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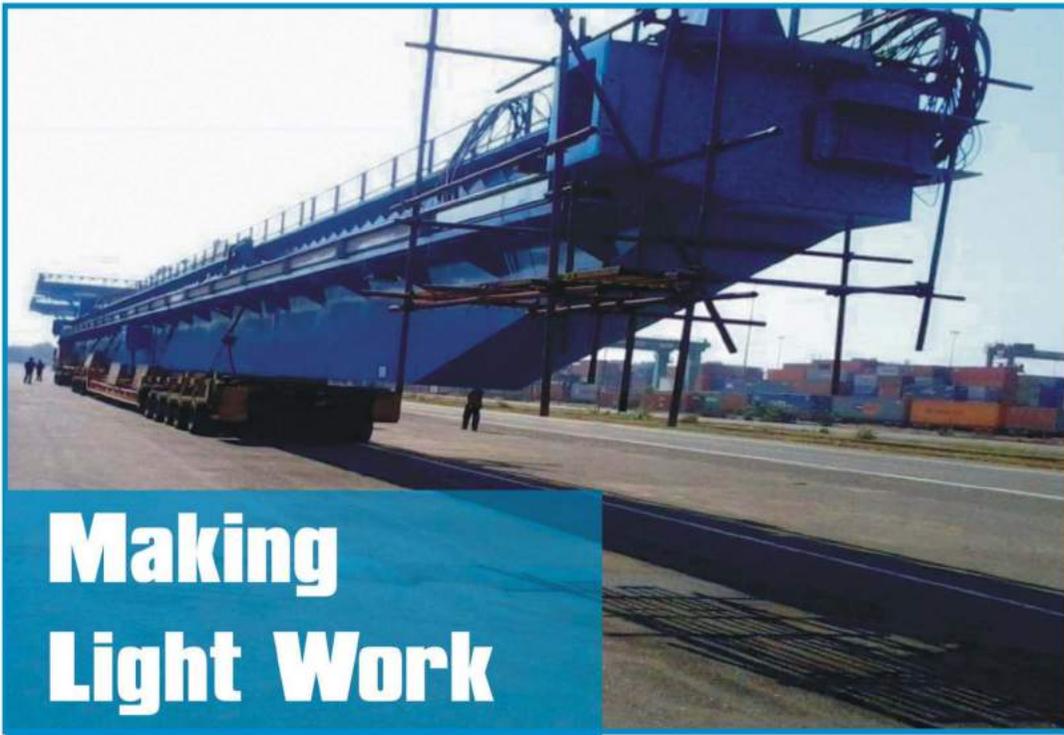


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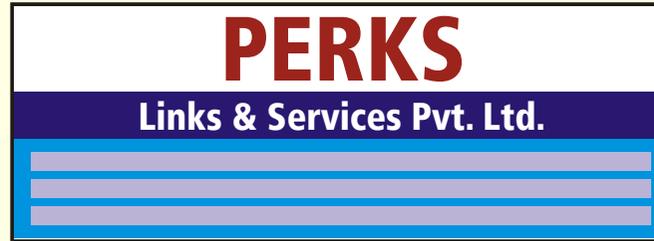
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INDEX

Sr. No.	Contents	Page No.
1	Foreword	01
2	The Best	
3	The Spirit of Inclusivity	
4	Kaleidoscope - PBWA, Yearly Roundup	
5	- Durgotsav 2019	03-25
6	- Kali Puja	26-27
7	- Sports for a Cause	28-29
8	- Ekantey Rabindranath	30-31
9	- Media Coverage	32-34
10	- Mission Swayam Siddha	35-36
11	- Our Bit for Society & Environment	37-39
12	Self Expressions	
13	- Articles, Poetry, Paintings, Sketches	41-90
-	Sponsor Advertisements - Across the Publication	



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The publication reflects the association's activities and creative expressions of its members.
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QR Code for Durgotsav 2020



Foreword

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”...

These enduring words penned by Charles Dickens in ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ typify the tumultuous times we live in. Without dwelling on the devastating effects of the Coronavirus on humanity and economies in general, the pandemic has brought to the fore some noteworthy examples of altruism, compassion and philanthropy.

PBWA is one such shining example.

From the very day that the country wide lockdown was imposed in late March, PBWA went into high gear in helping a cross section of selfless Covid warriors and needy sections of society. The first initiative was delivering food and essentials to frontline healthcare and other indefatigable workers at JJ Hospital, Cama Hospital and Mantralaya. A synchronised suite of targeted welfare activities along with associated budgetary allocations were charted after due deliberation, and subsequently rolled out over the ensuing months. This program included delivery of rations to our MSS trainees (and we continue to augment their means of livelihood by way of endowing them with stipends in these arduous times when their earnings have all but dried up). We also responded to fervent pleas from Pranav Kanya in supplying monthly essential provisions for their orphaned girl

children since donations from their patrons have acutely dwindled. These measures were supplemented by contributions to Cankids (for cancer afflicted children), Community Development Centre (orphanage), Blind Persons Association, Amphan victims (through Bharat Sevashram) as well as clothes distribution to Kochai tribal villagers in Talasari Taluka of Palghar district. We have, in fact, meaningfully enhanced our charitable activities budget this year even in the face of a sharp contraction in revenues. You, dear members and patrons are the prime movers of this laudable benevolence.

Activities on the Durga Pujo front have been no less energetic...

Our members have eagerly come forward to discuss, plan and strategize ways and means by which our pujo can be held even in these Covid times - and many erstwhile physical activities have consequently gone virtual. Starting from Mahalaya where Birendra Krishna Bhadra's immortal Chandi Paath was broadcast over Zoom to a large group of members (followed by distribution of Shinghara, Jilipi and Nimki packets from our pujo grounds), PBWA is laying out a rich cornucopia of offerings and pujo activities for its members and patrons – these measures also afford a modicum of livelihood to our vendors who bank on our custom and support every year during this time. The essential pujo activities circumscribe small idols inside a

compact natmoncho, restricted entry in line with social distancing norms mandated by BMC and live telecast of pujo aarti through cable TV and other virtual media (FB live, etc). An out-of-the-ordinary measure being implemented this year is the arrangement to deliver bhog (holy community lunch) packets to our members at their residences.

