roads but not many people to walk. There were hill cottages but only cock' a doodle doo's to hear. Occasionally a painted wall sign, 'Call Army' with some telephone numbers recorded below disturbs you.

Go ahead eight kms. to Jatinga and see children perform *Shadpdung* - a harvest dance. Jaintia is the tribe that inhabits the village of Jatinga. Originally established as a pan vineyard it now produces pineapple. Its journey from pan to pineapple is amazing. The next dance called *Shadpliang,* set to the tune of guitar, was performed by girls balancing one plate on their forehead and another sucked on the mouth. Pure innocence peeped out of their smiles and steps, and the courtyard tree, the forests in the distance, the mighty hills, all stood charmed. In this remote, back of the beyond place there is an enviable literacy rate of above 95%. Jatinga is a 100% Christian village. Walk on the winding road of this village and you may find little children queued up with shiny aluminum pots before a water tap. A smile is hard to come by on their faces hardened by the force of living. You may have to make faces for a 'smiley photo'. Women appear shy and vanish into their dwellings whose walls are made of matted bamboo peels. Only the large hibiscus blossoms are not behaving coy as they populate the roadside.

Jatinga is infamous for a strange phenomenon, mysterious in its enactment and ghastly in result. In the hills of Jatinga lies a 'pocket of death' for migratory birds. From August to October every year the valley lives a dance of death. The night must be dark for the grisly to happen. The wind should flow from the south to the north. The extreme cold weather, fog and drizzle to aid and abet, the valley sucks in flying birds from evening to early dawn, silencing them forever. The only respite is for an-hour-and-half immediately past midnight. The species, which come over the red blood patch to perish the most, are Indian *Pitta* and the *Kingfisher*. There are others too on this chartered flight of death – the *Siba Brata Goswami, Blue-breasted Banded Rail*, Green Pigeons, *Cattle Egret, Pond Heron, Hooded* or *Green-breasted Pitta* and the Three-toed Kingfisher. The flow is continuous and in good numbers. The eye cannot see more than three feet in the mist, but death knows whom to fall upon with precision!

A school of thought says that the villagers light bamboo torches in large numbers to blind the birds in their flight. They fall prey to greed. But what remains unexplained is

Muri-pipe and *Kharam* drum players at Haflong.

that the entire north-eastern region eats birds, then why only at Jatinga do they fall and in such quantity? Whether this harakiri is deliberate or engineered only the birds can tell. Whatever be the truth, the fact remains that the Jatinga Bird Graveyard, to the north of Haflong, is a place in the Barail Hills witnessing an unusual occurrence.

Originally the Nagas populated the Barail hill regions. An epidemic in early 1900s forced them to quit and find shelter elsewhere. Now, the present North Cachar Hill district has a vast number of Dimasa tribesmen and seventeen others like the Jaintias, Khasis, Kukis, Biates, Jemi Nagas, Karbis, Hmars, Hrangkhols and Mizos. They live in the inhospitable terrain practising *Jhum* cultivation i.e. cultivating a piece of land only once, then moving off to another. Vast tracts of land on which bamboo plantations had been felled or burnt testified to this lifestyle. In all there are more than 1.31 lakh people of different tribes living here. Marriage is mostly within their tribes and tribal laws govern their actions. The village headman is still a voice to be heard! Education however is slowly breaking down tribal laws and matrimony outside the tribe is just no more a possibility; it has come to stay.

We turned to the forests of Jatinga to see pineapple gardens. A thick forest cover stopped us in our tracks and a paper signboard reading 'Munik Sinchiang Garden' greeted us. I jumped over a lot of shrubs, waded through bushes, balanced my feet on uneven stones and finally arrived at an alcove where two attractive bamboo benches were waiting for visitors. Making myself comfortable I looked around and saw a bevy of freshly cut bamboo placed on a square stone. These were to serve as tea

glasses! Quickly came an attendant, busily lighted a fire using leaves and dry sticks, and placed long hollow bamboo sticks over the clumsy flame. These were filled with water and tea-leaves had been sprinkled in each hungry hollow. As the fire rose in intensity, the green bamboo exterior gathered soot and the tea in its womb its flavour. Downloaded from a container to our bamboo cups it tasted of fresh bamboo shoot. One of the most unusual tastes of tea I now associate with Jatinga. The pineapples grew in large numbers. The garden almost appeared as if an army of pineapples was camping there!

The prospects of watching the folk dances of North Cachar Hills brought us to the Circuit House precincts. The first to perform were the Dimasas. *Baidima* dance, usually performed after harvest during the *Buhu* festival, set to the accompaniment of the *Muri* pipe and *Kharam* drum enthralled onlookers. Then came the Jemi Nagas enacting the Naga dance, which is rendered during the *Heleingi* spring festival. They had feathers in their headdress and a tightly strung overall covered their thin frames. The shoulders however, were sensuously revealed. The slow thanksgiving tone and mood was changed by the performers of the *Hmar Bamboo* dance. As the bamboo poles clapped in the skilled hands of the men, the women dexterously jumped in and out of the vanishing squares the bamboo created.

The Biate danced their *Meburlam* dance clapping with bamboo cups, keeping their date with musical drums. This too was a harvest dance. The Karbi tribe enacted the motions of *Jhum* cultivation activity in their traditional *Ritnon Chindi* dance. So much of variety in a remote corner of India, so much of life in their steps, so much of hope in their eyes, and I looked up towards Hempeopit, the highest peak of Barail mountain range, and prayed for peace in the lives of these tribal folk.

A pretty Dimasa girl explained to me in English that the name *Haflong* actually came out of the Dimasa word *Haphlau,* meaning hills and valleys. What is known as Haflong today, is so full of strange life, I wondered.

We boarded three coaches of the special Centenary Celebration Train, to be pulled by a puffing steam engine. It was sure making sufficient noises, letting out steam at intervals in a display of youthful vigour. Its vitality was, however, to be tested on the 100 year-old tracks. The train chugged merrily. I was sorry to leave the beautiful Dimasa girl, our guide, behind in Haflong. Bamboo forest, rivulets, and long valleys populated the journey to Maibong.

The train runs into 37 tunnels as it goes through to Badarpur, the farthest point of the hill section. As it was engulfed by darkness, sucked into the next tunnel, it got filled with smoke. So did the nostrils. The heady smell of fired coal, which so many steam buffs consider better than the best perfume, hung in the strands of hair on my balding head, and stayed in the air pockets of my clothing for a while. Past Haflong, the Dyang river bridge became a hauntingly beautiful stop for everyone. The bridge is high, and built on a curve. The train came out of a tunnel, panted on the bridge as it ran over and halted the other side unable to climb up any further. It had to go back thrice over the bridge to gain the desired momentum for the uphill task!

