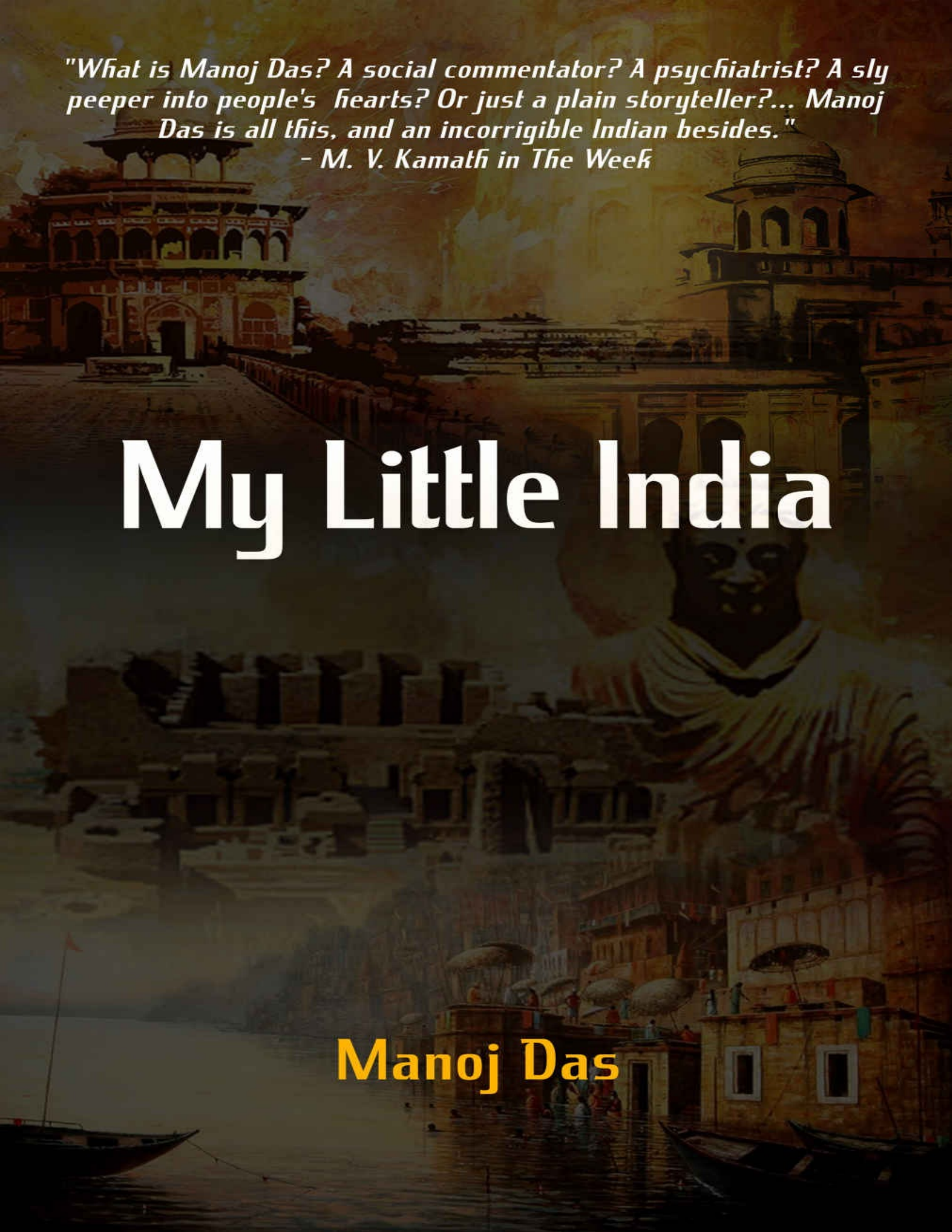

"What is Manoj Das? A social commentator? A psychiatrist? A sly peeper into people's hearts? Or just a plain storyteller?... Manoj Das is all this, and an incorrigible Indian besides."
- M. V. Kamath in The Week
My Little India
Manoj Das

My Little India

Manoj Das

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About the Author

“Manoj Das, on whom the Sahitya Akademi confers today its highest honour, declaring himself a Fellow of the Akademi, is one of the most illustrious fiction- writers of this country,” said the citation of India’s National Academy of Letters on that rare occasion, for at any given time that honour which is “reserved for immortals in literature” according to its constitution can embrace only a little over twenty writers. Further it said, “Though outside his home-state he is widely known as one of the best-loved and serious among the Indian writers writing in English, he is probably the foremost successful bilingual writer in the country.”

The citation said in conclusion, “Honouring today this unparalleled master of narration and passionate advocate of transcendence the Akademi is honouring itself.” Born in a remote village on the sea in Odisha in 1934 Manoj Das has travelled not a very short way through vicissitudes of life, standing a helpless witness to a devastating famine accompanied by epidemics sweeping away innumerable familiar faces and his affluent house being plundered twice by brutal gangs of bandits. Turning into a radical youth leader in his college days, courting jail, playing a role in the Afro-Asian Students’ Conference at Bandung in 1956, he ultimately became a student of mysticism. His first book in his mother-tongue getting published when he was fourteen, he is an author “whose writings have enchanted a long range of readers, from the village boys to Graham Greene” as a university citation read while conferring on him D.Litt. (Honoris Causa). The numerous accolades he has received include the country’s national recognition - the Sahitya Akademi Award, the most prestigious Saraswati Samman, the Padma Award and D.Litt. from about half a dozen universities.

Preface

There are many ways to look at India - rather many visions through which to experience the phenomenon that is India. Born and brought up in a village inaccessible even for the bullock cart, and educated in village schools till his early teens, this author’s vision of India had been often, if not always, coloured by his rustic emotions and nostalgia. May he suggest that he be spared of any scrutiny with any yardstick of history, for this work is an invitation to share, if you are in a leisurely mood, the author’s impressions of places and people, as his mind and imagination recorded them over the years.

Visions could also be interspersed with one another while looking at India, as it happens in Mark Twain’s summary of the country even though made in the nineties of the 19th century: ‘This is indeed India! The land of dreams and

romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendour and of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of Tradition,...the one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for shows of all the rest of the globe combined.' (*More Tramps Abroad-1897*)

While the first few articles, on the Andamans are factual, 'dreams and romance' dominate the pieces on Rajasthan and the rest are a fusion of objective experiences and subjective reactions. As the author is a bilingual writer, most of these pieces have their Odia versions, compiled as *Antaranga Bharat* .

The electronic version of the work would, I hope, reach an audience for which the printed edition is not easily available.
Bon Voyage!
Manoj Das *****

The Sinister Twilights

Twilights at Port Blair were never pleasant for Dr. Diwan Singh, the Senior Medical Officer for the Andamans and Nicobar Islands. They made him nostalgic; the faint clouds on the horizon, gilded by the unsteady brush of a drooping sun, silhouetted his distant home.

That particular evening in 1941 had disturbed him more than ever - he could not make out why. He had, of course, heard some blood-curdling veils from a tribal hamlet, while passing by a small island, on his way back to his headquarters after inspecting a medical camp. It continued to echo in his memory and sounded somewhat ominous - again he did not know why.

He must do something to cleanse his mind of elusive forebodings. He drew a scrap of paper and scribbled out his thoughts in Punjabi:

'It is the storm- over there,
Lingering with a blind fury,
It will strike, from across the horizon;

It will strike
And leave in its wake,
Darkness, obliterated Sun – the Moon – the Stars.
The storm of destruction, turmoil and change.
I won't know you, neither you me
The storm will strike
The storm . . ."
His feeling proved premonitory, in a few days.

World War II broke out. On the 23rd of March 1942 the Japanese struck at Port Blair. By then most of the English officers on the archipelago had escaped to the mainland. The rump of the administration had an uncertain duty.

As a few thousand Japanese marched into the town while more waited in their ships off the coast, the leftover of the colonial bureaucracy had to take prompt decisions - whether to retain their allegiance to the beaten British lion or to salute the Rising Sun. Among those who decided in favour of the former course of action were the officials of the telegraph department. They blew up the office with the help of mines laid earlier but were captured.

The hapless native population managed to show welcome signs to the grinning invaders. The occupation was complete within twelve hours without a single shot being fired. Many viewed this as auspicious. And when the Japanese threw the doors of the Cellular Jail open and signalled the prisoners out, there was a bit of euphoria among those who knew something to history and of the tail of the Bastille.

A few exciting hours were to pass before the islanders would realize the meaning of the invaders saving their bullets that long.

Soon, the Japanese were seen moving about through the bazaars, picking up anything they liked and from any shop. Hard as they tried, the merchants found it difficult to keep their welcome smiles stretched for too long. Nor could they cry, for some of them were slapped even for drawing long faces. They must look grateful.

The plundering spree continued on the second day - until the unexpected happened. 'Look,' Mr. Kesar Das, a kind of legend in Port Blair, popularly known as Masterji, told us, pointing at a row of houses across his balcony.

‘Beyond that was the residence of my friend Julfiquar, called Sonny by us. A Jap entered his house and picked up two eggs. “Please leave one, for we have a child who needs it,”Sonny had the cheek to say, trying to look polite through a grin. But the officer cast a menacing look at him, his gestures daring Sonny to check him. Sonny suddenly drew his gun and fired.’

The picture of the aftermath that emerges from what Masterji told us and from an invaluable document prepared by Rama Krishna, a Tahsildar whom the Japanese had appointed the Deputy Commissioner of the Territory and who was also the Chairman of the Andamans Branch of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s Indian Independence League, was like this: Julfiquar’s shot only grazed past the Jap’s head, but he was soon back on the scene with a thousand soldiers tiring their rifles in every direction. They went on setting fire to all the houses on then-way. Finally they caught hold of Sonny.

It was evening. Practically all the residents of Port Blair were driven to the market place. They included Sonny’s parents and brothers. They saw their Sonny, dear to all for his courage and kind-heartedness, kicked and dragged to a corner of the ground.

And here is how Bijay Bahadur, an eye-witness, narrated the event over All India Radio, Port Blair: ‘A burly Jap soldier approached and caught Sonny by his hands and started beating him methodically. I had never known anything so cruel in my life. Then Sonny was made to stand; six soldiers took positions with their rifles; the Commander stood with a white kerchief. He dropped it and Sonny was shot dead.’

As the deadly sound died down, the stunned crowd was ordered to disperse.

While the Japanese were plundering and burning Port Blair, some of the convicts let loose by them attacked the suburban villages. There were clashes. Both plunderers and innocent villagers, scores of them, fell dead.

Some affluent locals thought it a sound strategy in the prevailing situation to befriend the Japanese, throwing parties or heaping gifts on them. Through these contacts the Japanese realized that most of the people who mattered had fled the islands or were absconding. The population present could be easily cowed down.

And they acted promptly. They must have the best available accommodation. Without the least apology they entered any bungalow, private or official, and

literally threw out its occupants. Atul Chandra Chatterjee, an officer who stuck to his position as the head of the Treasury and Financial Advisor to the Chief Commissioner, was evicted from his house. As he came out to the lawns, hapless and perplexed, the Japs saw that a crowd had gathered in front of the gate, curious about the fate of an officer considered important by them. It could be favoured with a glimpse of the Japanese sword power.

'Halt!' cried the leader of the gang. He gave a broad grim at the crowd before rushing upon Atul Babu. He then unsheathed his sword and stretched his grin as well. Next moment Atul Babu's head rolled on the grass.

Once comfortably Lodged, they looked for pleasure. They mobilized a gang of ex-convicts who raided the villages, captured women.They were led into Jap camps in the manner cattle are driven into slaughter house,' reminisced an old witness.

Days passed smoothly for the new potentates. They had set up a civilian government with Narayan Rao as the Chief Commissioner. Rao, partly in good faith and partly under the spell of his unexpectedly gained status, liberally used the only car at the disposal of an Indian.

But perhaps he sported his blessings a bit too liberally. Before long the Japanese ships were bombarded by the Royal Air Force. There must be a spy ring transmitting information to the Allies and Narayan Rao could be its hub, for he had been observed driving his vehicle at night. One evening the Commissioner' was stopped right in the market and unceremoniously dragged from his status symbol and pushed into the Cellular Jail.

Suspicion grew into phobia. Hundreds were rounded up and herded into jail. Let us listen to Rama Krishna:

'Between the tortures, interrogation by the Japanese continued, accompanied by constant blows with a thick stick. When continuous questioning alternated with beatings yielded no desired result, new steps were taken. Sprinkling a part of the body with petrol and setting fire to it until the entire skin burnt deep was one step. Another step was to incise daily some part of a man's body and to sprinkle the cut with salt or powdered chilli.

'When all these methods failed, wives and children from the homes of the victims were brought to the jail. In me torture chamber the woman was beaten in

front of her husband and the husband was beaten in front of his wife. Or the wife was asked to beat her husband and the husband, the wife. Children were beaten in front of their parents . . . sometimes the son was asked to beat the mother or father. Confession? But what confession, having done nothing . . .? Seven prisoners were shot dead. Many died in the torture chamber and it is not known what happened to their dead bodies. The entire population was panic-stricken.'

Summary deaths were metal out to those who did not prove quite servile. Among them was Dr. Dewan Singh.

It was a relatively lonely forenoon when I was walking across the courtyard of the Cellular Jail. Early in the April though it was, the heat was unbearable, particularly for a group of three Europeans passing by me. They wiped their faces frequently and cursed the weather, hardly paying any attention to their guide's commentary: 'This is the famous Cellular Jail, the Bastille of India . .'

'The best jail of India?'
'No, madam', the guide corrected the stooping old lady. 'The Bastille.'
'What?'
'The Bastille, you see...'

The lady shrugged. Every European was not bound to know the significance of the Bastille. Her eyes had fallen on me. No reason why I should not help.
'The Bastille was the fortress used as a prison which the rebels stormed, marking the beginning of the French Revolution.'
'Oh, oh, oh . . . the French Revolution! Thanks.' She hurried to catch up with her companions. The guide eyed me with some wariness.

'Look, my friend,' I told him in Hindi. 'Your analogy does justice neither to the Bastille nor to the Cellular Jail. The Bastille had been stormed by the French themselves and not by any foreign invader. Therein lies the Bastille's glory. The Cellular Jail had a more glorious past than the Bastille and far more tragic....'

He did not seem to appreciate.
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Night to Remember

The extraordinary man we were looking for proved elusive, time and again, for three days. ‘I saw him meandering here!’ we would be told. Alas, he was just not there.
‘To find him is not easy,’ said a proud neighbour when we located Soudagar’s hut. Nevertheless, the neighbour gave us the unfailing clue to find him.

At last Viswam (publisher of *The Heritage,* the magazine I edited in the eighties of the twentieth century) and I closed in on him, standing guard at the two gates of a mosque where he offered Namaz without fail on a certain day. Local acquaintances stood behind us to identify him.

It was the Director of Public Relations of the Union Territory who had given us an account of Soudagar. From AIR, Port Blair, I had obtained a script of a feature they had broadcast lately, under the bizarre title “The Man Who Survived on Human Flesh”.

Soudagar had been deported to the Andamans, convicted of murder, in 1935. What he had done in his youth had completely faded from his memory. What made him a moving curio was his experience in the hands of the Japanese.

We practically forced him into our car the moment he emerged from the dispersing crowd. ‘Do you intend to kidnap me?’ he asked with a chuckle. A little coaxing and he stopped dragging his feet; he grew fluent, by and by, as my tiny tape recorder began whirling.
And this was his story:

By the middle of 1945 the islanders were left with no food. Bombardment by the Allies made it impossible for any ship carrying foodstuff to reach the harbour. Starvation was followed by a plundering spree and anarchy - a culture pioneered by the Jap colonialists themselves.

But the Japs, too, had their version of ‘final solution’ to the problem.

Five hundred villagers were taken to an island and clean machine-gunned. Not even one survived the operation. Heaps of bones were found by investigating officers only after the Japanese occupation ended and the horror was revealed by some distant onlookers.

Another day it was announced that the new masters of the archipelago would create opportunity for massive cultivation on the virgin soil of some uninhabited

islands. Those willing to work were asked to gather in front of the Cellular Jail. Food, shelter and handsome remuneration awaited them.

Between six and seven hundred people responded. They were detained for a full day. ‘Happiness will be yours in a few hours,’ the starving multitude was told. They were driven in trucks covered by tarpaulin to Aberdeen jetty and herded into a ship.

It was dark and raining and a biting cold wind tore through the skin of the emaciated passengers. The ship was nearing the Havelock Island.
‘Jump, you fools, quit our ship!’ The command sounded like a terrible thunderclap through the lashing wind.
Was someone out with a joke?

Nothing, the white foam on the dancing waves apart, could be discerned. No, that horrible voice must be a hallucination! But such a hope, desperately cultivated, proved wistful before long. The passengers were pierced through by bayonets and many were beheaded. Flashes of lightning showed dozens of swords at their sinister best. Within minutes the ship was emptied of its human cargo.
Now, let us hear Saudagar who, too, was in the ship, hoping for a new life at dawn.

‘I was at the rear of the boat when the massacre began-patient till the last moment. Then blindly I took the plunge. I splashed and gulped mouthfuls of salt water. My end had finally come, I was sure.

‘I started swimming - rather floundering in whichever direction on the ocean in that dark stormy night chose to push me. Then my feel touched sand. “Come this way folks, shore this way” I shouted to my invisible fellow-travellers.’

Saudagar reached the shore of Havelock Island, panting and nearly dying. As dawn broke out, he saw corpses floating about, with stomachs ripped open and some half-eaten by sea creatures. He counted up to 150 and gave up. Then he loitered and met the other horrified fellows who had managed to save themselves. They talked to one another and a sort of fraternity developed among themselves.

‘The first thing we did was to light a fire by rubbing bamboo poles together. We kept the fire going. In a single day, all the small insects of the shore were eaten

up and we were nearly a hundred skeletons prowling about. There was nothing more to eat. Rain water was the only means for quenching thirst.'

For the first starving week, they would sit in batches and plan ways of keeping themselves alive and escaping to safety. But, after ten days:
'I saw small groups of ghostly fellows sitting here and there, waiting for their deliverer - Death! Their bones are still lying all over that island. Have you ever been there?'

Soon he felt something indefinable in the air. Those who still nurtured a flicker of life in them started forming packs and moving about. There was something stealthy, something mysterious and ominous in their movements. Saudagar was a loner. Occasionally he would get a whiff of the creepy smell of burning flesh. He was bewildered. Then one day...

'Three chaps staggered towards me. Because I was a gardener, they wanted me to identify edible leaves. I went with them. While I was searching for such leaves, one of them suddenly caught me from behind, trying to gag me with one hand and stab me with the other. Here - look, I still bear the mark ... And remember, he was also very weak and it was I who was getting murdered - life is the dearest object, *Saab* so I pushed him off with all my might and he fell flat. I walked away. I was not chased because my would-be killers were left with no vigour to do so.'

The bemused Soudagar soon found out how the handful of survivors would move about like packs of wolves and pounce on a loner and strangulate him. They would then roast him and eat his flesh.

'The assassins themselves were in a pitiable state, their stomachs sunk into their spines, the rib-cages showing and trembling with the rhythm of their feeble hearts. Each of them had started counting steps towards the dark abyss from which there was no return.

'My brain, dim and hazy, grasped a bizarre idea. Couldn't I do that? Oh no - not killing someone and eating him. That was beyond me. But there were corpses - quite fresh. One after one they collapsed never to stir again. Could not I? . . . Could not I? ... Something had also started moving in closer - every moment - closer. I knew any time it would overtake me and I would also sprawl for good. So, what's wrong in it? . . . what's wrong in it? . . . damn it, what's wrong in it? .

. .

‘I got accustomed to it. But I think human flesh is poisonous. After a few days my eyes turned yellow. But I continued ... until, one day, I could feel that death - that creeping shadow -was just there, standing behind me. My companion was lying on the beach - we did not have water for three days. My tongue felt like a dry twig. I thought I was being punished for my sin. I knelt down in meek supplication - I was praying to God for death, then suddenly ... there was a shower!

‘I accepted the Grace of God in my cupped palms. I drank - and then soaked my shirt and wrung drips into the mouth of Govardhan Pandit - my only companion who also survived.’

The same day, Soudagar and Pandit were rescued by an American battleship heading towards Port Blair. Earlier, on the 14th of August 1945, Japan had surrendered the islands. The Rising Sun was brought down from the official buildings and for the next two years the Union Jack flew. Soudagar to Singapore as a witness in the Court Martial of Vice-Admiral Hara and 36 Japanese officers charged with atrocities against the islanders. Hara was executed for ordering wanton killing.

A grey old Soudagar, a little befuddled, roamed the streets of Port Blair till the early nineties of the twentieth century.
Why did the Japanese carry out such massacres? Here is an act from *The Statesman* of 27th October 1945:

‘It is alleged that after the Japanese Civil Governor had declared that the Japanese would be unable to feed the civilian population of Port Blair, about 700 natives, including women and children, were told that they were to form a new colony on Havelock Island and that they would embark at night. They set out, but a few hundred yards from the island, they were attacked and flung into the sea.’

We left Soudagar in his modest house behind a bazaar. He was happy to recount his recent feat in a running race, the laurels he received and how his picture glowed on the TV. I remembered the Ancient Mariner:

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;

That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me;

To him my tale I teach.
O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
Alone on a wide wide sea:
So lonely 'twas, that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be.
...
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

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The Haunted Islet and Its Last Great Guest

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep: And Bahram, that great Hunter - the Wild Ass
Stamps O'er his Head, and he lies fast asleep.

-Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rub'yát* of Omar Khayyam

A few haunted houses I had seen, but never a haunted islet, an islet that was vibrant with life, love and laughter till a few decades ago. Solemn hymns and carols emanating from two churches, one Catholic and the other Protestant, merged with the melody spilling out of the nearby dancing hall, and white children raced with squirrels and flitted about with butterflies in a beautifully laid out park and the broad steps leading to the imposing building atop the hillock was continuously trodden by officials, merchants and citizens seeking favour from the lord or the archipelago, the Chief Commissioner for this part of British India - the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Surrounded by the deep blue sea, the tiny hillock consisting of only 80 acres of

land, known as Ross Island, was the paradise from which the Commissioner ruled the 293 big and small islands, 8,249 square kilometres in area.

Now the only permanent residents of the deserted Ross island were some deer and peacocks. They stamped over many a buried head, of convicts and their executioners, of those who gave orders and those who obeyed them, some good and some evil.

One of the last to die there was indeed a good man, they say, one Mr. A.G. Bird, a senior British administrator to fall into the Japanese hands soon after the archipelago was invaded by the latter in 1942. They tied him to a pillar and rained on him blows, *ju jitsu* style.

The septuagenarian Mr. Gurumoorthy, one of the survivors of the Japanese atrocities who had kindly guided us to the islet (with the permission of the Navy, for it is under their custody), narrated the last moments of Mr. Bird, probably standing on the very spot of the macabre enactment of the occurrence.

‘Were our blows rather hard? Do you wish to drink a little water?’ a grinning Japanese officer asked him.
‘Yes, please!’ muttered the gasping prisoner.
They brought a bucketful of water and the officer dipped a sword in it. ‘It’s clean now,’ he observed. And suddenly he thrust it into the prisoner’s chest and then chopped off his head.
‘Only the other day I guided Mr. Bird’s daughter and son-in-law here - they came from England to have a glimpse of this site,’ Mr. Gurumoorthy informed us.

Silent trees spread their branches and shoots into the crumbling skeletons of once majestic mansions in a desperate bid to stop them from totally disappearing. A million leaves murmured against the violent gusts of wind trying to dislodge the fragments of the structures from their intricate embrace. Wave after wave pounded the islet from all sides. There was no other sound. Strangely, I never heard any chirping of birds.

Over the scattered blocks of ruins, the graveyard of the proud, several recent visitors had sought their way to immortality by inscribing their own names and occasionally of their consorts.

This isolated islet had hosted a great Indian leader for three days during that

turbulent period. On the 29th of December, 1943, the Andamanians were ordered to proceed to the aerodrome. By then the people had learnt to resign to the practice of the new rulers to summon anyone to any place, any time. Only a few of them knew that an illustrious son of India was arriving to celebrate the ‘liberation’ of that chunk of the country from the British.

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose emerged from the plane and walked through the people who had been ordered to stand in two rows ‘as though he was inspecting a guard of honour.’ Japanese officers marched before and behind him and often flanking him too. He had no opportunity to talk to the Indians. He must have felt uneasy, but that could hardly be an occasion for him to question or violate the protocol.

He was led to Ross Island although by then the administration was being conducted from Port Blair. During his sojourn, he was shown the empty wings of the Cellular Jail while a large number of Indians were rotting in the wings shut off from his sight. ‘Alas! if he had seen persons whose skins were missing from thighs, scrotum, abdomen and chest and who could not wear any apparel; a few who had no flesh on their breeches; a few who had no skin on parts of their bodies, the result of burns by petrol; a few who could not walk straight, a few who had deep knife-cuts all over the fleshy part of their bodies in which salt had been sprinkled. Alas! if he had only seen these with his own eyes!’ laments Mr. Rama Krishna.

The public meeting Netaji addressed was well attended. ‘Masterji’ Kesar Das led a team of his students in singing Bande Mataram. He demonstrated the tune to us on the upper floor of his log cabin. Almost half a century did not seem to have deprived his voice of its melody.

But the office bearers of the Independence League must meet Netaji, without any Japanese presence! They somehow managed to communicate their request to Netaji to pay a visit to their office. Netaji readily agreed. Indeed, he must have eagerly looked forward to the opportunity.

But his hosts scheduled his visit for the early hours of the very day of his departure - while he would be on his way to the aerodrome! And to their amazement, his native followers saw the office of the Independence League and the ground around it jam-packed with women and children long before the leader’s arrival. At midnight soldiers had shunted them out of their homes and

herded them there.

Netaji came and left, hardly able to talk to anybody and anybody being able to talk to him. Some of the office-bearers could not even reach him through the unmanageable chaos so imaginatively managed by the Japanese.

Hardly had the sound of Netaji's plane faded when 33 of the elite of the Andamans, doctors, teachers, *et al,* were rounded up and taken to a lonely place and asked to confess their role as spies for the British. Their inability to confess anything only intensified the perpetration of torture on them. They reached a condition when they could neither move their limbs nor talk. Their captors promptly solved their problem by shooting them dead.

I was going through the incomplete list of freedom fighters incarcerated in the Cellular Jail, inscribed on tablets. Deportations had begun as an aftermath of the great rebellion of 1857. The rebels must be totally uprooted from the mainland and the Andamans were the ideally inhospitable ground for them to be dumped. These unwanted men could also be used as shields to make inroads into the dangerous interiors. They could be sacrificed to reclaim fresh patches of colony.

The British Indian Government, of course, meant to send shock-waves across the country with orders of deportations into the unknown. If tens of thousands of suspected participants in the Mutiny or its sympathisers were hanged or shot, a few thousand more were despatched beyond the vast sea - where waters were so deep and so unfamiliar that they inspired the spectre of a dark sphere. Thus dark, *Kala,* assumed a sinister suggestion, literal as well as figurative. To be hurled across the dark waters, *Kalapani,* was to surely meet with a painful death.

And not even one of the 4,000 Mutineers deported between 1858 and 1860 ever returned to the mainland. Death at one's native place created its normal reactions, but snatched from his environment, from his own people and deported to *Kalapani,* the victim only left an eerie vacuum in the minds of his kinsmen. They would never know when he died . . . No communication between the deported and his kinsmen was possible. And the rulers saw to it that the Andamans remained a forbidden zone.

Among the prisoners from the Mutiny were feudal lords like Hatte Singh of Ghens (Sambalpur) who used to attack the East India Company's regiments from the hilltops of Barihadera, and distinguished scholars like Allama Fazali Hag

Khairabadi and Maulana Liakat Ali. Recent efforts to trace their burial spots proved futile.

The British saw to it that the terror of *Kalapani* produced the desired effect. Even a hapless Maharaja of Puri, Divyasimha Dev, who could very well have been punished at home, was sent to the Andamans in 1878 where he died. This was a warning to the other Indian princes. Maharaja Divyasimha was a safe choice, for he had ceased to rule any State and had ceased to command any force that could create any problem for the rulers.

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Death after the Loveliest Sunset

Thus spoke ‘Sir’ John Mandeville, probably a self-styled knight, of the Andamanians, in the 14th century.

“In those isles are many manners of folk... one of them is of great stature, like giants, horrible and foul to the sight and they have but one eye, in the midst of the forehead... In another isle are men without heads; their eyes in their shoulders and their mouths are round shaped like a horseshoe, amidst their breasts... in another isle is a manner of folk that has a flat face, without nose or eyes, but have two small holes instead of eyes and have a flat mouth, lipless. In another isle are foul men who have so huge over lips that when they sleep in the sun, they cover the whole face with the lip...”

But Mandeville was not alone in scripting spectres to surpass the of extraterrestrial beings in contemporary fiction. A 7th century Chinese work of ‘history’ refers to the archipelago as the domain of demons. Marco Polo in the 13th century had hardly any different opinion about the place. A 16th century traveller, Caesar Frederich, described the Andamanians as people who ate one another!

For long fear and mystery surrounded the islands inhabited by different tribes (their population dwindling): the Andamanese concentrated on Strait Island, the Nicobarese and Shampens in the Nicobars, Onges at Dugong Creek in the little Andamans, Jarawas in the South Andamans and Sentinels on the North Sentinel

Island. The one man who was very keen to cleanse the atmosphere of fear and make the islands hospitable was Lord Mayo, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India who visited the archipelago in 1872.

‘See that green outline? That is Mount Harriet,’ a companion aboard the boat told me. Among half a dozen rare books relevant to my Andaman trip I had carried with me was the biography of Lord Mayo (1892) by WAV. Hunter. The mention of Mount Harriet was enough to drive me into its pages.

Lord Mayo had finished inspecting the Viper island to which most of the dangerous convicts were confined. Precautions to protect the most important visitor from any possible danger had been judged foolproof. The local administration was relaxed.

But the dynamic Lord Mayo was restless. He was looking for an ideal spot for building an ideal sanatorium. Mount Harriet, a hill rising to a height of 1116 feet, was almost beckoning him. ‘Let us do Mount Harriet,’ he said, ‘We have still an hour of daylight.’

It was a stiff climb through thick jungles. ‘His own party were dead tired; they had been on their feet for six blazing hours, and Lord Mayo, as usual the freshest after a hard day, begged some of them to rest till he returned. Of course no one liked give in and the cortege dived into the jungle.’

Alas, ‘cortege’ is the word Hunter chooses.

Atop the hill the Viceroy was almost in a trance. He surveyed the site for his project all right, but he was growing more and more withdrawn. He sat down, gazed across the sea at the setting sun and murmured, ‘How beautiful!’ He drank some water and, after a long look westward, exclaimed in a subdued voice, ‘It’s the loveliest thing I think I ever saw!’

It was growing dark. The party began its descent. Torch bearers from the jetty met them midway. They were not far from their launch which, with steam up, was whizzing at the jetty stairs.

The Viceroy’s party was evidently happy to have arrived at the end of a long day. A brief voyage over the dark waters and they would be under the welcome light where so many waited to receive the august visitor for an elaborate dinner.

‘The Viceroy stepped quickly forward before the rest to descend the stairs to the launch. The next moment the people in the rear heard a noise as of ‘the push of some animal’ from behind the loose stones: one or two saw, in the torch light, a hand and a knife suddenly descend. The Private Secretary heard a thud, and instantly turning round, found a man ‘fastened like a tiger’ on the back of the Viceroy.

‘In a second twelve men were on the assassin; an English officer was pulling them off, and with his sword-hilt keeping back the Native guards, who would have killed the assailant on the spot. The torches had gone out; but the Viceroy, who had staggered over the pier side, was dimly seen rising up in the knee-deep water, and clearing the hair off his brow with his hand as if recovering himself. His Private Secretary was instantly at his side in the surf, helping him up the bank, “Burne,” he said quietly, “they’ve hit me.” Then, in a louder voice, which was heard on the pier, “It’s all right, I don’t think I’m much hurt,” or words to that effect. In another minute he was sitting under the smoky glare of the re-lit torches, on a rude native cart at the side of the jetty, his legs hanging loosely down. Then they lifted him boldly on to the cart, and saw a great dark patch on the back of his light coat. The blood came streaming out, and men tried to stanch it with their handkerchiefs. For a moment or two he sat up on the cart, then he fell heavily backwards. “Lift up my head,” he said faintly: and said no more.

‘They carried him down into the steam launch, some silently believing him dead. Others, angry with themselves for the bare surmise, cut open his coat and vest, and stopped the wound with hastily torn strips of cloth and the palms of their hands. The assassin lay tied and stunned a few yards from him. As the launch shot on in the darkness, eight bells rang across the water from the ships. When it came near the frigate, where the guests were waiting for dinner, and jesting about some fish which they had caught for the meal, the lights in the launch were suddenly put out, to hide what was going on in it. They lifted Lord Mayo gently to his cabin: when they laid him down in his cot, everyone saw that he was dead.

‘To all on board, that night stands out from among all other nights in their lives. A silence, which seemed as if it would never again be broken, suddenly fell on the holiday ship with its 600 souls. The doctors held their interview with the dead - two stabs from the same knife on the shoulder had penetrated the cavity of the chest, either of them sufficient to cause death. On the guest steamer there were hysterics and weeping; but in the ship where the Viceroy lay, the grid was too deep for outward expression. Men moved about solitarily through the night,

each saying bitterly to his own heart, “Would that it had been one of us.” The anguish of her who received back her head was not, and is not, for words.

‘At dawn the sight of the frigate in mourning, the flag at half-mast, the broad white stripe darkened to a leaden grey, all the ropes slackened, and the yards hanging topped in dismal disorder, announced the reality to those on the guest steamer who had persisted through the night in a hysterical disbelief. On the frigate a hushed and solemn industry was going on. The chief officers of the Government of India on board assembled to adopt steps for the devolution of the Viceroyalty. In a few hours, while the doctors were still engaged on the embalming, one steamer had hurried north with the Member of Council to Bengal, another was ploughing its way with the Foreign Secretary to Madras, to bring up Lord Napier of Ettrick, to Calcutta, as acting Governor General.’

The assassin was a highlander from the remote North western Frontier. He had killed (according to his own confession, he had been only an accomplice) a kinsman. He was to he hanged, but the court had mercifully awarded him transportation for life.

Killing a kinsman who had been nasty with him was his right - he believed - and his philosophy read in the justice done to him an inscrutable injustice. He must avenge, he decided.
To return to Hunter:

‘During three years he waited sullen for some worthy prey. On the morning of the 8th February, when he heard the royal salute, he felt that his time had come, and sharpened a knife. All through the day the close surveillance gave him no chance of getting to the islands which Lord Mayo visited. Evening came, and his victim landed unexpectedly at his very door. He slipped into the woods, crept up Mount Harriet through the jungle side by side with the viceroy; then dogged the party down again in the dark; but still got no chance. At the foot he almost gave up hope, and resolved to wait for the morrow. But as the Viceroy stepped quickly forward on the jetty, his grey-suited shoulders towering conspicuous in the torchlight, an impulse of despair thrilled though the assassin. He gave up all idea of life, rushed round the guards, and in a moment was on his victim’s back.

‘He was a hill-man of great size and strength. When heavily fettered in the condemned cell, he overturned the lamp with his chained ankle, bore down the English sentry by brute strength of body, and wrenched away his bayonet with

his manacled hands. He made no pretence of penitence, and was childishly vain of being photographed (for police inquiries in Northern India) as the murderer of a Viceroy. Indeed, some of the above details were only got out of him by a native officer who cunningly begged him for materials for an ode on his deed, to be sung by his countrymen. Neither his name, nor that of his village or tribe, will find record in this book.'

Bits of information about the assassin, nevertheless, are found in some other works. He was a Pathan, Sher Ali by name. According to the memoirs of M.M. Bhowmik, an inmate of the Cellular Jail, he killed two of his armed guards bare-handed a few days prior to climbing the gallows.

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A Domain beyond God

It is doubtful if there was another prison site in the world where so many generations and schools of fighters for freedom of a country had been interned and where so many political prisoners had been hanged or killed through torture. The 1857 rebels were followed by the Wahabis (1860-1870), the Manipuri rebels led by Tikendrajit (executed on the mainland) including members of the Raj family; convicts of the Alipore Conspiracy Case, the Nasik Conspiracy Case, the Lahore Conspiracy Case, the Barisal Conspiracy Case, the Benares Conspiracy Case, the Burma Conspiracy Case, and participants in several other less-known plots.

The rigidity in maintaining isolation among the prisoners was exemplified in the case of the famous Savarkar brothers. Vir Damodar Savarkar who reached the Cellular Jail in 1910 learnt only after a full year that his elder brother, Ganesh Savarkar, had been secured before him!

The early jail buildings had disappeared. What stands today as the Cellular Jail is a fortress, constructed in the nineties of the 19th century, on the heart of Port Blair, earlier Port Cornwallis. It was constituted of seven three-storey wings, all of them extending from a central tower and called Cellular because it had only cells, 698 in all, and no dormitory. A cell measured 13 and 1/2 feet by 7 feet and had a door with iron grating and a small ventilator at a height of 10 feet on the

back wall. The front of each wing faced the back wall of another wing so that the inmates of one wing could not communicate with those of another. After a day's hard labour, a prisoner was locked up in his cell from 5 p.m. till 6 a.m.

Prisoners were kept shackled even in the ship that took them to the citadel of punishment. They were marched to the fortress in fetters and received with appropriate courtesy at the destination. Passages from the memoirs of a well-known revolutionary, Upendranath Bandopadhyay of the famous Alipore Conspiracy Case:

'So, here you are, at last! Well, you see that block yonder. It is there that we tame lions ... You will meet your friends there, but mind you, don't talk!'
This was Mr. Barrie, the jailor who looked like 'a huge frog in trousers with the face of a bull dog.'

'The block yonder was the citadel of unimaginable atrocities. One's limbs could be smashed methodically, nails and skin taken off, burning torches applied to different limbs, to mention a few, apart from the usual thrashing, kicking, etc. If one cried out for God's mercy, this was Mr. Barrie's fond advice to him: "Look here. I've been in Port Blair for thirty long years and take it from me - I've not seen God anywhere near this compound even once! This is my domain and not God's."

'Only one day in a year he looked sober. That was the Christmas Day, when this Roman Catholic Irishman went to the church to deposit his year's accumulation of sins at the Bishop's feet.'

The political prisoners were only a part of the Cellular population. The rest were prisoners convicted of usual criminal offences. After serving a term for ten years, one obtained a 'ticket of leave.' He could settle down on the island and earn a living through agriculture or some petty trade, though still a prisoner. He could be a free Andamanian only after proving his good conduct for 20 or 25 years.

Groups of such ex-convicts, male and female, formed scattered settlements. Very few could manage to bring their families from the mainland. But marriages were allowed between the convicts or their children. English officers played a Fate-like role in the event. As an old Andamanian recollected in a programme broadcast over AIR, Port Blair:

‘The choleric Brookes would suddenly burst out in Hindoosthani, startling those who came inside his room. “Take off her veil,” he would command. The father of the girl would fail to understand at first, and then, prodded by the orderly, would ask the daughter to bare her face. Brookes would look at her searchingly and then ask, “Look, here is a man who is a convict, a ferocious murderer, a desperate character. If you misbehave, he could cut off your head. Are you still willing to marry him?” On her assenting, he would turn to the man, “Look here, you no-good bum. This girl belongs to this place. She may marry you but she will be friendly with other men. Are you still willing to marry her?” Now, if he also agreed, Brookes would give them eight days time to live together and find out the compatibility or otherwise of the marriage.’

Thus grew up a new population in the Andamans - children born to couples who came from different states and different religious faiths and spoke different languages. By and by the Andamanians cultivated a kind of detachment towards such differences. They have upheld a unity in diversity that might have been born of necessity, but is no less laudable for that. The casteless society that emerged out of the Cellular jail is a proof of Emerson’s statement: ‘Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good.’

Approaching the archipelago as our plane descended through the clouds had been as inviting an experience for us as it had been at least for one of the convicts in the first decade of the last century, even though he was approaching it by ship. The lush landscape had been to him as consoling as it was soothing to us. He was Barindra Kumar (the revolutionary younger brother of Sri Aurobindo), convicted in the Alipore Conspiracy Case. I had his memoirs with me. I read even while we were ascending and later in our hotel at night:

‘Our ship arrived in the harbour. On the north lay the Ross Isle, on the south the Aberdeen Jetty and the Cellular Jail looming like a huge fortress, on the east Mount Harriet with its green luxuriance and on the west the infinite perspective of the sea. Where did we come at last to anchor in this shoreless expanse? Should we, when we had lost all moorings, find ourselves always thus again ashore? Perhaps it was not the harbour that we sought for and yet Nature appeared there in such a beautiful and captivating aspect! The Ross Isle looks from the bosom of the harbour like a veritable landscape painting. On the hill-side at various levels lies in natural negligence, as it were, the red and the white buildings intermixed with the green of the trees and woods. The sombre Jetty touches the waters of the Ross. Above, the buildings rise, tier upon tier, along a

meandering path and hall-veil themselves in the woods ....

‘The woods have in some places the deepest blue colour, at other places where there are neem and bamboo and tamarind trees they look like a mosaic of light yellow, and again in some places they are red with copper-coloured leaves. A stream has burst open the hard bosom of the rocks and flows down like a current of silver. It embraces the foot of the hill and trips forward with a gurgling music to meet the ocean.’

What kind of people were Barindra Kumar and his tribe to wax poetic even while confronting doom? What was their philosophy of life? I knew three of the ‘Andaman-returned’ revolutionaries - Sudhir Sarkar, Biren Sen and Bibhuti Sarkar. Once I asked the first, ‘How could you dream of winning freedom from British rule through an armed struggle?’

‘It was not as formidable a task as you are prone to think, looking at the many-tiered arsenals at the disposal of the powers that be. The rifle was the most powerful weapon they had then. If we could have that and the bomb, we could not only match them but also far outweigh them in manpower,’ he replied.

‘But even then they could have crushed you!’

‘Who cared!’ Sudhir Kumar fell silent for a moment, perhaps groping for words. ‘You can’t easily appreciate the minds of my compatriots. They were qualitatively so different! Offering one’s life for the Motherland was a *Yajna* for them. Mother India deserved the sacrifice of the best and the bravest of her children,’ he added.

‘You were described as terrorists. How do you review your action today - in the light of the new brand of terrorists?’ I asked.