Our annual rendezvous with culture has kept pace with the times...

From a social engagement standpoint, our cultural team has been humming with activity over the last month and the group has put up a bounteous collection of programs during the days of Durga Pujo for the viewing pleasure of our esteemed members, patrons and general public - this too is being done through virtual media (cable tv and live social media platforms).

This all-encompassing never-say-die spirit, boundless enthusiasm, and deep piousness of our members is the glue that binds us as an association and enables us to rise above seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Dear members and patrons - we salute your generosity, conviction, mettle and dedication in keeping our sacred traditions alive during these challenging and testing times.

- Arnob Mondal

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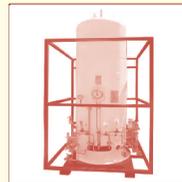
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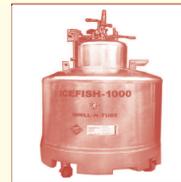
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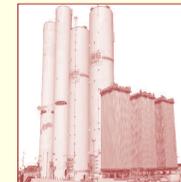
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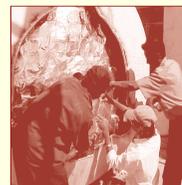
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Durgotsav 2019 - From Clay to Life

For the first time, PBWA had the idol of Maa Durga and Her Children sculpted, right at the Puja venue, instead of at the artisan's workshop.. This delightful journey from 'Clay to Life' happened right in front of our eyes, Not only was this a learning for the children but to their sheer joy, they also participated in the painting of the idols, which was very fulfilling.



Durgotsav 2019

The Exquisite Natmancha handcrafted with indigenous weaves & handlooms



Durgotsav 2019

Ma Durga in all Her magnificence along with her divine Children



Durgotsav 2019 - A Pandal with a Difference

While the Natmancha - or the Pandal - was uniquely created using indigenous handlooms and weaves, it was also decorated with dancing dolls from various parts of India.



Durgotsav 2019 - The core of the occasion - The Puja Rituals



Sandhya Arati in Progress



*The Bath of the Banana Tree, the wife of Lord Ganesh...
The First ritual of Durga Puja*



*The 'Kick Off' whistle -
The Conch signals the beginning of Durgotsav - 2019*



'Boron' - Welcoming MaDurga



Puja in Progress



108 Diyas for 'Sandhi' Puja



*Sharanney Trambakey Gouri Narayani Namastute...
Pushpanjali in Progress*



With Blessings from our Elders - We Begin



The 'Alpona' comes alive



That way please...



Youngsters manning their Food Stall on 'Ananda Mela'



Karaoke singing on the 'Mukto Moncho'



Dancing with unbound joy

Moments Durgotsav 2019



Serpentine queue for the lip smacking 'Bhog'



Awaiting their turn for Pushpanjali



Sea of Humanity



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The 'Bhog' Ladies



The Blue Angels



Leesa Mohanty, Accomplished Odissi Dancer



Full-on Rehearsals

Moments Durgotsav 2019



The Kids set the stage on fire



'Boi Mela' - The Book Fair



All hands on deck

Durgotsav 2019 - 'Dhunuchi Naach'

PBWA has been organising a 'Dhunuchi Nach' competition over the last 15 years, which is thrown open to all members of the society including those from the LGBT segments. The roll of the Dhaak, the smell of incense, the smoky ambience together with the swaying dancers truly make it a surreal experience.



Durgotsav 2019 - 'Boron' and 'Sindoor Khela' - Happiness & Prosperity for all

On 'Dashami' the last day of Durga Puja, the Mother and Her Children are bid farewell by married ladies in a ritual called 'Boron' wherein they feed sweets, apply vermillion and seek blessings. Later the ladies smear each other and all that is seen is a blur of red! New bonds of friendship forged, old ones strengthened.



Durgotsav 2019 - Farewell to the Mother....



**'Ashche Bochor Aabar Hobe'
Farewell Mother - Till next year!**



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Durgotsav 2019 - Including the under-privileged

In all its endeavours, PBWA has sought to include ALL segments of society, particularly the sick, the underprivileged and the marginalised. During Durgotsav 2019, children battling cancer, kids from orphanages and those of sex workers participated in the festivities alongside children of PBWA members. They participated in a drawing competition, which gave vent to their creativity and self esteem. Also they were treated to a story-telling session by members, which not only aroused their curiosity but also helped expand their horizons.



Durgotsav 2019 - Inclusivity of a different kind

No Durga Puja is complete without a handful of earth from the house of Sex workers. Yet rarely do we see Sex workers as part of a typical Durgotsav. Here, PBWA once again breaks the glass ceiling. On Shashthi, Sex workers from a nearby suburb were invited to participate in Devi Boron, the inaugural ritual of Goddess Durga, shoulder to shoulder with everyone. Later they were presented with token gifts and refreshments. Inclusivity of a totally different kind!



Jeebon Maanei Utshob

Life is nothing but, celebration itself. This universe finds its most appropriate expression through myriad celebrations - sometimes seeking new direction, sometimes in the miracle of nature, in sudden heavenly showers invigorating the lands or in joyous songs invigorating the souls. We dance to the indigenous beats of the earth and drench ourselves in the greatest of human emotions - Love. The cupid's arrow spares none. Both young and old evolve and bloom with its touch. With infinite salutations to the almighty, we greet the medley of life in love, nature, and all parts of creation.