Beyond the Migrendisa station long cultivated valleys became the landscape. And Wadrengdisa station was not noticed as the train thundered without bothering for the amused look in the eyes of local children who stood as bystanders. Trains in this area are symbolic of movement, of change, and of the great wheel of time. They denote authority and bring before the tribals the immense possibilities of being connected with the rest of the country. However, their flight of imagination, as their physical journeys in one life span, are shortened by the force of circumstance and penury. They remain tied to their roots and the dictat of their tribal law.

This is definitely bamboo country: bamboo on the hills, bamboo in the valley, bamboo poles for the hut roof and peels for the walls, bamboo cups to serve tea, bamboo pieces to clap in a dance, bamboo benches to relax and bamboo shoots on your plate to relish. Bamboo is all pervasive and benevolent. If you love to live here, you have to have bamboo for a lifestyle.

These godly people live with their bamboo an 'abandoned' life in these hills, just like the statue of 'a prayed upon goddess', standing uncared for on a hill slope long after the festival, waiting for the rain showers to melt it away.

Ever wondered the difference between Haflong and Long?

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The author, a civil servant, is a noted travel writer.

Satellite Technology for Better Healthcare

RADHAKRISHNA RAO

Right since its inception the Indian space programme has been driven by its commitment to exploit the potentials of satellite technology to improve the lot of the masses. The telemedicine initiative, made possible by the capability built into India's INSAT series of domestic spacecraft, is a glowing tribute to the Indian space programme which has achieved total self reliance in designing and building world class satellites during its four decades of operations. Thanks to the support of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Karnataka became the first Indian state to enter the operational phase of the telemedicine project that connects all the hospitals at the district and *taluk* levels with five super-speciality hospitals. This is a joint venture between ISRO and the Karnataka government.

Mr. G. Madhvan Nair, Chairman of ISRO, has stressed the need to lower the cost of treatment to help telemedicine become a popular and easily accessible instrument of healthcare. He also pointed out that ISRO's role in the telemedicine projects was initially envisaged to be just the connectivity provider. But now it has taken on the task of providing high quality diagnostic inputs and their software too. "We are driving the industry to make it low cost and affordable", observed Nair.

And when India launches its exclusive healthcare satellite "HealthSat" by the end of 2005 through the highly successful four stage Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), those in remote rural areas of the country would be able to access to the superspeciality expertise available in the urban centers of the country. Significantly, Healthsat would help extend the telemedicine network to the length and breadth of the country. Thanks to the telemedicine network, *Narayana Hrudayalaya* has been able to diagnose the cardiac problems affecting poor rustics in the remote parts of Karanataka. Obviously, these rustics otherwise don't have access even to the basic healthcare facilities.

Since the resumption of rail link between India and Pakistan, many Pakistanis have started taking advantages of the world class cardiac healthcare facilities available at Naryana Hrudyalaya. Thanks to the efforts of ISRO today telemedicine facilities are also being made available to the inhabitants of Ladakh, parts of North East India, Andman and Nicobar islands and Lakshadweep islands. Telemedicine network is also being extended to other parts of the country in a phased manner. Significantly, ISRO has lent its wholehearted support to the statewide telemedicine

PSLV with its satellites.

network being implemented by the Orissa government. A telemedicine network put in place moments after a killer earthquake hit parts of Gujarat in 2001, helped save many lives. Similarly during the *Kumbha Mela* held in 2002, Online Telemedicine Research Institute (OTRI) in collaboration with the Sanjay Gandhi Post Graduate Medical Institute, Lucknow, established a telemedicine network for the benefit of 25 million pilgrims who had congregated at the holy spot of Allahabad.

Indian telemedicine venture is an indigenous enterprise with the Indian-built spacecraft and computer software engineered by Indian experts. A telemedicine system mainly consists of a customised software package integrated with computer hardware along with medical diagnostic instruments connected to the commercial VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) at each location, which in turn, is linked to a superspeciality hospital through the satellite high up in the space. The health status of the patient under observation in the form of medical images are sent to the specialist, who in turn studies them, diagnoses and advises on the course of the treatment to be followed. The specialist doctor could even guide doctor at the patient's end during a surgery. Thus the patients in distant, rural areas can avail themselves of the timely consultation of specialist doctors without going through the ordeal of travelling long distances at a huge cost. Telemedicine is thus the most ideal route to boost healthcare facilities in India.

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The author is a noted freelance writer on scientific subjects.

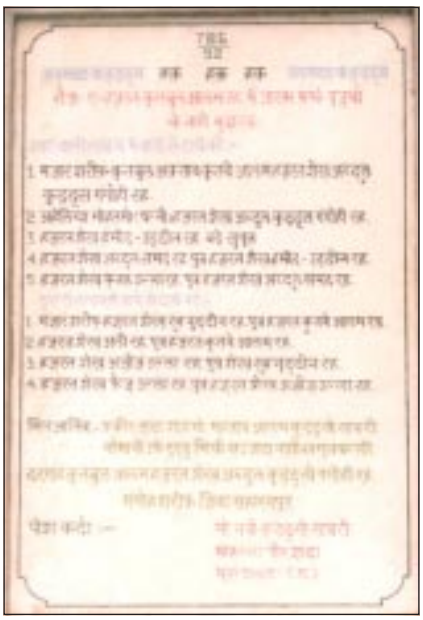
Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi

SYNTHESIS OF ISLAM & YOGA

Text & Photographs: MADHURI GUPTA

The fifteenth century in Indian history is traditionally referred to as the 'Dark Century'. But it is better understood as a period of historical transition in medieval India. The invasion by Timur in AD 1398-99 left the Delhi Sultanate in tatters, diffusing the centre of political power to various regions of India such as Jaunpur, Malwa and Gujarat. It was followed by great political turmoil as struggle for the Delhi throne continued between the Rajputs, the Sayyids and then the Lodis. However, these turbulent times also witnessed the flowering of regional languages, the rise of Hindi poetry and the synthesis of several rich cultural traditions in the field of language and religion. One such unique blend – that of Yoga and Islam – is to be found in the personality of Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi.

Shaikh Abdul Quddus hailed from a distinguished family of Ghazni that came to settle in the metropolitan city of Delhi, probably in the Ghazanavid times. Its members were known for their learning in the traditional Islamic sciences. Following disturbances in the wake of Timur's invasion, one Shaikh Nizam al-Din moved eastwards towards the rising Sharqi kingdom of Jaunpur. His son, Shaikh Nasir al-Din, was given lands at Phagwali, very near to Rudawli in the present-day Barabanki district of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. These lands were enjoyed by his son Safi al-Din and then his grandson Muhammad Ismail. It was



Plaque in Hindi at the Gangohi tomb.

the last to whom was born Shaikh Abdul Quddus in AD 1456, the third of four sons, from a mother who hailed from an equally distinguished family of *hakims* (administrators) of Rudawli.