The answer my provocation drew was this: ‘The term terrorist denotes, as it is used today, a certain method the person uses, not the end for which he uses it. Hence it is a deceptive term. The revolutionaries used terrorism against a colossal foreign power and they had their symbolic targets. They did not take recourse to cowardly and indiscriminate killing nor did they do anything with petty gains in view or as agents of some vested interests. The question of killing innocent people simply for creating panic, something only the despicable ghouls and soul-less imps could do, could not have been imagined by them even in their most anarchic dream. What matters are the motive and the quality of

consciousness behind an action?'

'Do you hold yourself responsible to any extent for the current trend?'
'I have to be awfully naive to do that. In its ordinary form, wasn't terrorism always there - in the bandit, in the highway robber who wielded the dagger before the gun or the bomb came into vogue? The Rani of Jhansi used a sword. If a criminal uses a sword, will you blame the Rani of Jhansi for setting an example?'

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In Quest of the Mythical Forest (1)

'It was decades ago that I had taken, for the first time, to the ghat road from Vizianagaram, zigzagging over varieties of tableaux - of slumbering hamlets, lush green groves or a gorge with a silver brook under a silky mist - before reaching Jeypore on the brink of Dandakaranya.

The spring festival of the tribals was on. Groups of dancing damsels would stop our vehicle and, satisfied with a coin or two, dance their way back into their rocks and woods.

I had described Jeypore as 'a sleepy little town' in my contribution to a series entitled "The India You Do Not Know" in what was once India's most popular periodical, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. I stood ridiculed by the memory of my own description when early in the morning, in one of my late sojourns there, a high pitch microphone began its pre-dawn assault on my sleep. The merchant who employed it did not expect any customer at that hour. He was merely following the injunction of his dear departed father to inspire devotion with a vengeance in the hearts of the townsfolk, resigned to inertia, with appropriate recorded songs before their day began.

The town, surely, was no longer sleepy. Numerous projects mercilessly nibbled at the forests and hills all around it. The main road of the town, with the palace of the erstwhile Maharaja on its western end, and the college named after him on the eastern end, shook with heavy vehicular movement all the night through.

Tranquility is the second sacrifice the town had made, after its first sacrifice

centuries ago, at the founding of the settlement. The king commissioned the digging of a lake. The work force dug on and on - for days and weeks - deeper and wider, but not even a trickle surfaced. The king consulted a necromancer who whispered to him the cure for the jinx -and the king whispered the secret to his priest.

At dawn the priest sat cross-legged at the centre of the arid pit and performed some rituals. Then he climbed on to the embankment. A young girl was passing by. The priest surveyed her. Indeed, she seemed endowed with all the auspicious signs to appease the supernatural guardians of the place.

‘Well, my daughter, will you mind going down and fetching the vessel I left by mistake?’ he asked, pointing at the bottom of the pit.

The sweet little girl smiled and readily descended into it. No sooner had she stooped to pick up the vessel than a surge of water submerged her. The lake became full to the brim. The occult beings had been satisfied.

The lake continues to quench the thirst of the growing population to this day.

Almost a day-long drive from Jeypore to Malkangiri, with a slight diversion, enabled us to pass through a tribal village where women remained unclad but for some intricate ornaments from the waist down. It was the weekly market day - with the barter system still in vogue.

High on a hillock overshadowed by a cluster of banyan and other trees the market had to conclude all business by afternoon so that the participants could return home before dusk and the beasts were on the prowl. The women moved about without the least sign of inhibition. I raised my camera. Immediately three or four youths confronted me.
‘What do you propose to do with the pictures?’ Their question was translated to me by my companion, a leading social worker.

‘Well, I never thought of that!’ I mumbled. T will not click if you object to it.’
‘Don’t sell the pictures. Let them not appear in the papers.’

‘I agree,’ I said. They nodded with understanding and moved away. (I have been faithful to my promise.)

We had just come out of the crowd when two “researchers,” appropriately

accoutered for their expedition, accosted us. Half a dozen cameras hung from their shoulders. ‘We came all the way from the city for a few snaps. But they won’t let us have any, even though we were willing to pay them tips. You seem lucky. Won’t you please plead for us?’

My companion carried their appeal to the youths but returned glum. ‘They did not even care to respond to my submission. But what I understood from their conversation, they are fast developing a mood for puncturing the tyres of your vehicle and smashing your cameras - and, ah, if you don’t mind - bits of your heads, too!’ he informed the dandies, his gestures and voice at their polite best.

The photographers jumped into their jeep and sped away.

At 641 feet above sea level, Malkangiri, now a town, nestled in a luxuriant teak grove. The locals claimed that its name was a corruption of Malyavantagiri of the Ramayana fame. They support their theory by referring to nearby Balimela, bearing the memory of the Vanara King, Bali.

Be as that may, there is no mistaking the shy and serene river Tamasa flowing by a few kilometres away. On its bank was situated the hermitage of Valmiki, our first poet, the guardian of Sita and her twins, Lava and Kusha.

Talk to the tribals and for a few precious moments you will stand convinced that the Ramayana was not merely a literary epic but a chain of factual events intricately woven into the history of the original dwellers of this forest Dandakaranya was the stage for many happenings in the epic: Rama’s temporary abode, Surpanekha’s accosting him; the destruction of the demon leaders, Khara and Dushana; the death of Maricha; the kidnapping of Sita, the death of Jatayu, so on and so forth. But there seems to be events not reported in the epic, but the collective memory of the tribals kept them alive through their life style.

For example, why do the women of a particular tribe go without clothes? One day Sita was bathing in the Tamasa, bare, when she found a group of them spying upon her and giggling. Sita was annoyed. “Being women, how do you fail to understand that I am one with Mother Nature now?”

The repentant women took a vow never to wear clothes themselves! If one did, even thousands of years later, she only invited a curse on herself and her tribe.

It was sundown when we reached the Tamasa. All was quiet and the ancient river

was as translucent as the autumnal sky, revealing the charming designs on her bed of bright pebble-would have loved to sit there till the moon-rise - a full moon night was in the offing - but that was unsafe, I was warned. I had, however, time enough, reclining on a rock and gazing at the green, to muse over the legend of the origin of the river and the forest.

Long, long ago, the region was ruled by a dynasty known as the Dandakas. The last of them, a young epicure who was roaming the forest for hunting, set his eyes, and temporarily his heart, too, on a young lady emerging from a lake. He approached her and proposed to lead her to his palace right away, but she spurned the offer. To his repeated entreaties, her quiet response was he could duly propose his marriage with her to her father.

The young ruler had no patience. ‘Any father should feel honoured at having me for his son-in-law,’ he claimed boastfully and tried to drag her away and, failing, to molest her. She struggled and wriggled out of his clutches and ran away and reported her humiliation to her father.

And the father was none other than the Sage Sukracharya. ‘What!’ he flared up. ‘Must a ruler prove himself so unruly? His conduct symbolizes the sinful state of affairs and the anarchy prevailing in his domain. Let his kingdom go up in flames!’

A million flames engulfed the region. Sukracharya left the place. His daughter took shelter in the lake. The fire subsided only after it had reduced everything around to ashes.

Monsoon brought a stream down from the hills to the lake. The lake overflowed and became the river Tamasa. By and by a forest grew upon the wasteland. Hermits christened it Dandakaranya - the forest bearing the memory of the Dandakas.

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In Quest of the Mythical Forest (2)

Once Dandakaranya covered huge chunks of today’s Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra - between the rivers Godavari and Narmada,

embracing the Eastern Ghats among other ranges of hills and the rivers Vamsadhara, Matsyakunda, Savari, Indravati, Nagavalli and Tamasa. The forest, on one hand the home and retreat of the Rishis, and a haunt of the demons on the other, had been the witness to numerous events, mythical and historical.

Despite its shrinking size, different tribes - the Parajas, the Bondas, the Santhals, the Savaras, the Marias and the Gonds - had lived there in peace for millennia - until the recent past.
They knew no fear of beasts, but. . .

It was the dead of night and the dusky peak appeared to dissolve into the few clouds in a sparsely starred sky. The car had stopped midway on the ghat road, thanks to a snag in its engine. There was nothing unusual in a couple of lights twinkling a thousand feet below to the left, for that was a valley on which nestled a tribal village, but a solitary light flickering and wending its way down the peak to his right intrigued my friend, Ramnath Panda, a distinguished Oriya editor and author, hailing from the tribal district of Koraput.

He crossed to the right of the road and waited for the light to come nearer. It was a torch of twigs held by a tribal woman. She raised the torch and revealed her wrinkled face -that of a septuagenarian.

She smiled at my friend's query and explained: He: had raised a crop high over the hill and passed his nights guarding it. That night too, as usual, she had carried for him his dinner, but found him down with fever. She sat beside him comforting him and left only after he had fallen asleep.

'Are you not afraid ...?'
'Of ...?'
'Of beasts-say- of the tiger?'
'What's there to be afraid of the tiger, sonny? Shouldn't one rather be afraid of man?' She resumed her descent, totally oblivious of having created a quotable quote.

The woods were receding from every frontier and civilization had made stubborn inroads into the tribal world. The situation was candidly described by one of the last veterans of the Indian Civil Service, R. P. Noronha:

'It is almost impossible for a non-tribal, even for me, to comprehend what his land means to a tribal. It has a life of its own with which his life is inseparably

linked, it is the Mother Goddess that gave all men birth, but because it is his land, it is *his* mother, with an umbilical cord that cannot be severed. If its fertility decreases and the crops fail, it is because the gods are angry with *him* and it is he who must make amends, with a human sacrifice if the omens so dictate. The sacrifice is not for his well-being, it is for the well-being of the Mother Earth who has suffered through him, and if he has to hang for it - well, he has to hang.

'When a man like this loses his land, something inside him dies, that something which made him a man. And it is the land that is the first casualty when civilization sweeps over the tribal. When he accepts money and executes a sale deed, he assumes that he is parting with his land only temporarily, only until it has produced enough and more for the new master to neutralize the amount he paid. I have seen a Gond in Rehli *tehsil*, standing with dead eyes before the *munim* of the *bania* who had bought his land, and asking 'Have you got enough from the land to repay the hundred rupees I took?' He had sold his land twenty years ago. The *munim*, accustomed to such scenes, said briefly 'Not yet' and turned back to his work. The little old Gond carried his dead eyes silently away. He would not have minded so much in the days when alternative land was available for the asking, or for the us an axe, the good days a hundred years ago when he had the run of the jungle. But today the money he gets is pre-empted by his debts as soon as it comes into his hand . . . Now it is not so much the individual who wants his land (only the poorest quality is left), it is the state. Projects for irrigation require land for the dam and the canal.... Iron and coal are discovered and the country's needs demand their exploitation. The land is the tribal's. New railways cut through virgin territory - and the tribal's land. What centuries could not do, civilization has achieved; it has cut the umbilical cord between the Adivasi and his land. I have no solution. I merely report a tragedy, the tragedy 1 saw pictured in the dead eyes of the Gond. . . .' *(A Tale Told by an Idiot).*

This was in the forties of the 20th century. The situation had worsened. The forest was growing elusive, even though Verrier Elwin wrote, not long ago:

'As the traveller moves towards the Bastar plateau the countryside breaks into a song about him; he is greeted by hardy smiling woodsmen singing at their work; the skyline is broken by fantastic piles of rock; all around is the evergreen *Sal* forest." *(The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin).*

I saw piles of rock and piles of timber, rarely any evergreen *Sal* forest. Near the

Bagra waterfalls (I was informed that I was among the last few to see that primeval grandeur of the thousand silver cascades frolicking down, for it was to be sacrificed to yet another project) I stopped to take pictures of the burning and felling o] trees going on in full swing. The young labourer posed with his axe while I photographed the ghastly sight and then demanded money for his gesture. He had just learnt to be clever.

I asked a shop-keeper-cum-hunter in a bazar that had lately popped up on my way to Jagdalpur, the capital of the erstwhile Bastar State, 'When had you last been to the heart of the forest?'
'Heart of the forest?' he grinned. 'Babuji, you are right now standing on the heart of Dandakaranya.' He threw his arms wide to make me conscious of the expanding bazar.
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'Sarabu remembered also his endless miseries and the miseries of his tribe. He was the *Saonta,* the headman of the village, dressed in a loincloth, copper-coloured hair on his head, thick and dishevelled, a quid of tobacco leaf always in his mouth. His Kondh religion told him that the King - the Authorities - happened to be younger brother while the Kondh. the Paraja (the subject), was the elder brother. The younger brother was crafty and had snatched away the kingdom from the elder brother by dishonest means, but he did not mind. He had learnt to forgive. He was as tall as the hills, broad and expansive as the sky, somewhat uninhibited and impulsive.'

This is from a novel entitled *Paraja* (now available in English), a saga of the tribal life, by Gopinath Mohanty, a revered name in modern Oriya fiction. As a Deputy Magistrate in the tribal district of Koraput he would at times get lost amidst the hilly tracts, eating, sleeping and dancing with the folks and his anxious boss had to despatch a Stanley or two to locate the lost Livingstone. Meanwhile he would keep busy presiding over their functions or settling their disputes.

In the fifties of the 20th century, when my maternal uncle, K. K. Samal, was the District Magistrate and Collector of Koraput, pressing business obliged Gopinath to pay a visit to him. It was a winter night. An eerie silence had taken the region in its grip, even though it was only the first quarter of the night.

'As the headlights of my jeep focused on your uncle's gate, for a moment I

wondered when two unusual sculptures had been installed there like stone gatekeepers before castles or shrines. But they moved away and I realised that it was a tiger couple on honorary duty!' Gopinath Mohanty once narrated to me.

Things had changed. While Koraput is the headquarters of the Dandakaranya Development Authority, founded in 1958, the *aranya* itself had become a memory.

The tribal's magnanimity was once again proved when they absorbed the Bengali refugees in their world. We can once again refer to the concern expressed by R.P. Noronha (of the I.C.S) in the forties of the last century: 'When the East Bengal refugees began to be settled in the Dandakaranya Project, much of which is in Bastar district, I asked H.M. Patel what was going to happen to the tribals. He was optimistic about the benefits they would get through the opening up of the area, roads, schools, dispensaries and all the trappings of civilization. I asked doubtfully, "But what about their land? What will they cultivate, not now, but when their population increases?" There was no answer. There never is an answer to a fundamental question. The tribal has a low birthrate because he lives on the edge of starvation. Because no one really cares whether he lives or dies, he has a high death rate. Naturally, the few forests and barren mountains that have been left to him are underpopulated. But with the awakening of a social conscience during the last 25 years his numbers are increasing, and by the time he needs land, there will be no land left for him.' *(A Tale Told by an Idiot).*

But it is such genuine concern felt by a few like him that brought about laws to safeguard the tribal's lands. The Dandakaranya Development Authority had acted commendably in rehabilitating the refugees on one hand and protecting and improving the lot of the tribals on the other. The DDA's infiltration into the inaccessible regions have scared away many of the old, seasoned and absolutely brutal vampires - the *sahukaras* (moneylenders), although that has not prevented new and more sophisticated ones from indulging in brisk business. Among them are politicians and terrorists masquerading as their liberators. This new brood of outsiders are cashing in on their innocence and teaching them the easy road to the 21st century-violence.

The problem is that the tribal's attitude to violence is very different from that of the others. Since he does not mind offering himself to suffering and death, he does not understand why it should horrify others. Once he cultivates loyalty to some ideal or institution, he must prove it with a vengeance.

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In Quest of the Mythical Forest (3)

I was on my way to Jagdalpur, the stage for one of the last violent flickers of the tribals' legendary loyalty to their rulers.

The drive from Chitrokote was pleasant, though dusty. I stopped at every spot that promised some interest - the Marias collecting red ants, their delicacy, and some others offering obeisance to Mouli Mata, the primeval goddess. A young girl leaned and cupped her palm and drank from a ribbon-like waterfall. She had her goat with her. It, too, drank while an unidentifiable colourful bird perched on its back. The moment I raised my camera it flew away. It did not feel with us, despite our good conduct certified by the smiles of a passing tribal couple, even half of the affinity it felt with the girl and her goat.

It was late in the afternoon when we reached Jagdalpur and had a look at the decaying palace of the former ruling family.

The kingdom of Bastar, amidst Dandakaranya, had been founded by Dalpad Dev, a prince from Orissa, some 250 years ago. Jagdalpur, its capital, on the banks of Indrawati, must have been a fine site before its growth became chaotic.

The last ruling Maharaja of Bastar had no son. Prafulla Chandra Bhanj Deo of the Raj family of Mayurbhanj married the Princess of Bastar and came to live here as the Prince Consort, but his pleadings with the British India government to be recognized as the Maharaja went in vain. He was a Ph.D.from Cambridge and his love was archaeology. As a school boy I had attended his lectures and remembered him as a sober and scholarly speaker. But his elder son, Pravin Chandra, the heir to the throne, was of a different mould. He refused to believe that the princely states had merged with the Union of India and that, though allowed to retain his feudal decorations, he was no longer a ruler.

He behaved quixotically. When his father died in Delhi in 1959, Pravin Chandra did not even care to bring his body to Jagdalpur, but upon the death of his own favourite dog, the town witnessed the most magnificent funeral procession in its history.

If Pravin Chandra were angry with someone, he would unsheathe his sword and cut clean the hapless man's arm before anyone could suspect his mood or deed. Once his fancy went over to a married woman. He sent her husband away on some commission and married her in great haste as well as great earnest, though the priest was obliged to abridge the ritual at the point of sword. Later, when the governor of Madhya Pradesh congratulated him, he shot back, 'But she is only a matron to me! When did I wed?'

His oddities and audacity rose from heights to new heights. At last and inevitably the Government of India's patience reached the breaking point and he was stripped of his status. His younger brother was persuaded to step into the empty position which he did very reluctantly.

Pravin Chandra's authority till then had been comprised of a privy purse, titles and several other rights under the Instrument of Accession. With those privileges and trappings gone, he claimed to possess supernatural powers. He prophesied a total rout of any power however great before his Tantric incantations. He sported flowing long hair and an impressive vermilion mark on his forehead. His awestruck "subjects" were never tired of prostrating themselves to him. He relished the practice.

While he never stopped provoking the government, he became a hero for his people most of whom hardly knew about the epoch-making transition of their country not only from the British Raj but also from the native Raj, to freedom and democracy.

Right from the morning, one fateful day, the tribals, armed with bows, lathis, hatchets and spears began to gather in front of the palace. It was never quite clear who organised the melee. The crowd believed, in a vague way, that the dignity and divinity of their Maharaja were in danger and they must come to his rescue.

What did the prince wish to achieve with their help? No doubt he could wreak havoc on any institution on which he would decide to let loose this terrible army. The mob was not only ready but also anxious to make their utmost sacrifice for their Maharaja.

The district administration summoned the entire police force at their disposal. They could not let the throng proceed towards some target fixed by the prince.

The mob was asked to disperse. But it would not budge. More and more “royalists” were streaming into the town. Tension was growing to a bursting point.

And it did burst when Pravin Chandra’s confidants assured the tribal leaders that the Tantrik spell cast by the prince would render the police bullets as ineffective as raindrops.

Suddenly the police party was bathed with a shower of arrows. They fired blank shots in return. There was an awful silence. Then someone yelled, ‘Don’t you see? The bullets could not singe even a single hair of ours! Our Maharaja had indeed cast his invincible spell!”

Lusty cheers for the Maharaja, the great performer of miracles, shook the region. Sure of vanquishing the police who they believed their wizard Maharaja had reduced to mere scarecrows, the mob launched an abrupt and violent attack on them.

This time the police responded with real bullets. Hell surfaced in front of the palace. Sound of bullets and eerie shrieks and howls deafened the town. The tribal leaders and their lieutenants retreated into the foreyard of the palace protected by a wall. Others dispersed. But the police seemed to have continued firing into the palace compound.

When all grew quiet and the police crossed into the walled zone around the palace, hosts of dead and dying lay sprawled, scattered all over the ground. And among them was found the bullet-ridden body of Prince Pravin Chandra.

Was it murder - hot-blooded if not cold? I desired to hear from some eyewitnesses. And we found two of them.
‘No doubt, the Adivasis invited reprisal by shooting arrows at the police, but so far as the killing of the Maharaja was concerned . . .’ The ex-Municipal Councillor hinted at something ominous.

‘How charming this place looked till the other day, with green lawns and gardens around!’ observed the other gentleman, guiding us around the almost deserted castle. Now the ground lay pitiably neglected, without even a creeper to celebrate the memory of its floral past. Pravin Chandra’s younger brother, the reluctant Raja, was no more. The wives of the two were fighting over the property.

Pravin Chandra's garlanded picture adorned the durbar hall, dusty and gloomy. A lone watchman, looking even gloomier, was its custodian.
It was hardly necessary to put any question to our next interviewee, the priest of Danteshwari, the deity of the Raj family. His eyes spooky, he shrieked, 'They killed our Maharaja! The murderers!'

Not long ago, a "holy man" claimed that he had been possessed by Pravin Chandra's spirit. He collected a large following and created a fresh law and order problem. A *Yajna* proposed by him had to be banned. In the priest's voice I heard the echo of the same spirit - distant and dying, though.

The great Dandakaranya - a glorious chunk of India's heritage, too - appeared like an echo, receding farther and farther into the horizon. The tribals are learning to live without it, notwithstanding the cultural and identity crisis the situation was bound to cause them. Men around the Dandakaranya and within the forest whatever is still left of it - continue to be merciless towards it.

A Postscript: I had given an account of my impressions at Jagdalpur in *The Heritage,* the monthly I edited. One day, a genial hand tapped my shoulder at Pondicherry. 'Well, I should tell you, Manoj, that the police did not select the prince to fall to their bullets. He got killed because he was directing the attack on the police standing amidst his lieutenants. Police, of course, fired at all the spots from where the arrows were coming,' the smiling gentleman, tall and dignified in gait and mild in voice, informed me. 'How did you know?'

'I constituted the one-man Commission of Enquiry,' the late Mr. Justice Vinay Chowdhury enlightened me.
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The Shadow of the Silent Princess (1)

Thus spoke James Tod in the second decide of the 19th century:

What nation on earth would have maintained the semblance of civilization, the spirit or the custom of their forefathers, during so many centuries of overwhelming depression, but one of such singular character as the Rajpoot? Though ardent and reckless, he can, when required, subside into forbearance and apparent apathy, and reserve himself for the opportunity of revenge.

Rajasthan exhibits the sole example in the history of mankind of a people withstanding every outrage barbarity can inflict, or human nature sustain . . . and bent to the earth, yet rising buoyant from the pressure, and making calamity a whetstone to courage.

Many factual errors might have crept into *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* by this British Political Agent enamoured of that wonderful people and their past, but it is doubtful if there is another work as fascinating as his, written by an Englishman, on any other area of the British empire.

If Tod conjures up a magnificent vista of history coloured by myths and romances of Rajasthan in general, Arnold Toynbee surely holds up a very inviting picture of Udaipur: 'I have always known that Udaipur was one of the beautiful places of the world, but pictures and photographs do not give one an adequate idea of it. One has to see it with one's own eyes to take it in. I have done this today.'

It was a temperate, bracing noon when I descended on Udaipur. I had deliberately arrived a day before my scheduled talk at the University and did not expect to be received at the airport. But a friend had alerted his industrialist cousin who owned a cozy little guesthouse in the city, and the latter, who lived away from the city, had sent his car. The chauffeur sported a board on his chest bearing a couple of words which resembled my name as much as half a dozen other names, but I struck a lucky guess.

'I'm at your disposal, Babuji, for the whole day,' he informed me while greeting me. I was happy. I had no desire to contact my hosts at the University until the next morning. I should feel much more comfortable in the company of the chauffeur in my unacademic activity of driving along or roaming about the city than in the company of a learned professor or two.

The chauffeur had, in principle, placed himself at my disposal. But by the time I had had my lunch and set out for a drive, he reversed the position unilaterally. The young Rajput was sure that I was at his disposal. He drove me wherever he liked and was fluent with the legends and proverbs of his race. That was good. I sat resigned and relaxed.

He was keen to draw my attention to every monument associated with the memory of the Maharanas, but even when I would ask him about some

impressive modern structure, he would just shrug: ‘Babuji, these are nothing but foppish, useless Government showpieces!’

‘I understand that your Maharana had turned his palaces into hotels, one after another. How do you like that?’ I provoked him at one point, a bit impatient with his exaggerated nostalgia.
‘Who are we to like or dislike? You’re of course at liberty to do what you please with your father’s property, aren’t you?’
‘But weren’t they built with the resources of your forefathers?’

The young man was hardly prepared for a question so unabashedly pragmatic and probably superfluous for him. He kept quiet for a moment, but then burst out like thunderclaps, at time gesticulating with both his hands, giving a fearsome autonomy to the steering wheel, even though the road was zigzag with abrupt ups and downs.

This was the substance of his speech: His forefathers had fought and died under the leadership of the Ranas of bygone days. If he can boast of his ancestry, it is because of the Ranas who made heroes out of ordinary mortals. What is bare material wealth in comparison with that kind of glory? True, values had changed, but how does he care! Who on earth could stop him from feeling proud of the colour and quality of the blood in his veins?

‘Do you see the present Maharana?’
‘Why not! But his stay here is always short. He does not mix with many; he does not like the politics of the day.’

‘How did you know?’
‘Should we not know about our Maharana?’
‘But didn’t you say that he does not mix with many?’
‘Why should he? Was he not a monarch till the other day?’

I understood that the arguments had reached a blind alley. For him the Maharana was a symbol and a tradition, not an individual. The term measured up in his mind to an average of the personalities from Bappa Rawal to Rana Pratap, with so many mediocres between them.

According to legends, Lava, one of the twin sons of Sri Rama, founded his capital at Lahore that was then Lavapura. A branch of the dynasty shifted to Indur in Gujarat. Generations later a scion of the dynasty, Aparajit, was

assassinated by some rebel Bhils. Bappa, his son, fled to Rajasthan. He brought under him Chittorgarh, the capital of Mewar, and founded the dynasty of the Ranas. The capital was shifted to Udaipur in the sixteenth century. (I met the symbol of my chauffeur, the last Maharana, a few days later at Pondicherry. A learned prince, he was unassuming and betrayed no impatience at having to stand in a queue for a visit to Sri Aurobindo's room.)

Once on the soil of Mewar, one naturally remembers numerous legendary personages. But those who dominated my memory, Rana Pratap apart, were four women. Of them, three - Rani Padmini, Meera Bai and Dhatri Panna - were widely known. But the fourth one, Princess Krishna Kumari, was rarely remembered.

The sad face of the princess almost assailed me from every dusky nook and corner of the old palace of the Maharanas. The face, of course, had been formed out of the impressions given by legends, for no painting of this extraordinary beauty existed. But her phantom figure developed more and more distinct contours in my vision as the labyrinths I explored grew darker.

A very different kind of darkness had one day swallowed up that sweet but sad princess.

That was in the 19th century. Princess Krishna Kumari, the daughter of Maharana Bhimsingh, was already a legend by the time she was sixteen. Such a beauty had never adorned Rajasthan - nor even on the canvas of the most gifted painter.

The minister of Maharaja Jagat Singh of Jaipur called on the Maharana and submitted that his master was most willing to wed the princess. There was nothing inappropriate in the message and it was received with the courtesy it deserved. But the minister had hardly retired for a happy night's sleep when the emissary of Maharaja Maun of Marwar bowed to the Maharana and informed him that his master was no less willing than Jaipur's.

'I'm afraid you are a bit too late!' the Maharana told him politely.
The Marwar emissary nodded, sighed and left. Hardly three days had passed when the news of the army of Marwar marching upon Mewar reached the Maharana.
That was a time when Mewar's military might was on the decline.

Jaipur was alerted. The combined army of Mewar and Jaipur offered stiff resistance to the invading Marwar force, but in vain. Maharaja Maun pushed his way into Udaipur and camped on a meadow not far from the palace. ‘Since I have won a victory over the Maharaja of Jaipur, I must win the hand of the princess, too,’ was his argument.

But Jaipur sneered at Marwar’s claim and its army besieged Marwar’s capital. Maharana Maun had no other go than to rush back to his kingdom. He managed to save his palace, but his city had been ransacked. It came to light that some of his kinsmen were conspiring to dethrone him. The unhappy Maun decided to commit suicide. However, he announced his decision rather loudly, thereby obliging some well-wishers to snatch the dagger from his grip which did not appear to be very tight!

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The Shadow of the Silent Princess (2)

Raja Maun had lately found a friend, philosopher and guide in Nawab Amir Khan, ‘the most notorious villain India ever produced’ in Tod’s opinion. Khan, his purse filled to the brim by Maun, pretended to be a well wisher of those of the Marwar nobility who conspired against Maun. A ‘feast of friendship’ was thrown by the conspirators in honour of the new entrant into their circle. Music and dance were at a high pitch when the lieutenants of the honoured guest, Khan, unleashed their hidden sabres and butchered Maun’s detractors to the last man. Even their innocent valets and coach drivers were not spared.

Safe from enemies at home and rid of any urge for suicide, once again Maun’s attention went over to Princess Krishna Kumari. Meanwhile the Jaipur army had gone back. But as soon as Maun’s intention became known, Jaipur reiterated his claim over the princess.

The two rulers continued to send their well-chosen emissaries to the Maharana’s court. In flowery and poetic language what the emissaries conveyed was that if the Maharana chose one prince, the other would take it as his sacred duty to ravage the city of Udaipur as well as the kingdom of Mewar.

The Maharana did not know what to do. Alas, never had the virtues of a daughter - beauty, tenderness and wit -had caused such a crisis for a father.
A nobleman famous for his worldly and pragmatic prudence, who had apparently come on a mere courtesy visit to the Maharana, whispered in the ruler's ears: 'Can Mewar risk the enmity of any one of the two contenders?'

'I'm afraid, no. Militarily we are weaker than any of them at the moment.'
'I thought as much,' said the visitor, his words steeped in sympathy.
'But what is the way out?' asked the Maharana. Anxiety had reduced him to his own shadow.

The visitor smiled, 'There's a way out, my lord, there is!' he assured the Maharana. Indeed, he had come equipped with a highly original solution. He confided it to the Maharana. 'This done, neither Marwar nor Jaipur should have any reason to quarrel with each other or with you,'he said displaying yet another wave of his sinister smile.

'Oh no! I can never do that,' cried out the Maharana.

The nobleman nodded with understanding. 'Maharana, did I say that you have to do that? But someone else in the royal family must. You cannot entrust an ordinary assassin with the task of dispatching our beloved daughter to safety!'

The visiting nobleman was none other than the same Nawab Amir Khan. This explains Tod's comment on him quoted earlier. Raja Maun suspected that as soon as the situation became normal the Maharana would marry his daughter to Jaipur. That would be a terrible blow to Marwar's prestige. Hence this charitable advice from Amir Khan, Marwar's emissary.

But who would execute the scheme? No member of the royal family agreed to do it. The senior ladies of the palace were privately told about the necessity of the operation. They wept bitter tears.
Time was running out. Both Marwar and Jaipur were growing apprehensive of the Maharana's intention. Spies brought news of both the parties preparing for a fresh march upon the city of Udaipur.
It was a moonlit night. The princess was taking a stroll on the terrace. 'Leave me alone,' she said. Her maids retired.

Suddenly she became aware of a shadow. Someone was stealthily coming closer to her, hiding behind the colonnade. The princess was surprised, for there was no

possibility of any stranger popping up in that part of the palace.
She surprised the intruder, catching up with him.

‘Is it Uncle Jawan?’
It was he - Jawandas, a cousin and confidant of her father.

The unsuspecting and innocent address by the princess chilled Jawandas. ‘Oh my child’.’ he exclaimed and trembling like one possessed, sat down at her feet. A diamond-studded dagger slipped off his hand. The soothing moonlight, the tranquility of the terrace and the purity of the princess could not but have imparted such a loathsome irrelevance to the weapon!

The princess gazed at the glittering stuff, but betrayed no tension.
‘What’s the matter, Uncle? You were not here to guard me against some unknown danger, I’m sure!’ she asked. She had begun to smell the sinister.
The sobbing uncle confessed to his having undertaken the task of doing away with her - for the sake of the ancient dynasty and the security of Udaipur and Mewar.
‘Pardon this sinner, my daughter!’ was all he could cry out before running away.

But it was not the question of any one man’s sin; the atmosphere had grown sombre with the sin of cowardice. Princess Krishna Kumari had lost the zest for life, a life that must be sustained by breathing in that accursed air.

With determined steps she entered her chamber and ordered her maids to prepare a deadly concoction. They understood. Weeping, they handed over the cup of death to her. She drank from it, but life was most reluctant to depart from that beautiful body. Three times more did the maids serve her with it. She closed her eyes after the fourth cup.

Along with the rays of the morning sun spread the news of her death.
Respectable ones from both Mar war and Jaipur came to check the fact. Bards do not tell us if they brought any bouquet with them. Their business was to ensure that the bone of contention between their masters was gone. A mere look and they grew sure - for no other face could combine so much beauty with that faint smile of scorn.

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The sun had set when I came out of the old palace. Apart from Krishna Mahal - the apartment in which the princess poisoned herself to death - I remembered

nothing though I saw so many memorials.

I sat absentmindedly brooding over the four illustrious women of Mewar - each of whose lives had left a sad commentary on her contemporary men. Rani Padmini's trouble accelerated with her husband's going out of the fort, unarmed and unprotected, to bid goodbye to Aladin Khilji. He thereby made it possible for the cunning enemy to kidnap him and demand her as the ransom; Meerabai was harassed by her male guardians; Dhatri Panna's nobility and sacrifice showed Banbir a pitiable creature.

But probably the sharpest comment was left by the silent princess - Krishna Kumari.

My chauffeur had driven me to the charming park surrounding the hilltop statue of Rana Pratap. The wooded elevation, Moti Magri, overlooked the famous lake of Udaipur with its island-like palace turned into a luxury hotel. A serene evening was setting in. This is the hill on which Maharana Udaisingh is believed to have received the inspiration for building the city in 1559.

Every climax has an anti-climax hidden in it. Before leaving the city, I bought a book, *Udaipur Invites*, from the airport bookstall. Published by the city Municipal Council, it contains a list of *Oldest/Biggest Things.* I quote: 'In India, following are the oldest, earliest, most ancient, most modern, longest, largest, highest, biggest, grandest, most unique, most versatile, fiercest, most beautiful, most spectacular and most enchanting things at Udaipur and its environs.' It speaks of the Aravali hills, the most primitive geological formation, the Gambhiri river, the abode of early man, Tower of Victory, etc., and then suddenly breaks into an unsuspected ecstasy: "Shri M. L. Sukhadia, who was a councillor of Udaipur Corporation (1946-52), Minister (1952-54), Chief Minister of Rajasthan (1954-71), and is now Governor of Mysore (Feb. 1972), has been versatile public man of numerous virtues."

I wonder if Shri Sukhadia, whose "forward" (sic) adorns the book, ever knew what his native municipal council knew - that he belonged to the category of India's 'oldest, earliest, most ancient, grandest' things. *****
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'The Tragedy of Greatness' (1)

My guesthouse at Udaipur was situated on an elevation and I had been put up in the upper floor, alone. I was still under the spell of the memory of Krishna Kumari and the serene sunset on the lake. For a long while I sat on my balcony gazing at the sky touched up by a few surrealistically designed clouds.

By midnight the spider-web of lights over the city was growing thinner.

The hope of my visiting Chittorgarh, too, had thinned to a vanishing point when I went to bed. I did not know when I would be able to contact the University authorities -they must be under the impression that I am yet to arrive -and whether they would be able to arrange for my trip to and from Chittor before my talk in the evening. The thin screen on my window was flapping in the erratic breeze in keeping with my fitful sleep, each intervals bringing to my mind Chittor and Krishna Kumari, alternately.

A young industrialist, a guest lodged on the ground floor, had told me at dinner, ‘Chittor? A disappointment unless bare skeletons in stone interest someone.’

But he was realistic and circumspect. ‘Yeh, there is a shop at the gateway to the ascent churning out top class hot *jilebis*, Delicious; weren’t they?’ he threw his question at his wife and daughter at the other end of the long dining table and added, looking at me again, ‘soaked in pure cow ghee’.

‘Had I eaten any? Do I eat them?’ His wife’s rebuff was soaked in annoyance.

‘Correct, correct! Of course you did not taste the stuff,’ agreed the husband sportingly. ‘She has diabetes,’ he confided to me lowering his voice and, on second thought, said aloud, ‘I was asking Dora!’ pointing at his daughter.

But Dora, in an exemplary exercise of simultaneous alacrity, was consuming her dinner and a film magazine. She was too far away - in Mumbai - to come to her daddy’s aid.
‘Asking Dora!’ mimicked the fuming wife.

While climbing the stairs after bidding goodnight to the touring family, I was confronted by the boyish Shombhudas, freshly appointed manager of the guesthouse. He was continuously affable but continuously heaving, too, and was the very picture of nervousness.

‘Do ladies also suffer from diabetes?’ he demanded, pouring a full gallon of

amazement into his puzzle, and that plunged me straightaway in a whirlpool of uncertainty. Alas, do ladies suffer from diabetes? ‘They should not, but you see, a fat lot of things which ought not to happen, happen nevertheless!’ I managed to say.
‘Was my impression then wrong?’
‘Well, we should not expect all our impressions to be right. For example, I was under the impression till the other day that ladies never grew bald!’ I said in a confessional tone.
His eyes bulged under a powerful bulb. ‘Do you mean to say that ladies grow bald?’ His nervousness was alarmingly heightened.

‘For your information, even Queen Elizebeth ....!’
‘Queen Elizebeth? Have you seen her bald pate?’
‘I mean Queen Elizebeth I - the bald queen of 16th century England.’
‘Hey Bhagwan!’
I could not understand whether it was an exclamation of relief or protest against Providence.

But the childlike young man had endeared himself to me at the very first sight. ‘I’ll put you in the bus for Chittorgarh in the morning. Don’t you worry,’ he told me more than once. But I was not enthused. What if I fail to be back on time for my programme?

I knew that barring the nine-storey Victory Tower (1458) of Maharana Kumbh, all the other monuments of Chittor were in ruins. Even then the desire to spend a little time at that eventful hilltop was irresistible. What had enhanced my curiosity was Sister Nivedita’s inspired reflections: ‘It was almost midnight, as the moon grew near the full, when we looked for the first time on the fortress of Chittor. The lights in the village at its foot had been extinguished, and the hill with its great length stood dark and isolated against the sky .. . And the newly arrived traveller watching it may see it tonight as the returning escort may have seen it when Padmini’s marriage procession halted for the last time on the homeward way, more than seven centuries ago .. . Little can the “lotus fair” Padmini have slept that night, the last of the long journey from her father’s distant strong-hold. ... Did no vision the future cast its shadow across the path before her to make Padmini shrink and pause, in the glory of this her great home-coming? Had the bard whispered no word above her idle of the tragedy of greatness that lay before her?” *(Studies from an Eastern Home)*

Like Sister Nivedita, thousands through the ages have stood entranced by the legend of Rani Padmini; the wife of Maharana Rawal Ratan Singh.

Well known is the story of Sultan Aladin Khilji of Delhi growing enamoured of Rani Padmini simply by the rumours of her beauty and his repeated efforts at possessing her. But could that be history? Was it not mere yarn spun by some folk genius?

But some aspects of the legend remain unstressed in its generally widespread version, whereas their merits cannot be ignored.

On his first expedition against Chittor the Sultan fail to make any dent on the fort atop the hill and expressed his willingness to retreat if he could have only a glimpse of the legendary beauty. The proposal, of course, was unacceptable However, a compromise was struck. From a small castle at the centre of the lake, he could have a look at a mirror hung against the wall of another castle facing it. Rani Padmini would take position in a way so that the incorrigible devotee of her beauty could behold her reflection.

This was done, but what the popular version of the legend does not reveal is that the Rani had no reason to grant him the boon of even her reflection; the face the mirror showed was that of one of her beautiful maids.

Probably this justifiable deception on the arrogant Khilji was kept a strictly guarded secret. Centuries later, the man who gave this out to me did so spontaneously lowering his voice! Surely, if the whole episode was a fact, then this appears more reasonable than Rani Padmini herself standing before the mirror. She would not care to and in any case Khilji would not know.

Khilji was, or he pretended to be, overwhelmed by the courtesy extended to him. He embraced his host Maharana Ratan Singh and walked towards the rear gate of the fort, expressing his joy and wonder at the shrines and monuments on both sides of the passage, and at intervals profusely admiring the Rajput bravery as well as the prosperity of Mewar.

The Maharana must have wondered how, instead of being friends, they had been foes. Since Khilji had come unarmed and all alone for his exclusive appointment with the Rani’s reflection, the Maharana thought it proper to escort him outside the rear gate unarmed and without any bodyguard. Dusk set in while the host and the guest stood talking, overlooking the vast fields, orchards and hamlets

sprawling for miles below the hill.

Dense bushes covered the slope leading to the valley. As arranged by the treacherous Khilji,some of his men in olive green, crawling up like lizards, suddenly pounced upon the hapless Maharana and carried him down at great speed to Khiliji's camp consisting of a large garden and a palace of the Maharanas on the plains.

Then came the message: Either Khilji must get Rani Padmini live, or Rani Padmini would get her husband dead!

Nobody slept a wink in the fort on the hill which looked like a floating isle because of its plethora of lights. Nor did Khilji who, from his camp, looked up once every few minutes, sleep. His soldiers remained alert lest the Maharana's army should descend on them.

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'The Tragedy of Greatness' (2)

With the dawn breaking out, two riders arrived bringing the message, directly from Rani Padmini: Khilji's will be done! The first quarter of the night two days later was auspicious according to the almanac for solemnising a lifelong union. Rani Padmini would surrender herself to Khilji ceremoniously, as behoves her status, accompanied by her entourage. Meanwhile Khilji must treat his royal hostage honourably.

Khilji was in ecstasy. He gave all his attention to decorating his camp. He had no fear. He might have failed to infiltrate the fort, but his huge army would easily defeat the Maharana's in an open battle on the plains.

The Rajputs kept busy collecting as many palanquins as they could from the houses of the nobility. At last, after sundown on the third day, a procession of seven hundred palanquins wended its way along the slope and the meadow below it, amidst sound of tender music and occasional blowing of conch shells.

Khilji's heart "leaped like a frog" - as a rustic Rajput put it, at that wondrous cavalcade streaming down, flanked by flaming torches.

The procession entered the garden. The chief escort, the tall and handsome Gora, a cousin of the Maharana, got down from his horse and greeted Khilji.
My lord, my revered sister, Maharani Padmini, would naturally like to have a brief meeting with her husband for the last time. She expects you to be chivalrous enough to grant this first ever request of hers.' Khilji appeared hesitant.