Aaj Jibon Khuje Pabi

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মহয়ার রঙ্গিন নেশায় আমাদের মাতাল মনে লেগেছে প্রেমের দোলা | সাত-
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হঠাৎ এলোমেলো করে যাওয়া এক দমকা হাওয়া, শরতের আকাশ, কাশ
ফুলের বন সবই যেন কিছু বলতে চায় | প্রাণে খুশির ছোঁয়া লেগেছে | প্রকৃতি
তার ভালোবাসার পসারি সাজিয়ে পৌঁছে যায় মনের দোরগোড়ায় | আর সেই
নেশায় মাদলের তালে তালে অনায়াস ই নেচে ওঠে আমাদের মন

Megher Palok

প্রেম অনন্ত ; প্রেম সীমাহীন ; আর এই চলার পথে যদি সঙ্গী হয় মেঘের পালক
তাহলে , স্নিগ্ধ নীলের গভীর ছোঁয়ায় কলুষতাহীন এক নির্ভর মন ভেসে চলে দিক
দিগন্তের পানে | যেখানে দিন শেষে নীল নীলিমা অন্ধকারে আবৃত হলেও চাঁদ ফুটে
ওঠে নোলকের মত |

Classic - Folk Medley

জীবন মানেই উৎসব | এই উৎসবে সামিল প্রকৃতির হাজারো সৃষ্টি অথচ কোনো
সংঘাত নেই | প্রতিটি ঋতু নিবেদন করে ফুলে , ফলে , রং ও বর্ণে সাজিয়ে তোলা
অর্ঘ্য , তার শুভেচ্ছার ডালি | আমাদের এই নিবেদনের মাধ্যমে আমরা
আপনাদের আন্তরিক শুভেচ্ছা জানাই | মঙ্গলময় হোক এই প্রার্থনা করি দেবী
দুর্গতিনাশিনীর শ্রীচরণ পদ্যে |



Dhitaang

'Dhitaang' - the in-house singing choir of PBWA presented a bouquets of melodious, soul-stirring, retro bengali songs - but with a difference. This time it was to celebrate those singers of the 60s, & 70s who were stalwarts in their own right but perhaps remained in the shadows of other luminaries of their time.



Apparels of India

Visitors were treated to a spectacle of a different kind on Ashtami evening. This was a show of the Apparels of India - models walked the ramp, attired in costumes from all corners of the country . India's diversity was on full display as each region, or state stood out in their own unique style and form.



Beats from Bankura....

This unique group of men & women came all the way from Bankura, a district town around 215 kms from Kolkata. They sang, danced and emoted their way into the hearts of one & all with their rhythm, playfulness and vigour.



Lord Cornwallis - er Chchata

Lord Cornwalliser chchata or Lord Cornwallis' Umbrella - a satire laced crime thriller, left the audience in splits. While the lead story was about the search for an umbrella, apparently belonging to the late Lord Cornwall is (the Governor General of India in the 18th Century), the climax brought forth the eerie character of an antique smuggler, who impersonated as a Hindustani Classical music Guru.



Arko Rocks

Ashtami night was rocked by Arko Pravo Mukherjee and his band. Arko, as he is popularly known, is a Kolkata based singer and lyricist who has also made his mark in Bollywood as a composer. Arko was accompanied by Swapna Mukherjee, famous Bollywood singer of late 80s and Debojit Saha, an Indian Idol winner. The trio belted out numbers from across decades which catered to all sections of the audience.



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Bhalobashi Shotorupe

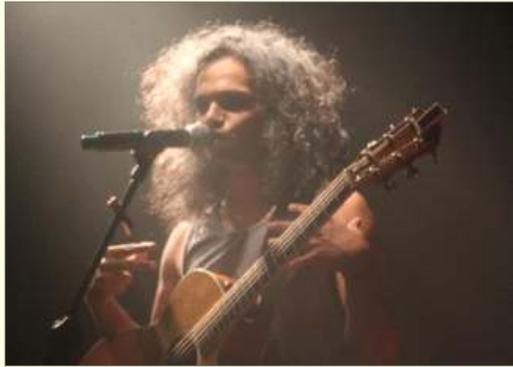
Love - that emotion which perhaps surpasses all others in terms of variance and depth. Whether it is love for a close one, love for nature in all its bounty, love for one's country or humanity as a race, this is truly an emotion which knows no fences, eludes rationality and transcends across the physical into the spiritual. Truly, an emotion of the soul! 'Bhalobashi Shotorupe' - Love in all its forms - is an experience in experiment - a presentation by PBWA on Navami evening, a unique juxtaposition of Song, Dance & Poetry, stitched compositions of selected poets including of course, the bard, Rabindranath Tagore, whose expressions of Love are perhaps beyond the imagination of ordinary mortals . Presented by over fifty participants , this was a truly a transformative experience.





The Local Train

The curtains came down on Navami evening of Durgotsav 2019 with a Bullet-Train performance by the Hindi Rock band **"The Local Train"**. The band's signature lies in a raw, honest sound which resonates with the youth. As the band delivered one high octane number after another, the audience just went into raptures. Truly, a grand finale to the festivities.



CEO Power Walk

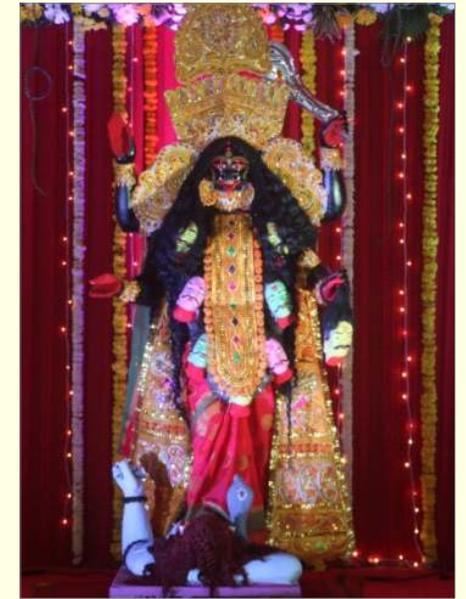
Six eminent personalities including four Corporate Executives, an ex First Class Cricketer & National Selector and a Lady mountaineer - addressed thousands of visitors at the Durga Puja venue on 'Women Empowerment' and the society's role in breaking the gender bias. The discussion particularly focussed on Cricket and Sports at large & the role of today's women in this space. This session is the CEO Power walk, a flagship event of PBWA during the Durgotsav, in line with the celebration of feminine power or 'Naari Shakti'.