Befitting the status of his family, Abdul Quddus began the curriculum of formal Islamic learning, but he had not pursued it far when the love of God overtook him. He destroyed the books he had been learning from. It is said that his later ability to teach and write upon the *'ulum-i-zahiri,* the non-Sufi branches of Islamic theology, came about as a divine inspiration.

After much opposition from his family members, he joined the Chishti-Sabri *silsila*, of Shaikh Ahmad Haqq who traced his spiritual lineage to Shaikh 'Ala al-Din 'Ali Ahmad Sabir, a nephew of Baba Farid of Punjab. Abdul Quddus devoted himself to worship and austerities, keeping awake through the nights on religious vigils. During daytime, he associated with Shaikh Piyare, an old servant at the *khanqah*. It was Piyare who encouraged him to learn both Persian and Hindi poetry.

In the last decade of the 15th century, when political climate deteriorated drastically due to accession wars between the Rajputs and the Lodis, Umer Khan Sarwani, one of the disciples of Shaikh Abdul Quddus, persuaded him to migrate to Shahbad in the Thaneswar *tehsil* (sub-division) of Karnal district (in the present-day state of Haryana). It was in Shahbad that Shaikh Abdul Quddus spent three and a half decades of his life.

From Shahbad, he often travelled to Delhi where his son Rukn al-Din studied. By the 1520s, there was widespread alarm about the impending threat of Mughal invasion. It led the Shaikh to decide to move away from Shahabad also as it lay on a direct route to Delhi. This time he moved his residence across the Jamuna to Gangoh, about 40 miles south-east of Shahabad, in district Saharanpur of Uttar Pradesh. Shortly after his arrival in 1525, there was a disastrous fire in Gangoh in which

Tomb of Shaikh Gangohi.

he narrowly escaped. The same night he heard the voice of God urging him not to lose hope and proclaiming that He had bestowed on him the rank of *Qutb* (Pole of the World) and made him *Qutb al-Aqtab* (The Pole of Poles of the World).

The Shaikh composed seventeen works, of which only a few are extant. His *Rushd-nama* is a short Sufi tract, interspersed with his poetic compositions. Collections of his letters also survive. His eldest son Shaikh Rukn al-Din recorded his conversations and biography as *Lata'if-i-Quddusi*. Although the orthodox Islamic element is strongly attested, there is also a surprising blend of Vedantic and Nathpanthic beliefs in his Sufic expositions. One such element is his strong advocation of the *salat-i-ma'kus* – prayer performed when hanging upside down, the heels tied with a rope. This posture is akin to that practiced by the Yogis. Among Chishti Shaikhs, Baba Farid is said to have performed this posture-prayer.

Abdul Quddus quotes a couplet from Bu'Ali Qalandar in support of this practice:

A prayer, which I, who am drunk from the taverns, perform;
It has in it neither standing, nor kneeling nor prostration.

It is said that Shaikh Abdul Quddus would spend the entire night praying hanging upside down. He also practised more such practices that were quite akin to the yogic exercises.

Shaikh Abdul Quddus died at Gangoh in November 1537. His tomb was probably built by Humayun. His *khanqah* is still in the possession of his descendents. His tomb is a large square structure, much in vogue in the early 16th century, and houses nine graves – all of family members. ◆

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To Nurse with Love

(For Sharad Dutt)

SHIV K. KUMAR

After his personal physician had failed to diagnose his ailment, he was advised to get admitted to the Miracle hospital. But there too all that the doctors could say was that he was suffering from some kind of viral infection. They said they'd be a little more definite only after a series of clinical tests.

Rajesh felt a little uncomfortable during the first three days. A heavy dosage of antibiotic and other medicines had almost benumbed his sensibilities. The only solace of comfort for him during the day was his deluxe room on the ninth floor, which overlooked the Hussain Sagar Lake and the Tank Bund. Whenever his bed was raised during the day, he could look at the boats sailing in the lake and the giant Buddha statue poised on a granite rock.

But at night, he often felt despondent and lonesome. Nostalgically, he conjured up images of his bungalow on Banjara Hills – the rose garden, the Ashoka trees standing watch along his front compound wall, the waterfall from a huge boulder near the porch, and the terrace on the third floor from where he could see Charminar – a monument to the love of Mohammed Quli Qutub Shah for Bhagmati, his beloved.

For the first three days, he was served by a nurse who wore the stern expression of a matron. Pock-marked, short-statured, with narrow Mongolian eyes, she looked forbidding. But what really piqued him was the abrasive tone of her voice, like two metal bars grinding against each other.

Then, on the fourth day, he almost felt rejuvenated as a new nurse walked into his room – soft-paced like a swan. Tall, olive-complexioned, moon-faced, she looked like a character from *The Arabian Nights*. In a voice, husky and sensuous, she said, 'I've taken over the ninth floor.' To him, the stethoscope round her neck looked like a diamond pendant and the BP case in her left hand like a jewellery box.

Then, bending over his bed, she added, 'I have to take your pulse-beat and BP'.

He just nodded his head, his eyes riveted on her face. In his mind's eye, he'd taken off her cape to see her dark hair, soft and flaxen like cashmere wool. She then held his right wrist to feel his pulse, which was now racing like a steed just unbridled and unsaddled. Then, as she took his BP, her forehead wrinkled.

'Hypertension,' she said, in a gentle voice. 'Due to your viral infection, I guess'.

'But there may be some other reasons too,' he said, smiling. 'There was no such problem yesterday'.

She looked a little mystified, not sensing what he really meant. Announcing that she'd be back in an hour for his sponge bath, she

walked away. Rajesh felt as though a dark tunnel that had suddenly been lit up with a match-stick, had lapsed into darkness again.

A little later, she returned with a small plastic bucket, a towel and a sponge. As she started to sponge his back, chest and face, he felt as though he was being abluted for some retrial. Occasionally, her naked fingers touched his body only to stoke up the blood in his veins. He felt tempted to hold her hand and say: 'You are like a high priestess to me. Let me kneel before you for your benediction'.

After she was gone, he asked his ward-boy what her name was. 'Marianne', he replied. He then took up the hospital pad and started to write a letter.

Dear Marianne,

Please forgive me for addressing you by name – which I've just picked up from my ward-boy.