Gora laughed, albeit mildly. 'Do you by any chance doubt her having come?' At a sign from Gora, the bejewelled screen of the first palanquin was removed by a maid and a lamp was raised. The blushing profile satisfied Khilji. This is the face that had adorned the mirror.

'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?' Three centuries before Christopher Marlowe wrote this of Helen of Troy, Rani Padmini wrought comparable havoc with her 700 palanquins. The aftermath of that night's episode burnt the topless towers of Chittor, but unlike the destruction of Ilium, it was not an unmixed tragedy so far as the Rajputs were concerned; it was a triumph of their spirit over their social and political misfortune.

The face which dazzled Khilji's eyes was marvellously beautiful, the face Khilji had seen on the mirror
- the face of a brave maid of the Rani, the solitary lady in that cavalcade of palanquins, but a face by no means Rani Padmini's.

Khilji allowed his illusion of Padmini to visit his prisoner. No sooner had the Maharana's room been unlocked than the gentle and humble Gora gave out a deafening cry. Fourteen hundred Rajput soldiers leaped out of the 700 palanquins. The 2,800 bearers, too, turned into fighters. They drew their swords concealed in the palanquins and unleashed a holocaust on Khilji's camp.

General Gora's first task was to arrange for the safe escape of the Maharana to the fort, along with the maid acting as Rani Padmini. Taking advantage of this momentary diversion of the general's, Khilji fled like a hounded fox. Gora pursued him as soon as he grew conscious of the arch-villain's escape, calling out to a group of his soldiers, but without waiting for them to join him. The fleeing Khilji and his men stopped abruptly, found Gora alone, and killed him. His soldiers caught up with him a moment latter, but a moment that had proved fateful. Khilji had disappeared in the darkness.

Khilji’s entire army was routed in an hour. The Rajputs returned to their fort with the dead body of their leader.

Gora had a dear friend in another young noble, Badal. He swore revenge. The author of this plot executed successfully, though falling short of perfection, was none other than Rani Padmini herself, according to the bards. Khilji’s humiliation and defeat were a matter of rejoicing, but the Maharana and the Rani felt certain that he would strike again.

Strike he did - with an army five times larger than the earlier one. His sea of violent men besieged the fort. The battle claimed thousands of lives every day. Doom was closing in on Chittor and the Rajputs knew it well. But there was no question of compromise or even negotiation.

Each day two Rajput nobles would lead their defence and light on until death. The grim routine was religiously followed. At last came the turn of Maharana Rawal Ratan Singh himself and Badal - and everybody knew that to be the final day of the battle. From a small window on the main palace Rani Padmini witnessed the end of the last two heroes. The pyre had been kept ready in the courtyard. The women of the dynasty, led by Padmini, offered their prayers. The pyre was lit and they entered it. The fire filled the entire courtyard and the maids jumped into it from the terraces. As massive columns of smoke rose and kissed the clouds, all the gates of the fort were thrown open and the last battalion of Rajputs without any captain burst into the advancing enemy horde, killing many before being trampled to their deaths.

A sepulchral silence descended on the fort. The mushroom clouds of smoke and a few stray clouds hanging over the towers assumed a fearsome hue reflecting the setting sun and the flickers of the mass pyre.

Khilji, surrounded by his generals, entered the quiet fort, his face a picture of anxiety, uncertainty and fear, still tinged by some hope. He had walked through the fort a year ago, viewing its splendour with envy. He had desired its ruination, but had desired something more too. His first desire had been fulfilled, but, as he advanced, he grew sure that his second and his fondest desire was not going to be.

Silence and smoke could never have been more terrifying. The smell of the burning corpses vied with the fragrance of sandalwood, musk and other incense

to dominate the atmosphere; the result was sickening. Khilji felt giddy and drained of all zest. His arms resting on the shoulders of two generals, he stepped into the main palace.

The last flame of fire virtually sneered at him before a gust put it out. The Sultan broke into a mad delirium, say the bards. Never did he smile or laugh normally thereafter. If he did, it was a wild laugh, sudden and sinister.

That Sultan Aladin Khilji attacked Chittor first in 1302 and finally in 1303 when he destroyed it, and Padmini committing *johar* are facts of history. Those who view the other episodes as only a legend argue: (1) for the Sultan to trust that Padmini would come down to submit herself to his desire was improbable; (2) a cavalcade of 700 palanquins ought to have made him suspicious; (3) there would have been a monument to mark Padmini's triumph had it been a fact.

Those who look upon the legend as history argue (1) the Sultan had kidnapped Ratan Singh with the sole intention of winning Padmini. Going by his own values, there was nothing unusual in his expecting the elders of the dynasty deciding to sacrifice a woman for the sake of their king's life. For the Sultan, Padmini was a beauty, an object of enjoyment. He did not see her as one endowed with a will of her own, one capable of engineering a dramatic strategy; (2) there was nothing unnatural for the Queen of Mewar to be accompanied by 700 maids, more so when it was a ceremonial procession. Even in the 19th century so many British officers in India moved about with more than a hundred attendants each - as witnessed by Willian Howard Russel, Correspondent of the *Times* (London). They knew that to be a matter of status in Hindustan. May be 700 palanquins is an exaggeration. Whatever be their number, the Sultan was hardly in a mood to spoil the flattering occasion with any suspicion. His was a large army. And he had Ratan Singh as hostage. Could the Rajputs endanger their king's life? Besides, the fake Padmini in the palanquin assured him of his trophy coming within his reach; (3) Rani Padmini's triumph having lasted only for a year, there was no time to erect a monument to immortalize it. Besides such a monument was bound to remind posterity of Rawal Ratan Singh's humiliation. A far more lasting and inspiring monument had been built by the people - in the way of ballads, plays and a dozen legends with imaginative variations.

Aladin, an awfully lusty and ambitious illiterate who had mercilessly killed the founder of the Khilji dynasty, Jalaluddin, his patron as well as his uncle and father-in-law, and who had usurped the Rani of Devagiri, Kamala Devi, could

very well have coveted Rani Padmini, resulting in her committing suicide. Posterity avenged her death and Chittor's destruction through the legend, which, all said and done, could very well have been true to some extent.

Gusts of breeze swept over Udaipur throughout the night. Dawn was still an hour away when I marked a shadow outside my window. I shifted the screen. Shombhudas stood with a tray.

I opened the door hurriedly.
'You - and so early!'

'Our cook comes late. Better I make tea for you, I thought. After all, you have to start early for Chittor in order to come back by evening,' Shombhudas explained.
'Thanks, my brother, but I don't think I can make it to Chittor.'
Shombhudas smiled. 'Get ready, sir. Soon after you retired a car for you arrived. It is from Bhupalsagar.'

I remembered having received a phone call from an unknown well wisher residing at Bhupalsagar. Since he enquired about my programme I had casually told him of my desire to see Chittor and had asked about the time the travel by public transport takes, I had not expected him to be so kind.

I was at the portico as soon as I could and the young driver greeted me with a smart salute. Another Rajput!
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The Trustee Nonpareil

My drive from Udaipur to Chittor which started at the crack of dawn gave me the sensation of going through a long lyrical poem, its last stanza being sunrise beyond the Aravalli hills, with the silhouette of the fort of Chittor outlined against a bright blue horizon.

The zigzag ascent to the fort passed through lush green bushes and creepers interrupted by a living shop or a dead sentry post and ruins of archways. A historic passage indeed, that had vibrated to a million hooves and laughter and cries, to waves of victors and vanquished through the ages.

Guides accosted me as soon I emerged from my car. “It’ll be difficult for you to appreciate the various monuments inside the fort without a guide’s assistance,’ said one. ‘Just tell me the amount of time you’re prepared to spend and I’ll be selective accordingly,’ said another.

A guide, no doubt, is a help, but he is a hindrance to one’s personal brooding, reflections and nostalgia. I walked passed them.

‘Can I be of any help?’ The skeletal aged man seated on a boulder at the entrance extinguished his cheroot, stood up and removed his worn-out cap, some sort of an army relic, in the way of greeting me. His dignified gait, but sad eyes, moved me to a nod. He thanked me and ushered me into the fort.

Within minutes he became, more than a guide, a most genial companion. He was in the army, but lost the job for some disobedience attributed to him and, in the years that followed, lost every other privilege or position he stumbled upon. His nephew running a shop downhill did not mind providing him with food and shelter and he tried to earn a bit as a guide to meet his other meagre needs.

He had no regrets over his past, no great expectations from the future.

‘What has Akbar left for you to see?’ he asked me, standing amidst the first phase of the giant ruins. ‘Art and architecture were of no consideration for the builders of this fort. This was designed with pure safety and its strategic location in view. In normal times Chittor could kick down any enemy, but Akbar struck when the sun of its fortune was already under eclipse - and that over-ambitious foreign invader tried to leave no stone unturned! Well, sir, must you educated people call him “Great?”

‘My friend, you can call Babur a foreigner, but how Akbar? Babur disliked the country that enabled him to a solid crown, but Akbar, born in India, loved India and was eager to learn from its heritage. How can you judge a 16th century character with your 20th century values? So far as ambition and ruthlessness are concerned, don’t you think that they are some of the most glittering ingredients of history? Doesn’t the evolutionary force get much done though individuals possessed by such qualities or frenzies - Alexander example?’ I became Akbar’s lawyer, not so much for the great Moghul’s sake, but because I liked to provoke my guide.

But he changed his strategy at once. ‘What sin had Meerabai committed to suffer

an avalanche of harassment?'
An unusual guide indeed to storm his customer with questions! He kept staring at me, arms akimbo.

'Well, I believe, she was too modern, too great for her contemporaries! For a queen to throw the royal paraphernalia to the wind and sing and dance with ecstasy and abandon surrounded by a motley crowd or to stand entranced by love for Krishna, could be considered abnormal even by you and me!'

My guide listened with attention but without any reaction. I was not prepared to be grilled by him any more: 'Now, my friend, to your duty.'

He gave a start. 'Look at that dark underground hall. There and here on the courtyard had been performed that cloud-licking bonfire of ladies - *johar* - led by Rani Padmini. Chittor had seen such holocausts not once but thrice. And look upstairs at those skeletons of once magnificent zenana. That is where the noble Panna, the nurse nonpareil, sacrificed her own son to protect her ward. You know about it, don't you?'

Who did not know! But I was keen to hear his version of the episode. He began in Hindi, but changed into fluent English, albeit unconsciously.
That happened in the later part of the 16th century, he said. The queen of Maharana Vikram died leaving behind an infant son, the sole heir to the dynasty, entrusting him to her dearest maid, Panna. Panna used to bring her own son, a few months older than the little prince Uday Singh, to the queen's apartment at night, so that she could look after both the infants.

The first quarter of the night was coming to an end; Panna had fed both the boys and had lulled them to sleep. Suddenly she heard some suppressed cries of horror in the outer rooms. A servant dashed in and informed her that Maharana Vikram had been assassinated by an illegitimate son of the dynasty, Vanbir, who was heading towards the zenana.

Panna understood that the next victim Vanbir intented to claim was the infant prince so that he was left with no contestant for the throne. There was no time to lose. Panna lifted the infant prince from his cradle and handed him over to a confidant, advising him to carry the child under some items of food in a basket to a spot at the foot of the hill. She then brought her own child from the adjoining room and laid it on the bejewelled cradle.

The very next moment Vanbir appeared at the door. His sword was still red with the Maharana's blood. He looked at Panna with contempt, pushed her away and plunged the steel into her son's chest. Panna fainted while Vanbir's sinister laughter echoed along the corridors, but soon regained consciousness and hurried to the appointed spot down the hill for taking charge of the little prince.

She walked the whole night, carrying Prince Uday Singh on her back and reached the castle of the of the chieftain of Deola. She appealed to him to give shelter to the prince but the chieftain, afraid of incurring the brute Vanbir's wrath, begged to be excused.

Sleepless, hungry and exhausted, Panna resumed walking and reached the hamlets of the Bhils on the Aravalli valley. The faithful Bhils escorted her to yet another castle, that of the chieftain of Kamalmar.

She narrated the woes of Chittor and of herself to the chieftain Asha Shah. 'My lord, people would imagine things only if they see me here. But I'll go away as soon as I can place the prince on your gracious arms,' she said.

The chieftain's arms, only half extended, were unsteady.

'My son, are you not ashamed of your vacillation? Where would you be but for the munificence of the Maharanas? And don't you feel puny as an insect before the incomparable sacrifice, courage and faithfulness of this lady?' It was the chieftain's old mother behind him exhorting him.

Asha Shah received the little prince, his arms fully stretched and steady.
Panna did not wait a moment more. Dusk had set in. While the others were busy taking care of the child, she disappeared into an unknown destiny.

By the time Uday Singh was in his teens, one after another chieftains and nobles began meeting him and offered their allegiance to him, at first secretly but gradually more and more openly as Vanbir's sway began to wane. According to custom, if at a banquet the Maharana offered a dish from which he had already eaten a hit to a noble, the latter felt honoured. One day, when the self-styled Maharana Vanbir showed this gesture to a noble, the recipient spurned it, and Vanbir was unable to avenge the insult that signalled the sealing of his fate. The news spread; Uday Singh marched upon Chittor and Vanbir fled.

Nothing authentic is known about Panna after she left Kamalmar. She did not

return to Chittor, the theatre of her tragic sacrifice.
A tragic sacrifice it was indeed, according to Tod and several other chroniclers, for Uday Singh proved unworthy of her act.
'But Panna's greatness - a true greatness - stands out independent of the worthiness or otherwise of her ward,' my guide remarked in conclusion.
His English had been impeccable. 'What *is* your mother-tongue?' I queried.
'My mother's tongue was a mixed Hindi, but my father's was English. He was an Anglo-Indian. 1 am proud of my father. But I am proud to call myself just an Indian.'
I was proud of my guide. Years later I recommended him to a friend, a would-be visitor to Chittor. My friend made a sincere search for him. But he was no longer there and had left with no forwarding address. *****
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The Bride of Krishna

Silence and solitude seemed to have cast a spell over the ruins of Chittor. There was only a sprinkling of tourists. Except for the Victory Tower erected by Rama Kumbh to immortalise his recovery of the fort from the Mughals (1326), the majestic hilltop hardly offered any impressive monument. No wonder one should find it drab unless its past remained vibrantly alive in one's memory.

I sat on the verandah of the small Krishna temple of Meerabai. My guide who had also become my friend and philosopher, relaxed on the steps. A Bengali couple passed by, the husband bursting into a Meera bhajan: 'I have Giridhar Gopal alone, and none else'.

'Look here, Babu, don't scare Meerabai's tender Gopal!' his wife warned him.
'No wife ever appreciates a husband's genius!' the man lamented.

Meerabai's life story had been diluted with legends but luckily not polluted, as had happened with the unlucky Radha, the other lover of Krishna's. Meera is historical; Radha is mythical, rather post-mythical, emerging from the ecstatic experience of devotees belonging to the Bhakti discipline. A formation in the subtle world, Radha had never been a physical entity. She symbolised the psychic response to the Eternal's call represented by Krishna's flute.

Alas, what a farce to which the Krishna-Radha relationship has been reduced,

thanks to our matchless romantic dispensations and thanks galore to the film industry!
Historians agree on the broad outline of Meera's life, though they differ on her time. While the majority accepts 1547 to be her year of birth, some trace it to 1498.
Meera, a child of Jodhpur, one day happened to witness a bridal procession. Aged four, she asked her mother, 'If a bridegroom for a girl is a must, what about mine?'
'Why? Gridhar Gopal is your bridegroom, of course!' answered the mother in a lighter vein.

It so happened that a few days later a Vaishnav hermit spent a week in their house. He carried with him a tiny image of Krishna. He was unwell and he made the little Meera perform the rituals for the portable deity. Soon Meera grew so very enamoured of the image that she would put it on a cozy little bed by her side even when she went to sleep.

At last it was time for the hermit to move on. It was still dark when he set out for his next destination, lifting the image from the sleeping Meera's bedside.
The first thing Meera did after waking up was to look for the image. Her face turned dark when she did not see it; she cried and refused to eat. Nothing would console her.

At dawn the hermit was seen approaching their house. He found his way to Meera's room and, without a word, placed the image beside her. He had, in the courtyard of a distant temple, dreamt Meera's tearful face in the early hours of the night. Immediately he had begun walking back.

Meera bathed the image in her tears of gratitude. It remained with her till its enshrinement in the temple.

'What you see is an exact picture of the same image,' the priest informed me.
'But what about the image itself?'
'It's with the Maharanas,' he answered apologetically.

Perhaps to leave that small but precious image exposed in a temple that enjoyed little protection would have been unwise. Several idols missing from neighbouring temples had surfaced amidst proud private collections in the West.
'I hope it is safe in the custody of the Maharanas,' I said, looking at my guide.

‘Only as safe as the Maharanas themselves,’ commented my guide. ‘They, as well as everything they possessed, had always been unsafe. Think of Maharana Pratap!’
But there would be a time to think of Maharana Pratap. I sat checking my knowledge of Meerabai with the priest’s. I was not disappointed.

Meera had lost her father in her infancy. Her grandfather, although not a ruling prince, was a princely noble. Probably his relative, the old Maharana of Mewar, once passed through Jodhpur, happened to see Meera, liked her immensely and proposed her marriage with his son, the young Bhojraj. The Maharana must have been gifted with a rare vision to be attracted towards Meera who, it is believed, was endowed more with a serene grace than any sensuous charm.

The Maharana’s wish was done. Soon thereafter Bhojraj ascended the throne. Traditionally a devotee of Kali, Bhojraj by and by turned to Krishna and built a shrine for Meera’s deity adjacent to his palace, though his actions were frowned upon by his kinsmen. He would refuse to check Meera’s weird propensities even when she would make a dash into the temple dead of night, in a state of trance.

But the gentle and conscientious Bhojraj died young. His younger brother, Ratan Singh, who succeeded him was equally tolerant of the conduct of Meerabai - who would sometimes pass a full day and a night at a stretch in the temple, singing, dancing or simply gazing at her idol, while curious crowds would gather around her.

Ratan Singh was assassinated and the throne was occupied by his younger brother - a very different character. Swearing by the dynasty’s dignity, he and his jealous sister cried a halt to Meerabai’s eccentricities. They even mixed deadly poison in her drink which failed to harm her - according to one of her most touching lyrics.

But Meerabai decided to leave the dynasty in peace and departed for Vrindaban and thence to Dwaraka. The kingdom of Mewar, so sing the bards, was engulfed by several crises and the people held the dynasty’s deplorable conduct towards Meerabai responsible for it. There is the widely known story of a delegation led by the Rajguru to Dwaraka to persuade the ascetic queen to return home; but Meera, instead, disappeared inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Dwarkadhish temple.

Akbar attacked Chittor in 1567. The Rajputs defended the fort under the leadership of Saindas and Jaimull. After a day's battle Jaimull, with a burning torch, was supervising the repair of a wall when, it is believed, Akbar himself killed him, shooting from an early variety of gun he had learnt to handle. The next day Saindas was killed in a direct confrontation with the invaders.

The women of the fort made a bonfire of themselves *johar,* once again. The last battalion of the defenders of the fort, numbering about one thousand, who were left with no weapons, got torches lighted by flames from that mass pyre and let themselves loose like an avalanche of fire on the enemy throng below the hill. They got killed to the last man, but not before destroying a big chunk of the Mughal army. The last luminous flicker in the history of Mewar - Maharana Pratap - dazzled a million imaginations with his uncompromising heroism, but could not reclaim the fort of his ancestors.

'How was Chittor, sir?'
It was my chauffeur, while negotiating our descent from the height.
'Not easy to answer!'

'You may not answer. But I know that you loved it. I have driven here a hundred times; I would be happy to drive another one hundred times.'
He waxed profusely sentimental, lamenting the present state of the Rajputs, as we drove along.

We were passing through a crowded bazaar. Some young men stood right at the centre of the road, talking and laughing, refusing to budge even though the car was about to touch them. The chauffeur hooted and one of the young man stepped aside, as if taken aback and, in the process, delivered a two-syllable epithet, offensive but widely popular.

My chauffeur stopped and put the car in reverse gear. Closer to the offender, he demanded an unqualified apology in a voice ominous and louder than the whole bazaar's.

The situation would have been different if the offender were alone. But he had a half dozen-strong team behind him. He at once assumed the role of their captain and banged on the car, daring my chauffeur to do what he could.

I was the solitary sepoy behind my captain. 'I'm a Rajput's offspring!' he announced and, in the process of getting down from the car, removed his

wristwatch and handed it over to me, signalling his readiness for action and his expectation of my moral support.

I, too, got down and tried to tell my captain that his adversary did not mean offence, that his exclamation was a mere reflex utterance and that he would have uttered the phrase, so endearing to so many, even if his own father or grandfather were in the driver's seat.

'But am I not a Rajput lad?' he snubbed me. There was nothing to suggest that there were no Rajputs among his opponents. Besides, there was no assurance that a half-dozen non-Rajputs could not crush one Rajput. I tried to pacify the teams. What ushered in peace, I realised, was not my argument, but their pity for my desperately spoken weird Hindi.

The chauffeur took back his wristwatch with a short thanks and resumed driving. We both had fallen silent. 'In which direction is Haldighat?' I asked, to break the uneasiness. He slowed down. 'So, we go there!'
'Oh no. I must reach Udaipur in time for my meeting.'

'Why then did you ask me about Haldighat at this particular spot?'
'What do you mean?' I looked out while turning the question back to him. We were at a crossroads, an arrow left showing the way to Haldighat!
'You are destined to see Haldighat. It is my task to see to it that you're not late for your programme.' He turned the car to the left.
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Rider of the Blue Horse

The road to Haldighat was rocky and uneven, pebbles big and small shooting out from beneath my car which galloped rather than ran. My Rajput chauffeur had probably identified himself with one of the generals of Maharana Pratap Singh.

Haldighat - the Pass so named because of the colour of the soil - the high hills of the Aravalli range, the gorges and the narrow passage meandering through them were profusely green and lively, more a backdrop for fairytales, chivalry and romance than any bloody battle. Indeed, it had been the cradle for several episodes of the first variety and if it had been also an arena for war, that was a war with a difference, a war in which, to quote Bhavani Bhattacharya, "The cult

of heroism went to such lengths that it almost became an end in itself, not the means to an end."

The Bhils of the valley would still identify trees from the high branches of which were hung baskets containing Maharana Pratap Singh's children so that they were safe from wild animals. The Maharana moved about without a penny and was unable to pay his soldiers. Even so 25,000 of them were always alert, guarding Kamalnir, his improvised fortress in the forest, for Chittor had been lost to the Mughals during the time of his father, Uday Singh, a weak ruler.

Coming to chivalry, it was on the outskirts of Haldighat that one day the Maharana's son, Kumar Amar Singh, with the help of his youth brigade, surrounded Khan Khanan Abdul Rahim and his family. The Khan, a trusted noble of Akbar, had camped there in order to acquaint his wife and children with the thrill of hunting, little suspecting the enemy's presence in the vicinity. But when trapped, the Khan,without bothering about the fate of his family, managed to escape.

Kuamar Amar produced the Khan's family, taken hostage, before Maharana Pratap. A big ransom could have been demanded of the Mughals. But the Maharana addressed the Khan's wife as daughter and arranged to send the prisoners to the Khan's camp, duly escorted, taking great care for their safety and comfort.

No less noble and brave were the Maharana's confidants. Once while he stayed with Rao Bhan, his maternal uncle, at Nanpur, the Mughals set fire to the gunpowder godown adjacent to the Rao's castle. Rao Bhan, realising that he had no chance to confront the enemy with firepower, called upon his soldiers to face the enemy with bows and arrows and swords. He kept the enemy at bay, making it possible for the Maharana and his family to escape to safety before himself falling dead.

Akbar was never tired of sending offers to the Maharana for a truce - albeit to the former's advantage. Chittor would be restored to the Maharana but he must agree to rule as a vassal, recognising Akbar as his emperor and paying at least a symbolic tribute to him. Hadn't several other Rajput rulers done so? Hadn't the ruler of Amber (Jaipur), Mansingh, even let Akbar marry a sister of his?

Messengers meeting the Maharana with such offers were treated with kindness,

but the replies meant for their master, far from being couched in any pretension to courtesy, were always bald and bare: ‘Get out of Rajputana if you dream of any peace, for we will liberate not only Mewar, but also all the other kingdoms you have annexed, leaving nothing for you except ample reasons to regret.’

For Akbar, the indomitable Maharana Pratap was not only a challenge but also an inscrutable phenomenon. To rulers like Mansingh, Pratap was a continuous reminder of their own smallness. His already towering stature continued to grow higher and higher in the eyes of the people of Rajputana.

That apart, the Maharana was proving successful in winning over chunk after chunk of the kingdom of Mewar from Mughal occupation. His soldiers fought with a weird zeal, evidently inspired by an ideology whereas the Mughals fought mechanically and their Rajput allies were encumbered with a sense of guilt.

Mansingh took a bold initiative. He created a situation in which he must pass by Kamalnir. He sent word to the effect that he would love to break journey at the Maharana’s fortress at midday so that he could meet Pratap. Mansingh was not waiting for the Maharana’s consent!

Mansingh and his entourage must be entertained to lunch. But the Maharana’s coffer was empty.

‘How can the Maharana’s coffer be empty? Does he not have a hundred coffers here and there, filled by his dynasty for generations past?’ asked Mansingh’s minister Bhimshah. In fact he had already brought his entire movable ancestral wealth to place it at his master’s disposal. Mansingh arrived at Kamalnir and was received by Maharana Pratap’s son. ‘Father is unwell,’ he said, leading the guest to the dining room. A sumptuous meal lay spread before him. Members of his party were looked after in another ball.

‘Can it be in keeping with my dignity to eat even when my host refuses to meet me?’ asked an agitated Mansingh.
‘Where did you keep your dignity sealed while sacrificing your sister to a Turk?’ asked Maharana Pratap appearing before him.
‘Maharana! if I made a sacrifice, it was for protecting people like you.’
The Maharana laughed. ‘No, Mansingh, it is for protecting your own skin. You can deceive your own people and your own time, but not posterity.’
Mansingh, fuming with fury, left the scene. ‘You’ll pay dearly for your audacity

and arrogance,' he shouted.
'I'm already paying - and I will be proud to pay on till my last breath,' said Maharana Pratap. 'I'm safeguarding my *swadharma* , not my skin.'
We were at the centre of the valley. On display was an elaborate map showing the positions of the armies led by Mansingh and the Maharana - and a graphic description of their strategies.

It was on the 18th of June 1576 that Mansingh had struck, leading a vast Mughal army, assisted by Akbar's son, Prince Salim, and his own soldiers. The irony was, the Maharana's brother, one Shakta, also commanded a battalion under Mansingh.

The battle was brutal and bloody. Mansingh's army was numerically far superior to Pratap's but Pratap led his soldiers, mostly amateur, with such valour and swiftness - riding his blue-hued horse, Chaitak, a banner showing his emblem, the golden sun, flying over his head - that Mansingh was on the verge of retreating more than once. Prince Salim had a hair-breadth escape from Pratap's sword.

The blue-hued Chaitak, the envy of all horse-lovers and ace riders in Rajputana, moved like a Pakshiraj, the flying horse. At one point it put its forelegs on Mansingh's elephant, but there were sharp razors arrayed on the elephant's back and head and Chaitak was wounded. At last what came to the advantage of the Mughal army was its artillery. Pratap had none.

The enemy closed in on the Maharana. It was easy to locate him because of his banner. They did not know that a faithful chieftain of the Maharana, Mannah, had snatched the banner and was holding it aloft. The enemy killed him and gave out hurrahs, sure that they had killed their legendary adversary.

The Maharana escaped. Chaitak, despite its bleeding hooves, carried its master as fast as it could. Two Mughal captains who recognised him pursued him. There was a stream. Would the exhausted Chaitak be able to leap over it? Chaitak did it - the last great feat in its life, but then stopped. The Maharana dismounted. Chaitak neighed and collapsed.

The Maharana's pursuers were gleeful. They were assured of their mighty great trophy. But suddenly a sword swung like a bolt of lightning and their heads rolled right into the stream.

It was unexpected, for the wielder of the sword was none other than Shakta. His brother's valour had overwhelmed him. He regretted his treachery. He fell at Pratap's feet and then led him away on his own horse. The Haldighat battle was over, but not Akbar's anxiety, for Maharana Pratap, until his death in 1597, continued to be a nightmare for the great Mughal.
My chauffeur quietly laid a hastily made bouquet on the memorial to Chaitak at the spot where it had breathed its last.
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One and a Quarter of a Man

While describing about Jaipur in his *More Tramps Abroad* in 1897, Mark Twain said:

And the city itself is a curiosity. Any Indian city is that, but this one is not like any other that we saw. It is shut up in a lofty turreted wall; the main body of it is divided into six parts by perfectly straight streets that are more than a hundred feet wide; the blocks of houses exhibit a long frontage of the most taking architectural quaintnesses, the straight lines being broken everywhere by pretty little balconies pillared and highly ornamented, and other cunning and cozy and inviting perches and projections, and many of the fronts are curiously pictured by the brush, and the whole of them have the soft rich tint of strawberry ice-cream. One cannot look down the far stretch of the chief street and persuade himself that these are real houses and that it is ah out-of-doors - the impressions that it is an unreality, a picture, a scene in a theatre is the only one that will take hold.

It was in a winter night of 1967 that I had set out for Jaipur for the first time. An official of my hosts, my escort to the Delhi Railway Station, assured me that he had got me the best available compartment, an AC first class (of the pre-vestibule days). Soon, as the train began to roll, I began wishing that he had been less kind, for the air conditioner competed with the temperature outside with a vengeance for proving its teeth.

After a prolonged tossing on the berth and under a blanket both of which appeared to have become sheets of ice, I had just managed to fall asleep when desperate knocks on the door woke me up. The train had reached Jaipur and the representative of my hosts was healing in the bush to locate me at that unearthly

hour.

I was embarrassed. But a greater embarrassment awaited me. At the exit, I failed to produce my ticket, despite repeated search of my pockets and briefcase. The ticket-collector stood sporting a stoic stance but probably enjoying my plight. Fortunately, a higher officer came to my rescue. ‘There were only two passengers in AC first class; I checked their tickets and am sure of their bona fides,’ he asserted, and I was escorted out.

Once in the guesthouse, I remembered the resting place of my precious ticket - my hip pocket. I tried to go a bit philosophic over the situation, but could not proceed beyond the truism that a person with an unreliable memory had no right to own a hip pocket.

Years later, glancing through Raymond Chandler’s *Farewell My Lovely* , when I read, ‘She gave me a smile I could feel in my hip pocket’, I remembered having felt the ticket-collector’s frown in my hip pocket, and the chilly sensation it caused in that already chilly morning at the guest house. On my return journey I happened to run into the officer and very cordially offered to him the lost-and-found property. This time he visibly frowned. Alas, there is a time for everything: a time to love and a time to die and a time to produce your ticket.

‘Your first engagement, a talk at the women’s college, is at nine,’ I was informed.
‘What do you mean by first? Do I have a second engagement?’

‘Second and third - at the University alter lunch and, for the members of the staff, in the evening. Your train back to Delhi is at midnight.’

Even then I did not give up all hopes of stealing a few glimpses of the city. There would be a couple of hours available to me after the first meeting and before the lunch. But after the talk, the kind Principal refused to release me without entertaining me to tea, despite my several sighs of despair and wistful glances through the window at the pink buildings. Alas, when at last the tray arrived, there was only time enough to reach the guesthouse for lunch.

The university teachers who joined me for lunch were friendly and in good spirit. But as soon as we began our walk towards the lecture theatre they showed a tendency to fall behind and talk among themselves in whispers. They put up a grin if I looked askance. I was mystified but kept my curiosity in suspended

animation.

I found them reverting to their happy and courteous mood when they led me to our guesthouse for some rest before the next meeting.
Finally, I had to observe, ‘My dear friends, pardon me if I’m wrong, but the whole lot of you appeared to have grown suddenly gloomy, on your way to the lecture theatre, as if you were being led to police custody!’ ‘Indeed, we had our trepidations. Yours was the first speech in English in some years without protests from the champions of Hindi,’ they explained. ‘What a relief!’

It was a moonlit night and, even after the third meeting, it had not been too late for me or my kind friends to brave the cold for some rambling. We stood, before long, in front of what is known as Hawa Mahal, a name which must grow most inviting in the summer. The five-storied palace with curvilinear roofs and beautiful domes is remarkable for its semi-octagonal windows, screened by perforated stones through which queens and concubines, princesses and their maids used to witness festive processions on the streets. Today tourists on the streets witness the windows sans the twinkling eyes behind them.

‘This was built by Sawai Pratap Singh, the grandson of the city’s founder Sawai Jai Singh II,” said a friend.
‘Is Sawai a synonym of Maharaja?’ a lecturer new to Jaipur asked.

‘It is a funny suffix for a ruler, but obviously not so funny according to 18th century values. When Jai Singh ascended the throne, he was only thirteen. He met Aurangzeb and the latter was so impressed by the teenage ruler that he exclaimed ‘Sawai’ - one and a quarter! That is to say, the boy Jai Singh was more than even a full grown man. Jai Singh’s entourage took it as an honour and the word became a dynastic title,’ the professor of history explained.

‘Do you call it merely funny? It’s ridiculous when you remember the character of its author!’ commented one of his colleagues. ‘I wish the Maharaja did without it!’

Jai Singh II (1699-1744), no doubt, was a scholar and a seeker. He created Jaipur, the city bearing his name, after a thorough study of the plans of some of the Western cities as well as the Indian *Shilpa Shastra*. He then shifted his capital from Amber to the new site.

He established the five famous observatories - at Jaipur, Delhi, Varanasi, Ujjain

and Mathura in an era when hardly any Indian prince had any time to devote to astronomy. Of them the ones at Ujjain and Mathura have disappeared. The one in Delhi is most widely known, but the observatory mostly made of marbles at Jaipur, is larger than that and more sophisticated too. Jaisingh had secured the services of Xavier D'Silva, a widely acclaimed Spanish astronomer, but to make the project relevant to the Indian situation, he enrolled the talents of Samarat Jagannath of Maharashtra and Muhammad Sahi of Delhi.

Jai Singh's political ambitions, however, overshadowed his scientific quest. In ancient India, a king inspired by an urge to become the king of kings, let loose a horse which was to be followed by his army. The horse would wander as it pleased and if it returned to its owner unchecked by any other ruler, the former's claim to superiority was established. Jai Singh had the weird whim to revive the tradition, the *Aswamedha Yajna* .

Todd does not think that Jai Singh's horse wandered far, for had it entered the deserts the Rathors would have thrown it into their stables. Nevertheless, Jai Singh celebrated the triumphant return of his horse and performed a Yajna and erected a statue of the animal.

Jai Singh was conspiring with Peshwa Baji Rao to snap any tie of allegiance to the Mughals when death overtook him in 1743.
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A Tale of the Blushing City

Lamentations at Sawai Jai Singh's death had hardly subsided when claims to the throne, each excelling the other in their thunders, were heard from Ishwari Singh and Madho Singh, two of the foremost among the offspring of the late Sawai's legally married consorts, numbering 28. Ishwari's mother was the princess of Jodhpur and Madho's mother was of Mewar. Both had the backing of their maternal houses, but Mewar being the weaker of the two, their rivalry ended in Eshwari's triumph. The victor lost no time in giving all his attention to the construction of a victory tower.

It was too late for him to wish he had better given his attention to fortifying his throne! Madho Singh who was still roaming the city in disguise, cultivating sympathy among the nobles and inciting the generals, was growing more and

more determined to stage a comeback as the tower rose higher and higher to culminate at its seventh storey, casting an impressive shadow on the sand. Madho would pick up handfuls of sand and swear vengeance.

Soon he enrolled the support of the Holkar and invaded Jaipur. Ishwari's army was routed. His beloved Victory Tower must have become the most intolerable eyesore for him, as he looked back while retreating. He could not have erased it from the skyline. At first he thought of blinding himself. Before long frustration led him to immolate himself.

Madho Singh toyed with the idea of demolishing the tower or alternatively, to adorn it with scenes of his rival's humiliation. But better sense prevailed; he left it in peace. Posterity called it Ishwarilath.

The year 1875 was a milestone in Jaipur's history not because of Prince Albert's trip to the city, but because Sawai Ram Singh, the then ruler, decided to offer his royal guest a bazaar blushing pink! Did he read "I am the very pink of courtesy" in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ? Rose is the colour of hospitality in Rajasthani tradition, I was told. In the years that followed, pink became the colour of Jaipur.

Over the decades it had taken me several visits to appreciate Jaipur, old and new —the ruins of its Nagar Gurh or Tiger Fort, a little away from the present city; and below it the cenotaph of Jai Singh designed by himself amidst other tombs; its sprawling Ramniwas Gardens; and Acharya Vyakul's one-man indology museum, Chandra Mahal, also known as the City Palace; and the formidable Amber fort on the hills.

Much more important than any other historic monument of this region was Amber (pronounced Ameer), named either after Amba, the Mother Goddess, or Ambikeshwar, an illustrious scion of the dynasty of Lord Rama of Ayodhya, for the Kachhawaha rulers of Jaipur trace their origin to Kusha, Rama's son.

Gradually expanded through generations of prosperous rulers on the rose-tinted granite rocks, the massive serpentine walls of the fort protect a veritable treasure of fancies and designs, dominated by an exquisite marble palace glimmering with thousands of tiny mirrors.

'Rarely in any other medieval fort will you find such a judicious combination of provisions for comfort and security,' commented my companion.

According to Manucci, the Rajput princes were so very mad after war and fascinated by the death it offered that ‘it was rare to see one of them die of disease.’

Probably Munucci was also right when he said, ‘Had they been of one mind, they would have crushed every other tribe and race.’ But each prince had a peculiar mind of his own and that explained the octopus-like expansion of Mughal power and its ruthless tightening of grip over them. To put it more bluntly, mountains of individual ego levelled them collectively.

Here at Amber, however, a highly unorthodox effort had been made to achieve a civilized coexistence between the Rajput and the Mughal powers - not once but twice.

Akbar was offered the hand of the daughter of Raja Bihari Mall of Amber which he gladly accepted and Prince Salim (Jahangir) was the offspring of this wedlock. Again, Raja Bhagwan Das, Bihari Mall’s adopted son, arranged his daughter’s marriage with Prince Salim when the latter was in his teens. The untimely death of the princess made Salim quite unsettled, at least for a while, as he records in his memoirs.

Alas, the memory of all such unusual marital generosity Amber was thrown to the winds by Aurangzeb when he was out to accomplish his fanatic mission. He razed to the ground 66 temples around Amber itself. Along with them destroyed a large number of ancient manuscripts.

The British rule ended the feud among the rulers of Rajputana. They now rivalled one another in endearing themselves to the new masters.
‘How did the people receive the merger of Jaipur with the Union of India?’ I asked a veteran Jaipurian.

‘We of the elite were more or less in tune with the changing times. We were happy when, in 1956, Lord Mountbatten visited Delhi and President Rajendra Prasad entertained him to a state banquet. The Maharaj Kumar of Jaipur stood at attention behind the President, as the adjutant of his bodyguards, signifying his commitment to the new India through his allegiance to the symbol of the Republic, the President.’

I remembered the veteran’s observation when later I read about Lord Mountbatten’s reaction to another episode with the Jaipur dynasty: when the

Rajmata, ‘the widow of Mountbatten’s closest Indian friend and of whose children he was a trustee’ was imprisoned. ‘The Rajmata was imprisoned for illegally concealing gold, a charge which, it was said by some, would not have been pursued if she had not also been an active political opponent of the Prime Minister. Mountbatten was indignant on her behalf and did his best to intercede, but to small effect. ‘I must say that every time I visit India it tears at my heart-strings,’ he wrote after his visit of 1966. Ten years later he found the prospect so depressing that he almost began to wonder whether he could bear to go there at all.’ (*Mountbatten: The official Biography by Philip Ziegler*)

I was descending from the fort. ‘Come on, sir, enjoy a ride on my excellent camel,’ invited an aged but extraordinarily agile and smiling man with a soiled turban. And, lowering his voice, he said in the manner of passing on a secret, ‘This is an auspicious creature. A ride on this one today, an auspicious day to boot, will bring you good luck, will make you rich.’

‘My friend, don’t you know what the Bible says?’ I asked him. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Must you make me worse than your camel?’

‘Sir, where is the time for me to think of heaven? I must be able to fire my oven at the end of a day with my meagre earnings!’

I was about to tell him, ‘Why, then, don’t you ride the camel yourself and grow rich?’ But that would be rude. I undertook a brief ordeal. After all, his salesmanship was far more humble and civilized than what we encounter from sophisticated vendors of commodities and comforts.

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Imprints of some Tender Palms

More than 30 years had passed since I had last seen the short and smartly suited man I stumbled across inside small aircraft above Jaipur now heading towards Jodhpur. But Prof. V.V. John’s features and witty smiles were unforgettable. Educationist and Indo-Anglian writer of excellent belles-lettres - later a member of the Minority Commission, he was, in an earlier phase of his career the Principal of Balasore College when I was a schoolboy and his appearing in a

charity fancy football match as an English lady scoring goals against the team led by ‘her husband’, a dandily-dressed District Collector, one Mr. Dave, at once came alive in my memory at the sight of him.

Even though I introduced myself as the younger brother of his colleague, historian M.N. Das, he exclaimed (just short of Eureka) as if he had hit a jackpot. He almost embarrassed me by citing proofs of his keeping track of my writing.

‘From this moment you’re in my charge,’ he announced in a hijacker’s tone, unmindful of our exuberance winning for us a quietly amused audience. He exchanged his seat with that of the passenger by my side and overwhelmed me with his solicitude.

‘The end of my tenure as the Vice-Chancellor of Jodhpur University at last brought me a taste of freedom. I desired to pass another day at Jaipur but a friend informed me over the phone of some event at Jodhpur warranting my presence. The horrendous telephone line swallowed up the sound and I could catch only one-fourth of his words,’ he said.