The CEO Power Walk is a platform for Business Leaders to spread social awareness as well as to share their personal experiences in the initiatives they have adopted in their respective organizations. The session was ably moderated by Arpit Sharma, renowned Sports anchor, Host, Emcee and Voice-over artist.



Kali Puja & Diwali - with a Difference!

PBWAs humble worship of Goddess Kali and celebration of the Diwali festival is uniquely different. Kali Puja is also a time for us to bring happiness into the hearts of not-so-privileged children. These children, associated with our NGO partners are not just transported safely to & fro from the Puja venue, they are treated to fun games, given crackers to light and served with refreshments. With Ma Kali's blessings, the bit that we do for these children, to light up their lives, leaves us immensely fulfilled.



Kali Puja & Diwali - with a Difference! The Dharavi Dream Project

This year along with kids from the NGOs, PBWA invited a group of Hip-hop dancers and Rappers from Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia. These youngsters are part of 'The Dharavi Dream Project', launched by the music maestro A R Rehman and ace Bollywood Director, Shekhar Kapur. The project provides a platform to the under-resourced hip-hop talent and aims to make Music, a healer and hip-hop, a movement. An After-school of Hip-hop running in the bylanes of Dharavi to nurture, mentor and empower emerging hip-hop talent. The main focus of the project is to discover fresh talent from Dharavi, nurture

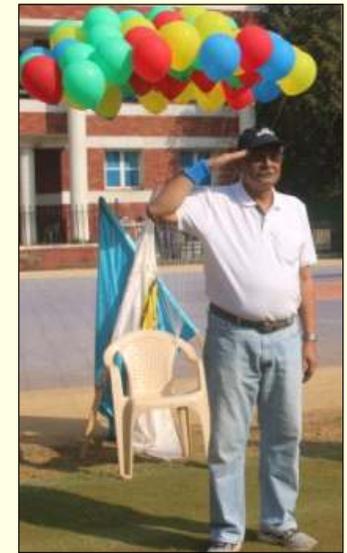
it through the programme and showcase it on a domestic and international scale via digital and traditional media. Kapur described the initiative as a "dream project" that will use music and dance to give hope to people.

A variety of young kids from The Dharavi Dream Project exhibited their jaw-dropping skills at Rap, B-boying, and Beat boxing. Each move, each swirl, each swagger received thunderous applause from the audience for whom this was a cracker of an experience.



Sports for a Cause

As part of PBWA's vision of Inclusivity, it has been our endeavour to organize events and have under-privileged children participate in them along with children of the association's members. The annual Sports Day is one event which all children look forward to. Not only does it foster a feeling of belongingness but also kindles the competitive spirit.





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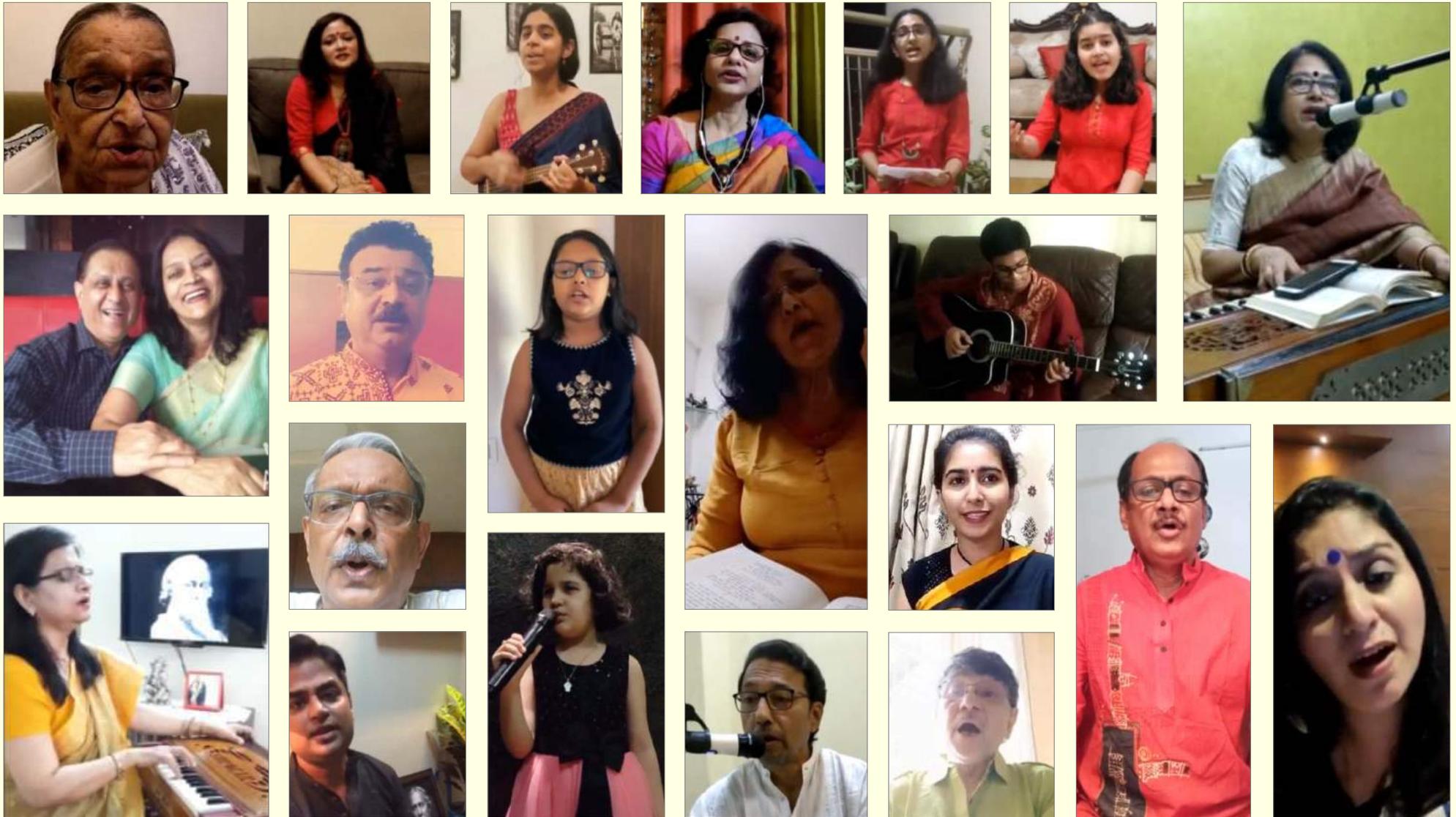
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Ekantey Rabindranath