I don't know if you could fathom a look of deep yearning in my eyes when you were feeling my pulse. Maybe I should have told you then that I've fallen for you. But to me a spoken word always sounds crass, wooden and insensitive, utterly incapable of capturing the invisible, and the inaudible. On the other hand, the written word operates in the privacy of one's soul. So, I couldn't bring myself to saying yesterday that my hypertension was an entirely new phenomenon for which you should blame your beauty. How could my pulse-beat be normal when my heart was galloping forth like a stallion?

I'd come to the Miracle hoping to be cured and discharged as early as possible. But now I wish to stay on here as long as possible. I'd run away from here if they transfer you to some other floor.

Last evening, as I was gazing at the Buddha's statue in the lake, I recalled his sermon at Sarnath. 'The way to happiness is through vanquishing one's desires.' But I wouldn't care for such happiness.

I want you near me – all the time. Even at the risk of unhappiness.

I know this letter will embarrass you. You may even ask for a new posting on some other floor to avoid me. But if you stay on, I'll think that you too... There, you see, how even the written word has failed me.

– Rajesh

When she returned to his room the next day for the same ritual – pulse-beat, BP, and the sponge-bath – he again said nothing. Only when she was about to walk way, he said, handing over the closed envelope:

'Here's something for you... But, please, read it only when you return to your quarters'.

As she took the cover, she looked confused. The whole night Rajesh wondered how she'd respond.

But when she entered the room the next day, smiling, he knew that the gods had blessed him. That day, she sat on his bed as she sponged his body. And she also pressed his hand impetuously before feeling his pulse.

Just then, the Head Nurse walked in and saw Marianne sitting on a patient's bed. Menacingly, she strode towards the bed and said to Marianne:

'Would you come out for a moment? I want to talk to you'.

Rajesh at once understood that the Head Nurse would now let loose her fury. Marianne may either be fired, or transferred to some other floor. He held himself guilty for what he'd led her into.

It was from the ward-boy that he learnt about her transfer to the ground floor. He also learnt from the new nurse, a dark snippety creature, that Marianne might even be fired for some lapse.

Rajesh decided to write her another letter, and send it through his ward-boy who always felt happy to receive generous tips from this patient.

Dear Marianne,

I seek your forgiveness for pushing you into this terrible mess. I hear from the new nurse that you may even be fired. Good for both of us!

In a sense, I feel happy that things have come to this. I may not be the Prince Charming in a fairy-tale, but I do propose to carry away my princess to the land of my dreams.

Marianne, I love you more than you can imagine. Let me seek refuge, once again, in the written word as I'd have felt somewhat diffident proposing to you orally.

Now that you have been taken away from me to the ground floor, I plan to get myself discharged, somehow. In any case, I am feeling cured – though only physically. Else, I am in a state of turmoil.

If you are fired, you'd be welcome to join me at:

Road No. 3
Bungalow No. 7
Banjara Hills
Hyderabad.

I know my parents are likely to haul me over the coals for wanting to marry a Christian, but I'll sort it out, somehow. As chairman of my own company, I am not dependent upon anybody'.

Only yours,

– Rajesh

Two days later, he managed to get himself discharged. As expected, his parents turned against him. But they gave in when he threatened to marry her secretly, and move into a rented apartment.

A week later, as Marianne taxied in through the front gate, she felt overawed to see the bungalow. On seeing her, Rajesh knew that she'd been fired.

As his fiance, she was to stay in the Guest Room, near the front gate, even though his parents had still not quite reconciled themselves to this relationship. To his brother, Suresh, however, she was just a nurse – and nurses, he thought, always flirted with their doctors and patients.

As night fell, a storm gathered over the Banjara Hills, and a wind began to howl like a wraith in a graveyard. With the moon veiled by clouds, a shroud of darkness descended all over the place. Suddenly, a shriek from the front gate rent the air. Rajesh at once rushed outside to see what had happened. As he got to the Guest Room, he was stunned to see Marianne standing near the door, in tears, her blouse partially torn off. Suresh stood close-by with a grin on his face.

'She's just a nurse', he said.

'This house is not safe for us, Marianne', Rajesh said contemptuously, his eyes flashing at his brother. 'We'll leave the place first thing tomorrow morning'.

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The author, a former vice chancellor of the Hyderabad University, is a much decorated writer.

The Desert Rhapsody

Text & Photographs: JUHI SINHA

Once upon a time, many centuries ago, across the vast Thar Desert came a caravan. It was a small group of singers from Sindh (now in Pakistan). After days and nights of travelling they settled down in a village along the western part of Rajasthan. These were the *Sindhi Sarangiyas*. All they had with them were their *sarangis* and an enormous wealth of music and musical talent. Today they are known as the *Langas*, and their homes are villages in the desert wastes between Jodhpur, Barmer and Jaisalmer, just short of the India-Pakistan border. One of the more important centres is a village called Burnawa.

Burnawa is a magical village. Every home here reverberates to the sound of music. The soaring voice of the singer, the notes of the *Sarangi*, the beats of the *dholak* and *kartal* – all come together to form an eternal cycle of night and day, summer and winter, life and death. Melody and rhythm are the very warp and weft of Langa life.

There is of course the business of day-to-day living – work to be done, chores to be performed. But it is all done to the background of music, and for the Langa men, music is both their life and vocation.

Music is such an intrinsic part of their life that it may not be an exaggeration to say that Langa children sing before they speak. The songs are a part of all their childhood games. The words may be incomprehensible, but the melody is a loved and familiar one. Deeply imprinted on their psyche – it is a memory of a time unremembered, unrecognized. Traditionally, only the boys and

Photographs in the article capture the life and profiles of "Langas".

men take up music as a vocation, and even for them, there is no formal training. But sometimes when a child shows exceptional promise, he is taken as a pupil by a senior Langa. There is an initiation ceremony and the boy accepts a guru to guide him.

The ceremony is an amazing amalgam of Hindu, Muslim and the local Rajasthani traditions. If the blessings are those of Ali, the symbols are the auspicious coconut and coloured thread, sacred to the Hindus. The colourful costumes, language and music are pure Rajasthani. It is a moment of piety and joyful celebration, and the entire village turns out in strength to participate. At the end of the ceremony, rock sugar *'Mishri'* is distributed to all.

The young boy has no formal lessons, even from his guru. He must learn to observe, and to imbibe the technique and the nuances that will make him a master of the craft. And the first step towards this is the mastery of the *Sarangi*, the eponymous instrument of the *Sarangi Langas*.