We were approaching Jodhpur and the most conspicuous sight on the edge of the Thar desert was Umaid Bhavan Palace shining with its rosy and red marbles. Begun in 1929 by the last ruler of the land of Marwar, Umaid Singh, it had just been completed - at a cost of one and half crore of rupees and labour of a 3000-strong work force - when Jodhpur, like the other princely states, was roped into the treaty of merger. The last ruling prince’s desperate bid to blackmail and terrorise the government into complying with his condition constitutes one of the most dramatic bathos in contemporary Indian history:

‘His Highness, the Maharaja Hanwant Singh of Jodhpur, clearly under the influence of his British advisers, thought he could negotiate better terms with Jinnah since his State could be geographically linked with Pakistan. Driven by his hostility towards Congress he ignored how his State’s Hindu population would react to this act of their Hindu ruler. Along with his friend the Maharaja of Jaisalmer, whose State also bordered Pakistan, he had had a secret meeting with Jinnah. It must have been a glorious moment for the Quaid-e-Azam to have two of the proudest Hindu Rajput princes come to him with the idea of joining a Muslim State and he was willing to agree to whatever terms they put forward. But Jodhpur lost his nerve when Jinnah produced a blank sheet of paper and

asked him to state his terms; the fear of his population's reaction stopped the impetuous prince from committing political suicide. Mountbatten described how the Maharaja finally surrendered with a last grand gesture. "I left V.P. Menon to get Jodhpur to sign the Instrument of Accession in my study, whilst I was dealing with the Hyderabad delegation in my wife's study next door. During my absence, young Jodhpur pulled out a revolver and told Menon that he would shoot him down like a dog if he betrayed the starving people of Jodhpur; but he signed it." (*Partition and Independence of India* by Manmath Nath Das)

It was no ordinary pistol, but one concealed in a fountain pen. As Lord Mountbatten's biographer, Philip Ziegler, records: 'The pistol was presented to the Viceroy and eventually passed on by him to the conjurors' society, the Magic Circle, of which both Mountbatten and the Maharaja were members.'

It was Prof. John who introduced me to the couple present to receive me at the airport - Bina Dasgupta, an education officer, and her barrister husband. Then and there also was revealed the nature of the function which obliged the Professor to cut short his programme at Jaipur. He was to preside over the meeting I was to address in the evening.

As I sat looking into the street through my window the next day in the morning, a small marital procession attracted my attention. The bridegroom was aged ten or eleven. A sword hanging from his waist and a turban on his head, the hero on a decorated horse was on his way to win his bride, the sight rivalled in colourfulness by that of a hundred ladies in their over-bright attires gathered on their doorsteps to enjoy it.

Somewhere inside a house not too far away, a girl-child aged six or five must be going through the process of her metamorphosis into a bride. The hand of law can never be long enough to interfere in their destiny in the making.

E.M. Forster wrote of Jodhpur: 'This is the land of heroism, where deeds which would have been brutal elsewhere have been touched with glory. In Europe heroism has become joyless or slunk to museums: it exists as a living spell here.' (Adrift in India, 1914).

I had two days of respite from travels and I could drive into the suburbs and even a not-too-near hamlet and talk to some elders. One of them was absolutely sure that his region, Marwar of the bygone days, had been the most civilised society

in the world. All that was old was gold and all that passes on as modern was as ephemeral as bubbles: ‘We love our culture, our lifestyle, our tradition,’ he asserted.

‘But your children would soon forget your traditions...’
‘Why should they?’ he interrupted me.
‘You cannot help it. The trend is . . .’

‘If I cannot help it, I cannot help it; that’s different. Once upon a time there was Ramrajya. That is gone. Nobody could help it. That does not mean we are more fortunate or happier than the people who lived in Ramrajya. We adore our traditions, our heritage, that’s all, even if we be doomed to lose them.’

I had read an instance of their stubborn love for their heritage in artist Krishan Khanna’s *Rajasthan Diary* . Architect Philip Johnson and Dr. Mulk Raj Anand were examining the sculptures on a temple when Philip’s attention went over to a walking stick of exquisite artistry held by an old man in a small throng of curious villagers surrounding them. Philip desired to buy it and offer a “hundred” - maybe he meant dollars and not rupees. The old man displayed an amused smile, but refused to sell it. Philip probably thought that the man was being clever and ambitious for a better bargain. He went on raising the price and at last promised to pay any amount demanded by the villager.

The old man looked moved, but requested an English-knowing bystander to explain to the Sahib that the stick was an heirloom and the question of parting with it simply did not arise. Thus did an ordinary Rajasthani farmer spurn a windfall.

Soon after I was back from Jodhpur the moving story of Amrita Devi, a daughter of the soil, was narrated to me by Shri Sundarlal Bahuguna, the Chipko leader. That event happened in the 1730s. The Maharaja of Jodhpur had ordered the construction of a new palace, and in search of suitable timber for it, his men reached a village of Bishnois. (“Bish” is twenty and “noi” is nine. These folks traditionally counted things by units of 29.) They chose a tree and began to hack at it.

The sound surprised Amrita Devi. She rushed out of her home.
‘What are you doing? We never cut our trees and we never allow others to do it!’ she warned. ‘They are sacred!’

Her plea went unheeded. She hugged the tree. The unrelenting axe struck her head off. Her three daughters, too, emulated their mother's style of protest and went her way. The news spread like wildfire and hundreds of Bishnois gathered and hugged the trees.

Three hundred and sixty-three heads had rolled on the dust by the time the Maharaja reached the spot, stopped and regretted the bizarre operation and apologised to the people. An annual festival still celebrates the sacrifice of Amrita Devi and her followers.

The old fort on the hill on the outskirts of the city continues to be the most significant monument in Jodhpur. Built by Rao Jodha in the 15th century it is a monumental document of the paraphernalia warranted by medieval forts. There was much in it that deserved to be remembered, but all I remember is the imprints of a few *mehendi* -painted tender palms on a wall. They were made by the young Ranis on their march into the funeral pyres of their husbands, in a pathetic bid to leave behind a visual whisper of their memory.

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Into the World's First Quiz-Master's Realm

A few stars on the eastern horizon, lingering as if in a resolution to defy the dawn, were losing their lustre and, through the fog, looked like smudges made by carelessly strewn drops of fluorescence. Trees flanking the railways were yet to shake off their sleep.

The train with its old-pattern bogies was slowing down. I descended from my upper berth slowly and cautiously so that the two passengers on the lower berths were not disturbed. But both had rolled up their beddings. The older one - probably in his seventies - had made a turban out of his long muffler and sat on the berth right below mine, thoroughly wrapped up in a blanket. His eyes were shut, but his folded legs shook nonstop, indicating his determination to keep inertia away.

His young companion was snoozing, his back resting on his luggage, on the opposite berth. ‘My son, I must remind you that you’re a fool,’ said the old man, imparting fresh gusto to his kneeshaking.
‘Jee!’ I responded through the most precise Hindi at my disposal, even before fully realising the import of his observation and the attitude of its intended beneficiary.

‘But why?’ he demanded, his eyes still shut. I relished every syllable of the riddle posed by the old man, for I was already on the frontiers of the legendary city of King Vikram and the whimsical spirit known as the *Vetala* - the world’s first quizmaster who narrated one enigmatic story after another and challenged the king to solve the riddles on which they ended.

But the old man’s Vikram was in no mood to respond. Like a bigger wave following half a dozen normal ones in the sea, the young man’s head would droop violently after a few shorter spells of dozing. He opened his eyes wide after one such major drooping, surveyed the situation, but quietly resumed his repose.

Probably ready to get down, both had sat on the same berth a little while ago, the old man beginning to impart a lesson or two to his ward on life’s little ironies. When the latter had broken away to another berth the old man seemed unaware. However, I was in a mood to be his proxy, leaning on my previous single-syllable mastery of Hindi, uttered in an interrogative mode: ‘Jee?’

It worked. Slowly but with rock-like confidence, the old man I released his wisdom: ‘My boy, Providence endowed man with ears so that he would hear his woman, but woman was sanctioned ears so that her man could give them a twist when necessary.’

I sat amazed and enlightened. The most profound raison d’etre for ears I had read so far was that they showed how farsighted Nature was in anticipation of man’s one day inventing spectacles, the handles of which would require resting places. I realised in that foggy morning, with the rhythmic I hugging of the train, that the old man’s thesis was in no way inferior to my earlier knowledge on the justification of ears “ii our overburdened physique.

‘What nonsense are you blabbering! Get up!’ the young in an exhorted his wise counseller, lifting the luggage of both. Only then did the old man open his eyes.

He stood up and eyed me suspiciously. The train stopped and they got down.

My destination, the next station, was only a few minutes away. I was prepared to sit alert and unblinking. Rarely had I felt so deeply eager to see a place. A thrill shot through my being when my eyes at last caught the legend on the platform: Ujjain in English and Ujjayini in Hindi.

I had neither any work there nor any friend. I would check into a hotel and visit the four ancient institutions of my interest at leisure: the temple of Mahakaleswar around which the city cropped up; the temple of Kalika, the deity whom the pride of Ujjain, Poet Kalidasa, worshipped; the Sandipani Ashram, the residential gurukul where the young Krishna had his education and, last but not least, the Bhartrihari Cave.

Ujjain on the river Sipra (Kshipra) is of course a place of great mythical antiquity, and one of the seven sacred seats capable of bestowing salvation on seekers, the other six being Ayodhya, Mathura, Kashi, Kanchi, Puri and Dwaraka. As the capital of Avanti, the city was sometimes known as Avantika and its other names were Dharanagari (popular during Kalidasa's time), Kushasthali and Kanakasringha.

Ujjain is also one of the four sites where the Kumbhamela takes place, drawing tens of thousands of devotees.

For people other than religious pilgrims, Ujjain's attractions are the memories of Kalidasa and King Vikramaditya. There are no ruins directly linked to them, but the cave in which King Vikram's elder brother, Sage Bhartrihari, performed his ascesis, is traditionally traced to a stone chalet on the city's outskirts, though the hillock containing the cave had disappeared.

Since my decision to make this trip from Surat was sudden and I was not expecting anyone to receive me, I had no reason to take position at the door of my compartment as the train crawled into the platform. I got down leisurely. But was not the gentleman walking briskly and peeping into compartments too familiar to be missed?

'I wondered if you were asleep!' Prof. G.P. Gupta sounded relieved as lie hugged me. 'But you were supposed to be elsewhere!' I said apologetically.

'I was, until a couple of days ago. A friend of yours at Surat informed me over

the phone, almost at midnight, of your visit. Please relax. No meeting for you here, no formal business. All I propose to do is help you see Ujjain.'

His words refreshed me like a bath in a hot spring on that winter morning. Dr. Gupta, the Founder Professor of Business Management at the University of Ujjain, had retired, but within a day I got enough proof of the love and esteem in which he was held by the elite of the city. Though trained in the West, he had given an imaginative Indian orientation to the principles of management and had produced a couple of highly readable volumes on the subject.

I was lodged at the Kalidas Academy, though the food was imported from Prof. Gupta's kitchen, active under Mrs. Vimla Gupta's care, for me and any number of guests.
'If thank me you must, do it only for the guide I have arranged for you,' said Prof. Gupta. I looked at him, expecting some elaboration.
'He is Nigam,' the professor advised me when I settled down in a cosy room of the Academy. 'That reminds me, Prof. Gupta. Do you know where Dr. Shyamsundar Nigam, the historian of Ujjain lives nowadays?'
Which Nigam do you think am I referring to? It is Shyamsundar who will be your guide. Nobody among our contemporaries knows more than him about Ujjain.'
I was delighted. The kind, courteous and unassuming Dr. Nigam devoted two full days to me, driving me from one significant site to another, explaining their antiquity and narrating the legends behind them. It was late in the afternoon when we reached the Bhartrihari Cave.
'Nigam-ji, I would like to sit in silence inside it for a while,' I said after peeping into the cluster of chalets bearing the memory of several Natha Yogis.
Dr. Nigam was hesitant. 'Well, do not sit for long,' he warned me politely. 'I'll wait outside.' He looked happy when I came out. 'It is believed that those who sit in these caves for long are likely to....'

'Grow crazy?'
'Something like that,' he agreed. 'But that inexplicable law cannot apply to you!'
'Thanks.'

The impression that people could lose the balance of their minds if they sat in such caves for long was not a mere superstition. There were powerful occult formations in such atmospheres and a seeker, not sufficiently guarded, may not be able to ward them off or to absorb and transcend them -and that brings about

disharmony in one's consciousness -say those with knowledge of occultism and those who, like Hamlet, believe that 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

'But so far as Bhartrihari was concerned, he had been able to restore the harmony of his consciousness through his meditation here! This place protected him from a possible madness!'
'You're right.' said Dr. Nigam. 'So, you are familar with the story of Bhartrihari!'

I was. In fact, the legend of Bhartrihari, the elder brother of King Vikramiditya, was one of the most fascinating legends in Indian folklore. Nobody can vouch for its factual veracity. But its philosophical import is indisputable. Forget about the issue of the ultimate Truth - whether one can realise that or not. But can one, a creature of average consciousness, differentiate between what appeared to be true and what was really true, in the course of one's normal transactions in life - the life that was itself so short? That was the question which tormented Bhartrihari once upon a time - maybe some 2,000 years ago - after the dramatic denouement of a chain of intriguing events.

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Legend of the Mysterious Fruit

Professor Nigam said in a murmur as we sat down on a rock overlooking the river Sipra and gazing at a serene sunset, not far from the Bhartrihari Cave. 'Under our feet lies ignored and almost forgotten the legendary Ujjain. A systematic excavation could probably bring to light a wonderful civilization, but...'

I had no difficulty in appreciating his 'but'. There were as many important mythological and historic sites in India as there are modern ones. So many adventures in exploration - at Toshali, the site of the Kalinga War, at Pumpuhar, the back drop of the great Tamil work *Silappadikarcim*, and even Dwaraka, the city founded by Krishna, were abandoned or suspended at early stages because of lack of resource.

I agreed with the professor that explorations at Ujjain might yield a diamond

mine of knowledge of several phases of the past. It had been associated, apart from mythological figures like Krishna, Sandipani and Sudama, and legendary characters like Vikramaditya and the *Navaratna* or the “nine gems” of his court Kalidasa the great poet and dramatist, Dhanvantari, the physician, Kshapanka. Sanku, Ghatakarpara and Vetalabhatta, all poets, Varahamihira the astronomer, Amarasimha the lexicographer, Vararuchi the litterateur and grammarian - with historical personages like Ashoka who ruled the province as the viceroy of his father Vindusar, and Chandragupta who shifted his capital from Pataliputra to Avantika - as Ujjain was then known.

Historians dispute one another regarding the time of these remarkable brothers, Bhartrihari and Vikramaditya, but folklore traces them to A.D. 1st century. And this is what the legend has to say about Bhartrihari.

The young king, who was also a gifted poet, enjoyed life, as is evident from his *Snngara Satakam* or a century of couplets glorifying love:

Is there a heart that girls cannot subdue
When they walk like swans, their bangles jingling,
their girdles tinkling, their anklets jangling,
and their eyes like those of deer glance frank but timid?

(Translated by A.L. Basham)

But he was an efficient and compassionate ruler too, loved by all. One day, while he was in his court, a hermit who lived in a cave in the nearby forest, appeared before him unexpectedly. Famous for his occult powers, he was nonetheless notorious for his short temper. He led the king into privacy and offered him a fruit the kind of which the king had never known.

‘Don’t try to identify it,’ said the Yogi, ‘for this is no ordinary fruit but one rich with the power of my ascesis an experiment which became a complete success. Whoever eats it would be endowed with a long and ever-youthful life. As I see it, you alone deserve it. Eat the fruit and be happy and let your subjects benefit by your sound rule.’

The Yogi left as unceremoniously as he had arrived.

The king stood delighted - but for a different reason. He loved his youngest queen more than anything else on earth - and was sure that she too loved him

with equal intensity. He had, of course, bestowed on her all the imaginable items of luxury but, he wondered if he couldn't give her something unique, something which no lover had ever been able to give his beloved.

He could - at last! He would happily forgo the prospect of a long and youthful life for himself, for the sake of the queen acquiring that marvellous destiny. King Bhartrihari at once entered the youngest queen's apartment and passed on to her the miraculous fruit along with its secrets. Satisfied that he had proved his love beyond any doubt, he almost forgot about it. Three days passed.

The king was returning to his palace after a leisurely ride along the banks of the Sipra at sundown when a veiled woman signed him to stop. That was a spot between the forest and the city and there was no other soul in the vicinity.

The king dismounted from his horse and the woman unveiled her face. The king was pleasantly surprised, for she was the foremost courtesan of the city - a highly gifted danseuse.
'My lord, I wish to hand over a gift to you - but on condition that you must not ask me any question about it,' she said pleadingly.

Intrigued, the king could display only an uncertain smile.
The courtesan brought out a fruit and pushed it into the king's hand.

'Whoever eats it would be blessed with a long, youthful life. There is none in my knowledge who could deserve it more than you, my lord!' she said.
The lady drew the veil on her face and walked away briskly without giving the king a chance to find out anything more about the surprise gift.
He gazed at the thing for long. It was unmistakably the very fruit given him by the hermit.

Bewildered, he turned and proceeded to the royal rest-house in the forest and summoned his Kotwal the chief of the royal intelligence service. After narrating his puzzle to him, he said, T must know in detail, as soon as possible, the process through which the fruit came back to the starting point of its movement - that is myself.'

The Kotwal perhaps already knew much. In any case he presented his foolproof report within twenty four hours, the substance of which was: just as the king loved his youngest queen most, the youngest queen loved a young noble most and had been anxious to prove her love through some uncommon gesture. The

opportunity came when she received the wonder fruit. She lost no time in making a gift of it to her beloved.

It so happened that while the queen was madly in love with the young noble, the latter was enamoured of the courtesan and to prove his love for her, presented the fruit to the courtesan at the earliest opportunity. The prudent courtesan, however, had no illusion about herself or her vocation and had no fancy for a prolonged youth. King Bhartrihari was her objective choice for enjoying the fruit's efficacy.

Unlike the king of the Arabian Nights who, not content with beheading his faithless wife, would marry a girl in the evening only to behead her the next morning, the stunned Bhartrihari was left with only one question to brood over. Had he died four days ago, he would have died with the belief that his queen loved him as much as he loved her, that is to say, he would have died without knowing the truth. Truth, in this case, was a chance discovery for him. Alas, can one ever know the truth behind even the usual happenings in life, with the help of the normal wit and intelligence at one's disposal? And, if truth can prove so elusive even in small things, how much difficult it must be to grasp the ultimate Truth!

He called his younger brother, Vikram, and his ministers and nobles to his forest rest-house and crowned Vikram the king. He then left them as an ascetic, for meditating on the enigma that is Truth. From Ujjain he went to Varanasi and several other places, living in a cave at Haridwar for twelve years, practising Yoga under the great guru of the Natha sect, Gorakhnath.

'How fascinating, though a legend!' I commented.

'There is an area where history and legends are inextricably merged. It is almost impossible to shift one from the other. Sage Sandipani, the teacher of Krishna, belongs to the lore of mythology. But his family stream has continued to flow, uninterrupted and undisputed, to this day, the present scion of it being Pandit Suryanarayan Vyas, the celebrated scholar. Where do we draw a line between myths and history in this case?' asked Prof. Nigam, adding mildly, 'And I wonder if that is necessary.' He almost echoed my thought.

The region abounding in rocks and bushes we surveyed, had probably been a stretch of forest during the era of Bhartrihari. The original caves as well as the

habitations which must have grown around the caves appeared to have been buried under layers of earth deposited by floods.

The sun was disappearing on the far horizon across the timeless city. The fusion of light and darkness in the twilight was as soothing and significant as the fusion of myths and history at Ujjain.

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The ‘God-Souled’ Himalayas

A pre-dawn hour in winter at Rishikesh is hardly the time for coming out of one’s room, more so if one had been put to sleep by the sweetest music imaginable, the lullaby of the Ganga flowing a couple of yards beyond one’s window, her music capable of working into one’s subconscious and moulding one’s dreams.

Beneath the snows dark forests spread, sharp-laced
With leaping cataracts and veiled with clouds:
Lower grew rose-oaks, and the great fir groves

Where echoed pheasants’s call and panther’s cry,
Clatter of wild sheep on the stones, and scream
Of circling eagles:—Under these the plain
Gleamed like a praying-carpet at the foot
Of those divinest altars.

—Edwin Arnold: *The Light of Asia*

But the shouts were too intriguing to be ignored: *Ganga-jine Shivjiko hadap liye!* (Goddess Ganga had kidnapped Lord Shiva!) I came out to the banks of the river. The rescue party, consisting of three young Sadhus, had plunged into the awfully cold water with strong current. But they were brave and well-familiar with the playful whims of Mother Ganga. The impressive image of Shiva, newly installed on the ghat and swept away by one of those sporadic surges of the river, was discovered after an hour’s search and brought back to the shore.

The gigantic masses from which the Ganga was rushing towards the plains were

still dark outlines against the sky but for a faint glimmer on a peak. An invisible drizzle transported me to a surreal plane, where gods and goddesses were as matter-of-fact as men and women.

I realised then that the geographical definition of the Himalaya was no clue to its psychic character. It was an alternative to and a suppressed laughter on the world dominated by intricacy, ego, ignorance, violence, anxiety, conflicts and clashes. It was a world of faith invincible and of innocence sublime.

The Himalaya is a stunning wonder, but it does not stupefy, it only inspires aspirations for a knowledge of things beyond. It is too big to make one feel small; it does not look down upon the dwarf that is man; it arouses the urge in him to transcend his dwarfism.

Apparently nothing but a physical phenomenon, the Himalaya proves itself to be a fusion of the physical and the occult the moment one begins meditating on it An observation like this can be dismissed as a thing subjective, but if so many people experience the same revelation, we should be unorthodox enough to accept it as objective - if not at the scientific, at the psychological plane.

Liberated spirits for whom the Himalaya is the abode, we are told, dwell not in the physical, but in the subtle ranges of this infinite grandeur. It required a Kalidasa to capture in poetry the visible as well as the invisible features of those invisible valleys. He wrote further how certain plants and creepers of the Himalaya grow fluorescent at night - and how hidden from the human eye there are valleys of minor divinities like the Gundharvas and the Kinnaras. Somewhere atop a high peak nestles a lake known as the Saptarsi, teeming with lotuses frequently plucked away by celestial beings.

My familiarity with the Himalaya (at least in my present incarnation) was limited to its often-haunted spots, but I was lucky to have met people who had the gift of beholding the ‘god-souled’ mountains in their special and exclusive ways.

Among them was Svetoslav Roerich, the great Russian painter.
Svetoslav and his wife Devikarani lived in a sylvan corner of Bangalore during the last phase of their life. As he showed me and went on interpreting to me some of his paintings that he valued most (and also permitted me to reproduce them in *The Heritage),* for a moment I had the delightful hallucination that I sat

in meditation in a remote Himalayan cave, overlooking a million deities lost in trance. I requested my educationist companion and Svetoslav's confidant, Aditi Vasisth, to record his statement:

'What truly makes a place important is the spiritual message it contains and conveys. The Himalayas carry a wonderful imprint of the thought that was generated for thousands of years by the greatest men, the Rishis of ancient India. We know that thought lives. Here we come directly under the radiation of that Eternal Thought which these heights reflect back to us in a wonderful way. Hence the Himalayas contain a treasure of great ideas and energy imprinted upon their slopes and sacred peaks. Only those who are truly sensitive can feel and receive these vibrations. I have travelled widely and seen several other mountain ranges in the world which are also beautiful, but they haven't got all that concentrated wealth of the Himalayas. Indeed, they haven't got the spiritual presence of the Himalayas, and that makes all the difference.'

Years before I undertook brief travels in the Himalaya, I encountered the thoughts of another indefatigable explorer of the unfamiliar areas of that splendid world whose experiences I loved to hear —Pramod Kumar Chattopadhyay, author of the Bengali classic, *Tantrabhilasir Sadhusanga*. He, too, was a renowned artist, though, unlike Roerich, not exclusively devoted to the Himalaya. What made him undertake long and lonely travels in the region was not so much the spell of the mountains but that of the Tantriks and Yogis residing in the little-known or unknown hermitages amidst them.

He met several of them. But one of the experiences that came to him uninvited in the course of his explorations, was astounding!

We believe that Gomukh is the source of the Ganga. But is that so? (After all, the real source of the Amazon was discovered only in 1971 by Loren Mclntyre!) Pramod Kumar was told by a mystic that the Ganga's source was farther north, in a snowy realm simply inaccessible to men.

He was then young and he ventured out into the desolate north in search of the secret source of the holy river. He stumbled into a bewildering valley - a world breathing an air which filled one's consciousness with delight and made one's body light. He communicated with the inhabitants of that world, probably in a state of somnambulism though it appeared to him to be a normal transaction and, on the third day, was shown the secret source of the Ganga. He was led out of the

region into the gross geographical point from which he had taken his unintentional diversion.

Was his experience a hallucination? I do not know. He would swear that it just happened - that there were supra-physical realms interspersed with the physical in the Himalaya and the one he had accidentally entered was the valley of the Gundharvas.

‘Do you believe you could find your way there again?’ I asked him.
‘Nobody could experience the repetition of a dream by will. Though mine was no dream, I do not think I can ever enter that region at my will,’ was his response.
But even as a bare physical phenomenon, as a geographical reality, it was an institution non pared. The more I saw it, the more I agreed with K.M. Panikkar:

‘To the peoples of the south, a thousand and five hundred miles away, to the men of the sea coast, to the dwellers of the desert land of Rajputana no less than to the inhabitants of the Gangetic Valley the Himalayas have been the symbol of India. The majesty of the snow-clad peaks, visible from afar, the inaccessibility of even the lesser ranges, the mysteries of the gigantic glaciers and the magnificence of the great rivers that emerge from its gorges have combined to give to the Himalayas a majesty which no other mountain range anywhere can claim.” *(The Himalayas in Indian Life)*

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On the Perfect Singer and His Perfect Listeners

At Haridwar I asked Brijbhushan, editor of the journal published by the Dudhadhari Ashram, ‘Can you lead me to Bhartrihari Cave?’
‘I know it to be there - but am not sure where,’ he said apologetically.
Brijbhushan who had taken to Yoga after taking his Master’s and law degrees, was well read in spiritual lore, but not so much interested in legends and antiquities.
‘But I will lead you to a Sadhu who has been here since his childhood in a cave and who should know,’ he added.

We crossed Hari-ki-Pauri, the central attraction for pilgrims at Haridwar, and entered the town. I was wondering about our destination. If Brijbhushan's Sadhu lived in a cave, we ought to head towards a hill and not into the town.

My guide stepped into a restaurant and signalled me to follow him. Perhaps he was in need of a cup of tea, I thought. We crossed the hall with a few customers eating and talking. Brijbhushan stopped before a closed door, hesitated for a moment and knocked tenderly.

'Come in!'
The voice sounded like a distant roar. Brijbhushan pushed open the door and, following him into what I thought to be a cabin, I felt I had been instantly transported into a different space and time.

It was a cave - with pristine, rugged rock above and around us. On a bed of deer-skin and tiger-skin sat a hermit, his body and face marked by stripes of ashes. By and by I realised that several hills, once the abodes of yogis, tantriks, hermits and mendicants, had been demolished to make way for residential and commercial buildings. However, some caves associated with great sages had been spared, not so much because the wielders of money-bags respected their memory, but because they were afraid of their own karma if they destroyed those hoary seats.

This was one such cave. The Sadhu was the incumbent of a line of hermits with an age-old tradition. After a few minutes of chit-chat we asked him about the Bhartrihari Cave. He offered to lead us there himself.

He put on his ochre robe but that was not enough to bring him out on the street. He opened a box and brought out, one after another, some seven necklaces of beads of different colours. He put them on mumbling some hymns.

'Are these beads made of glass?' I asked Brijbhushan in a whisper.
'What do you mean? Some of them must be precious and rare gems!'
'Why must he wear them when coming out to the street?'

'Maybe they protect him from unwelcome forces in the atmosphere or maybe they react to the sunshine in a way beneficent to him.'

'Or maybe he is afraid of leaving them behind in case they disappear!' I observed. 'May be!'

‘But is it safe to wander with such precious stuff around one’s neck?’
‘Well, attack on Sadhus is rather rare, even though there are robbers and bandits here.’

‘What about robbers and bandits in the guise of Sadhus - since robbers and bandits galore are there in abundance as merchants or politicians?’
‘They are there!’
Brijbhushan’s response was brief. I chose to trust what I had heard from a veteran Vaishnava traveller, that the Himalayan climate - at least the occult climate - was an antidote to man’s wicked propensities.

We had walked only for a furlong when the Sadhu led us into a temple-like building. I had stopped feeling intrigued and, as expected, I was shown into yet another cave preserved as a cabin in a sprawling modern structure. But this was an Ashram run by the Natha sect and the cave was maintained with care.

Sitting on a lovely spot on the Ganga at night I tried to visualise the Haridwar of ages gone by. It must have been a cluster of hills with hundreds of caves. Darkness must have been dotted by a few flickers of light on different tiers of the hills. There would be hardly any noise apart from the gurgling of the Ganga.

Haridwar’s oldest name was Kapilasthan.

Somewhere here was a passage to a nether region with the abode of Sage Kapila. The gods whisked away the handsome horse let loose by King Sagara and tied it to a pole in the sage’s hermitage. The king was furious, for he could perform the *Aswamedha Yajna* which would make him the king of kings only when the horse returned unchecked after roaming over the neighbouring kingdoms.

Sagara’s thousand sons, after a systematic search, found their way to Kapila’s abode and spotted the lost horse. They pointed their accusing fingers at the great sage and were instantly reduced to ashes by the sage’s fiery look. Two generations later. Prince Bhagiratha appeased the sage and got from him the secret for resurrecting his ancestors: that would be possible only if the River of Heavens descended to the earth and rolled on the ashes!

The story of Bhagiratha meditating on Brahma, Ganga’s custodian and persuading him to release the flow to the earth, and Lord Shiva consenting to absorb the first shock of the mighty fall so that its impact did not shatter the earth, is widely known. Much less known, however, is the story of the genesis of

the Ganga, the reason for her divine sanctity.

This happened at some remote point in mythical times. The unparalleled Narada, the only god to lead the life of a sage, was on his way back to Golaka, the home of Vishnu, after one of his trips to the earth. The subtle passage linking the earth and the heavens, of course, lay through the Himalayas, and Narada, as he ascended it, merrily playing his Veena and humming a song, was puzzled to see in one of the moon-bathed valleys a small get-together of some supernatural beings, male and female. Although they were stunningly beautiful, each one of them was maimed. Some had lost a limb each; others appeared to have been badly mauled or whipped.

Narada stopped and talked to them and learnt that they were Gandharvas, the demigods who were the spirits of music. Each one of them represented a Raga or Ragini - the modes of music.

'What deformed or battered you?' he queried. The spirits, though far from willing to speak out, had to satisfy his curiosity at last: Every time a singer or a player of a musical instrument, under the influence of his or her *ego,* disregarded the sanctity of a Raga or Ragini and made erroneous or whimsical deviations, the Gandharva concerned received a blow. Over the years, thousands of such blows had maimed them.

Narada, himself a musician, stood awfully embarrassed. He must do some penance on behalf of all the musicians

'Tell me, you noble beings, what can be done to restore your original forms to you?' he asked. 'Only if we could once hear the perfect musician sing!' was the answer.
'Who is the perfect musician?'
'Lord Shiva, who remains lost in silence.'

Narada forthwith proceeded to Kailash and appealed to Lord Shiva for a performance for the benefit of the much harassed supernatural tribe.
Said the compassionate Shiva, 'I am willing to sing, but I can be inspired only if I have before me at least one perfect listener!'
Who are the perfect listeners? There were only two: Brahma and Vishnu.

Narada hurried to them; they were only too happy at the prospect of enjoying Shiva's music. A time was fixed. The Guandharvas reached Kailash. So did

Brahma and Vishnu and, as the news spread, all the other gods and demigods.

Shiva began to sing. All were in ecstasy. Far below the hills the vibrations brought a touch of spring to Nature. Snows crystallised for ages melted.
And, most unexpectedly, the luminous aura that surrounded Vishnu's body also began to melt as the perfect listener became totally one with the flow of Shiva's song.

The alert Brahma at once captured the melted aura in his *Kamandalu.* Later poured into the heavens, the stuff flowed as a celestial river and it continued to do so till the day Bhagiratha ushered her into the human world.

Ganga is sacred because it owes its origin to Vishnu's melted aura - an element of his subtle body. The Ganga, reviving the Sagara princes, symbolised the power of Divine Grace, its possible triumph over death.
But lesser mortals go content with far smaller expectations:
The maid or matron, as she throws

Champac or lotus, Bel or rose,
Or sends the quivering light afloat
In shallow cup or paper boat,
Prays for a parent's peace and wealth,
Prays for a child's success and health,
For a fond husband breathes a prayer,
For progeny their loves to share,
For what of good on earth is given
To lowly life, or hoped in Heaven.
Such are the scenes the Ganges shows,
As to the sea it rapid flows;
And all who love the works to scan
Of nature, or the thoughts of man,
May here unquestionably find
Pleasure and profit for the mind.
Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1866)
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The Fading Path of Liberation

The pre-sunset mellow light was an invitation to gaze at the expanse of hills and terrains. ‘Do you see, on the other bank of the river, that narrow winding path? At many places almost invisible today, in another decade or two that would have completely vanished,” said the young officer of the Border Road Task Force, my guide. ‘My grandfather was never tired of narrating his adventures along that path, he added, but more as a soliloquy.

He had as much reason to feel nostalgic about the dying path as had I. Many a grandfather had the same tale of woe and adventure - of braving rains and storms, merciless thugs and bandits, beasts lying in ambush and, last but not the least, sheer exhaustion of trekking along a long - long mountain path paved by the pilgrims’ feet alone over the countless centuries.

Except at tiny temple-towns situated far from one another, there was rarely a shed by the roadside to protect the pilgrims from the vagaries of Nature; no inn providing food, no dispensary to render care to the sick. Even then irresistible was the call of Badri Vishnu.

‘Even a car-drive for hours at a stretch tires us. I cannot imagine how they could walk for months, many of them without even shoes, along a path as hard as stone could be and surmounting as frequent ascents and descents which the mountains must- offer! And think of it - they did not reinforce their vitality with tonics and vitamin tablets which I carry!’ The officer then asked himself, lowering his voice, ‘Could faith be a substitute for all that long catalogue of the modern man’s needs?’ Looking at me again, he said, conclud ing his exercise in nostalgia, ‘Gone is that era!’

The era he referred to was gone only in the recent past, after the automobile could push its way up to Badarikashram, but when did that era begin? There was no record to help find an answer.

My eyes raced along the opposite bank. The narrow path would appear for a minute and then disappear. That was the path Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas and the author of the *Mahabharata* must have used to travel between his permanent cave-abode at Badarikashram and Hastinapur; Uddhava must have covered that path to pass his last days at Badarikashram, as advised by Krishna, carrying the latter’s sandals as his sole asset. Shifting from mythology to history, we visualise Adi Shankaracharya plodding along the path, accompanied by a handful of disciples.

In no other country had pilgrimage developed into so strong a tradition as in India. The greater the challenge of the path, the greater was its lure and few paths were more invit ing than the one to Badarikashram from Haridwar or Rishikesh. Though for most of the aspirants a visit to this destination remained a dream, countless hermits and ascetics, seekers and mendicants, sadhaks and charlatans undertook it and among them were princes as well as paupers.

A pauper Sadhu was the character I remembered while gazing at the elusive path. The Sadhu was extremely exhausted. He saw several pilgrims, riding horses or donkeys, passing by him. He prayed to his deity, 'O Rama, kindly grant me a donkey!' He did not like to pray for a horse lest that should prove more costly or bothersome for his God!

A king was on his way to the same destination. He and his entourage rode horses while their luggage were carried by a number of donkeys. Suddenly one of the donkeys stumbled against a rock, fell down and was wounded. But the creature was too handsome, young and promising to be abandoned. The royal servants were looking for a solution to the problem when their eyes fell on the Sadhu. They summarily placed the donkey on his shoulders and ordered him to follow them.

'*Ulta bujhli Rama!'* (You understood contrary to what I meant, Rama!), muttered the Sadhu as he sighed.

I am yet to decide whether to laugh or to weep at the story. "No doubt, the Sadhu wished to ride on a donkey and not a donkey to ride on him. Rama made a slight error. But who does not err! Hence the Sadhu's sympathizing murmur. He had no complaint against his deity!

The Sadhu dominated my mind for long. Only if I could swim backward in time! 'Sadhubaba, enough is enough! Get rid of your burden. Let's see who can harm you!' I would have exhorted him.

As if I heard a soothing voice floating into my ears from across the river - from across aeons: 'My friend, my foolish dear friend! Could Rama have ever understood the contrary? The donkey you think I carried was symbolic; the weight of my ignorance. My throwing it down at Badarikashram would win me not only my liberation from the donkey, but also liberation proper! If I bear the donkey for these last few miles of my journey, it is to be free from that burden

for my soul's journey to my God!'

In the past the pilgrims prayed to Garuda, the bird-chariot of Vishnu. His kindness was believed to act as a catalyst for marching forward. There are legends galore of people who had resigned themselves to a fate of dying by the roadside, suddenly finding themselves at their destination when opening their eyes. Several inns bore Garuda's name. They are still there - serving the fewer people who still believed that pilgrimage not undertaken by foot was vain tourism.

The passengers in the army vehicle included a former Major General. He had fought and had trained Jawans to fight. Looking back, he saw the life he had lived a mere Maya. Since our meeting at the army guesthouse at Rishikesh, he was eager to draw me into dialectics. 'I'm out for Himalaya darshan, not for any discussion on darshan (philosophy),' I told him in a lighter vein even though I meant it. 'You cannot escape,' he cautioned me with a Commander's grit.

The silver peaks piercing the clouds around Joshimuth (Jyotirmuth) appeared to me like living arguments in favour of gods hiding amidst them. In any case, it was unimaginable that if aerial or celestial beings did exist, they could check their temptation to adopt this sublime sphere as their homes.

My humble meditation on the silent mountains from a chair on the lawns of the guesthouse was cut short by the General.

'What are you looking at?' he demanded.
Must I answer? I found myself in an utterly unenviable situation.

'For me the topography of this region is as simple as ABCD,' he prefaced his nonstop talk on pure geography. The earliest opportunity for me to interject came after more than ten minutes.
'A masterly grip that you have on geography, why don't you turn to the history or legends of the region?'
' Am I not doing exactly that? Did you know that it was Shankaracharya who gave a new lease of life to Badarikashram?'

'I know.'
'What is your opinion on Shankara's philosophy, Mayavada - Illusionism?'

'What purpose would my opinion serve? Should you not bottle up your thirst for

philosophy till you were back at home at your study?'
'But you wouldn't be available to me as a book on my table! Lately I have begun feeling that Shankara was right. All is Maya!'

'Right.'
'Right, you say?' the General drew his chair nearer. 'Does Sri Aurobindo agree with Shankara?' 'No.'
'No, you say? How then do you, a student of Sri Aurobindo, approve Shankara?'

'Sri Aurobindo's survey of human quest is as vast as the Himalayas. He *sees* a relative truth in every doctrine. What you believe now, at the present state of your consciousness, is true for you at the moment. Tomorrow it may change. Even Shankara, I'm afraid, was vaster than your concept of him. Shankara probably did not denounce the world as Maya out of your kind of despair or disgust - probably due to your unfulfilled or half-fulfilled ambitions in an otherwise eventful and brave career. He had a qualitatively different perception.'

I knew that once I had been obliged to break into speech, I would not be able to let my spirit play hide and seek amidst those citadels of mystery. I had lost a rare opportunity. But I could do nothing about it.

The General was in a combative mood. He gave me a shake. '*Brahma satyam jagan mithya* Brahma alone is true while the world is false - this is what Shankara stated clearly. Where is the question of my inability to comprehend it?'

'Had you not failed to comprehend it, why should you argue with me at all? You are as much an illusion as I am. Must one illusion argue with another? And by the way, if Shankara truly believed this world to be Maya as you understand him, what business had he to take pains to travel the length and breadth of India? Was it worthwhile to convince the Maya that it was Maya?'

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Midnight Rendezvous

A welcome silence seemed to have descended on the General. But that was only for a minute. 'Do you mean to say the great Shankara was wrong?' he demanded.

‘Wrong and right are not the words with which we are entitled to brand mystic doctrines. There are perceptions and perceptions, all true in a certain sense. In any case, my fear is, the exponents of Shankara had not projected his thoughts in the perspective of his actions. He surely believed that Brahma or the ultimate reality remained occult in manifestation, even though the manifestation as we experience it was illusory and the values we live by could appear valueless from the point of view of that reality. Had he not been hopeful of arousing the hidden Brahma in man, he would not have founded hermitages at Dwarka, Sringeri, Puri and Badarikashram, nor would he have cared to entertain long and complex arguments with great scholars of his time.’

The General generally fondled his fearsome moustache whenever he found a statement worthy of his consideration. He did the same with some added vigour and that could mean a longer harangue in the offing.

‘Sir, a future free from the false and illusory values awaits mankind. The present phase of evolution dominated by mind will one day be surpassed and our souls will preside over our being. This is the hope Sri Aurobindo has given us and you may kindly consider the proposition. But let us cry a halt to our illusory encounters and submit ourselves to cupfuls of hot and liquid illusion. Look, the manager of the guesthouse beckons us for tea!’ I said, pointing at our host.

I stood up. The General followed suit.
At Gouchar, where we spent the night, I heard the General paying tributes to Robert Frost in his room adjacent to mine:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

It was about midnight. That I had no enthusiasm to go miles before I slept and that in fact he had woken me up from my early thin sleep, are irrelevant. Alas, fate had thrown me into the company of not only a zealous debater on philosophy but also a lover of poetry.

The General’s attention, before long, went over to a lady conspicuously urbane, the widow of one of his colleagues who joined us at Joshimuth. They sat side by side and, to my amusement and a sense of satisfaction which comes out of a

revenge harmlessly taken, I saw the lady vanquishing him with fusillades of her philosophy of life and the listener's role confined to nods, patting of his moustache and brief exclamations indicating approval.

It was nearly evening when we reached our destination. As soon as I opened the window of my room at the Task Force guesthouse, the shrine of Badrinarayan flashed before me, tiers of snow-capped mountains responding to the farewell smiles of the invisible sun.

I strolled alone towards the shrine. The present monument was not old, but who could probe the deity's antiquity? His abode, probably, had been destroyed or damaged several times in the past by colossal landslides and avalanches, always to be rebuilt, but not necessarily immediately.

Legend says that the deity, an image of Vishnu, remained submerged in the Alakananda for years and the seasonal travelling devotees, unable to trace it, had to return disappointed. It was Shankaracharya who, through his long meditation, located the spot. The day was awfully cold and the wind was as biting as the water frozen at places.
But it was not wise to wait. Who knew if the image would not be swept farther away by the current?

Wistfully, Shankaracharya looked at the water, too stubborn to yield to his silent appeal, and then looked at his followers. The one who got the hint was a young Namboodiri Brahmin from Kerala, Shankaracharya's nativity. The young man plunged into the water and emerged with the idol recovered. Shankaracharya re-installed the deity in the shrine -probably a makeshift one to begin with - and appointed the same Namboodiri as the priest.