An important event on PBWAs calendar is the celebration of the great bard – Rabindranath Tagore’s birth anniversary; popularly known as Rabindra Jayanti. This event is a cultural extravaganza of music, dance, drama, recitation, et al. This year the Pandemic ruled out the conventional celebrations, but can even a Pandemic prevent PBWA’ites from remembering and celebrating the bard? No way! From the safety & comfort of their homes, came out recorded masterpieces of Song, Dance, Poetry and Narration. The programme aptly titled “Ekantey Rabindranath” or Celebrating Rabindranath in solitude - was presented on the bards’s birthday over an Internet platform after being painstakingly edited and stitched.



Ekantey Rabindranath

'Team "Mayabono Biharini Horini"'



Media Blitz - Courtesy our Partnership with Times of India

Eibaar Mahalaya, Let Us Pay Homage To Our Foremothers Along With Our Forefathers.

#EibaarMahalaya

It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers.

3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

Eibaar Pujo Te, Let Us Embrace Lost Folklores To Create New Memories Of Celebration.

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3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

Eibaar Pujo Te, Let Our Foremothers Inspire Us, As We Drape Their Legacy From The Past.

#EibaarPujoTe

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3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

*Ebar Pujoye Shudhu Maa Noye
Houke Matripokkher Aradhana*

Powai Bengali Welfare Association

Welcomes you to

Durga Puja Ground
(next to BEST depot),
Hiranandani Gardens, Powai
3rd - 8th October, 2019

TIMES Powai Durgotsav 2019

Eibaar Pujo Te, Let Us Revisit The Lost Harmonies, And Rejoice The Tales Of The Good Old Days.

#EibaarPujoTe

It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers.

3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

Eibaar Pujo Te, Let Us Begin A New Tradition, Instead Of "Phansing Dohi" Let Our Wish Be "Jantaani Dehi."

#EibaarPujoTe

It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers.

3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

Eibaar Pujo Te, Let Us Touch Our Mother's Feet First To Script A New Way On This Auspicious Day.

#EibaarPujoTe

It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers. It is the time when we pay homage to our foremothers along with our forefathers.

3rd - 8th October 2019
Durga Puja Ground, Hiranandani Gardens, Powai

Newspaper Editorials, Cinema Hall Advertisements and Social Media presence truly turned heads and grabbed eyeballs

Walk down memory lane at this year's Powai Durgotsav

Times News Network

Homebodies Bengalis pining for the scents and sounds of old Kolkata can head to Powai's Hirramandani Gardens between October 3 and 9 this year. Given its twin themes of "returning to the roots" and celebrating "freemovers", the Times Powai Sarvajani Durgotsav (TPSD) 2019 promises to indulge their nostalgia by dividing its venues into zones named after famous alleys, institutions, cultural and architectural mecess of India's old capital.

This mobile-first memory lane will include "Bhurowar (Durga Mandap)", a house for dhooli draped with Indian handlooms and "Punti Naacher Itikhar" (autobiography of dancing dolls) which will feature 70 dolls. Age-old recipes like gya hoi, mittha and chini ghibay and a book fair with works of Bengali fiction, will help you time-travel. Interestingly, the stage this year will be named after the 380-built Star Theatre while the security office will be called Lal Bazar after the famous police headquarters of Kolkata.

What began as an endeavour by the Powai Bengali Welfare Association (PBWA) in 2006, then a small group trying to contribute to society through a socio-cultural platform like the Durga Puja, has now firmly established its presence in Mumbai's festive landscape. A key highlight of the festival arrived on September 9 in the form of Khat Puja - a



Members of Powai's Bengali Welfare Association gathered at Hiramandani Gardens for Khat Puja

ritual that marks the beginning of mandap construction and eventually becomes the Goddess's earthly abode. The 18-foot tall clay idol will be gilded with shola (Indian cork) and ornaments crafted by seasoned hand of traditional artisans from Bengal.

Apart from a joyous confluence of sounds including the beats of Dhamisa-Maddi, Bengali film songs by the legendary Sati Choudhury and, of course, tunes of Rabindra ranch Tagore, the festival will also host live acts by composers Arka Pravo and The Local Train band. Pome dancers from Bengal's villages will perform Jhumra dance while a 30-member play will mirror current issues in Janta style.



Durga Puja team fosters parched Palghar village

Times News Network

The parched village of Masopada in Talasari taluka of Palghar - around 140 kms from Mumbai - has an acute problem: a cockless Durga puja here. While water scarcity is the biggest of them all, farmworker joblessness, poor accessibility, lack of education and poverty adds to its woes.

To search for water here, a cartoon man named Madho that walks around this village barefoot with a coconut in his palm, the ones in which he feeds significant moment in the cocoon, are believed to hold hydraulic gifts. In 2017, on one of his walks, he was followed by a group of Bengalis and ITians who his occurred in two spots. On the spot, the team from Powai found water in one of these spots and built a tubwell there.

While the endeavour of the Powai Bengali Welfare Association (PBWA) - which organises the Times Powai Sarvajani Durgotsav every year - seems to have helped nearby Masopada whose erstwhile tubewell used to completely dry up in the hot months of April and May, the village must now feel nurtured in other ways.