The Thar Desert is their classroom, with its searing heat and freezing cold and strong winds that mould and shape both man and dune. The stark landscape is reflected in the plaintive strains of the Sarangi, and man's resurgent spirit finds expression in the resonant voice of the Langas. There is a rich treasure trove of Langa music to inherit, but it is an inheritance that each has to earn.

Folk tales and legends are the very fabric of Langa life and music. One such story tells of how the first Langa came to be. Centuries ago, a young Rajput boy saw a procession of musicians go by. Fascinated by the music, he asked to be allowed to join them. He was told that only a Muslim could learn. Enthralled by the music, the boy converted to Islam. It is said that the Langas are descendants of that boy who loved music.

Traditionally the Langas have earned their livelihood by singing

at the home of their *jajman* or patrons, a tradition that has continued to this day. Their patrons are the *Sindhi-sipahis*. For them, no celebration is complete without the Langas. Their music is an integral part of every occasion, births, weddings, religious ceremonies and all festivals.

The Langas also recite the genealogy of their patrons, which goes back to hundreds of years. It has been memorized by each Langa, and his father and grandfather, before him. And as they fluently trace the family ancestry down 17 generations, Rajput names appear, suggesting the time of conversion to Islam. Since the Langas also help to arrange marriages for their patrons, a knowledge of the family history proves invaluable. The *Sindhi-sipahis* are connoisseurs of music, and when the Langas sing before them, they know that they have an informed, aware and musically literate audience.

The Langas are followers of Islam and they regularly offer *Namaaz* five times a day. But like their music, which is free from conventional classical boundaries, so too is their religion. It is deeply influenced by Sufism which is the mystic aspect of Islam. The Langas pay homage to the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, but their repertoire has verses from many Sufi poets such as Amir Khusro and Bulleshah.

Sufism accepts that there is only one universal Truth – but it also accepts that the paths to God may be many and varied. The Divine Essence is present in all. And when you love God with a passionate intensity – or one cast in His image, the emotion becomes sublime. Love is a force so powerful that God himself must bow before it.

As the Langas sing, the fluidity of Sufi thought, rich in imagery and emotion, moves freely from mosque to temple. From the divine munificence of Allah, to the divine love of Krishna and Radha, the music is a bridge that connects all religions. Whether it is the Meera Bhajans, or the colourful songs of *Holi* (the festival of colours) and *Sawan* (the songs of the monsoon) the mellifluous voices of the Langas give a special meaning to them all.

Over the years, and specially in the last decade, many of the *jajamans* left the desert to seek their fortune in the bigger cities of Rajasthan. The desert was harsh, often inhospitable – and once the *jajmans* left, many Langas fell on hard times, and they too decided to look beyond the dunes of their village.

Most of them spread out to Jodhpur and Jaipur. Unused to city life and its people initially, life was hard. But their music kept them going as they sang at weddings, festivals and celebrations of all kinds. It was a 'language' that reached out and touched the hearts of all who heard it.

And suddenly, somewhere in the 1990's, the Langas were everywhere, for everyone. They

sang in forts, palaces and havelies. The tourists discovered them, and then the media. The words of the songs were unimportant – it was their tremendous zest for life, their delight in their music – that found an instant rapport with the listeners.

The five star hotels, wealthy connoisseurs of music, senior officials and decisions makers took note of the Langas. Their music was unique. Although in the folk tradition, it was often based on pure classical styles. And the range, depth and virtuosity of the singers was unparalleled. Without any formal training, and with a gfft for improvisation that added tremendously to the composition, the Langas became trendsetters. They travelled to Europe, the USA and the world. And wherever they went, the world welcomed them with open arms. Their music transcended mere rhythm and melody – it was evocative of hope and joy, love and grief – universal emotions that touched a chord everywhere they went.

After having conquered the world, many of the Langas came back to Burnawa, for their hearts are still rooted in the golden sands of their village home. The conical shaped, thatched hut is both dwelling and home. Many left their stone and concrete houses in Jodhpur and Jaipur and chose to live in the desert. Although some of their children were studying in city schools, they knew that it was music that would shape their destiny and their lives. And in Burnawa there are many young boys eager to hear tales of Jodhpur, London and Paris, so as to find their place before the world. They know that they are the inheritors of a priceless legacy, and that their talent will ensure a resplendent future for the Langas. ◆

The author, a noted travel writer, is a filmmaker too.

Cave paintings at Bhimbetka.

INCREDIBLE INDIA

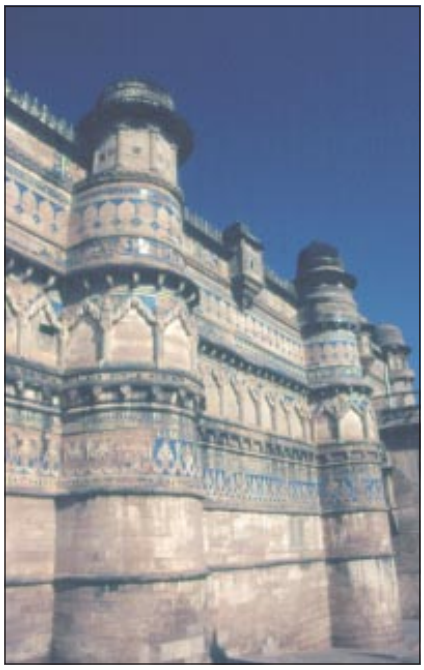
Madhya Pradesh

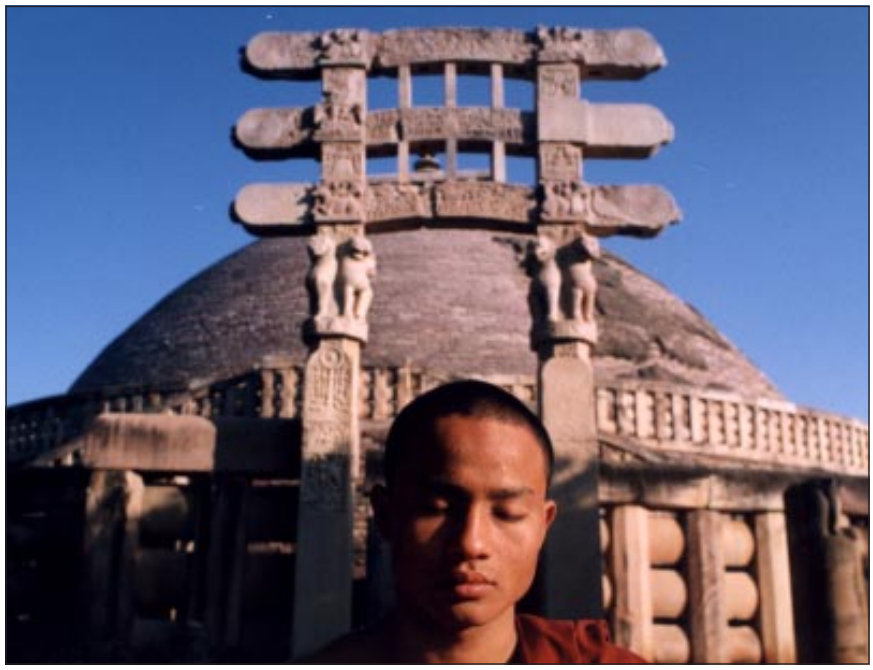
Text: ASHWANI LOHANI
Photographs: PHAL S. GIROTA