The first priest was an ascetic and, naturally, a celibate. He was succeeded by another Namboodiri ascetic. At one point of transition the mantle passed on to an ascetic's nephew, a householder. Thereafter it became hereditary. Known as Raols, their line of succession continues - priests from the southern end of India serving the deity at the northern end -yet another sign of the concept of India as one and an indivisible mystic unity.

'Where do you venture out at this hour of the night?' asked the manager of the guesthouse, an ex-army man, who stood supervising our dinner.
'Anything wrong in doing so?' I was apologetic, for, indeed, I had not

questioned my own motive - why I had wrapped myself up in an overcoat and muffler and stepped out.
'Not wrong, but not right either. As you can see, the place is not quite lighted and the ground is rocky. You may lose your way or find the climate inhospitable,' he explained and added, 'Better I accompany you.' Even though I did not know my motive in braving the darkness and the cold, the one thing I knew well was that my motive would be marred if I had a companion.
There was a blast of wind and the gentleman changed his mind. 'Well, if go you must, don't go far.' He retreated into his room.

I had no desire to go far; nor had I, strangely indeed, any desire at all. It was an urge, if 1 must define it, to feel one with the spirit of this ancient place known through the ages only for ascesis and nothing else, by great Yogis, until it was reduced to a tourist attraction in the recent past.

The majestic silhouettes of mountains against a serene blue sky, the stars which appeared more lively there than anywhere else, even the fog and the erratic waves of wind, and the silence over everything else, was an indication of realities of a different dimension.

Strangely, I felt that I was only keeping an appointment, a rendezvous fixed earlier at some forgotten moment in the past.
Later I found my feelings echoed to a great degree, rather unexpectedly, in the words of a German savant, Count Hermann Keyserling (1880-1946):

'In the Himalayas man is marvellously near to God. This nature widens the limits of consciousness more than any other upon earth. All petty connections are severed, and the widest, apparently even the most extreme, sway uncertainly in the air, like soap bubbles, ready at any moment to dissolve in the light of the Highest Sun ....

'This nightly play in the mountain world of the Himalayas works upon me like a living myth. The Indian sages of the beginning and the end of the world come back to my mind; playfully, they tell us, and as if at play, did Brahma create the world; without compulsion, without design, without forethought, just like a child at play. And in full play it will some day pass away. On Doomsday, Shiva will begin a wild dance, bacchanalian, exulting, more and more frenzied, till at last the universe is danced away.' *(Indian Travel Diary of a Philosopher,* translated from the German by J. Holroyed-Reece. Tagore called it a 'great book.')

I do not know for how long I had continued to breathe the air of that wonderful world at night, strolling between the guesthouse and the hot spring leading to the shrine. I checked myself from looking at my watch when, at last, I retired into my room. I did not wish to measure that experience by hours and minutes.

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The Forbidden Cave: The Nursery of the Great Epic

It was an October dawn at Badarikashram and quite cold. But I was already on my stroll - a resumption of my nocturnal stroll interrupted for a few hours of sleep when I continued to wander in my dreams.

At least for half an hour I was the solitary soul to meander along the dusky streets experiencing the gradual occupation of the valley by a gentle sunlight, at first manifesting like supernatural hues coming from the eyes of some invisible gods, then growing into a tenderly warm caress.

The twin mountains, Nara and Narayana, dominated the backdrop of the shrine of Badri Vishnu. (According to another account the mountain Nara was one on the eastern bank of the river on which the greater part of the bazaar had come up.) The sky between the two mountains, viewed from a certain spot, resembled a map of India.

Mythology says that the two earliest known Rishis, Nara and Narayana, performed their ascesis on these two mountains, imparting to the place a certain vibration of consciousness which can still be felt. Anyone who could silence his or her mind for a brief moment could feel or at least sense it - a vibrant tranquility.

The temple was to close down in a few days for the winter. Snow would take over the entire region. The sun, the moon, the stars and the twilight would brush the infinite white canvas with their personal tones and create wonders to amuse only themselves, not human beings.

I was already at the Taptakund, the hot-water spring. Unbearable at the first

touch, it grows quite hospitable to one's body in a minute and as one emerges from it, one feels a thrilling rejuvenation - an unforgettable sensation that could continue for a quarter of an hour. What a marvellous coexistence of cold and heat devised by Nature! The Taptakund must have been a cocoon of comfort for the ancient sages who lived here in defiance of the freezing winter.

'Do you know that there is a cave on the outskirts of Badarikashram bearing the memory of Vyasa?' I asked the officer who had received us at Joshimuth.

'Of course I know. Vyas Gumpha.'
'Can you kindly arrange for me to pass a night inside the cave?'

The officer laughed and in a voice tinged with empathy, said, 'To be frank, it may be difficult for you even to pay a visit there. The region containing the cave is forbidden to all, barring the army, since the Chinese intrusion.'

My face probably mirrored my deep disappointment, though I did not murmur. I sat looking at a chunk of dazzling cloud inching near a silver peak as though to surprise it with a kiss. The officer was talking to someone over the phone. My attention went over to him only when I heard him utter my name. The person at the other end was a colleague of his or may be someone senior to him. 'This guest of ours *is* not just a curious tourist or a traditional pilgrim. He loves Vyasa. I've read some issues of *The Heritage* he edits. Well, I don't mind confessing that to some extent I'm influenced by him. I'll feel very awkward if we let him go back disappointed.'

I was moved. His gesture was unexpected. As he listened to his colleague's response, his face grew brighter and I knew that he had got me my passport to Vyasa. I shook his hand gratefully.

He explained to me why passing a night in the cave was an unrealistic proposition. There were no human beings around. Well, the presence of a few hermits in unknown caves could not be ruled out - for once in a while the patrolling army men spoke of sighting a lone bearded stranger at ordinarily inaccessible spots - but that was no factor in my favour. 'Well, Sir, to let you pass the night there would amount to our leaving you at the mercy of the abominable snowman, if not surrendering you to the enemy as hostage. Oh no, agreeing to that part of your proposal is beyond us!' the officer said laughing. 'You propose to be there for some time. Bight? You propose to meditate. Right?

For how long? I will instruct your escorts to be patient with you - unless you pass into a trance and refuse to come out of it!' he said.

We drove to Vyasa Gumpha in the forenoon. Our jeep drove by the only village in the area, Mana. But the doors of all the houses were shut. The entire village had migrated to the planes, as was their practice for generations, at the approach of November. They would quietly return after the winter to their deserted village and resume their transactions, through the intricate snow-covered passes, with their associates in Tibet.

The people of Mana, in days gone by, were probably a great support for the Rishis - from the mythical ones like Vyasa, Bhrigu, Sanaka and Sukra to Badarayana, Gaudapada, and Shankara who can be historically identified. It is also likely that the Badarikashram of ancient days was green, the woods abounding in highly beneficent medicinal plants.

We stopped at the gateway into the prohibited zone. Despite the sanction already obtained by my kind host at Joshimuth, we had to wait there for half an hour for further clearance. I had to leave my camera behind. 'Please don't take it amiss. We often feel guilty at applying any rule mechanically *on all,* but we have no option. My only hope is, such an uneasy situation will not prevail for long,' explained the suave officer in charge of the camp.

He provided us with four or five escorts. We walked a couple of kilometres and then stood before the cave - the birthplace of ancient India's most profound creative work.

Vyasa had lived a life linked with epoch-making events - particularly during the great Kurukshetra War. Even after the war he had acted like a guardian of the victorious Pandavas. He made Yudhishthira the emperor and pacified Dhritarashtra, the humiliated and self-exiled king. He then retired to this cave and devoted himself to editing the Vedas with the help of his illustrious disciples like Vaisampayana and Jaimini.

And then began the most intense creative phase of the process.

Inspired to compose the great epic, the *Mahabharata,* Vyasa required a savant to take down his dictation, a divinely gifted scholar who would not make a single error while doing so. Probably he also wished that no human mind would intervene in the process of his inspiration's transformation into poetry. He

invoked the loving god, Ganesha.

‘O remover of every obstacle! Be kind to me. Once I am inspired I will like to go on reciting the verses nonstop. If my attention goes over to writing, the flow may be interrupted. Hence may I pray you to act as my scribe! My words, thereby, would assume a great sanctity. The hearts and minds of those who would read them would be ennobled,’ said Vyasa.

Responded the compassionate Ganesha, probably in a lighter vein, ‘Well, my dear Rishi, I will be happy to do your bidding, but on condition that you must not pause once I begin taking down your words. If you do, my flow would be checked!’

‘Very good, O kindness incarnate, but may I too put forth a humble condition: You must not take down a couplet without fully comprehending its significance; said Vyasa.
‘Let it be so, O poet sublime,’ said Ganesha - as generous and vast as the Himalayas.

And thus began a unique experiment at the dawn of Indian literature - creation and appreciation proceeding simultaneously. The *Mahabharata* came into being, courtesy the world’s first stenographer, Lord Ganesha.

‘This is the slab of stone believed to have worked as the seat for both Vyasa and Ganesha as they sat cross-legged facing each other,’ informed the army guide who had accompanied us from the last camp. I felt like bowing to the stone. But, ‘Can I, too, sit on it?’ asked another guest and she sat down on the slab without waiting for a reply.

The murmuring rivulet flowing by the cave is known as Saraswati - not to be confused with the other Saraswati sung in the Vedas which had disappeared. This is the way which the Pandava brothers as well as Draupadi had taken for their last journey, *Mahaprasthan.* A giant stone bridges the rivulet and it is believed that Bhima had thrown it there to facilitate Draupadi’s crossing the rivulet, while he and his brothers were able to jump across it.

But, for Draupadi, crossing the river was also crossing into a life beyond. She was the first to fall. The spot, at a higher altitude, is still identified. Too tired to climb, I sat looking at it - a milestone between the earth and the heavens.

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Farewell to the Workshop of Vyasa

Someone made some tender sound behind me, beating his ball pen on the metal band of his wrist watch. It is an irony of life that the moments we enjoy most slip away rather fast,' mildly spoke the young and courteous army officer, our guide, trying to pull me down from the world of my reveries into which the tiny memorial to Draupadi, lost in snow and frost, had transported me.

It was time for us to return to Badarikashram. I entered the cave of Vyasa once again and bowed in gratitude to him, trying to compress a million salutations into one. Here was articulated by Vyasa the epic which over the centuries had proved to be the greatest single influence on Indian literature; here also began, through Ganesha in the role of a scribe, the tradition of appreciation - the listener or reader responding to the poet's creation with empathy. No doubt the plane of consciousness at which both acted must have made the two functions a simultaneous experience.

Looking at the deserted Mana village on our return journey, I observed a solitary old man briskly walking through the rocks, sometimes jumping from one boulder to another. Obviously he did so in order to make a short-cut to his destination, but his movement showed no sign of his venerable age, no flatering before taking a risky step. His walk reflected his lifestyle - probably even his philosophy of life. Identified with him for a rare moment, I really felt a lightness, a joy which for Sir Walter Raleigh had only been a wish:

I wish I loved the human race,
I wish I loved its silly face;
I wish I like the way it walks;
I wish I like the way it talks;
And when I am introduced to one,

I wish I thought what jolly fun!
If the walker soon became a speck and was then indistinguishable from several other objects which had lost their contours in the frost, it was as much for the speed of our jeep as for his own incredible fastness.

Probably the walking style of the ancient sages was a finer version of this man's - determined, and undeterred by any vacillation. How did they cover the distance between their Himalayan hermitages and the faraway cities ruled by kings devoted to them?

A hermit once told me, 'There are of course secret passages linking several spots significant to the mystics. For example, I know for certain that an initiate could reach Kedarnath from Badarikashram in a few hours. My guru did so decades ago. But don't think that taking short-cuts or walking at great speed was the true explanation for the Rishis travelling between distant destinations!'

He ridiculed our rational approach to the issue, but all he would say when an explanation was demanded, only reminded me of Hamlet's wisdom: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

Our vehicle was ready to leave Badarikashram after another brief halt. But I had forgotten the time as I sat under a rock projected like a shelter and gazed at the peaks, Narayana and, behind it, Nilakantha, recollecting the myths connected with Badarikashram.

The current cycle of ages began with Vaivaswata, also called Satyavrata Manu, and this was his home. While bathing in the river Kritamala (a less remembered name of Alakananda), he found a tiny fish in his palms. 'Please protect me from the jaws of the bigger fish!' it appealed to the great ancient.

Manu carried it to his cave and nurtured it in an earthen vessel. As the fish grew up, he transferred it into a stone tub. Soon it proved too big for the tub and Manu led it to a lake. But it continued to grow and Manu directed it to the river.

It was this gigantic fish, which, at the time of the Great Deluge, saved Manu and the *Saptarshi,* the Seven Sages, tugging their boat to a high peak.

To decipher such myths is not easy. This fish is the first Avatar of Vishnu - the descent of a mighty consciousness. The gradual growth of the creature could symbolise the unlimited potentiality of that consciousness. The seven sages were probably the seven planes of consciousness mystics reveal to us.

The next to inhabit the place were Nara and Narayana -the latter a manifestation of Vishnu and the former, the man, his emanation. Eternally attached to each other, once in a while their relationship grew conspicuous, for example as

Krishna and Arjuna.

One of the names of Badarikashram was Naradiya Kshetra. In his frequent travels to the earth (which, the mystics, believe, has not stopped!) Narada always touched Badarikashram first. K.M. Munshi wrote:

‘Narayana Rishi lived here with his inseparable companion, Nar, and was served by the divine sage, Narada. Of all the Rishis, Narada appears to me by far the most delightful. As you know, he flies around in the ether throughout the whole Universe; *tambur* in one hand, *kartal* in the other, while the anklets on his feet jingle merrily; sometimes, when in a happy mood, I hear his music in my sleep. He sings the praise of God from aeon to aeon. Sometimes he permits himself a prose interlude. He acts as a roving ambassador of the gods. Occasionally, with roguish irresponsibility, he indulges in the pastime of creating trouble between two gods. But for his pranks there would be nothing to enliven the cheerless eternity of the heavens where birth is not, nor death, and marriage is eternal with no divorce.’ *(To Badrinath*)

Narada must be descending on either of these mounts. I was scanning the dusky yet dazzling peaks to see if I could discern his footprints or, who knows, if he would drop just then! After all there had been moments when a blessed soul or two could see him!

Among these mountains must be the one at the foot of which a devotee of Vishnu once asked Narada, while the latter was ascending the hill on his way to his celestial abode, to find out from the Lord when he would have the luck to unite with Him. As Narada reached the peak of the mountain, a Yogi, too, made a similar request to him.

Years later, when Narada descended on the hill again, the Yogi eagerly enquired of him if he had brought any message for him.
‘My friend, it will take you another twenty lifetimes to meet the Lord!’ was Narada’s report. ‘Still twenty lifetimes! What a long wait despite my having gone through so very strenuous and long ascesis!’ bemoaned the Yogi.
At the foot of the mountain Narada informed the equally eager devotee, ‘A hundred lifetimes more and you’ll be with the Lord!’
The devotee started jumping and frolicking ecstatically and crying out, ‘Only a hundred lifetimes and I’ll meet my Lord! Am I that lucky?’

Narada smiled and told him that he was only joking with him and that he had already acquired the merit to meet the Lord at the end of that very life. Thereafter he would be a liberated soul, not bound to the cycle of birth and death. He could take birth only when he desired to do so.

The seeker atop the mountain was a *Jnanayogi,* one who approached the Lord through knowledge. The seeker at the foot of the mountain was a *Bhaktiyogi*, one who approached the Lord through devotion. The anecdote emphasized the superiority of the path of *Bhakti*, marked by humility and gratitude, over the path of *Jnana,* often calculative and demanding.

But true knowledge, too, brings humility; there are always higher possibilities in every spiritual path. The story *is* a comment on the psychology of seekers only at the average plane.

However, had I a chance meeting with Narada I would have told him, *'Devarshi* !' Great indeed is your patience. But I am also intrigued. Why are you taking this trouble of moving between the heavens and the earth since times immemorial? A sublime purpose alone could motivate you, and my common sense tells me, that must be to bring the earth closer to the heavens. How long to wait? When do you think a life Divine would replace the life as it is, dominated by infinite nonsense?'

'Manoj Das is missing!'
It was our guide's voice, not jocular, but tinged with a bit of anxiety.
'I hope you did not forget him at Vyasa Gumpha!' observed someone.
I got up hurriedly.

'So, my boy, this much was the only time at your disposal with which you hoped for a meeting with me!' an invisible Narada would ask if he were descending just then. But there was no chance of his voice vibrating in my gross mortal ears.

The guide, at my sight, heaved a sigh of relief. I boarded the vehicle, keeping my eyes fixed on the peak behind the shrine for as long as possible. As if:

Without a wish, without a will,
I stood upon that silent hill
And stared into the sky until
My eyes were blind with stars and still
I stared into the sky.

Ralph Hodgson

A Postscript : If I had visited Badarikashram for the first time just before the shrine was to close down for the season, my latest visit, early in April, 2001, had been possible just when the shrine had opened. The rush of tourists - with only a sprinkle of pilgrims - was maddening. That could not be helped. But what could have been and should have been helped but nobody had bothered to do anything is the desecration of the cave of Vyasa. (Meanwhile an image of Vyasa has been enshrined, ensuring the presence of a priest.) Even though entry to the area *is* prohibited in principle, the rule exists only in the signboard. So far all is fine. Why should the visitors be deprived of the sacred sight? But how much necessary was it to build a room looking like an extension of the cave in order to facilitate commerce in a popular brand of cool drink, despite a couple of stalls only a few yards down? The thin stream of Saraswati is choking with plastic bags and paper cartons. The experience, contrasted with my earlier spell, was bizarre.

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A Drive with a Dialogue on Dreams

The General, as he sat down near me in the van asked ‘Why did you not take me with you to the cave of Vyasa? I’m angry with you and have resolved not to talk to you.’
I was sorry for his anger but happy for his pious resolution, though sceptical about its execution. ‘Would you believe? You shook my faith. I feel that Shankara’s Illusionism is losing its grip on me,’ he regretted.
‘The grip, obviously, was not very tight.’
He did not respond to my comment and went on, ‘Indeed, I wonder, if all is illusion, how do I know that Shankara was real? I’m afraid I’ll go crazy.’

He gushed out the dialectics of his confusion for half an hour. ‘Let me tell you a story,’ I said, to help him make light of his anguish: A gentleman handed over meat weighing a kilogram to his cook and instructed him in the recipe to prepare a delicious dish. The cook, while tasting his own success, gobbled up the entire stuff himself.

“Where is the meat?” asked his master sitting down for lunch.

“Your cat ate it up!” explained the cook.
‘The master immediately took out the weighing scale and weighed his cat. It was one kilo. “If this is the meat, where is my cat? If this is the cat, where is my meat?” wondered the gentleman. The General seemed to relish the story, but expected annotation.

‘The predicament of many seekers is no different from that of the gentleman in the story. If the whole manifested universe is illusion, how can we, being a part of it, ever know Reality? If we can hit upon Reality, how can the universe be illusion?’

The General grew grave and pressed his forehead. ‘I will probably return home a man different from the one who had left home,’ he warned himself.

‘We take birth again and again to accumulate different experiences. If in one life you can gain experience enough equivalent to another lifetime’s, you condense your personal evolution and reduce the number of births you were normally required to go through!’

If he did not say anything, it was because his eyelids were heavy with sleep.

Badarikashram was fading from my sight, but was growing more and more picturesque and inspiring in my thoughts and my vision. I was trying to visualise the quiet and tranquil primeval Yogis, Nara and Narayana, lost in their trance, and Indra despatching the nymphs - Menaka, Rambha, Tilottama, Sukeshini, Manorama, Maheswari, Pushpagandha, Pramodvara, Ghritachi, Chandraprabha, Sona, Vidyunmala, Ambujakshi and Kanchanmala - to disturb their meditation. As the hills vibrated to their rhythmic steps and wondrous music, Narayana opened his eyes - it is difficult to say what he felt - annoyance or pity. He slapped his own thigh and the vibrations assumed the loveliest form imaginable - that of Urvasi - so named because she emerged out of Narayana’s *Uru* or thigh.

The nymphs were ashamed realising how absurd it was on their part to dream of disturbing with their beauty the poise of one who could create at will a beauty to surpass all the beauties. As they retreated, Urvasi, too, followed them at his creator’s bidding.

Mythology tells us of a time when the celestial beings freely mixed with the earthly creatures. The nymphs were ageless and ever young. Urvasi fell in love with a mortal, King Pururavas, and lived with him on a certain condition. But

one fateful night the gods tricked the king into violating the condition, obliging Urvasi to return to her heavenly abode. The distraught Pururavas roaming in what appeared to be an endless search at last had a glimpse of her at Kurukshetra and implored her to come back, but that was beyond her. No mortal could consort an immortal unless first transformed into an immortal himself.

Urvasi disappeared, casting a piteous look at Pururavas, the latter's arms still stretched in a vain hope and there ends the story as narrated by the *Devi Bhagavatam*.

But the popular mind had refused to accept the tragedy. Folklore creates its own versions of myths. According to the *Katbasaritsagara,* Pururavas comes to Badarikashram and devotes himself to a long penance. A compromise is struck between the laws governing the human world and those governing the heavens. Once every year Pururavas could be united with Urvasi.

I woke up from my reverie with a jolt just as the General did from his snooze, for his head, in one of its major swings, dashed against my right cheek.
'Sorry, Sorry!' he mumbled, squeezing my hand and articulating his protest against the phenomenon of sleep: 'What a pity that half of our lives should be claimed by useless sleep!'

He looked at me. Is that not a pity?' he demanded response.
'I don't know.'
'What do you mean?'

'I mean, are you so sure of passing your wakeful state in a meaningful way that sleep should be branded useless?'
'A good question. But, after all, we continue gathering experience when awake. Experiences help us to progress. The process stops when we sleep!'

'Must you eat all the time? Shouldn't you allow time for your food to get digested? It is in your sleep that your experiences get assimilated. Besides, our consciousness continues to be active and continues gaining experience even when we are asleep -sometimes at ranges higher than the wakeful state's.'

'What's the proof?' 'Must a so-called knowledge?
objective proof be necessarily more dependable than your direct subjective The general's fingers went over to his moustache - an unmistakable sign of his appreciating my observation.

‘Do you dream?’ he asked me.
‘Who does not?’ ‘Do dreams have any sense?’

‘A lot. But that is a vast field of knowledge and I’m acquainted only with its fringe. But I can assure you that your dream can be a great help to you - provided you are receptive to its message.’ ‘For example?’
‘Once again a story for you: A villager carried his ailing son, his only child, to a physician. “Cure my son, please!” tearfully he appealed to the physician.
‘The patient’s condition was grave. But the physician did his best. The father sat near the boy all day and night, repeating his appeal to the physician from time to time.
‘The boy’s condition grew worse. The father wept ceaselessly and implored the physician to save the child in whatever way possible.

‘Towards the end of the night, after many anxious hours, the man had fallen asleep for a moment when his son passed away. The physician feared that the father, on coming to realise his loss, would shriek madly or swoon away. But, surprisingly, the man looked composed, thanked the physician for all he had done and got busy with the funeral rites.

“My friend,” the physician asked the man while bidding him goodbye, “You were so upset over your son’s illness and were so anxious to save him. How is it that you did not show any of matching sorrow when he died?”

“Dear Sir,” replied the farmer, “I dreamt during my momentary sleep that I was a wealthy man with five excellent sons. As I woke up, naturally I lost all of them at once. Tell me, if I did not cry over my five lost sons, why should I cry over the sixth?”

‘Thus did a lightning dream helped a mature consciousness to tide over a tragedy.’ ‘All is dream!’ remarked the General.

‘What you said may be the gross message of the story. But it may mean different to someone else, may help one look upon the occurrences in life - good or bad - with a certain equanimity even without treating them as illusions.’

‘Look here, my friend,’ the General suddenly straightened up, ‘my daughter’s residence is not far from Rishikesh. We’ll be her guest for a night. I will reward you with a bouquet of my dreams. I don’t mind passing a sleepless night, and hope you wouldn’t mind either.’

I kept quiet. We had reached Rudraprayag.
I had already chalked out a different plan. I had included Kedarnath in my itinerary. I informed our guide of my decision.
‘But, Sir, I must see that you reach Rishikesh! How can you break away suddenly? And how would you go?’
‘Don’t you worry. I’ll board any bus carrying pilgrims. And here is a message for your boss - declaring my voluntary retirement from your kind care, which in any case I’ll miss.’ I wrote out the letter. Within minutes I found a bus bound for Gourikund and bade goodbye to a smiling though slightly uncertain guide.

But remorse took me over. The General, innocent like a child and so kind hearted, may feel betrayed. I rushed out of the bus and tried to locate him. But he had gone off to a friend’s. I left for him another note of apology with our guide.

(Three years later, through a chance meeting with our guide I learnt about the General dying peacefully in his sleep at his daughter’s, sometime ago.)

Never had I experienced a more carefree driver. Narrow was the way with deep gorges and slopes to the left, without any wall. Even then the driver let the left side wheels fly several inches off the ground while negotiating the sudden turns. It was evening when I reached Gourikund and checked into the Garhwal Tourism’s guesthouse on a hillock overlooking the hot spring, Gourikund. After a brief meandering through the small, sleepy bazaar, I plunged into the Kund.

The sky appeared to have come closer and looked so different! As if each of its stars was in mysterious communication with one of the Himalayan peaks.
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A Territory of Innocence

If the Himalayan peaks had imparted to the stars above them a certain mystique at night, at dawn one could even see them signalling to the *silent* trees above the hot spring, Gourikund, as if about the things to happen during the day.

Walking up and down the balcony of my guesthouse, I fell in love with that tender dusk and decided to have a plunge into it, with the Kund for my goal.

My goal was just below my guesthouse, but narrow, rocky and zigzag was the

descent. I did not, however, mind tumbling a few times. Midway to the Kund, on a projected crag, was a kiosk - awake with a timid gas-lamp and active with an oven brewing tea, while the rest of the town was still in slumber under a blanket of mist. The fragrant vapour was irresistible and I was directed, the moment I entered the kiosk, to occupy the solitary VIP seat, a stool, while three or four others, clad in blankets, occupied a bench.

The very first glass of tea was handed over to me and I relished every sip of it. But as I emptied the glass, I remembered that, out for a bath, I had felt no need to bring my purse.
'I'm sorry, I will fetch the money in a moment.'

'Please don't bother,' said a voice as warm as my tea, from one of those silhouette figures on the bench. 'Have a dip in the Kund and get ready for Kedarnath. Allow me this privilege of entertaining you to tea as my first act in the morning.'

My eyes were getting accustomed to the dusk and the speaker's contours and voice identified him. He was Badriprasad, a local guide who had received me yesterday and arranged for my accommodation. He led me to the Kund.

The dimly lighted Kund exuded warm vapour. As at Badarikashram, here too the first minute in the water seemed to singe the body, but only to give way to an exhilarating feeling.
A few visitors standing on the brink were hesitant.
'Do not underestimate the benefit of a dip here. This is the birthplace of Gouri, an incarnation of the Divine Mother and daughter of Himavant, the monarch over mountains.'

I waited to hear more while remembering Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhavam.* But the speaker was cut short by the spokesman of his clients, 'Pandaji, we will rather walk all the way to Kedarnath than pay so much for the horses.'

'You are asking me! I will exhort you to walk if you can. That is the right way to pay your tribute to the Lord of the Himalayas. But horse is a horse - the vehicle of the heroes, human or divine. You cannot enjoy riding while calculating how to save a soiled coin or two!' rebuffed the Panda.

For a few moments I was the sole occupant of the Kund. The sky appeared to have suddenly grown more remote - or could it be that my eyes could penetrate

higher ranges of it from the lap of that very special and sacred Kund? If the sky represented infinity, my feeling was probably a warning that infinity could never be approached through a mere physical pilgrimage. Infinity must be realised in the finite.

The sky, speaking at the psychological plane, probably appeared remoter because the hills and the trees around were poised to measure its height - or depth - and in the process added to its elusiveness.

Badriprasad met me after an hour. A row of horses waited where the road to Kedarnath began. Badriprasad laid on one of them two folded blankets and made me sit on it. Each horse had a name and a guide to lead it. The name of my horse was Digvijay and my guide was Mahindar. There were only two or three travellers because the shrine was to shut down for the winter in a day or two.

The serpentine upward path was only 18 kilometres long. But the journey would claim about four hours. The traveller could walk or ride or be carried by two bearers in a *doli,* or packed in a huge pouch by one bearer on his back.

There was no sign of tiredness either in Digvijay or Mahindar in their progress towards our destination at a height of some 12,000 feet above sea level. Sometimes the passage precariously bordered a slope or a gorge; sometimes the horse stepped on pebbles that were slippery or on a loose slab of stone. But it never lost balance. No wonder the horse should play a role nonpareil in crucial activities of man through the ages - in his need for speed and war.

With my total confidence reposed in Digvijay, I concentrated on the environment. Hamlets nestled amidst hills, as if drawn by a master artist with a few strokes on a divine canvas.
We stopped at an inn—a multipurpose cabin containing the restaurant, kitchen and the owner’s bedstead.

On the bed, putting its head on the pillow, lay asleep a lamb. Mahindar and I occupied two stools close to it. On the other side of the lonely road, two goats, through some surprising feat or maybe identifying themselves with birds, perched themselves on the branches of a tree and leisurely nibbled at leaves.

Two pilgrims returning from Kedarnath had finished with their refreshments. Looking at the young server lifting their plates, one of them commented very kindly, “Well, boy, you have a close resemblance with X!” He mentioned a

popular film star.

The boy no doubt had some resemblance with the actor, but only at the gross plane. The boy radiated a serene innocence entwining contentment. No actor could even imitate it, not to speak of having it. Be that as it may, the boy betrayed no reaction at the compliment, to the customer's disappointment.

'Do you know who X is?' I asked the young man after the two customers had left. He gestured denoting no. Rarely had a negative response given me so much happiness. So, there were still Indians aloof from the culture of feeling flattered when compared to film stars.

'Babuji, I hope you have a raincoat,' said the shopkeeper, his eyes fixed on a pair of clouds floating into our ken. *'Bombaika fashion; Kedarka Mausam!'* he added. (Mumbai's fashion and Kedarnath's weather - keep changing unpredictably.)

I thanked him and we were on the road again.
'Do you expect rain, Mahindar?'
'No, Babuji, not today.'
'Why not?'

'Our Digvijay would increase his speed if it were to rain,' was his reply. I don't know whether he was joking or he really had that sort of uncanny faith in his horse's sixth sense.
It did not rain. We reached Kedarnath a little before noon. Mahindar and Digvijay stopped on the outskirts. They had their own arrangements for rest and food.

Barring two or three, all the shops had closed down. With the floating population thinning away, the personality of the Mount Mahapanth behind the temple was growing in stature. Its snow clad peak radiated a supernatural aura.

There was no bar against the devotees touching the strange-looking symbol of Lord Shiva. I had not planned a visit to Kedarnath. But there I was - led by a momentary inspiration. What but the Presence could have pulled me here, casting a spell on me! The spell was intensified inside the shrine, overwhelming me with a sense of gratitude.

I stood leaning against the parapet in front of the temple, viewing the range of

five magnificent mountains known as the Rudra Himalaya. They stood between Kedarnath and Badrinath hiding the secret path linking the two great spots. It is on one of these mountains that the Pandava brothers, except Yudhisthira, had breathed their last, one after another.

‘Where is Shankaracharya’s Samadhi?’ I asked the owner of the only hotel open, while he was preparing *chapatis* for me.
‘Go behind the temple and keep walking. You’ll find the Samadhi of the Asli (real) Shankaracharya.’ ‘Look here, brother, there was no *Nakli* (fake) Shankaracharya. Call him Adi (the first) Shankaracharya.’
He brushed away my observation.

I sat before the Samadhi - deserted by that time of the year. A life of only 32 years and this prodigy took the mystic India of the time by storm - establishing four monasteries in four corners of India and 72 religious institutions. I bowed to this inexplicable phenomenon. Also, I could not check asking him spontaneously and silently, ‘What do you think, O great genius, of your teaching as expounded by your followers - of its tremendous influence on the Indian psyche?’

It was late in the afternoon when I commenced my ride back to Gourikund. Midway we saw an old man walking towards Kedarnath, a stick in hand.
‘Namaste!’ Mahindar greeted him.
The old man looked up for a second and smiled, but I doubt if he was at all conscious of his own gesture.
‘Who was he?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mahindar. ‘But I remember seeing him from the very first year of my training under my father in this business. He would always reach Kedarnath a day or so before the temple shuts down. My father said that he too used to see him in his youth. That means the old man had already lived for more than a century.’

The old man’s smile flashes in my memory from time to time - assuring me that there were people who lived with values other than the crowd’s, whose wagons were hitched to the stars.
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Denizens of Snow and Infinity

I found myself in an unusual company. ‘If you know this to be the gateway to the Himalayas, why do you call it Haridwar? Don’t you know that the Himalayas are the abode of Lord Shiva? Say Haradwar!’ the ascetic sporting a pyramid of knotty hair exhorted me. His two companions nodded and one of them said supplementally, “Not only Shiva’s, the Himalayas are also the abode of Shiva’s father-in-law. Durga, the Lord’s eternal consort, was, in one of her incarnations as Uma, the daughter of King Himavant, who was none other than the god of the mountains, the Himalayas.’

‘Never mind, what these *Shalas* (brothers-in-law) tell you, my friend,’ commented the third, his benevolent smile obviously intended to end my confusion. ‘There are several planes to comprehend the Reality. At the highest, God is one. At a plane just below that, he can be perceived as three - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Down you come - and you have a multitude of gods and goddesses, all emanations of the same Divinity, some weak and some strong. They too belong to different planes. The same Mother Goddess, at her highest, is the Divine Mother; at the lowest, is a minor goddess presiding over even the phenomenon that is the small pox, as Shitala!

‘And Hara or Shiva would be the last person to mind if you call this place Haridwar (the Gateway to Hari or Vishnu) instead of Haradwar (the Gateway to Shiva).’ This was again at Haridwar - at the Mamasa Mandir atop a hill. The last tele-cabin was leaving, as dusk closed. But I sat crosslegged with the trio on a projected parapet, even though that would mean my having to walk the zigzag way down.

‘For how long have you been here?’ I put my question to all the three.
‘All the time, all the time, for lives past,’ said the first one, his tone betraying his impatience at my audacity to measure the length of his spiritual life - or even a part of it.

‘That’s improbable,’ I said firmly.
‘How did you know? he sounded almost aggressive.

‘My little knowledge of mysticism tells me that one’s soul keeps on gathering experiences life after life. It does not choose the same environment or milieu

again and again.'

The Sadhu's attitude changed immediately. 'You are a Sadhu in a deceptive dress,' he commented, giving a tug at my trousers. 'Himalayas for me are the world of God. Even if I were in Punjab in my previous incarnation and in Africa in a still earlier one, my aspirations were always here.'

He was precise and refined in his Hindi. All the three suddenly stood up and, without a word, melted into a dusky dungeon of the temple complex.
From that lofty spot Haridwar with the Ganga looked enchanting. The wind, luckily, was tender. A quiet evening was setting in - for that was no season for tourists.

But despite awful rushes during the Kumbhamela, which witnesses probably the world's largest congregation of pilgrims, Haridwar, like a few other ancient places, retains its serenity and the spirit within it remains aloof from the hullabaloo without.

It was my fourth visit to Haridwar in the late eighties of the last century and I was looking for Dudhadhari Ashram. Haridwar was a city of Ashrams - whether of hundreds or thousands would depend on your definition of an Ashram. Innumerable sages, since times mythical, had built their hermitages at this gateway to the domains of gods, demi-gods, tribes of supernatural beings, and last but not the least, of the great God Shiva. Most of those institutions had disappeared and some remained as memorials. But a list of modern Ashrams too would be quite impressive.

The Ashram I looked for belonged to the category of the better organised and affluent. Is this the way to the Dudhadhari Ashram?' I asked a mendicant.
'You mean Barfani Ashram. Right? There it is.'

The legend identifying the institution was bold enough. Brijbhushan, the editor of the Ashram magazine, was expecting me.

It was called Dudhadhari Ashram because its founder, a celebrated Yogi, lived on milk alone. (Any visitor to the Ashram, at any time of the day, is offered a choice between a glass of milk and that of curd.) But what was the significance of its other name? Brijbhushan satisfied my curiosity.

The story goes back to the early 19th century. While plodding along a higher

range of the mountains, a group of English surveyors saw a tuft of human hair visible through a glassy layer of snow. Curious, they dug and what emerged was a Yogi in a state of trance!

He opened his eyes and surveyed his discoverers. The legends do not say whether he was happy or annoyed at being taken out of his cosy shelter untimely, before the snow had melted. He quietly walked away, throwing his benign smiles and blessings on those travellers petrified with amazement.

Like India's *Adikavi* (the first poet), the poet of the Ramayana, getting the name Valmiki because he had once been covered by an anthill while in trance, the Yogi, who was none other than Dudhadhari Baba, became known as Barfani Baba because he emerged from *barf* (snow). He passed away in the early eighties - it is believed - at the age of 200 years or more.

The crop of such legends grew on the fertile ground of faith that the Himalayan Yogis were, to a great extent, above the natural laws.
Is there any truth behind such faith?

This is what a Yogi had to say to this author: 'Stress, tension and anxiety are among the greatest psychological factors contributing to the process of ageing. A Himalayan Yogi, far from the madding crowd and aloof from the problems of society, ambitions and competitions, is free from these factors. Food is only a medium through which our body receives the universal energy. But there are ways of imbibing that energy directly from its source, keeping the need for food to the minimum. Hathayogic Asanas and Pranayamas prepare the body to develop a certain immunity against the rigours of climate. The body bears heat with the same equanimity with which it bears cold. Then, the period of time one remains in *Samadhi* (intense trance) is a period during which one practically does not age. The influence of consciousness on the body is great. A strong spiritual aspiration and an unshakable faith in the immortality of one's soul have then-role to play, besides the help that comes from the purity of water and air they enjoy.'

Dudhadhari Baba had nominated no successor. A scholarly neurologist who had proceeded abroad, leaving his mother, a disciple of the Baba, in the Ashram, rushed back at the news of the Baba's demise. After the Baba's burial, the inner circle met to decide about the Ashram's future. Someone told the doctor, 'The Baba held you in great affection. Why don't you inherit his mantle?'

While the discussion was on, the doctor had broken away for a moment. When he reappeared he was in ochre garb, shedding his traditional suit.
He continues to head the Ashram, giving discourses in the evening and treating patients through homoeopathy. He spends months at a stretch at Badarikashram when the region is deserted, sealed by snow. 'The doctor-turned *Mathadhis* is a scientist by training. What is his view on the incredible claims regarding the great age of his guru?' I asked an inmate of the Ashram.
'He had several occasion to examine Dudhadhari Baba. He believes that his was an ancient body - of unusually long age,' was the answer.

I remembered an experience narrated to me by the late Umaprasad Mukherjee (younger brother of the famous Shyamaprasad), an indefatigable traveller in the Himalayas, on the strange powers of the human physique to acclimatise itself to nature's severities.

Once in winter he stood near a frozen lake in the inner Himalayas, his gaze fixed on a snow-covered mountain on its bank. He could see a dark speck appearing on its sun-bathed peak. He wondered if snow had failed to completely cover a rock. But the speck appeared to be moving! He focused his binoculars on it. The mystifying object was a Sadhu, all bare but for his long hair and beard.

The Sadhu, probably, had identified the object on the bank of the lake even without binoculars. As Umaprasad looked on, he let himself glide down along the snow and in a few moments was at the foot of the mountain. Smiling and like a child, he indicated his curiosity about the binoculars. Umaprasad showed him how to use the instrument. He was amused. He surveyed the mountains through it for a while and returned it to its owner with a look of thanks and was lost amidst the snows again.

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Footprints of the Enlightened One

How ancient is this story narrated by the Jatakas *Nyagrodh Jataka* to be precise? Not far from the city of Varanasi was a dense forest, a tranquil one, for it was inhabited by deer galore and not by ferocious animals.

A king whose palace stood close by the forest had obviously nothing much to do, and every day, without fail, he led hundreds of soldiers and citizens to comb the forest for deer. His people would shout and beat drums and corner the deer horde. The king would have taken position on a rock ready with his bow. He would shoot down a deer or two and call it a day. The ritual would end with the king witnessing his prey being butchered and dressed on a slab of stone reserved for the purpose.

One day, while looking at the horde, the king was in the process of choosing his prey when his gaze went over to an extraordinarily charming deer, which appeared as if it was a sculpture made of gold.

Realising that it had attracted the royal attention, the deer slowly advanced towards the king. ‘My lord, I happen to be the unfortunate chief of this horde,’ it said.

‘Why unfortunate? From this moment you are my friend. Surely, it *is* fortunate to be a king’s friend!’ said the king and, looking at his entourage, said again, ‘Nobody should ever harm my friend, this wonderful golden deer.’

‘Thanks, my lord, kindly pay heed to my appeal. All you need is a deer a day. But, I’m sure, you don’t realise the sorrows we suffer on account of that, day after day. When you raise your bow, there is a stampede among us, causing injury to a dozen. Some of the deer, in a bid to hide behind one another, are accidentally gored by horns. My humble proposal is, each day one of us would volunteer to die. It would emerge from the forest at the appointed time and place its head on that slab, under the executioner’s axe. You will save yourself the pains of hunting,’ submitted the chief of the horde.

Little did the golden deer know that hunting was no pain but a pleasure for the king! However, the king reflected on the proposal for a moment and accepted it.

The royal hunting, so far as that particular forest was concerned, stopped. Instead there was regular enactment of a strange and bizarre drama - but bereft of any excitement or suspense. The royal butcher would stand near the slab, his axe raised. While all the deer would stand on the brink of the forest shedding tears, one of them would slowly break away from them and, approaching the axe-man, would quietly lay its head on the slab and lose it.

Nothing was known about the process through which the deer for the day was

chosen by the leading members of the horde. One day it was the turn of a doe. ‘I’m going to be delivered of my child in another month. Let someone else sacrifice his life today. I will be ready for the purpose after suckling my child for a couple of months,’ the doe appealed to those whose deaths had already been scheduled. But none of them was willing to die even a day early.

The golden deer heard about the doe’s predicament. ‘My daughter, don’t you worry. I’ll take your place,’ it said and headed towards the altar.
But the butcher lowered his axe. Who would dare to kill the king’s friend? Yet a deer must be killed. The minister was alerted and he reported the impasse to the king.
The king rushed to the spot. ‘How did you think, my friend, that you could be killed by my men?’ he asked fondling the golden deer.
‘But, my lord, I’ll deem myself cursed if I cannot save the doe whose turn it is to be changed into your dish today!’ said the golden deer.
‘Well, I will go vegetarian today. And the doe in question would never be required to die,’ assured the king.