Shortage years now, the madhols help the hands of PBWA have brought some respite to Masopada by adopting it and trying to address various issues under its foster care. To ensure that the meritorious students from each class in the 100-creepers parochial school do not suffer during the frequent power cuts here, for instance, the association has provided them with solar lamps. Besides, given that the school



Durgotsav organisers donated water wheels to Masopada

is far off from the villages and that the kids are sent to collect bamboo which will be used for cooking, PBWA - along with the school teachers - measured the size of each of the students' feet and procured footwear from Mumbai. The students also received umbrellas, footballs and stationery.

Along with Talasari's Masopada, PBWA also works in Katarpada and Aghiyani villages in the malabarhills district where since 2014, it has initiated a breakfast program for schoolchildren in the two villages. "Today, in addition to Masopada, we have started foraging on the entire Kutchi Himalay group parochial which comprises seven villages in the region," says a member of PBWA.

Hours before pujo, artists put the finishing touches

Times News Network

With Durga Puja just a few hours away at a corner of Hiramandani Garden in Powai bears the look of a small factory floor together with bamboo poles and in narrow premises upholstered with black tarpaulin to protect the rows of ayas to be coloured. An acute problem and their diverse encouragement from sudden spurs of rain.

The season for making Durga idols in Bengal might be over for the year but Shobanath Saradar is busy making another - now in Mumbai. The chief architect, mostly called 'Baba', is working in the city on Sunday for the second phase of moulding the divine. Large size this time was light compared to last month when they came bearing the weight of wet clay straw and grass, collected from the river bed of the Hooghly to shape the deities.

The process of making an idol from mud, straw and clay is complex: once these artists usually begin backwards, potter old Saradar holding up a sample photograph of the idol. It took the artisans and sun days to build the skeletal frames that were covered with several layers of straw and mud before the figures were carefully etched and left to dry as Saradar and his army of artisans returned home. The idols and the idol makers both returned to Powai last weekend to breathe life in these effigies, especially with the chokkhatan (polishing the eyes of the idol). "We start work in the morning and go on beyond midnight. Baba, stretches or in hand can't be an excuse to pause because people will not wait for anyone," says Saradar standing in the makeshift shed where his co-



The idol maker faces the eyes of the goddess

worker Dhiren is spraying. Moreover, the sun-baking with sun days to build the skeletal frames that were covered with several layers of straw and mud before the figures were carefully etched and left to dry as Saradar and his army of artisans returned home.

Saradar belongs to the fifth and probably last generation of idol makers in his family from the potter's colony of Hagramnagar in Purulia that has bred traditional idol makers for more than a century. "My forefathers were in this business and it was natural for me to learn their skills and take it up. My son, although he knows the craft, isn't interested," he says but Saradar isn't complaining. "After completing college, he got a job in a biscuit factory," he adds. While the deities were decked in metallic varnishes shades, their vehicles - Lakshmi's owl and Sarawati's peacock - proved to be a hit with children, who were allowed to try their hand at painting them.



DURGA PUJA PANDALS ACROSS MUMBAI GEAR UP FOR AN INCLUSIVE SINDOOR KHELA

STORY ON PAGE 7

Last year, the Times Powai Sarvajani Durgotsav, celebrated Sindoor Khela with transgender rights activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and other transwomen

Bombay

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Inclusivity ruled Mumbai's Durga Puja pandals

PAGE 5

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Powai Bengali Welfare Association Organised Diwali with a Difference

Staff Correspondent

PBWA organised a Diwali celebration for underprivileged children from in and around Powai, packed with bursting firecrackers, sweets, goodies and other entertainment-cum-talent shows for the kids.

PBWA - Riding the Digital Wave

“Data is the New Oil” - so was said by the Chairman of RIL, Mukesh Ambani three years ago during their AGM. Most present probably shrugged it off as a Management speak. Today, a third of the valuation of RIL comes from Data driven businesses and more interestingly, it just took them five years to do so. Well, other brands like Amazon, Google, Alibaba, etc. too have demonstrated this mantra successfully. And so has our beloved Powai Bengali Welfare Association.

In just 5 years, we have grown in the Digital world to become the World’s Largest Durga Puja and very soon likely to reach the league of a Billion level viewership.

What might you ask is the significance of a Billion - In the world of Trillions, this is but a pygmy. The Market Cap of Apple tops a Trillion Dollars, India’s GDP tops 3 Trillion Dollars, so what’s the fuss about a Billion.

Well as it turns out - a Billion is not that bad - India’s population is still 1.3 Billion (or thereabouts) and if your Digital Channel has been viewed (at least once) by one in every fourth Indian - then maybe it’s not that bad a scale. From a modest start 3 years ago - our cumulative Video Impressions (equivalent to page views) (slightly different from Video views) - now touches 0.32 Billion - so maybe (& just maybe) - the equivalent of one in every 4 Indians (and one in every 20 humans worldwide) may have just passed by our home in the Digital World once.