Being the largest state in India, Madhya Pradesh (central state or region) is aptly named being more or less in the middle of the country. Romantics often call it the "heart of India", also because of its unmatched variety in the form of art, culture, nature, religion and a vast repertoire of historical monuments. Covering an area of around four hundred and fifty thousand square kilometers, this mesmerizing land was in the past home to a large number of Hindu kingdoms and valiant warriors.

Madhya Pradesh is largely a plateau, streaked with the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges, which give rise to its main river systems – Narmada, Tapti, Chambal, Sone, Betwa, Mahanadi and the Indrawati.

"A virgin tourist paradise" is perhaps the best description of this state which has so far not been adequately explored by the roving tourist. It has everything that a tourist looks for to satiate his hunger of sensory experiences. Innumerable monuments, exquisitely carved temples, stupas, forts and palaces are tantalizing reminders of a glorious era of maharajas and their kingdoms, of builders, poets and musicians, of saints and philosophers of various faiths. This state has been home to Tansen, one of the legendary musicians of this nation. Being adequately forested Madhya Pradesh also offers a unique and





The Gwalior Fort (above); a Buddhist monk at the Sanchi Stupa (right) and the marble rocks along Narmada river in Jabalpur (facing page).

exciting panorama of wildlife in the national parks of Kanha, Bandhavgarh and Shivpuri, where one can see the tiger, bison, deer and antelope in sylvan surroundings. A land of many tribes and rich cultural beliefs and customs, Madhya Pradesh is the place to witness colourful fairs and festivals that include the *Ramnavami* of Chitrakoot, Dussehra of Bastar, Shivratri and the annual internationally renowned dance festival of Khajuraho.

Located around 170 kilometers from Jhansi and well connected by air, road and rail, the internationally-acclaimed temples of Khajuraho, a world heritage site, are India's unique gift to humankind. They represent life, in every form and mood, testifying not only to the craftsman's artistry, but also to the extraordinary expanse of vision of the rajputs of Chandela dynasty during whose rule the temples were built between 95 to 1050 AD. Of the original 85 temples, the 22 remaining temples are recognized as one of the greatest artistic wonders of the world.

The Buddhist pilgrim town of Sanchi, located close to the capital city of Bhopal, is known for its stupas, monastries, temples and pillars dating from the 3rd century BC to 12th century AD. The most famous of these, the Sanchi Stupa I was built by the Mauryan Emperor Ashok, then the Governor of the province of Ujjayini. A chunar sandstone pillar fragment lying near the Stupa I carry the famous edict of Ashoka warning against schism in the Buddhist community. A Buddhist pilgrimage to the land of the Buddha would be incomplete without a visit to the world heritage site of Sanchi.

On the other hand, Bhimbetka – surrounded by the northern fringe of Vindhyas, lies 46 kilometers south of Bhopal. Over 600 rock shelters belonging to the Neolithic age were discovered here. Detailed paintings depicting the life of the prehistoric cave dwellers were found in these caves. The paintings

usually in red and white depict scenes of hunting, dancing, music, horse riding, elephants, fighting animals, honey collection and household scenes. Religious and ritualistic symbols can also be found painted frequently. Encrypted as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2003, these cave paintings are a unique heritage of humankind and a must -see destination for a tourist visiting Madhya Pradesh.

The state also boasts of the only hill station in the country which is literally an architectural paradise. Pachmarhi, located around 200 kilometers from Bhopal, is a lovely hill resort girdled by the Satpura ranges. At around 3000 feet above the sea level, it has a very pleasing climate, placid forest glades, groves of wild bamboo and jamun and dense sal forests. The valley, ravines and maze of gorges all sculpted in red sandstone by the wind and weather adds their own colour to the environment. With fabulous opportunities for watching wildlife and the bird kingdom, Pachmarhi is a tourist paradise. The cave shelters in the Mahadev Hills have an astonishing richness in rock paintings, mostly of the period between 500 and 1000 AD, but there are some masterpieces as old as 10,000 years.

For the nature and wildlife enthusiast, the state has Bandhavgarh and Kanha National Parks. Bandhavgarh is known for its very high density of tigers, and also for being the breeding place for white tigers. Spread over an area of 448 square kilometers at an average height of 811 meters above the mean sea level, the area surrounding Bandhavgarh was the favourite hunting grounds for the kings of Rewa. The fort of Bandhavgarh is almost 2000 years old and was under the control of various royal dynasties. Bandhavgarh is around five hours drive from Khajuraho. The Kanha National Park, also located in the Satpura ranges and spread over 446 square kilometers is home to a variety of deer, blackbuck, gaur, leopard and the striped hyena, besides the tiger.

The capital of the State, Bhopal itself is a conglomerate of a unique culture, heritage and modernity. King Bhojpal set up this city in the eleventh century, but its real foundations were laid by a valiant Afghani soldier called Dost Mohammed during 1708 to 1740. The twin lakes around which the city has developed are its unique attraction; it is also called the city of

The Lake at Indore (above); a beautifully-illustrated panel at the Khajuraho temple complex (right); the Bhedaghat Falls (facing page, top) and the Scindia *chhatri* at Shivpuri (below).

lakes because of them. There are many historical mosques in the city with tremendous touristic appeal, besides its palaces and forts. The museum of mankind spread over 200 acres of land preserves and showcases the lifestyles of as many as 32 different tribes. It is also the only museum of its kind in India and a must-see for the visitors to Bhopal.

How can one not mention Mandu here. Located 100 kilometers from Indore at a height of 2000 feet in the Vindhya ranges in the Malwa region of the state, Mandu is known for love, the love story of poet prince Baj Bahadur and his queen Roopmati. Originally the fort capital of the Parmar rulers of Malwa, it was occupied by the Sultans of Malwa in the late 13th century. It had a pervading spirit of gaiety and

its rulers built exquisite palaces like the *Jahaj* and *Hindola* mahals, ornamental canals, baths and pavilions, graceful and refined in tune with the peaceful environment of those times. The Jami Masjid and Hoshang Shah's tomb provided inspiration for the builders of the Taj Mahal centuries later. Under Mughal rule, Mandu was a pleasure resort with extravagant festivities. Mandu's glory shall live forever in its monuments, legends and songs chronicled for posterity.