‘My lord, I’m most grateful to you. Even so I entreat you to let me die.’
‘But why?’

‘My lord, is it not a pity that despite your acknowledging me as your friend, I am condemned to look on helplessly while the members of my horde, one after another, fall under your butcher’s axe? If you truly consider me your friend, spare me this awful daily anguish. Please kill me.’

The king stood stunned under the spell the deer’s disarming frankness cast upon him. He then said, ‘O noble and wise creature, is there no way to spare you of that anguish other than causing you death? From this moment I prohibit killing deer. In fact, I started losing my taste for deer-meat since the day I befriended you.’

‘It’s so compassionate of you, my lord! But, pardon me, my anguish refuses to vanish, for it will be equally painful for me to find your courtiers, officers and citizens hunting other beasts and birds in this forest.’ ‘My friend, here and now I prohibit hunting altogether,’ announced the king, and the necessary royal proclamation began reaching the people within hours.

The king’s decision must have surprised many, but for those who recorded the

event, they found his transformation absolutely natural, for the deer that cast the spell on him was none other than Bodhisattva, one of the earlier manifestations of the spirit that ultimately became the Buddha.

The forest had disappeared by the Buddha's time, but the place had a lovely park, a lake, tall trees giving shade to travellers and several public rest-houses around a temple dedicated to Lord Saranganath - from which the place got its later name, Sarnath. Supremely important in the Buddhist chronology, Sarnath lay practically forgotten after the decline of Buddhism till the last decade of the 18th century when Jagat Singh, an influential merchant and noble in the court of Kashi Naresh (the Maharaja of Varanasi), began exploring it.

But was Jagat Singh a lover of antiquity? Some opinions, bitterly critical of him, assert that his only interest was in the precious stones of the crumbling monuments. He carried cartloads of them away to use them in new constructions.

The process of real excavation of Sarnath can be said to have been launched by Major General Alexander Cunningham (later Knighted) in 1834. By and by buried spots of great significance were revealed. Sites once identified and their memory perpetuated by Emperor Ashoka through shrines and inscriptions came to light: where the Buddha first met his five would-be disciples; the earliest batch of Buddhists— Kaundinya, Bhadraka, Ashwajit, Mahanama and Vasava; where he initiated them through his first ever discourse; where he spent the monsoon lost in meditation, so on and so forth.

It was drizzling and an occasional blast of cool wind seemed to turn the pages in my memory of whatever I had known about Sarnath. While Gautama meditated under the Aswatha tree (to be renowned as the Bodhi tree) near Gaya, the five aforesaid mendicants served him with the hope of benefiting by his enlightenment which they expected him to achieve. But they deserted him when they saw him deviating from the path of starving himself and accepting food from a lady, Sujata, and even bathing in the river! How can truth dawn on one who cared to appease his hunger - that too through the services of a woman - and even took care to cleanse his body?

But no sooner had Gautama become the Buddha than he looked for the deserters. His intuition led him to Sarnath.

‘Look who comes our way!’ one of the five seekers camping on a rock alerted the others. They looked and felt uneasy and stood up. They instinctively looked in the opposite direction and were about to walk away briskly. But instinctively, again, or call it their reflex action, they cast their eyes on the radiant figure coming closer to them. And this time their look got glued to the pair of compassionate but piercing eyes surveying them.

The Buddha sought no explanation for their conduct. He embraced them and one by one they fell at his feet. He led them to a corner of the park. ‘My ascesis has fruitioned. I’ve received enlightenment and am prepared to show you the path for you to arrive at the experience,’ he assured them.

I ignored the drizzle and sat down at the site. But the blast seemed to tell me - it is not for nothing that the Buddha prescribed the Middle Path. Do not expose your body to unnecessary hardship nor crave for idle comforts; do not starve nor indulge in greed. Do not go sleepless nor fall a prey to inertia. Keep alive the flame of aspiration for Truth in your heart, in a body that is fit enough to retain your consciousness until it is transformed.

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Memories of a Great Dawn

Sarnath was a charming place with a serene atmosphere when the Buddha decided to camp there, guiding the world’s first five Buddhists along the path of Dharma. The locals viewed him with awe and reverence, but either they did not understand him or they were too conservative to respond favourably to his doctrine which did not project the Vedas as its authority.

But the Buddha’s eyes were keen to recruit eligible spirits and remained alert to locate them. ‘Where are you going?’ one day he asked a young man passing through the park, looking bewildered.

‘That is the question I have been putting to myself, O Sage. Where am I going? Where are all these people I see going? I woke up at midnight and looked around. My people lay like corpses. In the morning they sprang up and mechanically began their daily chores without asking themselves why they must go on with them. At night they will revert to their dead-like state. Where does

this futile monotony lead us?'

'Young man, that automatic resignation to the process of alternate sleep and action must be having some illusion of a meaning for all those who had never been tormented by this question. So far as you are concerned, this is my answer to your agony: alas, all this mad - mad drama of life has no meaning at all. Desires propel man to action. The consequences of his action tie him to the wretched, sorrowful cycle of birth and death. The cycle shall end only when you have conquered your desires,' said the Buddha.

'Conquering desires? Is that possible?'
'Possible. But you must follow a certain code of conduct. Are you willing to undergo the discipline which I am willing to impart to you?'

The young man, Yasha, bowed to the Buddha and became his disciple. His father, an affluent merchant, came there searching for his son the next day. The Buddha was giving a discourse to a small audience and near him sat Yasha. But the father, says a legend, could not see the son. The legend attributes it to the Buddha's miracle. An acceptable interpretation says that the gentleman at once grew so very fond of the Buddha that his vision refused to record anything other than the luminous figure of the Master.

The merchant bowed to the Buddha and became his disciple.

The group that was formed around the Buddha can be said to be the beginning of the Samgha. The inmates went out seeking alms at a certain hour of the day and the Buddha did not exempt himself from the discipline. One day, as he stood before a householder expecting a handful of rice, the man burst into a tirade against him, under the impression that the mendicant was only I disciple of the Buddha. He called the Buddha names attributed stupidity and vanity to him and went on spitting venom for long. Then, exhausted, he woke up to the fact that the mendicant who stood still like a statue had not uttered a single word either contradicting him or in a bid to silence him.

'What about all that I said?' the man demanded impatiently.
The Buddha who had a fruit in his hand, asked, 'What would happen to this fruit if I offer this to you but you refuse to receive it?'
'Well, it would remain with you! It's common sense!' replied the man.
'Right. Now, it so happened that I did not receive the abuses you uttered. Your

common sense should tell you where they rest!' calmly stated the Buddha.
The Buddha walked away. But the man, as if under a spell, followed him into the park. A few days later he accepted the Buddha as his Master.

Late one afternoon, while the Buddha was returning to his makeshift hermitage, he saw some young men racing for something invisible. He confronted them and they stopped, hoping that the holy man could be of some help to them.

'Whom are you chasing?' the Buddha asked.
'A dancing girl hired for entertaining us. We were here for a picnic. But, while we enjoyed a nap after our lunch, she decamped with all our valuables,' replied the young men.

'Your valuables are not stolen!'
'Aren't they really? Do you know where they are?'
'I can clearly see them. They are inside yourselves.'

Was the sage pulling their legs? They looked at one another, rather mystified.

'Indeed, your valuables are safe within you - none can ever steal them away. Listen, young men. There are now two ways open before you. Either you follow the dancing girl under the delusion of recovering your valuables or follow me for your true valuables,' said the Buddha and he departed without waiting for their response. The young men stood petrified. Soon one of them took the way of the Buddha. One by one the others followed suit.

Probably the first Buddhist Vihara was established here - and it flourished. When Hiuen Tsang visited the place in the A.D. 7th century, 1500 Vikshus lived there. Emperor Ashoka built an impressive Stupa on the spot where the Buddha initiated his first disciples. It bears an intriguing name - Dhamek.
'Is it a Pali word?' I asked an official of the museum.

'It is a deviation from Dharmarajik, a word which was Sanskrit as well as Pali,' he explained The original Ashoka Chakra, which once dominated the holy territory, had found its protection in the museum, broken and disfigured.

'Who damaged this?' I asked the official. He gave some answer referring to history. But I had my own answer at another plane, as I surveyed the shrine erected by the Mahabodhi Society. On the walls of the monument containing the Relics of the one who preached the futility of fame and wealth - in fact of life

itself was inscribed the names of people claiming immortality by virtue of their donations to the memorial. I remembered animals and birds being sacrificed before the image of the Buddha in a major shrine, a great tourist attraction, in Thailand. The tragedy of mutilated monuments paled before the tragedy of mutilated ideals.

I had three fellow travellers in my compartment on my train to Delhi - two Europeans and their Indian friend.

‘How could Buddhism disappear from the very land of its origin?’ one of the two foreigners asked his Indian companion. His struggle to express himself through English had a charm about it and that caught my attention.

However, the explanation put forth by the native gentleman in fluent and flowery English saddened me more than the broken monuments at Sarnath. The essence of his thesis was - the Hindus harassed the Buddhists so much that the latter forgot their Dharma. ‘The Brahmins caught the Buddhist monks by their forelocks and dragged them and dumped them outside the localities,’ was one of the ‘quotable quotes’ emanating from the expert.

My irritation burst into a guffaw - before I could make a bid to contain it. Luckily, our Indian companion took it as an appreciation of his epigram.
‘Am I not right?’ he asked me genially.
‘Your imagery of the Brahmin driving away the Buddhist holding the monk by the hair is so lively that I thought you had been a witness to it in an earlier incarnation of yours!’ I said.
He smiled. I’m not a professor of history; only a lover of it. I’ve read a lot.’

‘No doubt,’ I said and, lowering my voice so that his companions could not hear, added, ‘But the Brahmins must have found the task quite formidable, for the Buddhist monks were bald - shaven clean - as a rule!’

He was indeed a jolly man. He laughed and shook hands with me.
Half an hour later, the younger of the two Europeans asked me, ‘I suspect you have a different view on the disappearance of Buddhism from India. Would you mind telling us?’

‘I have made no study of the issue. But I believe that Buddhism did not disappear from India. It is as much here as it is in any Buddhist country. It became a part of Hinduism -a faith that accommodated diverse and even

mutually contradictory doctrines. Once Shankaracharya highlighted the ideal of Nirvana, Buddhism's special appeal was weakened. The Hindus accepted the Buddha as an Avatar of the Supreme and revered the faith. These are some of the historical reasons behind the so-called disappearance of Buddhism. The other reason is deeper.'

'What is that?'

'The ancient Vedantic doctrine-later loosely called the Hindu faith, traced a secret and sublime force of delight at the origin of life. Buddhism presented life as nothing but a bundle of sorrows. This contradicted the very basis of the original Indian collective faith. After the high tide of the new faith, the Indian psyche found a greater support in its earlier vision of life.'

The two foreigners nodded appreciatively. My native lover of history yawned.
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The City Older than Time

Mrote Mark Twain in the last decade of the 19th Century, tongue-in-cheek, 'Varanasi is older than history, than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.' And yet another traveller, Rev. M. A. Sherring, wrote, 'Twenty-six centuries ago at least it was famous, when Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy; when Tyne was planting her colonies, when Athens was growing in strength, before Rome had become known or Greece had contended with Persia, she (Varanasi) had already risen to greatness.'

The city lay dazed under a pouring rain when I made my way into it. I enjoyed it, for in that atmosphere impenetrable and opaque throbbed the spirit of Varanasi - primeval and irresistible. Many are the cities boasting of great antiquity, but their origin can be traced either in history or legends. So far as Varanasi was concerned, to ask who founded the city would be as good as asking who founded the Himalayas, as Edwin Greaves observed.

According to a legend the three wise men of the East who went to greet the infant Jesus included the King of Varanasi. (Some other legends identify them as

three Brahmins from India or Persian disciples of a Brahmin). King Solomon is believed to have imported to Israel a troop of monkeys and a muster of peacocks from Varanasi. That was a thousand years before the birth of Christ.

And who can say how many times the Bodhisattvas, the Buddha's earlier incarnations, had traversed the narrow zigzag roads of Varanasi - as a prince, as a mendicant, as a merchant or *Shresthi* (the original word for the current Seth), as a student and even as an animal, for most of the Jataka stories begin with 'It happened when King Brahmadatta ruled Varanasi'!

The *sattva* or essence (we cannot call it soul because Buddhism does not entertain the idea of soul) which, saturated with experiences gained over numerous lives, was at last born as Siddhartha and, through further ascesis, became the Enlightened One, chose to launch his mission of preaching Nirvana from the outskirts of Varanasi.

The road through which I was driving had also been tread by great souls like Mahavira Jina and Shankaracharya in a remote past, and by Kabir, Tulsidas and Tailanga Swami of later times, among countless other spiritual figures. Indeed, countless is the word.

The pouring rain proved a blessing for me, even in a practical way. It had barred crowds from thronging the shrine of the presiding deity of the city, Viswanath. For a minute or two, there was hardly anybody else at the shrine excepting my young friend and guide, Dr. Saroj and I. Even the monkeys had taken a day off. However, one of them, obviously a 'dada' of sorts, came leaping towards us, sported what I interpreted as a meaningful smile, and then retreated. It seemed to tell us, 'Don't believe all that the *feringhees* have written about us - that we slap the pilgrims or snatch away their bags and sticks or even kidnap an infant from a mother's lap and detain it as hostage until appeased with gifts! These things may not be utterly false, but are exaggerated. No doubt we shake our brains to evolve ways to earn a living and you can brand our actions naughty, but you need not envy us, for I assure you that we can never excel you, our human brethren, on such counts.'

An unusually large bull quietly stood blocking a lane and ruminating, eyes shut. It enjoyed the rain, but a devotee, despite being harassed by the downpour, was bent on feeding it with a banana. He held the fruit close to its mouth and coaxed it to take it in, but the bull remained unobliging. The devotee must have viewed

the holy one's rejection of his offering as inauspicious. No wonder, looking back after two minutes, I should find him still suffering the rain and trying to win the creature's favour. I wished him success.

Like hundreds of other temples in Varanasi the Viswanath temple was damaged or destroyed more than once between the 12th and the 17th centuries. Its last scourge had been Aurangzeb. The ruling queen of Indore, Ahalyabai, reconstructed it and Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab covered its crown with gold. Sightless though in his left eye, this far-sighted monarch knew that times were changing and no plunderer would dare to tear away his valuable offering.

Alas, the wealth plundered from the temples of Varanasi, time and again, was incalculable. Muhammad Ghuri's general, Kudbuddin Aibak, alone, had to engage 400 camels to carry his booty, according to records left by the chroniclers travelling with the invaders.

The early shrine of Viswanath was probably elsewhere. Its builder, according to tradition, was King Divodas - a character belonging to the dusky dawn of history. Shiva and Varanasi were of course always inseparable. But for some reason, annoyed with Divodas, the great God deserted the city. He returned when Divodas invoked His Grace, after building an impressive abode for Him. Some historians interpret the legend as the temporary dominance of Buddhism, at the cost of Saivism, over Varanasi, and the subsequent reassertion of the latter. I do not know, for Divodas appears to be a pre-Buddhist king, according to numerous signs.

By late afternoon the rain had stopped, though clouds galore sealed the sky. We boarded a boat at the Ghat renowned as Dasaswamedh in memory of Brahma performing ten Aswamedh *Yajnas* on the spot in mythical times. The boatman first took us near Manikarnika Ghat (so named because here the ear-jewel of Vishnu had got immersed in the river) where half a dozen pyres were burning, and then, in the opposite direction, along the line of palaces of the erstwhile Maharajas. Most of them were evidently uncared for and on the balcony of one hung some tattered and soiled clothes.

'They are no longer in royal use, Sir; they are sold away to ordinary people like me, chunk by chunk even room by room,' informed our helmsman.
The Maharajas built palaces in several big cities to enjoy life, but here they did so to enjoy death, for death at Varanasi, both for the king and the commoner, was

an easy passage to the heavens.

It started drizzling. The helmsman at once brought out an umbrella and handed it over to us. ‘What about you?’

‘We are accustomed to rains and storms. But look. Do you know the name of this Ghat? This is Harischandra Ghat.’

Through the drizzle and dusk flashed the scene I used to witness in village operas in my childhood undoubtedly one of the most moving scenes in the literatures of the world. King Harishchandra, true to his promise, has surrendered everything he had to Visvamitra and is reduced to a pauper. His queen Saivya is a maidservant in a household and maintains her little son Rohit with her meagre earnings. She does not know where her husband is. The son, bitten by a snake, dies. But she is not allowed to absent herself from her duties even to carry the dead child for cremation. She can do so only at midnight. The man who guards the cremation ground must collect his master’s fee for allowing the facility to be used, even though the queen has nothing to give him. Through a heart-breaking exchange they come to discover the identity of each other: the guard was none other than King Harishchandra himself! Both decide to die in their son’s funeral pyre.

But their misfortune has come to an end. The apparently heartless Visvamitra reveals his compassionate self. Everything, including the dead son, is restored to the couple - and their endurance and truthfulness remain an all-time example for people in the grip of misfortune.

We hurried to the shore before the clouds melted into a fresh downpour. From my room in the hotel I tried to feel the heartthrobs of a timeless Varanasi through moments cool and lonely - and remembered C. A. Kelly’s poem written in the 19th century:

Thy Gods have wrapt thee round as with a shroud,
Saintly Benares, where from morn till night,
From mosque-crowned street and temple-haunted height,
Throb out the voiceful murmurs of the crowd,
Over thy hallowed Ganges echoing loud;
While in the deep nook of each flower-clasped shrine, Ever the speechless Shape, in calm divine,

Broods o’er the suppliant heads before him bowed. But the majestic River rolls beneath,
Serene, relentless, bearing towards the sea
The dust of those, who, happy in their death, By her blest margin meet Eternity.
Last, the clear sunset throws a golden wreath, And the sweet Night sinks down all silently.

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In Quest of the Lost Peacocks

Mid-sixties of the 20th century were a different time in village India. Still there were people to treat a visitor as a gift from Providence. No wonder that a cluster of them should brave the cold of a December night and keep standing amidst the meadow in front of their village, waiting for the vintage car that brought me from Kohlapur. They held a lantern and, through the fog, looked like a patch of the moon.

In the morning I realized how remote and distant the village was from any urban air. It was situated amidst the ruins of a medieval fortress, its compound wall still standing guard over it, though broken at places for easy traffic to and fro of men and their animals.

And birds too - but not ‘theirs’. They, the peacocks, conducted themselves in such a way one could conclude it was they who owned the village and the human residents were at their mercy.
‘Whose pets are these?’I asked my host Purushottam, the elder son of the poet, the late Madhurachenna.

My query appeared to intrigue him. I directed his attention to the village square where a proud peahen and a woman walked side by side in a carefree manner, so much so that they tumbled on each other, but none reacted. Three or four more peacocks were walking in the company of some village boys and their cattle. They cast suspicious looks at me, the solitary stranger. But the sight, so far as Purushottam was concerned, did not seem to be something more unusual than the creepers around us or the profusion of ruins.

‘Do you mean the peacocks? Well, their ancestors and ours probably lived

together when the village itself was founded and the passage of time had not affected the coexistence!' said Purushottam. While taking a stroll along the dusty road between the village and the cornfields, in the company of an elderly teacher, I saw dozens of bonny green pigeons gobbling up the scattered corn.
'They must be causing the villagers quite a loss!' I observed out of my worldly prudence which, in any case, was meagre.
The teacher hemmed and hawed as if he had been asked to explain a fault of his own. 'But they have always depended on us!'
By and by a conviction was formed in me that the people of Halasangi - that was the name of the village
- had no violence in their minds. That explained a lot of things.

Halasangi meant 'companions of the plough'. The fortress had disappeared and nobody even knew who had built it and when. On the banks of the river Bhima, not far from the village, are to be found scattered skeletons of a bygone era gradually pounded to chips by time. It is presumed there had been a war between the masters of the fortress and some invaders at the end of which none was in a position to claim the fortress.

If I had been the guest of a poet's son at Halasangi, at Bijapur the hospitality had been offered to me by Principal Desai, the son-in-law of another poet, Huilgal. My interpreter Jahagirdar and I had taken a public transport to the town and Desai had not been able to reach the bus stop on time to receive us.

'Please call a taxi,' I suggested to Jahagirdar.
'Taxi? Where on earth would I find a taxi for you at Bijapur?'
'Very well, a rickshaw should do, I suppose.'
'Where to find a rickshaw, either?'

But I was not required to stand puzzled for long. I heard the sweet sound of trotting and soon half a dozen horse-drawn carriages surrounded us. It appeared that the soul of the little town, tired of its history, wished to continue in its medieval snooze.

Once Bijapur vibrated to the sound of a thousand galloping horses manoeuvred by their proud riders. Today their descendants drew *Ekkas.*

That Bijapur, till then, was in love with its medieval air became evident to me the moment I climbed the 66 metre-high Gul Gumbaz, its wonderful dome

second only to the St. Peters in Rome. Upon the benches on the balconies of its upper tier, famous as the Whispering Gallery, sprawled or sat, their eyes closed, a number of young and middle-aged men. From time to time, for no provocation whatsoever, one of them would give out a shriek and then resign himself into the spell of its echoes - the weird vibrations appearing to come from some otherworldly sphere. 1 was told that the receding echoes of every sound numbered twenty-one.

I stood and observed those enchanted souls while my two companions went round the monument. Some of them blinked and smiled at me at intervals between their indulgences in then voices. They seemed to be under the command of some invisible spirits. Once released from their throats, it was as if their voices became the property of those spirits who changed them into a sort of uncanny laughter before licking them.

By the time I came cut to the balcony, the sun was setting on a horizon studded with minarets and tall trees. All was silent but for the faint echoes oozing out from inside the Gumbaz. The sleepy town itself appeared to be an echo of the past - a past which was briefly and tersely narrated by Meadows Taylor:

‘ In the citadel the visitor will have many a scene of historical interest shown to him. The court which the devoted Dilshad Agha and her royal mistress Boobooji Khanu, queen of Yusuf Adil Shah, clad in armour and fighting among their soldiers, defended against the treacherous Kumal Khan ... the place where the son of Kumal Khan stood when the young king pushed over a stone from the parapet above which crushed him to death, the window where the dead body of Kumal Khan was set out as if alive to encourage the soldiery in their brutal assault ... all these will be pointed out with every accompanying evidence of probability and truth as well as the apartment from which the traitor Kishwar Khan dragged the noble-hearted queen Chand Beebee to her prison at Sattara. . . . And yet inspired by the effect of these beautiful ruins with the glory of an Indian sun lighting up palace and mosque, prison and zenana, embattled tower and rampart, with a splendour which can only be felt as a personal experience, it may be hoped that some eloquent and poetic pen may be found to gather up the fleeting memorials of traditions which are fast passing away and invest them with a classic interest which will be imperishable.’

Much had vanished since the time of Taylor and I am sure, much more had vanished since I visited it in the sixties of the twentieth century. However,

Bijapur can still be the joy for a creative writer—not for any poet but for a novelist. He could begin from the very founding of the town by Yusuf Adil Shah.

That takes us back to the 15th century. The then Sultan of Turkey, Murad II, was an unusual character. He was determined to bring the feuding regions of the Ottoman Empire under his iron grip, but once m a while he was beset with almost an ascetic impulse. Should he sneak away from the affairs of his state and lead a life of detachment? He loved philosophy and was the first Ottoman monarch to patronize poets, artists and thinkers.

His favourite was his second son - the little Yusuf. He and his Begum looked on from their balcony when the sweet boy frolicked in their garden. But the boy failed to understand why sometime the Begum would hug him and shed tears.

One day in the year 1451 the news of Sultan Murad's breathing his last in a distant camp reached the capital. While the palace was immersed in sorrow, the Begum sought out Yusuf, took him into her embrace and swooned away. Only her confidants understood her anguish.

This was the terrible tradition ruling the dynasty: Within hours of the death of the ruling Sultan all his sons, barring the eldest, must be put to death, so that there was no rivalry for power and the Empire remained intact. Secret preparations by the inner circle of the palace began to give the younger prince, Yusuf, his due!

However, no sooner had the Begum recovered from her fit than she sought out her most trusted eunuchs and hit upon a strategy. A poor boy, a member of a merchant's party camping in the town, was bought for a good price. He was clad in royal attire and ushered into the palace. It was whispered to him that he had been adopted by the Begum as some auspicious signs had been marked on his person.

The bewildered, if delighted, boy was served with a sumptuous dinner for the first and the last time in his life. At midnight, while preparations were afoot for the coronation of Yusuf's elder brother, Yusuf, dressed as a commoner, was entrusted to the travelling merchant on his way to Hindustan. The 'adopted' prince was found dead in the morning. His dinner, obviously, consisted of something more than mere delicacies! He was billed out as Yusuf.

The real Yusuf reached Hindustan, where for some inexplicable reason luck

always seemed to have awaited the guests, and through vicissitudes of time and events, founded the Adil Shahi dynasty at Bijapur. ***

I had an occasion to visit Halasangi 28 years later, in 1993. On one's way from Chennai to Gulbarga or Solappur, one witnesses a number of castles in ruins on hillocks. At the foot of such hillocks golden flowers bloomed over thousands of acres of land. What a beauty! I wondered. But soon I got the explanation of the phenomenon from the conversation between two fellow passengers: Sunflower oil had become a lucrative trade.

I spent the night at Gulbarga and resumed my journey, no longer by a vintage car but by a familiar modern one. An unusually severe earthquake had jolted the region a few weeks ago and its impact was still visible. We drove through valleys and villages which were no longer as tranquil as they had been in the sixties of the past century and I did not expect them to be so. Billboards and microphones, posters of films and faces of politicians torn or given fresh touches - the charming smile of a great woman leader assuming a horrendous import because a moustache had been added to her - were the kind of treats villagers all over India had learnt to put up with, and so had the visitors from the urban world. The discordant note they struck in the sylvan air could not be wished ay.

I was absorbed in my thoughts when the friend escorting me from Gulbarga said rather suddenly, 'So we have arrived!'

I woke up with a shock. Surely, I did not expect a chunk of light to emerge from fog, revealing faces of love and affection, but where is the wall isolating the habitation from the road and the fields? The wall had given way to a row of shops constituting a bazar.

Buildings had replaced the earthen houses and the village school had been promoted to a college. Lanterns and lamps had been replaced by electric light and the meeting ground was imaginatively illuminated.

But where was the grove - the hamlet of the peacocks? Can I see once again, at sundown, the spontaneous and simultaneous dance of three of them, one on the ruins of the fortress, another in the grove and a third one on a thatch?

'Where are the peacocks?' I asked a teenager in a whisper. He cast a blank look at me. I understood that he would have his chance to see the peacock when he visits the zoo in the city.

‘Purushottam-ji, what happened to the peacocks?’ I asked my host.

‘They deserted us and found new homes in distant woods and bushes,’ he said with some embarrassment. ‘Once in a while some of them would come to have a look at us. That, too, they stopped gradually.’

The parrots too were gone. They had perished mostly because of the effect on them of the crop treated by chemicals.

All the faces caught in the patch of light amidst the fog in a winter night 28 years ago, barring one, had departed. The lone survivor was the poet Madhurachenna’s wife, bedridden at ninety. I sat down on the edge of her bed. She mustered light into her otherwise bleary eyes and recognized me. I saw in-them a million peacocks. My quest for the lost peacocks ended there.

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The Enigmatic Emissary

Dr. Dilip Datta gave me an amused smile. ‘I took you to be a noted football player heading for Digboi at the instance of our General Manager Kanuga Sahib, an incorrigible sports fan/ he told me at Dumdum.

That was in the early sixties of the last century. The oil in Assam was still a British enterprise and I was proceeding to Digboi as the Company’s guest, though at the invitation of the local Sri Aurobindo Centre. As I overheard Dr. Datta mention Pondicherry in his conversation with someone else, I grew curious and introduced myself as a Pondicherrian. On the staff of the Assam Oil’s sophisticated hospital at Digboy, Dr. Datta was to soon become its chief, the first Indian to occupy that position. (But he was not to stick to it; he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry.) We sat side by side in the plane and since that was my first visit to that part of the country, he became my friend, philosopher and guide, introducing me to the glittering peaks of the Himalayan range disappearing and reappearing in the clouds, telling me about the wonder that were Assam and her folks, and bits of the adventure that went with the exploration of oil by the early speculators.

It was noon when we reached Mohanbari, on the outskirts of Dibrugarh. Local

friends took charge of me and I was lodged in a guesthouse consisting of a solitary room. My hosts, after entertaining me to an elaborate lunch, assured me that I could enjoy an equally elaborate rest till late in the afternoon. But I had hardly resigned myself to a nap when my doors trembled at some cautious but continuous knocks.

The tall, nervous young man who dashed in the moment I opened the doors and closed them himself behind him, looked like a composition of limbs gathered from several sources alien to one another. He kept standing even after I offered him a chair.
'Do you happen to be a writer?' he asked in the manner of entering a shop and enquiring if a soap or toothpaste of a certain brand was available.
'Right,' I replied lifelessly. 'But why don't you sit down?'
He obliged me, but with gestures to indicate that his decision to sit or stand hardly depended on my suggestion.
The stranger must be hailing from one of the regions of the northeast, so far as his dress and hair-style were concerned, but his face and figure continued to intrigue me while hi English accent impressed me.

'Do you know anything about Rani Gaidelieu?'
I was taken aback, though I tried to hide it. The Rani, alas, was the hub of numerous sensational stories. 'I know whatever the newspapers carry.'
'You know nothing.'
'She is the leader of a certain tribe among the Nagas.'
'You know nothing.'
'She demands a state for her people.'
'You know nothing.'

I gave up. The visitor smiled. At once the ominous air in my room changed for an easy one. I felt he was not rude or arrogant. He was just simple and spontaneous.
'Should you wish me to know what 1 don't know about the Rani, you are welcome to help me to some literature am her.'
'All the books and articles on her are trash,' he said 'The Rani is not a leader of the Nagas, but a goddess, their liberation that she desires, not a mere state for them.'
'I see!'

' You see with a touch of sarcasm. But I am stating facts and nothing but facts.

Now to the point. We want an authentic account of her life and mission to be written. Will you condescend to do that? We will take you with us. You will be explained things. Then you will write. We will bring you back here or leave you at Gauhati if you please. Is this acceptable?'

'Acceptable in principle. How long do you think the project will take?'
'At least a week. You are welcome to prolong your stay.'
'Sorry I was thinking in terms of hours.'
My visitor stood up with a jerk.
'Are you willing for five days?'
'Sorry. I must leave for Digboy tomorrow in the afternoon. Then, I must be in Calcutta . ..' 'Thanks. Don't tell anybody about my meeting you.'
'Whom did I meet? Do I know it myself to be able to tell others?'
'That's immaterial.'

'Do you belong to the Rani's sect? What's wrong in revealing your identity? You did not propose anything objectionable!'

He had no patience for a dialogue. He went out as hurriedly as he had come in. I followed him to the verandah. His motorbike was parked some half furlong away. He pushed it forward for a while and jumped onto it in the manner of riding a horse.

Probably he would not like anybody to know that he had failed in his mission. He inflamed my curiosity about Rani Gaidelieu and I read *Nagapath* by Ursula Graham Bower 0ohn Murray, London, 1952) and years later *Naga Land: The Untold Story* by S.C. Dev (1988).

There was a prophecy in vogue among a section of the Nagas that one day a messiah would lead them to an easy victory over the British and would become their king. One Jadunang proclaimed himself the messiahcum-Raja and enjoyed the tribe's allegiance. He even invented a new faith, a combination of Hinduism, Christianity and tribal rituals. He needed money and his followers supplied it in plenty.

He would have continued to bask in the glory of a postdated victory over the British but for an unfortunate incident. Four wealthy Manipuri merchants who entered his region disappeared without any trace. One day, one of the Raja's lieutenants, caught up in a quarrel with a rival, threatened to despatch him the

way they had despatched the Manipuris. He exhibited some hair stitched to his garment - as mementos of their victims.

The authorities were informed. Investigation led to discovery of the remains of the lost merchants. Jadunang and his accomplices were apprehended and captured through a process that turned violent resulting in the killing of several men as well as the Raja's pet python. The Raja was tried and hanged.

His cousin and consort, Gaidelieu, was let off because of her young age. But she metamorphosed into a deity in no time. Soon she became a menace and kept the administration on tenterhooks. Whoever informed the police about her movement was strangled.

She gave police the slip again and again, reinforcing the legend that she could disappear and appear at will. Once on her assuring people of a village named Hangram that she had magically made the police bullets ineffective, the villagers charged at an outpost and got killed. Soon thereafter the police managed to surround her hideout:

'They found her sentries drunk, for, primed with wrong information, everyone had been celebrating their supposed security. The sepoys swarmed over the palisade and surrounded her house, but when she began to shriek spells and call on her bodyguards to resist, the men who composed it... laid down their spears and surrendered, and it was left for the sepoys to go in and pull her out, screaming, scratching and kicking and inflicting the only casualty on the expedition by biting a Naik severely in the thumb. A few hours later she was telling Mills that it was very hard work being a goddess -people wanted to worship her night and day, and she never had time for a bath. So she had her bath, in the rest-house, with sentries at every exit; and the goddess, queen, and terror of the Kacha Nagas, the elusive sorceress, the evasive divinity, went off to Manipur and trialand a sentence of fourteen years for abetment of murder."
Nagapath by Ursula Graham Bower

This strange character was ultimately tamed by the courage and tact of one officer, S. C. Dev, the Commissioner of Nagaland.
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'A Tryst with the Unknown'

A jailed Rani Gaidelieu became a national figure when in 1936 the Indian National Congress included her in the roll of honour of freedom fighters and passed a resolution demanding her release. It was Jawaharlal Nehru, who in one of his chivalrous moods, referred to her as Rani and the honorific stuck on to her.

She was not only set free as soon as India was free but also accorded recognition as a political sufferer, awarded a pension and other honours.

Nehru, however, was to be once again disillusioned. The Rani went underground in 1960 to organise a militant upsurge of her Zeliang Naga tribe and set up a 'government'. There were already other Naga groups ready to wage war on India, some under the instigation of foreign powers and some inspired by over-ambitious individual leaders. Among them, the Rani's chief rival was self-styled as the Naga Federal Government.

'The Federal rebels made repeated attempts to win over the followers of the Rani but without success. Sometime in early 1965, while trying to collect ration and money from Zeliang people a group of hostiles sent the Rani a specific proposal urging her to merge her movement with that of the Federal regime. The fate of the proposal soon became evident as all the nine hostiles in that group were done to death and rumours spread that the Rani had gorged on their blood. Weird tales gathered round the Rani: She was thought to be a witch, a bloodthirsty vampire, a goddess.' *Nagaland: The Untold Story* by S. C. Dev

Plans were afoot to destroy the Rani's stronghold by shifting the population of a cluster of villages to a distant place and, as a large number of people antagonistic to the Rani demanded, to confront her militarily and finish her off if that was warranted. Stories galore circulated about her merciless dealing with anyone who tried to make her see sense, not to speak of those opposing her.

Somehow, the officer to whose lot the task of tackling the Rani fell, was made of unusual stuff and deserves to be remembered as a pride of the Indian Administrative Service. Perhaps more than reason, Dev's intuition told him that the Rani was not what the rumours projected her; she was not an incorrigible secessionist.

Dev sent feelers seeking an appointment and through different tactics persuaded her to grant it. He and nine others, all unarmed and 'without any protection save their faith in the sincerity of their mission and their government's moral strength/

set out for their ‘tryst with the unknown’.

It was a journey through most difficult terrain. Treacherously calm, it was infested with beasts and bandits - the latter with political pretensions. At the second phase of their journey they were escorted by armed followers of the Rani. So very stiff was the last stretch of their climb that they took a full day to cover two and half miles.

At last they were in a village from which could be seen the Rani’s citadel. ‘Situated on top of a hill with almost vertical slopes, it was an impregnable bastion, so well planned that a single man with an LMG could easily hold an entire brigade of attackers at bay. Clearly Rani Gaidelieu was well fortified to defend her virtually invincible position.’

The next day, in a situation tense and suspenseful for Dev, his party met the Rani. ‘Were you not afraid of coming to my hideout?’ she asked. Dev answered that he came to her with the attitude of a son coming to see his mother.

That moved the ageing lady. The ice was broken. By and by it became clear that what she demanded for her tribe was not a separate state but a district with an identity of its own. It is likely that she had foreseen the futility of her earlier ambitions.

Two of her statements were cardinally important and they radically changed Dev’s view of her. The first was: ‘We are Nagas and we should live like Nagas. We have beautiful folklore and folksongs, colourful dress and culture. When I see these new converts copying the Western way in a cheap manner it pains me.’

The second was: ‘If there is anybody who feels and thinks that he or she is a Naga - I am the one. Also, if there is anybody who feels or thinks that he or she is an Indian - it is me.’ Altogether they talked for 21 hours. She would meet the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, but if their talk failed, she must be allowed a safe return to her jungle. Dev had to sign the agreement in his blood. ‘I felt foolish participating in this archaic and romantic ceremony. But, thank heaven, that was the only mention of blood during that long session of nerve-wracking parleys.’

The Rani went to Delhi via Kohima and, accompanied by Dev, met the Prime Minister. In an atmosphere of cordiality the latter promised to fulfill her demands. The Rani returned satisfied. The finish was written to a bizarre chapter of the history of the region.

The one who came to lead me to Digboy-80 km from Dibrugarh-was Anil Bhattacharya, Secretary of Sri Aurobindo Centre.
Assam in the sixties of the 20th century was another name of tranquility. The road was flanked by green fields teeming with crop and they were guarded by rows of serene hills.
Our car tore through a tender evening.

'Sometimes elephants cross this road, from the hills beyond one side of the fields to those beyond the other. If by chance a pedestrian or a cyclist came their way he had had it! Of course, we are safe, as long as we do not stop,' said Anil-da.

His statement had hardly reached its full stop when our car wavered and stopped. 'Don't you worry, I can change the damaged tyre in no time,' said the driver.

We came out into the open. 'How much I wished to enjoy a few minutes amidst this cool and vast Nature!' I said putting up a brave face as if my memory had not at all recorded the fear of elephants!

The tyre replaced, we resumed our journey. Anil-da laughed. 'I could somewhat smell the presence of elephants in the vicinity. But nothing to worry about now,' said he. We entered a bazar. 'Do you anticipate any more difficulty with the car? If so, let's tackle it before we leave the bazar behind.'

'No difficulty, Sir,' assured the smart driver.
We had gone no more than four kilometres beyond the bazar when the driver stopped the car which had swerved to a side precariously close to the brink.
'What's the matter?'
'Another tyre, Sir. Gone!'
'So?'
'I have neither any extra tyre nor any repair kit, Sir.' 'So?' 'I will walk back to the bazar if I don't get any lift and fetch a mechanic. But I don't expect anybody to oblige us at this hour.' 'So?'
'The car shall wait here. I'll pass the night at the bazar.'
The driver's smartness in proposing a safe plan for himself and his perfect detachment towards our fate were extraordinary indeed.

'We have crossed the elephant infested area," said Anil-da in a reassuring voice, even though I had no longer the zeal to sing my love of Nature. We had to wait for half an hour before any car heading for Digboy could be located. But the

very first car we saw and stopped happened to be owned by Mr. Singh, owner of a cinema house, known to Anil-da. He gladly shifted to his chauffeur's side, leaving us the rear seats.

The car started.
'You Babus buy cars but do not know how to maintain them,' observed Sardarji looking askance at Anil-da.

'True, true,' agreed a slightly embarrassed but grateful Anil-da. 'Look at my car. Do you know its age? Twenty years! Not even once ....'
A bizarre noise startled us. 'Brake, brake!' shouted Sardarji.
The car stopped and we got out of it. Its axle had snapped.

'First time in twenty years!' lamented Mr. Singh. What he could have added, but did not, was, 'What kind of stuff are you carrying with you, Anil-ji?' Had Mr. Singh looked at me suspiciously, I should not have been surprised.

He detained a truck and compelled Anil-da and me to sit near its driver whom he instructed to send another vehicle from his establishment to have his car tugged.

How relative things are! That the truck was able to carry us smoothly to our destination seemed to me a minor miracle. We got down in front of what was probably the very first house in Digboy and Anil-da telephoned to my host who came rushing to our rescue.

I have made several trips to Assam thereafter – twice during periods of statewide turbulence. But the first trip has excelled them all as memory. It is indeed one of the little ironies of life that little accidents as long as they are harmless to myself make a delicious dish of recollection. There are of course the likes of Harry Graham's *Mr. Jones* who could evaluate far greater accidents in a different scale:

'There's been an accident!' they said,
'Your servant's cut in half; he's dead!'
Indeed!' said Mr. Jones, 'and please
Send me the half that's got my keys.'

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“Dig, Boy, Dig!”

Many of my readers would remember the Assam Oil Company heralding its existence and action through insertions reading, ‘Dig, boy, dig!’, supported by a lovely baby elephant standing on hind legs and driving a crowbar into the earth, inserted in several newspapers in the fifties of the last century.

Early in the morning I surveyed the site from the bungalow of my host - a town appearing as though held aloft in the clouds, very tenderly and affectionately, by some invisible baby elephant - at least that part of it consisting of houses meant for the Company’s executives. Overlooked by snow-clad mountains and surrounded by well-trimmed little gardens, the bungalows were the examples of a posterity reaping the crop for which the early pioneers had tilled the hard soil and fertilized it with no insignificant quantity of their blood.

They lost blood more to leeches than to the wild animals. Those compact vampires creep from below and drop from the unsuspected foliage to carry on their sinister business as quiet as sleep! But the wild animals continued to be a threat - even after physically they had been reduced to a miserable minority through their worthy sub-species, if not their ghosts.

It was a relaxed afternoon at Duliajan and Mr. K. B.Kanuga, the affable and smart General Manager of the company, after entertaining me to a delicious lunch, was still feeding me with his reminiscences of his early days in the region. I remembered them only faintly, but to my good luck, I have just come across his autobiography, *The Road Traversed.* Here is a gem about one of his friendly seniors, Mr. Gossage:

‘One night, while living in the Inspection Bungalow (on the trunk road to Jorhar), Gossage shouted, “Kanuga, come at once to my room - for a tiger has come through the window!” I was shocked and rushed out of my room - only to find his bedroom door locked from inside. I asked him to open the door - and prompt came his instruction to break the door open - as he was not going to leave his bed - with a tiger prowling around in his room! The bearers and chowkidars from the Inspection Bungalow had by now joined me and we broke open the door - and what do we find - a frightened little cat staring at our torchlight - looking more confused than Mr. Gossage. All of us, including Mr. Gossage, had a good laugh at this little encounter with the wild animals of

Assam.. . .’