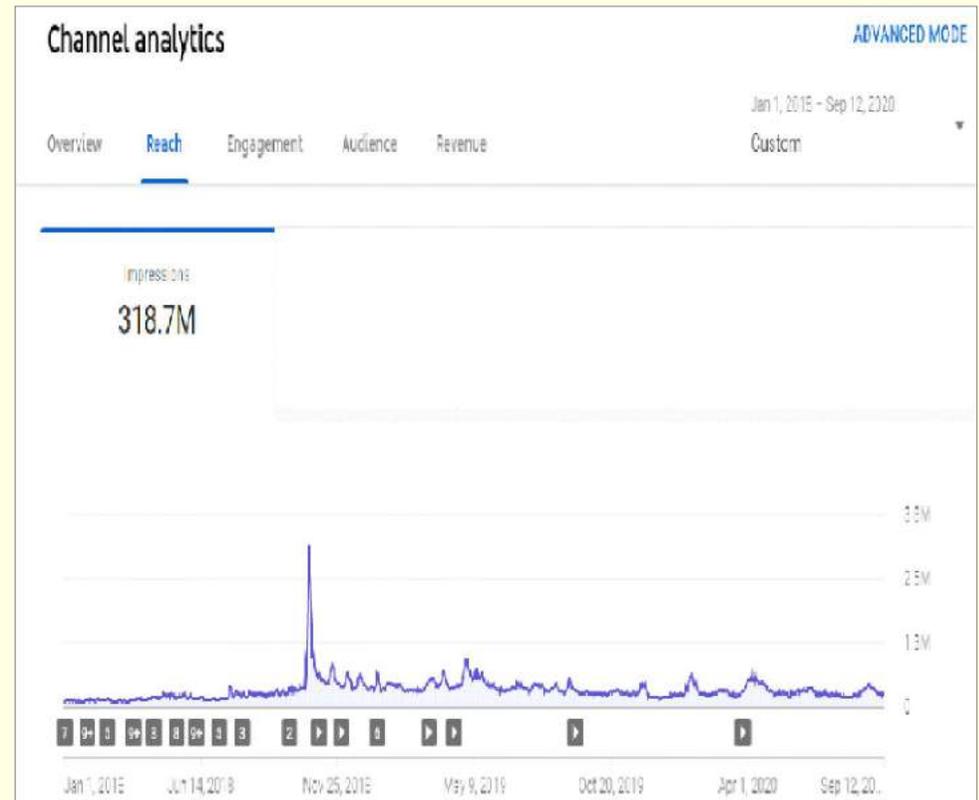
Well one day in the near future - we hope that - we would have been viewed at least once by every Indian citizen and a fifth in the world. A Billion is only a pygmy step to the world of Trillions!

- Prateek Bhattacharya

TPSD-2019 was rated the Best Durga Puja in INDIA in Google Searches worldwide



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MISSION SWAYAM SIDDHA

Empowering Women through Self-Reliance

Mission Swayam Siddha 2.0: Going Digital

Fourteen monsoons ago, Powai Bengali Welfare Association (PBWA), an organization that has envisioned itself to serve the less privileged in our society, embarked upon a challenging mission to empower socially and economically disadvantaged women. What better way to do this, than to provide the deprived, with tools, training, and guidance required to uplift the women to lead a better life? Thus, in line with PBWA's mission of making a difference through social activities, a mission of self-reliance and fulfilment was born - Mission Swayam Siddha (MSS).

Time has been the testimony of the one and only



end-goal of MSS – self-reliance. Over the years, MSS has trained and motivated largely homemakers from chawls in and around Powai to carve out some free time for themselves away from their daily household responsibilities and empower themselves. Our trainees took on the challenge with elan and what we have been seeing all these years is magic happening, when some exquisite eco-friendly handcrafted work is brought to life by them. Their skill sets have grown over the years and the products they have crafted find consumers not only in Mumbai and parts of Maharashtra, but also in Paris where they were showcased successfully.

In 2019, the generic MSS products that have won many a heart, was given a unique identity, Diksha. Diksha means initiation, and being named after Goddess Durga, signifies the embodiment of power - a perfect label to convey the ethos of our mission. Expectedly, Diksha has been extremely well-received by our clientele - both individuals and corporates who are spreading the word about our high quality, eco-friendly products through exhibitions and gifts. Close on the heels of our product brand Diksha, comes MSS 2.0 in 2020 - the new digital initiative to launch our brand online.



This initiative is driven by us, the youth of PBWA. We are a young band of volunteers who have watched our parents launch MSS and take it to where it is today. The time has now come for us to chip in, by bringing in fresh ideas and perspectives and reimagining brand MSS around its core objectives. Through MSS 2.0, our aim is to enable MSS to reach its true potential, and powering it to spread its wings across the digital sphere.

We think MSS has reached a critical mass, and the time is probably just right for a larger base to experience its products and services.

So, what is MSS 2.0? As a first step we would like to create a prominent social media presence on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Through these social media pages created for MSS, we will showcase our product range in the best way possible. Aesthetics, product features, attributes, benefits, will be key focus areas for us around which we will build our brand. The end-goal is for any customer to purchase our products.



We have adopted a quadrangle approach for MSS 2.0, the four components of which are as follows:

Awareness: create awareness for the brand through our messaging, what it stands for, story behind the brand, story behind each product.

Interest: generate interest in the benefits and attributes of our products through appropriate pictorial/text descriptions.

Desire: move the customer from liking our product to wanting it, based on the way it is presented to him/her.

Action: move the customer to interact with the brand and take the next step, i.e call/purchase.

The short-term goal of MSS 2.0 is to establish our foothold digitally, beginning with sales of key items (sling bags, table runners, notebooks, folders, pouches etc.), and finalizing various aspects of the inventory and distribution, before moving towards our long-term plans of paid promotions, partnering with other NGOs, enlisting products on mass

aggregator platforms, and expanding to other geographical regions in the state/country.

To us, the year 2020 is significant for daring to open up a new dawn for our MSS trainees amidst the gloom and hardship caused by the pandemic, a dawn that will renew their hopes and strengthen their resolve to continue in their journey towards self-reliance and fulfilment. To us, this is about enabling our trainees to dream, to learn and to earn and to empower themselves both socially and economically.

With MSS 2.0, MSS products under brand Diksha will just be a click away very soon! As initiators of MSS 2.0, we sincerely urge our readers to lend their support to MSS 2.0 and through online engagement, promote the eco-friendly products created with pure love under the MSS brand Diksha. Your support will be the wind beneath our wings, and the day is not far off when brand MSS will reach every household.

- MSS Youth Team



Doing our bit for society...