Shivpuri, the summer capital of the Scindia rulers of Gwalior, the forts and palaces of the Bundela kings at Orccha, the religious town of Amarkantak located at the source of river Narmada, the sacred island of Omkareshwar shaped like "Om", the auspicious Hindu religious symbol, the holy town of Maheshwar on the banks of river Narmada, the holy city of Ujjain are the other destinations that beckon the tourist.

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The author is a civil servant.

JEWELS OF INDIAN SKY

White-Eye

Text & Photographs: BHAGAT SINGH

The White-Eye *(Zosterops palpebrosa)* is a tiny restless olive-green bird – 10 cm in size, with a greyish-white breast. Its under-tail coverts are yellow, and its chin and throat are a brighter yellow. The conspicuous white ring around the eyes is its distinguishing feature. Both the sexes are alike.

The bird is practically distributed throughout India except desert regions. In the Himalayas, it is found upto 8000 feet elevation, and in peninsular hills upto their tops. It inhabits groves of trees, gardens, orchards and forested areas and woods. It also likes humid evergreen forests.

The White-Eye is entirely arboreal, and hardly descends to the ground. Its pointed, slender and slightly curved bill is especially adapted to reach deep into blossoms to draw nectar. In the process the bird also pollinates the flower. The bird, therefore, is also known as a 'flower bird'. It spends its time hunting for food amongst the

foliage of lofty trees as well as in bushes, often clinging upside down or sideways like *tits* to peep into sprigs and buds for insects. Its food consist of tiny insects, spiders, fruits and berries.

White-Eye emits a short nasal-toned call- *'twee-twee-twee'*. Its Sanskrit name *'Saranga'* in all probability is derived from its call.

The breeding season is practically from April to July. The male bird in this season warbles a pretty little tinkling song from some exposed tree-top. The nest is a cup made of finer grasses, lichen and fibres neatly bound with cobwebs, and slung in the fork of some thin twig at the extremity of an outhanging branch. It is placed in a bush or tree between three to ten feet from the ground. The normal clutch consists of two or three eggs of pale-blue colour. Both the parents participate in building the nest, incubating and tending the young. Incubation takes ten to eleven days, and the young leave the nest in a like period.

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The author is an eminent wildlife writer/ photographer.

Andaman & Nicobar Islands

FRESH FOCUS

Text & Photographs: JOGINDER CHAWLA

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands have for long been known as the ultimate penal settlement for India's freedom fighters who were incarcerated here during the country's freedom movement. They were subjected to all kinds of brutalities and indignities here as the question of any escape from these islands was simply ruled out – as one could go nowhere from here except seeking refuge in death!

However, in recent times, these islands have attracted world-wide attention for entirely different reason: anthropologists, social scientists and researchers have been wondering as to how, and wherefrom the prehistoric aboriginal Negroid and Mongoloid tribes came here to inhabit these islands? How have they been able to preserve their culture, lifestyle and identity even centuries after they first set their foot on these islands? Are they the last surviving ancestors of human race?

The Andaman & Nicobar consist of 572 islands of which only 36

A panoramic view of Port Blair, capital of Andamans (facing page) and an Indian ship approaching the port (above).

are inhabited. Adrift in the Bay of Bengal, these are spread over 8249 sq. kilometers; 86 percent of their land is under forest cover.

Though the historicity of these islands is shrouded in mystery, but it is gathered from many sources that Nicobar was known to man in the 5th Century BC and Andaman came to be known in AD 100. These islands of the naked, as they have been known, have been home to the Negroid natives right from the very beginning. They are still living in the same fashion. When Marco Polo sailed past these islands, he thought the natives here were cannibals! Even the locals here had shut themselves off from the outside world till the 17th century when missionaries from France, Denmark and Austria tried to establish contact with them but failed.

In 1777, John Ritchie, a British adventurer, realized the strategic importance of these islands so as to gain control over the oceanic routes. The British forces thus started the first settlement as a harbour at Chatham Island in August, 1790. It was soon shifted to the west coast of North Andaman, in November 1792, as it lacked even the basic facilities like water and arable soil. Ultimately, it was abandoned on the 8th of February, 1796.

The importance of these islands was again realized when in 1857 the Indian soldiers revolted against the British rule. These islands were found to be an ideal place to incarcerate the rebels and to instill fear in the minds of Indian freedom fighters. This isolated, far off place with no escape route was selected as the penal settlement. The Jail here was named the *Cellular Jail,* because it only had cells, 698 in all, and no dormitories. It was so designed that a single sentry could control all the seven massive wings. All these wings were three-storied and spread like a big star fish. Each wing faced the back of the other, with no opening in the rear except a ventilator at a height of ten feet, which was inaccessible to the solitary prisoner. At present there are only three wings left, others have given way to a hospital. The Jail was declared a National Monument in 1979.

The first batch of the 1857 rebel soldiers was brought here on the

The Swami Vivekananda memorial is a big tourist draw (top) and the underwater life (above & right).

10th of March, 1858, under four officers and 60 guards. The superintendent of this penal settlement first hoisted the British flag on 22nd of January, 1858, and the place was named as Port Blair, notoriously remembered as

A painting at the local museum depicts the revolt by the tribesmen against the British.

Kalapani, the dark dungeon. The living conditions here were so barbaric that one Sher Ali, an ex-convict, took revenge by murdering the visiting Viceroy of India, Lord Mayo, in February, 1872. He could not bear the day-to-day injustices meted out not only to the freedom fighters but also to the innocent tribals who were living here.

When the British penal settlement was set up, there were about ten closely-linked tribes living here; in the Andamans they were called great Andamanese, Ongese, Jarawas and Sentinalese, all of Negroid origin. In the Nicobar, they are of Mongoloid origin, known as Nicobarese and Shompens. They all spoke different dialects but were able to understand each other. A linguistic genius, Joseph Greenberg of Stanford University, was unable to find anything common these dialects had with other known languages, except with a smattering of the extinct "Tasmanian".

The Islanders were less than ten thousand, and they fiercely resented the intrusions of the British in their area. With their primitive arrows and spears, they raided the penal settlements but did not kill the prisoners. However, their raids were no match to the British might and they were brutally repulsed. The British later did try to entice them with the goodies but failed. And all subsequent efforts to assimilate them in the mainstream met the same fate.