This was in 1938.

The impact of the Chinese aggression of 1964 was still discernible on the faces of my friends when I first visited Digboy a year later. Driving me along the foot of the hills, they would describe their creepy feeling when the Prime Minister’s broadcast implied, while the Chinese guns boomed behind the hills, that Assam was almost lost to the enemy: ‘I want to tell them [the people of Assam] that we feel very much for them and we shall help them to the utmost of our ability/ The episode had become a memory when I visited Digboy for the second time in 1969, but ironically, my friends’ faces did not look any brighter. We sat inside a friend’s bungalow, doors and windows shut, submerged in gloom. As scheduled months earlier, I was to lay the foundation stone for a library and meditation hall on a lovely hillock acquired by the local Sri Aurobindo Centre. But Assam was lately in a state of turmoil, the Opposition parties demanding a second oil refinery. My friends had sent message to the Mother (of Sri Aurobindo Ashram) about the situation and they expected her to advise postponement of the function. But, surprisingly, she quietly handed over a flower symbolizing her blessings. That meant we must proceed, come what may.

And the worst seemed to be coming. A total Assam bandh had been announced for the next day - the very day of our function. A bandh had the uncanny propensity for turning ugly and violent, and according to the signs of the day there was a possibility of its turning against the non-Assamese. I was surrounded by people of this vulnerable section and my few Assamese friends sat embarrassed.

As I was brooding over the irony of the situation - in which not in Assam alone but in any region of the motherland Indians must fear Indians - someone switched on the radio. What greeted us was the news that the opposition had called off the proposed bandh. I remember how two of my friends jumped up and since they could not continue with the feat, opened wide all the doors and windows despite cold blasts invading the room.

The situation repeated itself on my third visit, this time for the inauguration of the aforesaid institution already built. On the eve of my flying to Assam from Mumbai (then Bombay), my esteemed friend, V.K. Narasimhan, editor of *The Financial Express* (subsequently the chief editor of the Express Group), had

asked me to give an evaluation of the situation. I quote from what I wrote for his paper of 18 November 1972:

The cause of the crisis this time, apparently, is language. Assamese must be the sole medium of instruction in Assam, demand the Assamese. The Assam Assembly passed a resolution unanimously giving English a temporary lease of life along with Assamese in the existing universities of the state and giving the people of the Bengali-speaking Kachar district the promise of a new university where they will have the freedom to choose their medium. They could have Bengali if they pleased, or English or Assamese or any two or all the three.

This sounded good to the people outside Assam. But inside, the students of Assam, including those of Kachar, rejected it and the people of Kachar, too, did so, though for different reasons. Nothing but Assamese must prevail all over Assam, Kachar not excepting, say the Assamese. The people of Kachar say the resolution is fine so far as the students of Kachar are concerned, but what about the Bengali students of the vast Brahmaputra valley? If not Bengali, at least English should continue to be an alternative medium of instruction indefinitely.

A very delicate issue no doubt and no solution has been found yet. But found it must be, by the people of Assam themselves. Meanwhile passion is playing havoc . . . An Assamese student leader was murdered. At the oil-town of Duliajan I saw rows of Bengali houses gutted. Tall trees around them with their burnt branches standing witness to the ghastly acts.

Hailing from Orissa which had an intimate relationship with both Bengal and Assam, I could gain access to the sentiments of some of the leading members of both the communities. They confessed that there was no issue so very stubborn that could not be sorted out if goodwill governed both the sides.

Call it miracle or coincidence, once again the agitation was called off the night before the inauguration of the beautiful ‘Matri Mandir’ built atop the hill at the end of the town, a green forest extending behind it up to the frontiers. People of all the communities participated in the function and among the most active one was General Nagra, a great lover of flowers. Soft-spoken and gentle, he was busy adorning the site with his love flowers and more flowers in handsome pots.

General Gundharva Nagra was soon to become famous as the one to lead his army into Dacca as the finale to the Bangladesh liberation struggle. (“The game

is off, my friend!" he had called out to the Pakistani General, Niazi, who surrendered to his classmate in undivided India.) Years later I saw that the garden planted by General Nagra flourished elegantly.

Dr. Dilip Datta drove me to the Pangshu Pass bordering Myanmar (then Burma) in what was then the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) the next day, escorted by an army officer, for that was a restricted zone. 'How do you find our place?' asked the courteous General in charge of the camp. Tours is an enchanting valley,' I replied.

'Enchanting, indeed, for the first week. But then?' he murmured.
NEFA had become Arunachal Pradesh and Burma Myanmar. Pangshu, I hope, continues to be enchanting to the outsider and, how much I wish, to the insider, too.
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'Babylon in All its Glory' in India

It was a dawn in the winter of 1966. As my train chugged into the station at Madurai, it was not easy to locate the man, expected to receive me, in the crowd on the platform. A towering figure among the mathematicians of India and the editor of their journal, Prof. Venkataraman, in his simple dhoti, his head halfshaved, could be mistaken for a poor rustic Brahmin from the Tamil hinterland.

He led me to what was then the best private guesthouse in Madurai, belonging to the TVS group. Its manager, his hands folded, greeted me, saying, 'We have tidied for you our most valuable suite, rarely opened for anybody after its first occupant, Pundit Nehru!'

A few guests at the reception viewed me with awe and I, too, would have done the same had there been a mirror nearby - but for the manager's post-script quietly disenchanting all: 'So great is our boss's respect for Prof. Venkataraman!'

Mathematicians, for me, belonged to a sub-species of man-eaters and I never suspected Prof. Venkataraman's presence in the large audience at Sir Srinivasa Shastri Hall in Chennai (then Madras) to celebrate Sri Aurobindo's birth

anniversary which I had addressed a few months earlier. It is not the speaker, that is, the author, who had any role in pulling the crowd, but, the importance of the event apart, it was the man who presided over it - Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, a great orator, a legend in his lifetime. It was he who had, as the *Sachivottama* (the Prime Minister) of Travancore, declared the state a sovereign kingdom on the eve of India's independence, and submerged in a surge of popular protest (culminating in an attempt on his life), led the ruler to be among the first ones in signing the Instrument of Accession.

People still quoted the statement he made when he was offered the position of a judge by the English Chief Justice of the Madras High Court who was deeply impressed by his role in the famous case of Annie Besant versus Krishnamurti's father: 'My lord, I will prefer talking nonsense for an hour or so a day to hearing nonsense for several hours all the days!'

That was a time when one could afford to raise a laugh at the cost of a profession without hitting a hornet's nest.

Sir C.P.'s public appearance was growing rare. No wonder that the intelligentsia of the city would vie with one another for a prime seat in the hall. Alas, that was to be his last speech. Some days later he flew to London for a lecture assignment at London University and collapsed at Hethrow airport.

'Look here,' said Prof. Venkataraman, emerging from the crowd after the meeting, 'I want you at Madurai!'

'Surely, but after two or three months.'
'Agreed, but the condition is, you must repeat this speech there!'

'With mathematical precision?' I laughed apologetically. 'I wonder if I can repeat even a small part of my speech right now, not to speak of months later.'
'Well, well, we may consider allowing you some deviation,' he had said condescendingly.

I do not know how much impressed he was with my performance in his city, but at night, while taking me round the Meenakshi Temple, the hub of the city, he deeply impressed me with his melodious recitation of Sanskrit hymns for two hours at a stretch. In the incense-filled, dimly lighted world of the ancient shrines, for a while I felt like a pupil being guided by an Upanishadic sage.

In the South mathematicians and scientists did not find any contradiction between their faith in Divinity and their academic discipline.
Ramanujan, the astounding genius, spoke in unambiguous terms of receiving solutions to his mathematical problems in his dreams, revealed by the deity he worshipped, Goddess Namakkai.

Madurai, probably the oldest city in the South, was a forest once upon a time. A king who had some mystic inclinations, dreamed of nectar raining on the forest from clouds presided over by Lord Shiva. He cleared the forest and shifted his capital there and named it Madhurapura (the sweet or nectarian city) of which Madurai is a derivation.

But the city came to prominence only after it was ruled by Princess Meenakshi. Her father had prayed to the gods to be blessed with a son, but the moment his eyes fell on his female child, he realised that she was worthier than a thousand worthy sons.

The princess succeeded her father to the throne. She was a stunning beauty; now she proved herself a great ruler.

But a young and beautiful damsel as a successful ruler was an unacceptable proposition for the neighbouring kings. Several of them were too willing to ease the bizarre situation by marrying the princess and taking over her kingdom. But Princess Meenakshi spurned their overtures in the manner of fanning away nasty flies.

The aggrieved suitors united to avenge their humiliation. They attacked Madhurapura.

Her sword swirling like strings of lightning, Princess Meenakshi, riding her wondrous horse, stormed through the swarm of invaders, cutting and scattering scores of heads including those adorned with bejewelled crowns. The enemy melted away in no time. Even then, in her uncheckable fury, he princess galloped on.

But suddenly her horse stopped and she grew conscious of an unusual figure - the very embodiment of Bliss and Grace - standing before her.
Instantly, not only the stranger’s identity but also her own was revealed to her. He was Shiva; she was a human incarnation of his eternal consort, Parvati.
The date for the wedding of the celestial couple, once again according to the

earthly calendar, was fixed.

Unknown to Parvati, her elder brother, Vishnu, living atop a hill, Alagar, on the outskirts of the city, began walking to the palace to participate in the ceremony. A bit late for the auspicious moment, he went back to his hill top abode. The chief annual event at Madurai still celebrates the Alagar deity's visit to the city and his return journey. However, one of the finest sculptures anywhere in the world, to be found in the Meenakshi temple, shows a loving Vishnu joining the blushing Parvati's hand with that of a gentle Shiva. It indicates that even though the Divine wedding technically took place at an auspicious moment, Vishnu authenticated it subsequently, personally giving away the bride to the bridegroom.

'Do you know what Bhaigai, the name of the river, means?' Prof. Venkataraman asked me the next day as we passed by it. 'No!'

'Hands down!'
I blinked at him, looking at my hands, which in any case were not up.
'Bhaigai means hands down. It refers to the genesis of the river.'

The bridegroom Shiva's large party included an enthusiastic goblin named Gandodara. He went on eating, his eyes devoutly concentrated on his plate, sackfuls of cakes - varieties of them - poured on it and tumblerfuls of *Payasam.* Everything would disappear in a trice. The servers were tired; the kitchen was about to be empty. The panicky cooks reported the matter to Meenakshi. She came out holding a few sweets, gave them to Gandodara and asked, 'Do you need more, my son?'

Gandodara gobbled up the sweets and stood up. 'Mother, the trouble with me is, I'm not a very great eater! All I need now is a little quantity of water to drink.'

The amount of food he had despatched into his tummy was indication enough for defining his little quantity of water. The princess showed him a place away from the palace and asked him to throw his hands down – *Bhaigai* ! Gandodara did so. Instantly flowered a lake - which later flowed as a river.

'Every marital party accompanying the bridegroom even to this day includes a mini-Gandodara or two!' I observed.

The grandeur of the temple of Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswar - as

Siva is known here with some of the Gopurams dating back to the 1st century, looked magnificent *in* daylight. The wonder expressed by W.S. Blunt more than a century ago, in *Ideas About India* (1885) was indeed significant: ‘When I had seen Madurai I felt that I had at least seen a temple of Babylon in all its glory, and understood what the worship of Apis might have been in Egypt.’

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Seven Hundred Brides for the Island

The abode of Vishnu atop the Alagar hill on the outskirts of Madurai was as charming as a sylvan lap of Nature with a touch of antiquity could be. The tender waterfall was shared by pilgrims and a small troop of genial monkeys. Looking around from that elevation and scanning the distant temples and towers, some of them in ruins, was like confronting several chapters of a bulky book of history at the same time.

‘Madurai is the oldest living city in the South, just as Varanasi is in the North. Historical evidence of the dynasties ruling the region and other activities of the city goes back to the 4th century B.C., but legends tempt us to look far back, to dateless times,’ observed a scholar, a friend of Dr. Venkataraman.

‘What’s the age of *Mabavamsa*, the Ceylonese chronicles?’ I asked him.
His face brightened up. ‘My familiarity with that ancient work is rather thin. But that probably is among the earliest works bearing references to Madurai,’ he said.

We sat down near the ‘golden lotus lake’ inside the temple complex. On the banks of this lake functioned India’s first academy of letters, the Tamil Sangam. A new literary composition, submitted to the Sangam, was thrown into the lake amidst the chanting of certain hymns. If the manuscript did not sink, it was presumed that it would not sink down time’s surface either. It was then approved for circulation.

‘We have forgotten those hymns. As a result, every piece of rubbish can float and pass on as literature,’ observed the scholar.

‘By the way, have you read the *Mahavamsa?’* he asked me. I had read Wilhelm

Geiger's translation published (1950) by the Government of Ceylon, that is, Sri Lanka. And the most pathetic episode recorded in the work immediately stirred my memory.

The prince of Banga (Bengal) was wedded to the princess of Kalinga (Orissa). They were blessed with a daughter -rather cursed - for it was prophesied that she would marry the king of beasts. The princess whom 'for shame, the king and the queen could not suffer,' one day joined a merchant's carvan. While the caravan was crossing a forest, a 'Simha' carried her away and obliged her to marry him. (He was probably a tribal chieftain though 'Simha' is popularly understood as Hon.)

Unto the couple were born a son and a daughter. The boy, Simhabahu, when 16, asked his mother why she was so different from his father and learnt her antecedents. The boy was determined to return to civilization. His mother too was concerned about her children's future.

One day, when the lion was away, Simhabahu put his mother and sister on his shoulders and ran away right into the society. Soon the lion, agitated over their escape but unable to locate them, ravaged the human habitations. He became a great menace, so much so that the king of Banga announced a big reward for anyone who could kill him. The young Simhabahu, despite his mother's efforts to restrain him, confronted the lion and shot an arrow at him. The arrow touched the lion's forehead, but because of his great love for his son, returned to Sinhababu and fell at the latter's feet. Two subsequent arrows also proved ineffective. But when he shot for the fourth time, the lion grew angry. His occult protection was gone and the arrow killed him.

Simhabahu succeeded his grandfather to the throne. Of his many sons, the eldest, Vijay, proved extremely unruly. With a gang he had mobilised, he plundered and harassed the citizens. Tut Prince Vijay to death!' was the popular cry. The king ordered his exile. He and his followers, numbering seven hundred, were shipped out to an uncertain destination and destiny.

Their ships reached the shores of Lanka, inhabitated by Yakshas. The daughter of the Yaksha chief, a warrior of great merit, could have destroyed the intruders, but she set her heart upon Vijay. With her help Vijay and his men vanquished the Yakshas. The survivors fled into the deep woods. The Yakshini lived with Vijay.

Vijay proclaimed himself the king of the island, now named Sinhala in the memory of king Simhabahu. But his position could be formalised only if a powerful king recognised him. His emissaries sailed to the Pandya king at Madurai and convinced him about the genuineness of Vijay's claim. They requested him for a princess to marry Simhabahu and 700 damsels to marry his lieutenants.

The king proclaimed with the beat of a drum: Whichever family had a daughter to spare 'should provide the girl with a double store of clothing and place her at their door-steps. By this sign shall we collect them.' The required number of damsels collected, the king chose a princess from the royal household to sail with them to Lanka.

No sooner had the ships teeming with brides been visible on the horizon with signals indicating success of their mission, Vijay summoned the Yakshini by whom he had already had two children. 'Go thou now, dear one, leaving the two children behind,' was his message.

The dear one stood stunned. But time was running out. Vijay Simha grew impatient. She had to leave, but she left along with her children.

No wonder that she should be literally torn to shreds the moment she was sighted by her kin. Her children, however, escaped. Their descendants are said to be still in the remote part of a forest and they hate civilization.

Vijay and his men duly married the brides imported from Madurai. As Vijay had no son, a nephew was brought from India to succeed him. Three generations later Mahendra and Samghamitra, the son and daughter of Emperor Asoka, initiated the Simhalese into Buddhism.

The accuracy of this legend, of course, is questioned. But the fact is, the difference between the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka (after the Yakshas) and the later day migrants from the Tamil lands is rather weak, though the conflict between them is so stubborn.

There are only a few cities that could rival Madurai in richness of anecdotes, often historically corroborated and associated with its monuments. I had a greater opportunity to know them on a second visit to the city years later. In 1559 the Cholas attacked the city and the Pandya king took refuge at Hampi, the capital of the Vijaynagar Empire. The monarch of Vijaynagar sent the chief

commander of his army, Nagam Nayak, to drive away the usurper and restore the kingdom to its original ruler. Nagam Nayak fulfilled the first part of his mission, but instead of reinstating the Pandya king, occupied the throne himself.

The angry monarch of Vijaynagar called his generals, ‘Who can capture the treacherous fellow and bring him to me? I don’t care even if you don’t succeed in bringing him alive. His dead body would suffice,’ thundered the monarch.

All kept quiet, for to confront the crafty and skilled Nagam Nayak was to embrace death. But the monarch did not have to wait for long. A young man took up the challenge. All were taken aback, for he was none other than Nagam Nayak’s son, Viswanath Nayak.
Viswanath defeated his father and produced the captive before his master. The happy monarch offered Viswanath a reward of his choice.

‘Release my unlucky father,’ was Viswanath’s choice.
That was granted and Viswanath was appointed the administrator of Madurai as the king’s Viceroy.

The Pandya king continued to sit on the throne, but holding a sceptre that was no more powerful than any other stick of its size. Two generations later the throne, too, slid away from the Pandyas. Viswanath’s grandson, Thirumal Nayak, declared himself the king. Vijaynagar was no longer in a position to take him to task.

Thirumal Nayak was a great lover of art. He would stand for hours gazing at an image emerging from a stone as the sculptor worked on it. He was keen to adorn old temples with new gopurams.

Alas, leaving scores of gopurams incomplete, one day he just disappeared! Those who put forth the theory of his disappearance as a sudden whimsical ascent to the heavens probably knew what, by and by, grew into whispers to this effect: One afternoon, while the king was alone, a noble reported to him of a treasure trove found in a deserted shrine. The king followed him, without any escort, into a labyrinth and then into a dungeon through a small opening. The noble was later seen basking in the sunlight, but not his master. A huge slab was believed to have been clamped on the dungeon’s opening.

A similar fate befell an illustrious lady of the Nayak dynasty, though rarely mentioned. She was Mangammal. For fifteen years she provided the kingdom

with an ideal rule, as the regent of the infant prince. The subjects sang her glory, but the nobles resented her inclination towards a brilliant young General. The lay the prince came of age, they demanded of the queen n other that she hand over her authority to him. She was ready to do that, but of her own will and at a time to be chosen by herself, not at the command of the envious nobles.

She was technically at fault. Captured, she was thrown into a special gaol with a single window. Every day she was shown some delicious dishes, which were promptly withdrawn, leaving her to die of starvation.

The remains of the gaol are still there. She was the last flicker of the powerful Nayak dynasty. J. P. Lasrado Shenoy, of the British Indian Civil Service, wrote in his book *Madura:*

‘European scholars sometimes refer to Madura as the Athens of South India and the title is not without some justification. As the seat of the Tamil academy, it attracted all the scholars of the south. Famous Tamil poets yearned for recognition from the Madura Tamil Sangam, and were not satisfied with their works until the latter had obtained the hall-mark of this academy. Madura is one of the few Indian cities which has maintained intact its connections with the past, and its growth is still dependent on roots firmly planted in soil that is 2000 years old. Thus, while Buddha might feel a stranger in modern Patna, the famous Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar would recognise in present day Madura, a good deal of the culture and civilization which distinguished her in the past. There is, therefore, no other place in India where the foreigner, anxious to have an insight into the religious life and traditions of the Hindus, would be so well rewarded as by a visit to Madura, and a close study of the Meenakshi temple.’

Shenoy wrote this in 1937. Even decades later the observation holds good to an extent. *****

A Site Recreated from a Classic

Twilight was changing into night and we drove through long stretches of rocky lands and hamlets resigned to early rest. From a distance came some stray strains of a concert, marking the interlude in a village opera.

Our chauffeur surely deserved a cup of coffee after hours of driving. We stopped

when the distant music had been swallowed up by the growling of a dog guarding a roadside kiosk. A patch of weak light from the shop showed a huge arch beside it. I took a brief stroll enjoying the mild moonlight and refreshing breeze while waiting for the oven in the kiosk to recover its lost heat.

No, there was no sign of any shrine nearby, nor any ruins, to justify the beautiful arch. Moreover, though classical in its design, it appeared to be new.

'Well, Sir, this is the first of the arches we must cross to reach Pumpuhar,' said Mr. Perumal, my alert guide, holding out to me my cup of coffee. He had anticipated my curiosity. 'A few more arches would be there to welcome us to that prize site - all named after the major characters in the classic *Silappadikaram:* Kannagi, Kovalan and Madhavi.'

In the eighties of the 20th century there were still a few English publications left which valued creative fiction and features, and prominent among them was *Imprint.* My whirlwind 12-day travel project of Tamil Nadu emerged out of a dialogue between the state government's secretary for the department of culture and the publishers of that monthly since crushed by the steamrollering news magazines), the former requesting the latter to carry an elaborate article on Tamil Nadu and the latter consenting to the proposal on the condition that it must be written by a creative writer, their choice falling on me.

My goddess of luck must have inspired the authorities to choose not only a new car for me, but also my team consisting of a courteous young driver, a gifted photographer who was also a mechanic, and a suave guide. For the first two days I used to be intrigued by common people greeting me with broad smiles wherever we stopped. By and by, through intense attention paid to the conversations between such people and my driver, I succeeded in resolving the mystery. My driver had been the favourite of the matinee-idol-turned-chief minister, MGR. Hence the passenger he carried must be someone of proximity to that superman.

And the photographer evidently belonged to an extinct species of gentlemen. It took me five days to find out that he was a smoker, for he would engage in that habit hiding from me and wash his mouth before taking seat beside the driver.

It was not yet midnight when at last I could hear that eternally sublime sound - the roar of the sea. We had reached the shores beyond which lay a submerged

city - Pumpuhar or Puhar or Kaveripattinam, the backdrop of the events narrated in *Silappadikaram* by Prince Ilango Adigal, written in the early part of the A.D. 3rd century, if not earlier.

The city was an affluent port 2,500 years ago, harbouring merchant ships from Rome, Greece and other distant places, visited by savants like Pliny. It was also the capital of the Cholas. It was an Utopia so far as safety and security were concerned. Valuable merchandise could be left unguarded and shopkeepers went home for the night leaving the doors of their establishments unlocked. If ever a thief entered the city, he would suddenly be lifted and hurled out of its walls, often meeting an instant death or, carrying the booty, he would be obliged to roam the city all night, unable to find his way out. This was possible because an invisible genie kept watch on the city. He loved to play pranks on intruders.

'There was a miraculous pond where the lame, the mute, the deaf, or the leprous, by bathing in its waters or walking round it, could recover beauty, strength and health. In an open square stood a tall, polished monolith. Men driven mad by an excess of drugs, paralyzed by poison, bitten by sharp-toothed snakes, or possessed by spirits, found instant relief by walking round it and worshipping it. There was a crossing of four roads where lived a fierce genie. His voice could be heard ten leagues away when he shouted that he would bind, beat and devour imposters dressed as monks to dissimulate their misdeeds, crafty women addicted to secret vice, dishonest ministers, lewd seducers of others' wives, and all bearers of false witness and gossip. There was also a square where stood a rare statue, the lips of which never parted, but which shed tears when the monarch transgressed the law or failed to render justice. In these five notable places daily sacrifices were offered by wise people who understood their mystery." *(Shilappadikaram*, translated by Alain Danielou, George Allen & Unwin, London)

Our car stopped before a small house. 'Please go to sleep inside the conchshell. We will hide inside an oyster,' said my guide.

I surveyed my shelter in the faint moonlight. It was indeed in a shape of a conchshell, elegant and beautiful. A narrow curling passage took me to the solitary room on the upper floor, overlooking the sea and the estuary though I could not see them at night. But I could see the contours of the row of houses a short distance away, made in the form of oysters.

Had I arrived in a magic land? I do not know if there was another place anywhere on earth where institutions mentioned in an old classic had been recreated. As I walked along the seashore early in the morning and marvelled at those imaginatively recreated monuments one after another, I felt convinced that the new Pumpuhar hardly received the attention it deserved. No doubt, its attraction depended on one's knowledge of the *Silappadikaram,* literally meaning the "Ankle Bracelet" - one of the most moving stories ever written. But of that later.

I stood on the estuary of the Kaveri for long. A bone of contention among more than two states today, the river was the symbol of love and sympathy between two kingdoms according to the legend of its origin.

That was in the mythical times. One day, the great sage Agastya, who had come from the north and made the south his home, happened to meet a prince who looked distraught and depressed because of a severe drought in his kingdom. He did not know what to do about it.

The sage had just come down from the Sahyadri hills in the kingdom of Coorg. While in meditation there, he had come to know that a new river was about to emerge from the hills. He led the prince to the king of Coorg. 'O noble King, let the stream in the offing be directed towards the Tamil land,' was the sage's suggestion. The king accepted it with humility.

Workmen stood ready with their equipment and the sage sat in meditation, invoking the spirit of the river at the foot of the Sahyadri. As soon as the waterfall came down, the workmen dug the earth to channel it in the required direction. The sage named the river Kaveri, after the king of Coorg who was Kavera.

Much water had since flowed down the Kaveri. Much had changed in man's attitude to rivers and to nature in general. Some excavations had been made to trace the remains of the submerged Pumpuhar. It had started yielding encouraging results. But the project was abandoned probably for lack of funds. Hence the city remains a fairytale wonder as sun in the *Silappadikaram:*

Blessed be Puhar the city of wonders! Blessed be the city of wonders,
Immortal testimony to the power
Of a glorious line of kings

Whose fame has spread to every land
The boundless sea surrounds.
*****

A Tale of Two Cities and a Tragic Hero

A visit to the most attractive of all the monuments in modern Pumpuhar was the last item in my itinerary in that unique and unexpected site and that was the one to leave the lasting impact on my memory. It was where the story of *Silappadikaram* had been sculpted, scene by scene.

Two thousand years ago South India was the very example of political and religious harmony. Three great dynasties, the Pandyas, the Cholas and the Cheras, ruled over three large regions of the land, for the most part of time respectful of one another. Often the members of a single family followed three different faiths, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, without causing any disharmony.

In Pumpuhar, the capital of the Cholas, lived a couple, Kovalan and Kannagi, the former the scion of a noble family and the latter the daughter of a prosperous seafaring merchant.

They lived happily, but it could not be happily ever after. The one to sabotage it unwittingly was Madhavi, a charming damsel and a highly gifted danseuse. She was launched into her career as a courtesan through a performance in the presence of the king and the nobility. According to custom, the garland she received from the king was to be offered for a price; the one to buy it would become the courtesan's first lover.

'In frail anklets bejewelled with circlets, Madhavi, the beauty of Puhar, displayed upon the stage her dance, her precise diction, subtle sense of timing, her knowledge of all rhythmic patterns, of the five sorts of temple songs, of the four systems of music, of the eleven kinds of dance.'

The entranced Kovalan, probably before he knew what he was doing, had become a candidate for the coveted position of Madhavi's first lover. Nobody

could have dared to rival him.
Madhavi received him with warmth and courtesy. But what ought to have been a casual affair proved to be lasting. Deviating from the way of the courtesans, Madhavi looked upon Kovalan as her husband.

Kovalan forgot his home, Kannagi, and his business and spent all his time with Madhavi at the latter's residence. He was hardly aware of the fact that his business was in doldrums, that his staff and household were being maintained by Kannagi with great difficulty.

And his sudden disenchantment with Madhavi came at a stage when he was left with nothing.

His disenchantment, however, was inexplicable. It could have been the outcome of a prolonged but suppressed sense of guilt at neglecting the faithful and noble Kannagi and a momentary doubt, unfounded though, in Madhavi's faithfulness. It surfaced arbitrarily on a festive night on the seashore when Madhavi sang some nostalgic songs and Kovalan interpreted them as her longing for some other lover. He deserted her forthwith and returned to Kannagi.

The sad but serene Kannagi, though reduced to a wreck, received her prodigal husband kindly and was ready to help him rebuild his life. If he was broke to the wide, she had at least a pair of valuable anklets left which could yield capital enough for a new business venture.

But the repentant and embarrassed Kovalan was no longer willing to work amidst familiar faces. He must begin his life anew in some distant city.
He and Kannagi set out at night for Madurai, the capital of the Pandyas. It was an arduous walk spread over ten days. At last the destination seemed to be nearer. On their enquiry some travellers told them:

'Do you not feel the southern breeze blowing from the city and bringing us the mixed fragrance of sacred *akil* and sandalwood? This breeze comes here laden with the odors of saffron, chives, sandal paste and musk. On its way it may have wandered over newly opened buds of sweet water lilies pouring out their abundant pollen; or trailed along champaks in bloom, or lost its way in groves of jasmine and *madhavi,* or caressed the buds of garden *mullai.* It brings us a smell of good food, for it went through the fumes of big bazaars, where pancakes are fried in countless little stalls. It brings with it a heavy odor from the terraces

where men and women crowd close together. It is thick with the smoke of sacrifices and many other pleasing smells. It blows through the palace of the great Pandya king ... the wealthy city is not far off and you need have no fear. Even if you go there alone you will meet no danger on your way.' (Translated by Alain Danielou)

Alas, but danger lurked from a rare, unfortunate coincidence.

An anklet from a pair of the queen's was missing and the king was furious about it. When Kovalan tried to sell one from Kannagi's pair to the goldsmith who had access to the palace and who, in fact, was the thief, the fellow reported to the king that the stolen property as well as the thief had been found. The king who was in a bad mood ordered Kovalan to be put to death. The order was executed by a drunkard who did not let the guards follow the formalities which would have allowed some time to pass and probably better sense would have prevailed in the king.

Kannagi who was waiting for her husband to return with the value of the ornament soon learnt about his fate. She rushed into the street out of her shelter and shouted, 'Is there no God? Is there no God in this country? Can there be a God in a land where the sword of the king is used for the murder of innocent strangers? Is there no God, no God?'

She went on daring the stunned people to answer her and then, taking position in front of the palace, she dared the king to do the same. To the confused monarch she proved with the other anklet of her pair that her husband had been falsely accused and wrongly killed.

Never had a ruler of the illustrious dynasty made that kind of blunder. The king collapsed and died. The queen followed suit.

But Kannagi's wrath did not end with that. She plucked her left breast and dashed it on the ground and cast a terrible curse on the city. A great fire engulfed it at once. However, she prayed to the god of Fire to spare the devotees, the honest and truthful men and women, the crippled, the aged and the children.

The city, including the magnificent palace of the Pandyas, was reduced to ashes.

That is the moving story of *Silappadikaram*. The name of its author, Ilango Adigal, means the ascetic prince. Legend says that when he was very young, an

astrologer predicted an illustrious career for him. His elder brother, the heir to the throne, was beset with the suspicion that it was Ilango and not he who would inherit the crown. The younger prince understood his brother's apprehension, renounced his royal status and became a Jain hermit.

The tastefully made building depicting the story contains two life-size figures of Kannagi and Madhavi. Great care had been taken to project in detail, after research in ancient Tamil literature, how a danseuse and a lady belonging to the aristocracy should have looked 2,000 years ago.

From Pumpuhar to Madurai we drove along the way once believed to have been walked by Kovalan and Kannagi. For a certain stretch of the road the couple had the company of a hermit woman. When a pair of young men, loafers, showed their propensity to tease Kannagi, the spell of the hermit woman metamorphosed them into jackals. Their pathetic howls could he heard from the bushes. Two millennia later the society has teasers galore, but no spell at its disposal to award them the form that is rightfully theirs.

It was evening by the time we reached Madurai. A *son et lumiere*, giving the story of the city, had just begun amidst the walls of the palace of the Nayaks. 'Who are you, O woman, you audacious stranger, to accuse us, the scions of the mighty Pandyas, of injustice? Don't you realize the absurdity of your accusation?' demanded an anguished Pandya king of Kannagi. And Kannagi thundered out her answer.

*****

A Night in the Forest

It seemed to be an endless drive. 'You're tired, aren't you? Well, we should reach the Anamalais forest soon after the Rundown and a full night is at your disposal for your rest,' my guide assured me as we drove along. 'The new forest bungalow is beautiful,' he added.

If not rest, which appeared to be an unreachable luxury, I surely needed some sleep, for I had worked for the greater part of the past night on my weekly column for a national daily to which I was then committed.

But even though hours of road speedily slipped through our wheels, there was no sign of the beautiful bungalow as we drove along the quiet range of hills identifying the forest between Kerala and Tamilnadu. It was too late when we realized that we had chosen a wrong route.

At last we were greeted by the official gateway into the forest, the reserved haven for wild animals and a valley for taming and training elephants. The new bungalow, under a bluish patch of light, emerged like an oasis. It was past midnight and rarely ever had I craved for a bed more eagerly.

The manager of the bungalow gaped at us in disbelief. Three big officers who had arrived in the early hours of the night with their families, unannounced, had bluffed their way into the suites, telling the manager that our travel plan had been altered.

‘But that is absurd, dishonest, and for the officers of their rank to do so is criminal!’ shouted my guide. ‘Where are they?’ he demanded, stepping onto the verandah and heading towards the suites.

Pale as his own shadow, the manager, his hands folded, informed him that the party had gone to sleep. My young guide was an excellent man, but he was a jealous caretaker of his guest and was always ready for a fight at the sign of the slightest disrespect to his charge. He had already chosen the doors on which to plant his first knock - the doors that mildly vibrated to the sound of a duet of carefree and what appeared to be highly satisfied snoring. What could be more satisfying than stealing the sleep from a tired, unsuspecting lot like us!

I not only checked my guide from acting but also dragged him down near the car. Took here, my friend, even if you succeed in arousing the bureaucrats, which would be a miracle, you cannot and should not dislodge them at this hour of the night. They would be irritated and, consequently, vengeful too. Don’t forget they are with their families - in the role of their protectors. Why sacrifice the rest of the night at the alter of discord? Let’s sprawl on the verandah. I hope that little dog yonder would notify us of any prowling tiger.’

But the manager politely reminded us about the old bungalow in the interior of the forest and assured us that it was unoccupied.
‘Kindly eat your dinner - we have the food ready - and then I will lead you there.’

‘Eat? Eat our dinner after being refused shelter?’ said my guide. ‘What do you think our guest is? A common holidaymaker? We will not touch even a drop of water here! I cannot sleep until I had reported this goondaism to our chief secretary and the minister concerned.’

We were in the car again, the manager’s pilot jeep leading the way. Our new destination could not have been more than a kilometre away. Evidently it had stopped receiving important guests and its ground floor served as homes for two or three forest guards who, too, were away probably on their nocturnal duty. We were received by a herd of barking deer crowding the portico. Despite coming under the focus of two pairs of bright light, they were in no hurry to disperse, a sign that they had not been quite exposed to the beast in man, an occasional poacher notwithstanding.

The guards were summoned through some signal and the rooms upstairs were cleaned on a war footing. I was about to lie down when my guide appeared with a loaf of bread and an orange.
‘How wrong it was of me to deprive you of your normal dinner!’ He wiped his eyes. ‘I cared more for my ego than for your need.’

‘Believe me, my friend, I had forgotten hunger. Since you remind me of it, I assure you nothing could serve at this hour as dinner - or should we say breakfast - better than an orange.’ It took me some time to convince myself that I meant what I said.

Once he was gone, I persuaded my sleep to wait for the next night, hopefully, and dragging a chair close to the open window, made myself comfortable in it, and tried to persuade the spirit of the sylvan night to unfold to me as much of its mystery as it would care to.

I was not disappointed. The moonlight and the chiaroscuro it made with the loving assistance of a million trees sporting foliage of shimmering silver, gave the forest a throbbing, dreamy and magical personality meant only for the silent nights.

Silent, but not in the normal sense of the term. Besides the spurts of noises made by creatures unknown to me, there were, in the atmosphere, it seemed, the vibrations of some inaudible communication among the trees and they were quite musical in an extraordinary and subtle way. For a moment -though I could

not have kept track of the duration of that moment -I felt it was possible to become one with that music and if one could do that, one could gain an open sesame to a very different but a very real world invisibly interspersed with our gross physical world.

I felt as though I had reached the threshold of that world but had not qualified myself to step into it. Even then it was a blessing, for by the time the numerous birds began announcing the dawn, I felt I've had a sip of the elixir for rejuvenation, totally alienating myself from the effects of two consecutive sleepless nights.

As soon as I came down, the manager of the new guesthouse greeted me. 'Sir, one of those officers, the leader of their team, had booked a suite in our bungalow last year. But, on arrival, he was denied accommodation because a ministerial party had occupied it. How could I have imagined that the gentleman would prove a curse for you, out to avenge his old discomfiture?'

I wish I could assure the manager that the gentleman and his tribe, far from being a curse, had been a blessing for me. I could not have had my rendezvous with the forest of the night had I not been hurled into the company of barking deer.

But I am sure, had the bureaucrats had a glimpse of my chauffeur, MGR's favourite, they would have bitten their tongues till they had bled!
The slow unfolding of the dawn, a daily occurrence, appeared like a miracle. Alas, how many miracles we miss marveling at simply because they were daily occurrences!

As we began walking, leaving the jeep near a stream, I requested the forest officer, who had been kind and alert enough to report so early for taking me around, and then-two deputies, to refrain from using their long torch lights, for Nature's light was busy working out wonders of art all over the forest. If it smiled over a plethora of wild flowers, it tickled a covey of chicks in their nests to cheep out their sense of sweet bewilderment and the elder birds to flutter their wings before taking off.

'Sorry,' muttered the forester because he switched on his torch, but he was confident of showing me something worthwhile.
'Look,' he said, fixing the light on the sand. 'A tigress has just preceded us in her

morning walk guiding her cubs along.'

He surely knew that there was hardly any chance of our feeling elated at his discovery. He hastened to add, 'In this *Abhayaranya* - the forest in which animals can live fearlessly - they are not the only ones to be safe from man. Man, too, is safe from them. It is never by instinct that they act hostile towards man, but by experience. Poachers are the enemies of the climate of coexistence in this forest. But for their mischief, I could show you the tigress suckling her cubs and she would not mind at all.'

'Better we do with meeting the tiger in the zoo,' our photographer whispered to my guide. *****

And a Dawn in the Forest

We were near a shallow rivulet and the trees and creepers on both its banks stood so harmoniously arranged that wondered if it was not a grove planned by an expert. But alas, by no human expert. Left to itself, Nature knew how to arrange its own harmony.

I sat down on a slab of rock. Only if I knew some magic to prolong this hour - this wonderful combination of tender light, soothing breeze and visible and invisible life throbbing all around but without causing any tension and without exacting any price for the abundance of its serenity! For a lightning moment the dawn seemed willing to reveal—only if I had the capacity and time for allowing it a passage into my inner being
- why the dawn of India's civilization had been possible in her great forests such as the Dandakaranya and the Naimisharanya. The splendour of the forest set free the imprisoned inner splendour of our soul.

' Are you tired? Did you sleep well?' the forester asked me with some concern.
'I did not sleep, but I dreamt all right.'

The kind gentleman tried to penetrate my quizzical statement, but I was in no mood to explain further. In fact I was still under the delightful hangover of my seance with the sylvan night, like the peasant in Milton: *Fairy elves,*
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side

Or fountain some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon
Sits arbitress.

An exclamation in a whisper woke me up to the presence of a rhino on the opposite bank of the rivulet. It stood absolutely still, surveying us with great concentration, but in an apparently menacing pose.

'Never mind its posture. It looks fearful to us only because a human being, when about to charge at his enemy, assumes this mode. The rhino might very well be appreciating us, it might be trying to tell us how nice it was of us to call on it so early in the morning! All the big beasts are generally gentle and hospitable. Now we are entering the domain of the biggest species of mammals. Less than half a dozen of our men are there amidst a large number of elephants. The creatures could just toss them off, if they so wished, and finish with them, but such a thing had never happened. Once in a while an elephant, under the spell of its *must*, behaves unpredictably, but it is never more unpredictable than the human,' said the forester.

'But don't they sometimes invade the localities and destroy crops and terrify the villagers?' observed my guide.

'They do, but that is only because we have encroached upon their home, the forest. We obstruct their freedom of movement. The gradual reduction of the forest areas have resulted in the disappearance of so many streams and natural pools; it has even affected the cycle of seasons. The animals easily feel bewildered. That explains their erratic conduct.'

Soon we were in a charming cozy valley surrounded by hills, some of their peaks as high as 8000 feet. Tiers of forest girdled this camp for elephants where they were tamed and some of them were trained to catch other elephants.

Those in charge of the captive creatures were waiting in front of a couple of spacious huts. But two lovely elephant calves outdid them in receiving us. They frolicked around us with abandon and nudged us with their tender trunks and ran away to their mothers who stood amidst ten or twelve other elephants, quietly enjoying the joy of their young.

Anamalai (not to be confused with Annamalai) means the mountain of the elephants. They have been the dominant residents of these hills and forests since

time immemorial. That probably explained why they looked so naturally dignified here. Well, so far their state of bondage was concerned, they did not seem to mind it very much; probably because they lived at a plane where they could easily pardon human greed and mischief.

A chair had been unfolded for me in front of the trainer's hut and a tumblerful of tea, sweetened with palm *gur,* had been placed on a stool. Flanked by the two calves, I sat sipping the tea with a sort of relish which I would not barter even for a wagonful of the most exotic tea if ever offered to me. I was given coconuts to feed the mother-elephants. But as the other elephants looked wistfully, I asked my hosts if I could provide that treat to them, too. They agreed and I had the great good luck to earn the appreciation of the silent herd. Its heavenly prototype serving Goddess Lakshmi and the king of the gods, Indra, the elephant held a position in the heritage of India that was unique. The elephant symbolized the soul of the Buddha and in several incarnations of the Bodhisattva, it had been closely associated with him. While I relaxed there and the first flakes of the golden sunlight played on the elephants, I remembered one such story:

Long long ago there was a forest on the outskirts of Varanasi. One day, while some woodcutters were at work, a cow-elephant approached them and lifted one of its paws. A big thorn had entered it. The woodcutters, with great care, removed it, applied some medicine on her wound and she relaxed.

Thereafter she would join the woodcutters every day and help them in dragging the felled trees out of the forest. Years passed. The cow-elephant did not report for a while. Then, one day she approached her familiar woodcutters once again, but with her calf, a silver-white baby elephant. She laid it before them and slowly departed, shedding tears. The woodcutters understood that it was time for her to die. She would retire to a certain valley and quietly lie down waiting to breathe her last.

The woodcutters nursed the baby elephant with love, and when it had grown up, it served them with utmost sincerity. But its fame as an unusually handsome, bright and strong creature began to spread and reached the ears of the king of Varanasi. He visited the forest and saw it and stood charmed.

'Don't you, my dear subjects, think that this rare elephant deserves to be in the palace?' he asked the woodcutters. They were most willing to give it away to the king. But the elephant would not budge! The king reflected on the situation.

Then he brought out a hundred gold coins and placed the amount before the woodcutters. The elephant trumpeted and followed the king.

The king grew extremely fond of it. He treated it more like a friend than a servant. Once in a while he rode it ceremoniously through the city and all the folks marvelled at the magnificent sight.

But the king died all of a sudden, while the queen was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. To add to the crisis, the king of Koshala marched upon Varanasi in a bid to annex it. He camped outside the city and asked the royal council managing the kingdom either to concede allegiance or to get ready for battle. After consulting the queen, the council informed the invading king that their queen was to be delivered of a child shortly. Should she give birth to a female child, the council would surrender Varanasi to Koshala, and the queen, along with her daughter, would leave for her parents' home. But in case it was a male child, the army of Varanasi must defend the kingdom for the heir's sake. The council expected the invading party to wait.

The king of Koshala agreed to wait. The suspense in both the camps kept building for a month and then the queen gave birth to a male child. A fight broke out immediately. The army of Varanasi fought valiantly, but the enemy had come well prepared and they were about to smash the resistance and rush into the fort.

When all seemed lost, spurred by an inexplicable inspiration, the queen carried her infant into the royal garden where the white elephant was housed. She knelt down before it and said, 'O noble friend of my husband, the king is no more. Here is his helpless child, his heir. But the enemy is about to enter the fort and the palace and once they have done so, to kill this child would be their first action. Save it, if you can.'

Tears rolling down its cheeks, the elephant lifted the infant prince for a moment by its trunk and returned him to the queen. Then giving out a loud trumpet, it rushed towards the palace door. The queen ordered the door to be opened. Then it headed towards the exit gate of the fort. That, too, was held open for it. The elephant made a beeline towards the enemy camp. The king of Koshala, jubilant over the prospect of victory, sat among his advisers when, before anybody could grasp the situation, the elephant took hold of him and turned and began running back into the fort. At first stunned, the king's men, even after they were ready to act, did not dare to do anything lest the elephant should dash their king to death!

The elephant returned safely to the palace with the enemy king as hostage. Needless to say, the nobility of Koshala had to go down on their knees to have him released.

The little prince, says the Jataka, was the Bodhisattva. I did not know when I had begun to see the episode enacted before me, sitting there in the world of elephants and in their majestic company. But it was time to get up.
'Do you know the names of these calves? Kannagi and Kapil.' the forester informed me. 'I hope you know who Kannagi was.'

'Yes, the goddess-like heroine of the great Tamil classic, *Silappadikaram* .'
'Right, and so far as Kapil is concerned, of course you know....'
'Indeed, who does not know the illustrious sage, the author of the Samkhya philosophy!' The forester looked embarrassed. 'Well, Sir, well, it is not exactly like that. It is after the cricketer . . .' I stomached my faux pas and bade goodbye to the elephants.

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A Thousand Hidden Isles

It was noon and under a tree along the rocky lonely road stood a young man, sweating but smiling. Our chauffeur had recognized him. He was an officer in the department of agriculture stranded because of some problem. We brought him in and resumed driving.

'My God! How come the Nutty Chief is here?' exclaimed the officer. His look was fixed on an elderly gentleman with trousers folded up to his knees, unshaven cheeks twitching with emotion, as he talked to some farmers. One of his listeners held a perforated umbrella on his head.

He was looking into our car. The officer requested the driver to stop and got down and greeted the gentleman. I could feel that he would like me to be introduced to him. The gentleman was our chance companion's boss, in fact the second senior-most executive in the directorate of agriculture. He had cycled down to the nearby village - he avoided using cars or jeeps as much as possible - to inspect a project financed by his department, and despite his happiness at

meeting us, was keen to save us the pain of standing under a hot sun and bade us goodbye impatiently.

But we had just begun to move when he shouted and stopped us and dragged out his junior and whispered something to him. ‘What can I tell the Nutty Chief?’ mumbled the officer when we were on the move again. ‘Because he could not entertain you, he gave me money and asked me to buy you ice cream at the next bazaar.’

‘Amusing!’ I commented.
‘Why otherwise should we call him Nutty Chief? He should by this time occupy the highest post in our department but for his idiosyncrasies!’ observed the officer.

I grew curious and the officer went on enlightening me with his candid observations: ‘Well, we can appreciate his stand against the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. But how not to call him crazy once you know his arguments behind his stand?’

‘What are they?’
“The destructive germs can never be eliminated through any external means because they are born out of the vibrations of greed, lust and violence which man nurtures and they thrive on such elements.’ ‘We just met a sage!’ I exclaimed absentmindedly.
‘Beg your pardon?’ The officer looked at me with suspicion. I smiled and he felt assured that the population of nuts was not on the increase in his immediate vicinity after all!

We were in the bazaar that was the officer’s destination. The zeal with which he looked for ice cream before bidding us goodbye, literally running from shop to shop, could be termed mad. I realized the respect the officers had for their Nutty Chief. It took me some effort to persuade him to settle for cool drinks - a double dose each to do full justice to the amount of money the Nutty Chief had given him. And I relished each drop of it as the Nutty Chief, in my vision, had truly assumed the stature of a sage.

No wonder that with the chance discovery of a character like that fresh in mind, the next discovery would be more thrilling than it would otherwise have been - for I could not have imagined a world of a thousand tranquil isles overshadowed

by dense mangrove trees to have remained practically hidden, tucked in a nook of Tamil Nadu, spread over an area of some 3,000 acres. Like Browning in *Pippa Passes,* I should have exclaimed, 'Some unsuspected isle in the far seas! Some unsuspected isle in the far-off seas'! But these were so close by! This was Pecehavaram.

The number thousand is a mere guess. It could be more. Another guess is the number of channels and lakes formed by the backwater of the sea, surrounding these isles - which could be 4,000.

Fisher-folk inhabited several of those isles. They lived in lightly built thatched houses. Occasionally, cyclones flattened their huts like those of cards. 'What do you do during such catastrophes?' I asked the boatmen who were taking us around. 'We wait and rebuild our houses,' was the quiet answer. That is what they had done for generations, without any complaint. Any idea of complaint against Nature and Destiny was foreign to them until recently. They reminded me of characters in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.

The mangrove forests, to be seen only in India and Australia, have their largest display here, now that the Sundarbans, once identified with them *(Sundar* means the mangrove), is fast being denuded of them. The other ancient home of the mangrove under rapid usurpation by human locality is Rameswaram.

We rowed on aimlessly. I was keen to have a feel of that private world of water and woods. Their silence under a mellow sun was vibrantly alive, as alive as the meditative trees and the throbbing water.

A tiny boat manned by a girl aged ten or eleven and two little boys was floating in the opposite direction, keeping close to the other bank of the channel. I raised my camera but hesitated because of the distance.

'Hello, little girl, our Sir would like to have a picture of yours and of your boat. Cannot you come closer?'

It was difficult to understand whether the girl heard him or not - and if she heard, whether she was ready to oblige us or not. Her boat plied along with the current while we were pushing ours against the current. We forgot her. I sat absorbed in observing the intimacy between the trees and the water, the trees and the birds nestling in them, and the sunlight and the silence. All the others on the boat were probably in a similar mood when we heard a splashing sound behind us. The girl

had struggled to bring her boat closer to us.

She was in petticoat and blouse when I saw her first. Meanwhile she had wrapped herself up in a sari. She rearranged her hair as I aimed my camera at her. I captured one of the sweetest objects I had ever come across in life. Unforgettable was that combination of kindness and courtesy on her blushing face.

She turned her boat away as soon as I had clicked. She had no expectation of anything from us. She neither spoke nor smiled. Over the years I have felt confident that all the cynicism of our world cannot obliterate the imprint the girl's gesture left on my mind. Goodness is a fact of life.

Chidambaram, the seat of Nataraja, Lord Siva in the act of His Cosmic dance, was not far. 'All my thoughts on the structure of the world and its movements find a clear exposition in the image of Lord Nataraja,' said Einstein. To concentrate on the image was to be exported into a different dimension of time and space where calm and movement, eternity and hour, creation and destruction were a single experience of consciousness.

And says Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Every part of such an image as this is directly expressive, not of any mere superstition or dogma, but of evident facts. No artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena. If we would reconcile Time with Eternity, we can scarcely do so otherwise than by the conception of alterations of phase extending over vast regions of space and great tracts of time. Especially significant, then, is the *phase alteration* implied by the drum and the fire which changes, not destroys. These are but visual symbols of the day and night of Brahma.

In the night of Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Siva wills it: He rises through His rapture and dancing, sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! Matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fullness of time, still dancing, He destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest. This is poetry; but nonetheless, science.'

A couple of Europeans were asking the priest, 'Is there any prohibition against our entering the shrine?' 'How on earth there can be? This is a Vedic temple!'

answered the young priest.

He had more than answered the query. A truly Vedic temple was above all taboos, just as the Vedas were.
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Two Lovers of the Lord

Srirangam, City of the Lord of Play, Lord of Joy. ‘If ever you wish to visualize the Indian cities as they were 2,000 years ago, pay a visit to Srirangam. I don’t mean that you’ll see any millennium-old monument, barring parts of the large temple complex and an array of sculptural and architectural specimens of several ages, but you’ll feel the ancient air and smell it while walking through the city,’ a Tamil scholar had told me. ‘And never be in a hurry at Srirangam. You not only need time to appreciate the wonderful figures of the Gopis at the shrine of Venugopal, the towers numbering 21 laden with ornamental art and other examples of exquisite beauty, but you need muster a certain calm and poise to feel the vibrations of love - that of Andal and the Bibi - which still pervade the subtle atmosphere of the complex,’ he had added.

I knew of Andal, but of the intriguing Bibi I learnt only at Srirangam.

The picture of the South Indian city that emerges from the ancient literature is an expanse of clean bright paths flanked by tall trees planted to offer shade to travellers, with elegant buildings behind them. While most of the people were pedestrians, some rode horses and a few elephants. A palanquin or a chariot was an occasional sight. The shrines exuded perfumes inspiring peace and devotion.

Faithful to the silent promise I had made to the scholar, I shut my eyes while walking certain patches of the streets of Srirangam filled with perfumes from burning braziers and tried to conjure up the probable scenes of the past. The scenes, naturally, could only be as pure as the perfumes frequently diluted by the smell of petrol and diesel.

But it was different inside the temple complex. The air was reserved for an abundance of fragrance from fresh flowers, the sandalwood paste and the *Tutsi* leaves. I was assured that the lyrical prayers, even though relayed through microphones, were no different in tune and rhythm from those as Andal sang

them in the 10th century.

Vishnuchitta, a devotee of Vishnu - here known as Ranganath - had adopted an infant girl he had chanced upon amidst a plethora of *Tulsi* plants. The girl grew up and was known as Andal. Vishnuchitta collected flowers every day in the morning, and made a garland of them and carried it to the temple. The priest received it and put it on the deity.

'What's this, Vishnuchitta, how come I find a woman's hair in the garland?' an annoyed priest one day demanded of the devotee.

Vishnuchitta was taken aback. There was no woman in his house excepting his daughter. Next day he kept alert. He saw Andal entering the puja room where he had kept the freshly made garland, putting it around her neck and looking into the mirror.

'What are you doing, my foolish child?' Vishnuchitta asked, storming into the room. Andal looked at him quizzically, as if unable to understand how a sensible person could ask such an irrelevant question!
'Well, Father, what is wrong in my ascertaining that I indeed looked like Ranganath's consort?' she asked innocently, taking off the garland and handing it over to him.

Vishnuchitta stood speechless. He had no doubt about the intensity of his daughter's love for the deity. He also knew that she composed moving poems on the Lord. But today she dared him to answer a question for which he was least prepared.

Despite his newfound impression of his daughter, he could not make bold to offer the garland to the deity. He threw it away.
At night Ranganath appeared to him in his dream and asked, 'Why did you deprive me of my garland?' 'I'm sorry, my Lord, but my foolish daughter defiled it by putting it on herself before it had been offered to you,' answered Vishnuchitta.

The deity seemed to laugh. 'Defiled it?' he said. 'It' s because she used it every day before you brought it to me that it exuded a special fragrance and was so dear to me,' said the deity. 'Never throw my precious ornament away again.'

Vishnuchitta felt overwhelmed, but his worldly prudence whispered to him that

it could be just a dream! In any case, a responsible father that he was, he looked for a suitable bridegroom for Andal. ‘But my bridegroom is waiting for me!’ said Andal, pointing her finger at Ranganath.

Once again neither could Vishnuchitta dismiss the girl’s incredible claim as nonsense nor could he accept the proposition as viable. But at night the deity told him, ‘How long do you propose to keep my bride away from me? Arrange for our wedding; would you?’

It was not as if Vishnuchitta alone began acting under a spell. The priest of the deity, too, did the same. Together they arranged for all that was necessary for a normal wedding. The bridal procession reached the gateway of the shrine. Andal was received by the deputies of the priest and their womenfolk with due ceremonies. Her aura dazed all and straight she entered the sanctum sanctorum, sat down beside the deity and vanished!

Andal (8th century) is among the twelve Alwars or celebrated Vaishnava saints of the South. Her poems are among the gems of ancient Tamil devotional poetry. But she is worshipped as an emanation of Bhudevi - the earth-goddess. The other damsel, Bibi, though nothing more than a mere human lover, is also remembered with reverence and looked upon as yet another consort of the Lord.

It happened sometime in the 12th century. A certain Sultan from the North invaded the temple town and plundered it, carrying away a huge quantity of gold and jewellery. One of the baskets filled with precious booty he presented to his daughter, Bibi Nachiar, contained the small *Utsava Murty,* the movable representative image of the deity, used during festivals, since the original image was immovable. The princess fell in love with the image. She forgot everything else and devoted herself to taking care of the image as if it were a living being.

Years later the great sage Ramanujacharya, the exponent of the Visishtadvaita philosophy, made a trip to the Sultan’s court and persuaded the potentate to restore the image to the temple. The Sultan obliged his daughter to part with it and the happy sage began his return journey to Srirangam.

It was a moonlit night. Along the lonely road, the sage woke tip to the fact that a young lady followed his cart on foot often sobbing He stopped the cart and, to his great amazement, found the follower to be none other than the princess She had not been able to reconcile to her separation from the image.

Nothing could dissuade the princess from settling down permanently in the temple complex. In recognition of her devotion some Muslim rites were introduced in the Puja that are still observed. A memorial to her in the temple complex, bearing Islamic motifs, perpetuates her association with the deity.

'Do you know about the origin of the deity?' I asked one of the priests and he went on to narrate it: once Brahma was meditating on Vishnu as the latter lay in his Yogic sleep. Brahma's vision materialized into this image later to be renowned as Ranganath. It was owned by Manu and in due course of time came into the possession of his descendant, King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Among the many kings assembled to honour Dasaratha when he performed the *Aswamedha Yajna* was the Chola King Dharmaraja from the South. The latter was fascinated by the image and continued to meditate on it on the banks of the river Kaveri after his return to his kingdom. Years rolled by marked by momentous events - such as Rama's exile, Ravana kidnapping Sita, the Rama-Ravana war and the triumphant Rama's return to Ayodhya. Once again there was an assembly of kings to honour Rama on the occasion of his coronation and among them was Bibhishana, the new king of Lanka. He, too, was enchanted by the image of Ranganath. Rama understood the mind of Bibhishana and made a gift of it to him. On his return journey to Lanka, Bibhishana stopped for a while here as King Dharmaraja's guest; but ready to resume his journey, he was unable to lift the image. The Lord had become a captive of Dharmaraja's devotion. Bibhishana went back without the deity. Since then the Lord has been here - making this the holiest of all the Vaishnavite shrines in the country.'

The legend was fascinating, not for the gross facts which nobody could vouch for, but for the sweet and subtle fact of the relationship between the devotee and the Lord. The themes of the legends of Andal and the Muslim princess were not different either.

Almost each of the 60 shrines within the seven circles of walls had a legend to tell. 'Look at that tower. That bears the memory of a Devdasi, a danseuse of the Lord, who once saved the temple from a planned plunder and ravage,' told a local friend. Once a certain invader, who had taken the town by storm and was looking forward to a merry night in the company of a dancing girl procured for him, was led by the latter to the tower with the promise of showing him some hidden treasure. 'Lean and look down,' she said sweetly and as soon as the dreaming paramour followed the instruction, she pushed him down to his death. His soldiers fled.

Srirangam was never attacked thereafter.
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Is the Lord's Bliss Still Undisturbed?

Way back in 1948 we, a group of school boys from Balasore, had to shuffle through a long stretch of wilderness on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar to discover a certain rock which, our textbook had informed us, was in the shape of an elephant. We had to part an abundance of bushes and creepers in order to have a satisfying glimpse of it; when we located the significant monolith, it was lying not only neglected but, as it appeared, abandoned.

The site was a natural demonstration of serenity in desolation. The whistling of the wind and an occasional hoot from a distant cowherd were the only sounds to remind us of the density of its silence - a silence throbbing with the cries of a hundred thousand people killed and another hundred and fifty thousand taken prisoners in a remoter past, for the meadow lying in front of the Elephant Rock, known as Dhauli, was the site of the great Kalinga war of 261 B .C . The man who launched the war witnessed its course standing, most probably, on that very rock and, it is believed, felt a sort of transformation within himself. He was a rare man of destiny one who changed the course of history - not only of India but also of the world. He was the youthful monarch of Magadha, Chandashoka, Ashoka the Terrible, getting metamorphosed into Dharmashoka, Ashoka the Pious.

This is how the Earl of Ronalshay had seen the rock a quarter century before I saw it for the first time: 'Closer inspection discloses the fact that the elephant stands guardian over a polished slab of rock some fifteen feet in length, on which is graven an inscription in three columns. The historic interest of this message from the distant past was made known by the genius of one James Princep who succeeded in deciphering it in 1834. We are in the presence here of the famous edicts of Ashoka, the great missionary emperor of the Maurya dynasty, who made of Buddhism a world religion. We are gazing upon the commands of a great monarch graven by his orders upon this same rock more than two thousand one hundred and seventy years ago ...' *(India: A Bird's-Eye View.*

And about the significance of the edicts, Nehru says in his *Glimpses of World*

History: ‘In these edicts Ashoka tells us of his horror and remorse at the slaughter which war and conquest involve. The only true conquest, he says, is the conquest of self and the conquest of men’s hearts by the *Dharma.* But I shall quote for you some of these edicts. They make fascinating reading and they will bring Ashoka nearer to you: “Kalinga was conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty,” so runs the edict, “when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were then carried away captive, one hundred thousand were there slain and many times that number died. ...”

‘Directly after the annexation of the Kalingas began His Sacred Majesty’s protection of the Law of Piety, his love of that Law and his inculcation of that Law. Thus arose His Sacred Majesty’s remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves slaughter and death and carrying away captive of the people. That is matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.’

‘The edict goes on to say that Ashoka would not tolerate any longer the slaughter or captivity of even a hundredth or thousandth part of the number killed and made captive in Kalinga. “Moreover, should anyone do him wrong, that, too, must be borne with His Sacred Majesty, so far as it can possibly be borne with. Even upon the forest folk in his dominions His Sacred Majesty looks kindly and he seeks to make them think aright, for if he did not, repentance would come upon His Sacred Majesty. For His Sacred Majesty desires that all animate beings should have security, self-control, peace of mind and joyousness.” Ashoka further explains that true conquest consists of the conquest of men’s hearts by the Law of Duty or Piety, and to relate that he had already won such real victories, not only in his own dominions, but in distant kingdoms. The Law to which reference is made repeatedly in these edicts, was the Law of the Buddha. Ashoka became an ardent Buddhist and tried his utmost to spread the Dharma.’

Much had changed. Just as the Vivekananda Rock at Kanyakumari is now adorned with a magnificent memorial - but at the cost of all chances for another Vivekananda or a lesser aspirant to lose himself or herself in an entranced solitude all alone - so had been Dhauli hill. As grand Stupa built by a Japanese Buddhist mission celebrates Ashoka’s transformation and provides for tourists and sight seers facilities for their less sublime celebration of a birthday or a-wedding with a picnic.

The situation reflects the paradox of our time. No doubt, leaving the rock islet at

Kanyakumari or the Dhauli hill to their pristine solitude would have been the best thing to do, but that just could not have been. The expanding population or some organisation of dubious motive would grab them sooner or later. Hence we must celebrate loudly what the past celebrated in silence.

If Dhauli, Tosali (an ancient fort-city under excavation - a process notorious for its lethargy), Khandagiri and Udayagiri (the twin hills with a number of Jain caves) skirting Bhubaneswar are of great antiquity, how old is the history of the city itself? If Varanasi was ‘older than time’, Bhubaneswar would perhaps fall into the next category of places still alive, places as old as time. India, of course, has the largest number of cities and sites in the world with their continuity maintained for 2,500 years and more and there is plenty of evidence to prove that Bhubaneswar is one of them. The oldest rock-cut sculptures in India, dating back to 3rd century B.C., are found here, suggesting the importance the place had gained even earlier.

No doubt, the most celebrated name associated with the place is that of Kharavela (2nd century B.C.), the emperor who revived and revitalised the land lying in a stupor since the devastating Kalinga War, who expanded his empire, defeated the King of Magadha and triumphantly brought back a remarkable statue of Kalinga Jina carried away by an earlier Magadhan king, Mahapadmananda, who dug canals and launched several projects for the welfare of his subjects, but who ultimately became an ascetic and, along with his queen, retired to the caves of Khandagiri-Udayagiri. His achievements inscribed there are historically invaluable and the caves carved by him have special features - one of them wide enough to serve as a stage for discourses or cultural programmes.

The caves continued to be the home of hermits of different sects till the beginning of our century. The last important hermit known to the public to live there was Mahimaswami, the founder of a mystic school called Mahima Dharma, mostly confined to Orissa. When Fergusson visited the site in 1836 and Lieutenant Kittoe who made a survey of the caves the next year, the inmates of the caves were very much displeased. But today’s inmates would be quite pleased to receive you, for they expect the visitors to follow the discipline of greeting them with roasted groundnuts available with the vendors roaming the place. They are a troop of monkeys, friendly and rather chivalrous. They ignored me and crowded around another visitor for no other apparent reason than that she was a distinctly fashionable lady.

The ancient monuments are far better preserved today, but at a very high price. The forests around the hills have disappeared. The primeval tranquility of the region is smothered by the concerted effort of domestic settlements, business enterprises and, last but not the least, a film studio. It is the same story everywhere.

But Bhubaneswar was what it was neither for Ashoka nor for Kharavela, but for its presiding deity, Lord Lingaraj. It has not been possible to ascertain who initiated the deity's worship, though we know that the 46-metre high temple was built in the 11th century. As Havell says, Tor purity of outline and dignity of its rich but unobtrusive decoration, as for its superb technique, the Lingaraj *shikhara* must rank as one of the greatest works of the Indian builder.'

No doubt, Bhubaneswar represents the heyday of the Saiva cult and the shrine of Lingaraj was its centre. The Linga symbol is believed to be *Swayambhu* or self-existent. Yet the deity is unique, for He is both Hara and Hari (Siva and Vishnu). His worship is conducted in accordance with both Saiva and Vaishnava rites. The *Vabanasthambha* (the pillar identifying the deity through His vehicle) bears the images of Nandi, the vehicle of Siva, as well as of Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu.

The oldest existing temple, however, is that of Parasurameswara, to quote Charles Fabri, 'one of the earliest temples in the whole of Orissa and its date can hardly be later than A .D . 650.'
Then come, according to their antiquity, the Boital temple (8th century), Mukteswara (9th century), Brahmeswara and Rajarani (11th century) and Ananta-Vasudeva (13th), among so many others.

While the sculptures of Rajarani and Lingaraj temples are widely reproduced for their excellence, practically every monument that has survived the ravages of time has a magnificence of its own, however dilapidated.

But it is not time or the elements of Nature alone that have maimed the sculptures. 'What a beauty!' I exclaimed looking at a panel on a minor temple. 'I wonder how much more beautiful it must once have been.'
'Indeed,' agreed one of the priests and, with a sigh, added, 'How much I wish that Kalapahar had never been born!'
I hear this observation, with slight variations, for the umpteenth time. Be it at Puri, Konarak or Bhubaneswar, it was Kalapahar who wrought the havoc.

Kalapahar, literally meaning the Dark Hill, was no doubt a historical figure. Named Kalidas Gajadani, he was a Hindu officer in the service of the Afghan Sultan of Bengal. He fell in love with a Muslim girl and married her and consequently was excommunicated from the Hindu society. His ardent appeals to me Mukti Mandap at the Puri temple, then the foremost seat of authority on the Hindu faith, evoked no favourable response. In 1568 Orissa fell to the Afghan army and Kalapahar lost no time in wreaking vengeance on all the monuments historically or artistically significant. A perfect pervert, he found a peculiar pleasure in mutilating sculptures that were remarkable for their beauty.

His mission was carried forward by one Mir Sayeed Ahmed, under order from Aurangzeb, to destroy the Jagannath temple at Puri in particular. It is surprising how the great temples of Puri and Bhubaneswar survived his assault!' writes H.K. Mahtab. 'Undoubtedly, it is their massiveness that saved them. But who can say how many smaller temples were reduced to dust?'

The species of Kalapahars is still living and kicking. Its members range from those inscribing their precious names, designations (sometimes extending up to quite enlightening information such as 'Mr. X, brotherin-law of Mr. Z, the respected sub-deputy collector') and those of their dear ones on the walls, pillars and sculptures, to the gangs of idol-lifters. In fact, long before smuggling Indian idols abroad grew into a milliondollar business, a far sighted Englishman had begun it with Bhubaneswar for his base, as early as 1810. He was Col. Stewart of the East India Company. At the early phase of his generously helping himself with idols and inscribed slabs, the priests were so deeply impressed by his love for their lore that they lovingly re-christened his name as Hindu Stewart. By the time they realised the nature of his conversion, it was too late. A large cabin-load of sculptures had been shipped to England. The higher-ups in the East India Company tried to assuage the feelings of the disenchanted priests by restoring two slabs to them - and they were fitted on the wrong temple where they continue to baffle the casual researcher.

Temples are not the only heritage of Bhubaneswar. Who can pass by without marvelling at the tank at the heart of the old city? Its grandeur is not due to its size, 1300 feet by 700 feet, but due to the fact that King Varaha Keshari (8th century) collected waters from all the sacred rivers and lakes of India and poured them into it. Hence its charming name the Vindu Sarovar - the lake formed with drops! Relaxing on its steps and gazing at the tranquil blue ripples on its surface at twilight, a luxury I cherish in my memory, may not be available to you today,

thanks to the stream of traffic along its edges!

There are of course two Bhubaneswars - the old and the new.

That was in 1953. The capital of Orissa had just shifted from Cuttack to the outskirts of the old Bhubaneswar. The site then known simply as the New Capital, was yet to develop into a town. The honourable members of the State Legislature had to plod through acres of sand to reach the Assembly hall and were occasionally lashed by mini sandstorms, in the absence of buildings or trees. Barring half a dozen rooms serving as the Legislature office, there was hardly any houses within a radius of one or two kilometres.

A friend and I, who had spent an hour in the visitors' gallery of the Assembly, were badly in need of some tea. We soon located a tea-stall a furlong away - a thatched hut flanked by some shrubs, run by a young man, its owner, and a teenage boy in tattered shorts. We ordered and had two cups of tea at the cost of an anna (one-sixteenth part of a rupee) each.

Seated on a soiled bench I commented, looking at my friend, more to ward off the monotony of the summer noon than to establish my connoisseurship, 'It's really good!' after my first sip of the tea.

The wrestler-like young entrepreneur got off his stool and stood facing me, his moustachio resembling a pair of hammers. His arms akimbo, he gravely demanded that I repeat my comment which I reluctantly did, not without some trepidations.

Displaying a broad smile (I will gladly walk five miles to witness a repeat performance) he forcibly took the tiny cups away from our hands.

'What you were drinking is plain tea. But I have provision for special tea - and even for especial tea. You are the first tea-lover I have met to appreciate our preparation since I set up this shop a month ago. Can I let you just walk away without a taste of my especial tea?'

He prepared the especial himself, commanding his assistant to bring out two special glasses and handing out a concoction of thick creamy milk and some masala and syrup sweeter than honey. He informed us, as we began talking, how his father and brothers who are in a village at the foot of the sacred Khandagiri hills had no faith in this brave enterprise of his and how he was determined to

prove them wrong.

We had already paid for the ordinary tea. Now all our efforts to make him accept the extra for the ‘especial’ treat went in vain. ‘You’re my friends,’ had been his farewell greeting.

Almost every time I pass by the massive new building of the Orissa Legislative Assembly, I wonder if my ‘friend’ owns one of those elegant buildings around it - if one of those posh hotels or restaurants is an evolution from the little hut I so fondly treasure in my memory. I wonder if the children and grandchildren of my friend, probably born in the city, while inheriting his business, had also inherited that wonderful smile of his - a smile I have never seen on the face of any contemporary city youth.

And that takes me back to the genesis of the original Bhubaneswar. Needless to say, it began around the seat of Lord Lingaraj. But why did he choose to dwell here - at Ekamra as the place was known earlier? According to the hoary legend, it is because Varanasi proved too crowded for Him!

I hope that at Bhubaneswar the Lord continues to dwell content, His bliss undisturbed.
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In Search of an Evening Marked by a Lantern and Stars

A *s* I entered my compartment in a Surat-bound train in Bombay (now Mumbai), I was warmly welcomed by the solitary other passenger seated cross-legged on his berth who introduced himself as Mr. Rabdiwalla - unless I heard wrong - a business magnet’. Soon I found out that he ran a moderate workshop of looms, but was obviously fond of ‘magnet’.

He talked fluently in his mother-tongue but realizing my poor comprehension of it, switched over to a smooth concoction of English and Hindi.
‘I like English and you appear to know English well. Tell me, what is the plural of child?’ he quizzed me.
‘Why, Sir, what can it be other than children?’

He bent double with chortle. ‘Can be, can be. Childs! Follow? That is Railway English. Did you not see the list of passengers hanging at the door? Mrs Childs and two of her daughters, a pair of misses, are to be our co-passengers. The Railways meant ‘children’, but wrote Childs and they forgot to write their mother’s name.’

Before I had gathered the courage to reveal to the magnet, agog with excitement over the Railway way of English, that Childs indeed was an English surname, the expected party entered the cabin. Mr Rabdiwalla stood up, introduced himself and was ready to shake hands with Mrs Childs, but had to go without it because the lady had luggage under both her arms.

‘I’m Mrs Childs,’ she said with a smile.
‘Are you really Mrs Childs?’ demanded the awestruck magnet.
No wonder that the lady failed to appreciate the import of the question.
‘Have we met before?’ she asked, her brows raised.

‘Never, never. I respect England ladies. These girls are beautiful. Your daughters?’ ‘Right. Lucy and Tiny.’

‘*Bah.* But if you’re Childs, how Lucy became Hudson? Already married?’ the gentleman asked, his eyes fixed on a suitcase bearing the child’s full name.

‘Her father, my first husband, was Hudson.’
‘*Bah.* Divorce? In India we also divorce.’
‘He died.’

‘Widow marriage! *Bah.* In India also we like widow marriage. *Bah.* We are no orthodox in 20th century.’
Had I come across a similar situation in Forster’s *Passage to India?*

Indian psychology records *Navarasa* or nine modes. But a tenth one - a combination of embarrassment and irritation - was killing me. Could I change over to another cabin? But ‘We’re tired,’ said Mrs Childs and got busy making beds.

The mysterious epidemic identified by some as a sort of plague was yet to invade Surat. But a look at the river Tapti was enough to make one curse the kind of industrial growth we had in our country. Innumerable factories discharged their filth into the river and every inch of it looked obnoxious. Yet,

within a year the *Surtees* (as the people of Surat are called) had made their city clean with a vengeance - an unmistakable example of the capacity the Indians had. Why don't we use the capacity normally? The answer, probably, is to be found in the bizarre opposite pulls of the philosophy of illusionism taught by the ascetics and endorsed by the Buddhists on one hand and the command to look upon the whole of life, including even the battlefield, as real, as taught by the original Vedanta and the Gita on the other hand.

My extension lectures at the University were over and my friends took me around the neglected ruins of the early Western settlers facing vast stretches of sand. I remembered John Orington's *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689*, a rare book. It is difficult to imagine the kind of thrills, suspenses and enlightenments the early Westerners experienced unless one read their testaments. For example, Orington's friends had captured a huge monkey which escaped from their fortress. The Sahibs gave a determined chase to it. But, to their amazement, even though the creature invaded one native shop after another and broke several of their precious items and even scratched a few gentlemen, no Indian lent a helping hand to catch it. Curiosity led the Sahibs to the story of the *Ramayana*. The amusing synopsis of the great epic presented by Orington must be read to be believed. According to him the demon-king Ravana turned an ascetic!

My interest was different. At last I was out under the captainship of my scholarly friend Kaivalya to explore the ground where the Indian National Congress achieved adulthood and matured into a power capable of demanding unqualified freedom for the motherland.

The full-moon night gladdened me; for I would be able see the site of the historic Surat Congress of 1907.I was waiting for the rows of mansions and shops to end, but Kaivalya stopped his car close to a market. 'So, we are here - on the Surat Congress ground.'

'But where is the ground?'
'In the pages of history. However, a small part of it is still there, as a park.'
We occupied a bench in the park as I turned the pages of history in my mind.

It was at the Calcutta Congress of 1906, under the Presidentship of Dadabhoy Naoroji, that resolutions had been passed for the boycott of foreign goods favouring Swadeshi and for a national education policy, with Sri Aurobindo (then Mr Aurobindo Ghose) in the background and Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and

Khaparde championing the causes in the open. While the President supported such moves, moderates like Ferozeshah Mehta, Gokhale and Surendranath Bannerjee were against them.

Since the programme for working out the resolutions were to be chalked out at the next session of the Congress, the Moderates succeeded in shifting its venue from Nagpur to Surat, their stronghold.

The session began before a large audience. The President elect, Dr. Rash Behari Ghose, flanked by other leaders, ascended the dais. Ambalal Desai proposed Dr. Ghose for the chair but the moment Surendranath Bannerjee seconded it, pandemonium broke out, giving the great orator, the Pied Piper of Bengal, the jolt of his life. Here is a first-hand report from the noted author and journalist, Henry Nevinson:

'Waving their arms, their scarves, their sticks and umbrellas, a solid mass of delegates and spectators sprang to their feet and shouted without a moment's pause... the whole ten thousand were on their feet, shouting for order, shouting for tumult. Mr. Malvi (Chairman of the Reception Committee) still half in the chair, rang his brass Benares bell and rang in vain. Surendranath sprang upon the very table itself. Even a voice like his was not a whisper in the din. Again and again he shouted, unheard as silence....."

The next day was not different. Surendranath exhorted all to maintain peace, and Motilal Nehru spoke in the same vein But Dr. Ghose had hardly occupied the chair, when Tilak stood up. He had given notice for an amendment and he must move it. 'You cannot move an adjournment of the Congress! I declare you out of order,' shouted Mr. Malvi T wish to move an amendment to the election of President and you are not in the Chair,' shouted back Tilak. 'I declare you out of order,' said Dr. Ghose at the pitch of his voice. 'But you are not yet elected. I appeal to the delegates.' retorted Tilak.

Nevinson's inimitable narration proceeds thus:
'Uproar drowned the rest. With folded arms Mr. Tilak faced the audience. On either side of him young

Moderates sprang to their feet, wildly gesticulating vengeance. Shaking their fists and yelling to the air, they clamoured to hurl him down the step of the platform. Behind him Dr. Ghose mounted the table and, ringing an unheard bell,

harangued the storm in shrill, agitated, unintelligible denunciations. Restraining the rage of Moderates, ingeminating peace if ever man ingeminated, Mr. Gokhale, sweet-natured even in extremes, stood beside his old opponent, flinging out both arms to protect him from the threatened onset. But Mr. Tilak asked for no protection. He stood there with folded arms, calling on violence to do its worst, calling on violence to move him, for he would move for nothing else in hell or heaven. In front the white-clad audience roared like a tumultuous sea.

'Suddenly something flew through the air - a shoe! - a Maharatta shoe! Reddish leather, pointed toe, sole studded with lead. It struck Surendranath Bannerjee on the cheek; it cannoned off on Sir Ferozeshah Mehta. It flew, it fell, and, as at a given signal, white waves of turbaned men surged up the escarpment of the platform. Leaping, climbing, hissing the breath of fury, brandishing long sticks, they came striking at any head that looked to them Moderate, and in .another moment, between brown legs, I caught glimpses of the Indian National Congress dissolving in chaos. Like Goethe at the battle of Valmy, I could have said, today marks the beginning of a new era and you can say that you were present at it!'

Nevinson was right and significantly so. The signs of a new era took a distinct shape the next day, the nationalists (as opposed to the Moderates) holding their conference in a serene atmosphere. Says Nevinson, 'Grave and silent, I think without saying a single word - Mr. Aurobindo Ghose took the Chair and sat unmoved, with far-off eyes, as one who gazes at futurity. In clear, short sentences, without eloquence or passion, Mr. Tilak spoke till the stars shone and someone kindled a lantern at his side.'

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A Legend and an Illumination

It was with some anguish that I said, 'If I were to be dropped here in darkness and look at the place in the morning, I would never believe what I *see*. I was desperately looking for the charming solitude sweetly broken either by the roars of the sea or songs from the shrine, the image and the air of the place so deeply imprinted in my memory for the past decades. But now all around me was an erratically spread bazaar.

‘Does your sentimentalism mean anything for the changing world? And the world has been changing since millennia. A day rarely passes when I do not read the New Testament, the *Sermon on the Mount* in particular. I visualize the environment through which Christ wandered. Sometimes I amuse myself with this thought: if Jesus were to be suddenly dropped amidst a Christmas festivity in any affluent Western city, would he believe that that had something to do with his birth?’ commented a visitor giving me company at a restaurant.

Despite two trips to Kanyakumari in recent years, what remains vibrantly alive in my memory is my first visit there way back in 1965.

Keen to be there before the sunrise, I left Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram) at 3 A.M. The southward gale blowing in my heart appeared to outrace the car as we sped through the city and the suburb sealed in a silence eventual to the sparkling hours preceding it, the trail of a Christmas night. Through hamlets and groves sprayed with mist I went, never ceasing to feel restless lest the sun should overtake me, till a sudden calm was to descend on me.

And that happened before the car stopped and I knew that I had reached the Land’s End.

It was still dark. I stood splashed by blasts of breeze - of a cold December dawn at that - but never before had I felt so indulgently tolerant towards that hazard as on that serene dawn. Standing beneath the sparsely starry sky I enjoyed the sound of the breaking waves on my three sides. They sounded like incantations directed towards Kanya Kuman, the presiding deity of the Land’s End. I realized how profoundly significant it was for the founding fathers of the nation - whoever they were - to commence the habitation of the land with an invocation to the Goddess. It was not for nothing that the mighty monarchs of the past did not come forward to build a palace on that elevated spot. Any human construction between the shrine and the three seas would have defeated the purpose of the deity’s presence there in the eyes of those who believed in occult realities behind the gross physical realities. She and she alone had the authority to dwell there; she and she alone could ensure the inviolability of the land just as she herself stood inviolable, destroying the arrogant hostile demon that tried to violate her.

Thus ran the legend:

Long, long ago, a terrible demon, Vanasura, who killed a number of kings and proclaimed himself a monarch, wrought havoc in the region. The Land's End was then the capital of a king who had somehow remained beyond the demon's greedy ambition. Kanya Kuman - the name by which she came to be known later an incarnation of the Divine Mother, was born to the king in response to the prayers of the seers and those others harassed by Vanasura.

As she grew up, her father began searching for a suitable match for her. She felt awkward - at first she did not understand why. She sat in meditation. At once her own identity became known to her - along with the truth that marry if she must, her bridegroom had to be none other than Shiva. She invoked Shiva in her trance. The great God, atop Mount Kailash, nodded consent to come down at an auspicious hour to wed her and, advised by the princess, the king announced the date and time of the ceremony.

Festivities began. The princess was prepared for the occasion, bedecked with ornaments. The hour was approaching. The bridegroom should appear any moment.

Alas, a mischief had been done - and who but Sage Narada should be its author! The seers were pensive at the prospect of Shiva leading his consort away to his Himalayan abode. Who would then put an end to the menace that was Vanasura? Shiva was walking alone, as usual, absentmindedly. Narada inspired a cock to shriek out its cock-adoodle-doo from a roadside bush. Shiva, now in the environment of the mortals, was confused. He was sure that it was already morning and the auspicious hour for the wedding that was at midnight, had passed. He sat down on a rock in despair. And, for him sitting down meant self-absorption.

At the royal palace while all were anxiously awaiting the bridegroom's arrival, the one to arrive all on a sudden was the demon, Vanasura. Reports had reached him of the great beauty that the princess was and he had decided that her father had no business to marry her off to anyone but he.

He made his way into the palace without obstruction, for the guards seemed paralysed at his sight. There was of course a commotion and the princess, seated surrounded by her maids, heard the suppressed cries of horror. She stood up and the next moment saw the laughing demon approaching her, eager to drag her away.

The princess snatched a sword from a soldier’s hand and dared the demon to take one-step more towards her. The demon gave out a lusty laugh and tried to advance, but that was to be the last noise made by him. He fell dead.

That was great. But where was the bridegroom? The colourful delicacies cooked for thousands lay waste and were turned into tiny pebbles. The locals still point at their abundance.

The Virgin Princess - Kanya Kumari - still stands there waiting for another propitious hour to come some day in the calendar of the future, her gaze fixed on the eastern horizon, a sign of optimism. I have rarely seen an image combining in its human form such a divine grace.

‘Mother India is not a piece of earth; she is a power, godhead,’ said Sri Aurobindo in one of his earliest writings. The dawn at Kanya Kumari woke me up to its significance. At the summit of the land - the physical form of a Consciousness - remains Shiva; at the bottom stands Shakti, invoking his presence. A day will come when they will be united. Meanwhile

Amid the work of darker Powers She is here
To heal the evils and mistakes of Space
And change the tragedy of the ignorant world

Into a Divine comedy of joy.
—Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*
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