It was only around 1970 that S. Bhaktawar Singh – a tall Sikh police officer – (now about 90 years of age) could win the trust and affection of the Jarawas who also treated him like a father figure. He just loved their innocence and treated them as naughty little children. He says they have an unwritten but strict code of conduct. There is no rape, adultery or theft in their area. The unmarried and widows live separately and children are treated indulgently.

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The author is a freelance writer.

Multiple exposures of a jazz singer made on a single negative, then solarised and toned.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Derivative Technology

Text & Photographs: N.K. SAREEN

Photography is just about hundred and fifty years old, but it has already pervaded our lives in such a way that no aspect is left untouched by its sweep. From our birth to the grave, not a single event in our lives passes without facing the camera. Who does not want to get photographed or take pictures of his marriage, a new-born baby or the places one visits with one's family and friends for preserving memories or just for posterity. Even for getting a passport or a driving licence – one has to face the camera.

The basic function of photography is to record, as it is wherever it is. It can be anything from our face to any inanimate object. While a photograph is considered a true documentary evidence of any

Outcome of the posterisation technique.

event – in the belief that the camera cannot and does not lie – it is a revelation in modern times that the camera can be manipulated and made to lie. This is primarily due to the fact that the camera and the film do not see or adjust the way a human eye can!

For many photographers, both professional and amateur, photography is an art. While many would describe the manipulation of camera as creative photography, for me it is both. There are several methods and techniques by which a completely ordinary image can be converted into a creative image of great visual impact. Like great masters of painting there are very many great photographers all over the world who have worked very hard and achieved legendry status by mastering some of these techniques and proved that photography is not just about recording events but it can be both creative and an art.

Posterization, solarisation, line conversion, bas relief etc.are known as derivative techniques or processes which have great pictorial possibilities. They derive from the basic negative for altering the original image and need a special film called line or lith film which requires a special contrast developer and can only be practiced in one's dark room. Lot of patience and hard work is needed to practice and master the

technique to get reasonably good results. Printing through texture screens or sandwiching two different negatives can produce some great pictures too. Two or more techniques can also be combined to attain some really startling results.

Then there are in-camera techniques which can be used very imaginatively and successfully either to control the final picture or produce a completely different picture which never existed before the lens. This can be achieved by using different types of lenses, filters and films. Many years ago I had successfully tried and converted simple and ordinary black and white images into colour pictures only by using chemicals, thus creating an impression of brush strokes which looked like the portraits painted by a painter. Reproduced here are some of those pictures. ◆

The author is a noted lensman/writer.

A black & white photograph solarised and red-dyed (top) and the pelicans' black & white photo solarised and then dyed in red polychrome.

"Couch of Love"

Kangra Miniatures

INSPIRED REPLAY

R.L. SAGGAR

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the emergence of Pahari paintings, more specifically the Kangra School of Art. So robust is this art form that artists in Chamba, Nurpur, Kulu, Mandi and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh are working to keep it alive by creating replicas of the originals. Art observers have taken note of this novel and interesting trend in terms of its artistic and commercial value.

The contemporary Kangra miniatures executed by artists in the hilly towns are available in original format at the network of state emporia and leading art stores. They reflect the same inspiration, themes and subject matter that had flourished during the era gone by. Critics call the freshly done miniatures as "The revived version of heritage art". Like the originals, they do not have the artists' signature. However, their close resemblance to the Mughal and later period miniatures is not difficult to discern.

Radha and Krishna, easy-to-recognise motif of Man and Woman – find portrayal in the present day Kangra paintings. Women in them are perfection personified – lotus eyes, flowing tresses, slender waists, delicate hands and fingers and the body having an arresting grace. Slight variations in themes in some executions notwithstanding, they hold the same powerful appeal.

Early miniatures were produced with great enthusiasm, each school having its own distinct stamp of individuality. Like the lyrical Kangra pieces, the colourful Basohli could add clipped butterfly wings to impart brilliance to its texture; Chamba with large and wonder-filled eyes, and the

"Princess in Garden" (above) and the "Ragini Gandhari" (facing page).

Kishengarh paintings had the distinction of curved and longish eyes.

The themes centred on seasons, landscapes, festivals, sports of Krishna, episodes of *Ramayana* and *Bhagwad Gita* highlighting love, duty, valour, devotion and commitment. Animals, pets and birds, trees, plants and flowers have also been stunningly rendered and lovingly represented.

Heritage preservation measures, acting as a catalyst, have resulted in extensive renovation of havelis and mini-palaces built by noblemen. Some of these have been transformed into heritage hotels and museums standing out as grand examples of hill architecture.

Local artists and painters have contributed their talent through Kangra and Mughal style paintings that decorate these palaces. Large halls, *baithiks* and wide corridors display these brilliant masterpieces. The intricate carvings and paintings don the doors, windows, galleries, verandahs and walls. With the passage of time the paintings on doors and windows had faded. Restoration work on some of these have brought them alive, reviving their original captivating appeal. Perforated jalis and jharokas and motifs impart exclusivity to each palace, fort and haveli. The credit to a large extent goes to artists and painters in the small hilly towns for bringing to life the past glory, through the freshly executed series of motifs and miniatures.

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The author is a senior journalist and art critic.

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India Perspectives

From the Editor…

The giant strides that India has been making in the applications of its advanced satellite technology in nation-building projects has started yielding rich dividends. This technology is now being applied in promoting healthcare facilities in the country – particularly in the far-flung and remote areas where medical facilities are not too developed. Karnataka has become the first state of India to launch the Telemedicine project that connects all the hospitals at the district and taluk levels with super-speciality hospitals. Efforts are underway to help Telemedicine become a popular and easily accessible instrument of healthcare. "HealthSat" to be launched next year (in 2005) would help extend the reach of Telemedicine throughout the country.

That India is a country of continental proportions with a mind-boggling diversity in its culture, topography and climate is too well known. Every state of the Indian Union has something unique to offer to the visiting tourist. This issue carries an illustrated article on Madhya Pradesh – home not only to the world-famous Khajuraho temples but to many other breathtaking and 'virgin' destinations that await exploration! Be it the wildlife sanctuaries at Bandhavgarh and Kanha, or the Buddhist site at Sanchi, or the intriguing Bhimbetka paintings by the caveman – Madhya Pradesh has them all and much more.

At the other end of the spectrum are the mesmerisingly beautiful Andaman & Nicobar islands. These are in focus now for the tribes that have been inhabiting these islands. Anthropologists from the world over are now trying to unravel the mystery that surrounds their ethnicity, and that how have they successfully insulated themselves for so long from the onslaughts of modernity.

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Transparency: Jitendra Singh.

Back cover: The Indore Fort by night.
Transparency: Phal S. Girota.