Uniforms, School Bags & full Stationery kit for Talasari's School children



Our bit for the Association for the Blind



Celebrating festivals with kids



Supporting residents of Sunderbans, devastated by the Super cyclone 'Amphan'



Girls of Pranav Kanya cheer up with Chocolates on Diwali



Fruits for residents of Bharat Seva Ashram



Clothes Distribution at Talasari Village in Maharashtra



Battling the Virus

PBWA standing shoulder to shoulder with those affected by and those at the forefront of battling COVID 19. Food packets for Doctors & Police force, Rations for NGO partners.



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Care for the Environment

Many of us feel ,environment care is the responsibility of Governments, & Municipalities alone. Well, not entirely true! PBWA partnered with Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation on a Tree Plantation drive in Powai, Mumbai as part of the 'Clean Mumbai, Green Mumbai' initiative. While we have already been doing our bit for society, this new journey that we have embarked upon will indeed go a long way in further Greening the Blue Planet! The event was also acknowledged through a tweet, by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India, which speaks volumes of the importance of trees in water conservation and PBWAs rise to the occasion.



Ministry of Jal Shakti, De... · Follow
3 h · 🌐

Water conservation awareness initiated by Powai Bengali Welfare Association requesting all the citizens to REDUCE and REUSE water.

This time during Durga Puja the citizens were encouraged to focus on Environment conservation. This initiative started by planting trees in the Durga Puja Garden on Mahalaya day.



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An Initiative by
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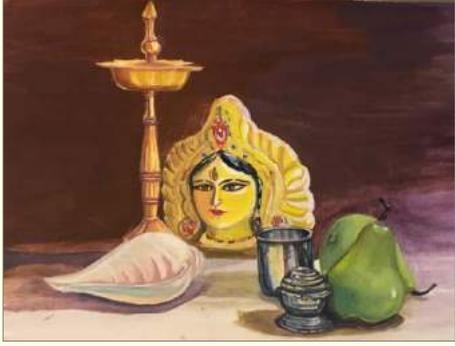
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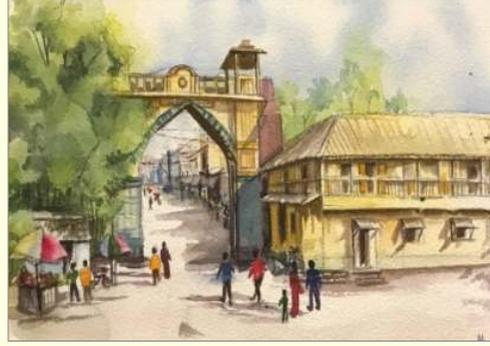
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Brushes & Strokes - Aparna Mondal



Puja Essentials



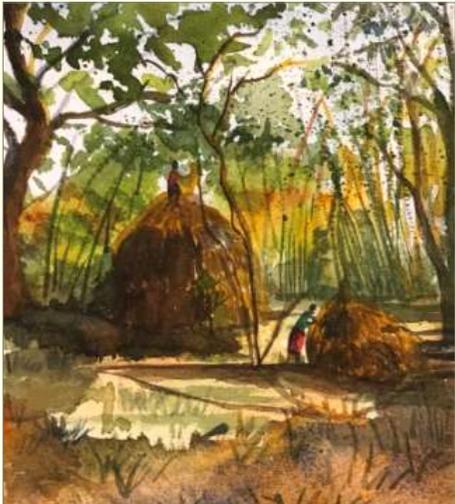
Bhor Town



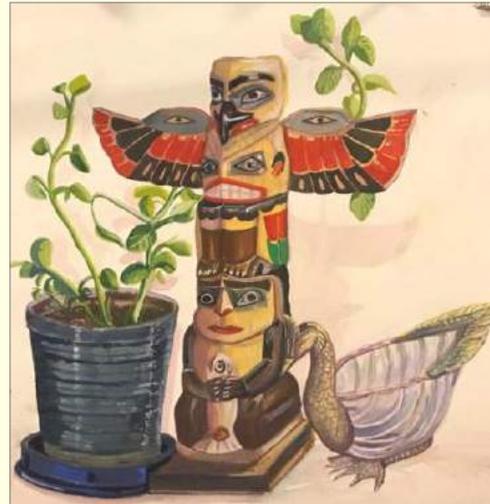
Dawnbreak at Village Aпти



Country Road - Take me Home



Haystack at Aпти Village



Personal Artefacts

Poems - Mitra Das

ভন্দবাবার ইতিকথা

চিটিং তরে মিটিং করে
আছে যত ঠকবাজ
মাথায় জটা লম্বা দাড়ি
রকমারি তার সাজ।
চামচিকে তার শিষ্য যত
পিছু পিছু চলে
ঠকবাজ এই সাধুর খোলস
মিথ্যে দিয়ে ঢাকে।
মহিলারা ভিড় করে তার
পায়ে এসে পড়ে
ভন্দবাবা মজা লোটে
তাদের সর্বনাশে।
সুন্দরী দুই অঙ্গরী
তার দুই পাশে তে থাকে
তারাই বাবার মন্ত্রণা দেয়
সঙ্গ যোগায় তাকে।
সাধুর খেয়াল তাদের প্রতি
দেবতাদেরও আগে
হাত ফোস্কে পিছলে গেলে
আর তো পাবে না সে।
সঙ সেজে সে মন কেড়েছে
মন্ত্রী ধনী সবের
ইরিং বিরিং মন্ত্র পড়ে
ভন্দমি তার ঢাকে।
হোমরাচোমরা শিষ্য যারা
পায়ে পড়ে থাকে
তাদের টাকার গদি দিয়ে
সোনার আসন গড়ে।

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হঠাৎ সাধুর উল্টে গেল
ভন্দামির এই খেলা
পড়লো ঘাড়ে সজোরে তার
আয়করদের থাবা।
কোটি কোটি টাকার সাথে
প্রাসাদ সম বাড়ি
গেল ঘুচে লীলা খেলা
নিভলো সুখের বাতি।
জামাই আদর করে পুলিশ
জেলে পুরে রাখে
শশুরবাড়ী থেকে ছাড়া
পাওয়া গেল না যে।
চোর ডাকাত কয়েদী ভরা
ঠকের সভা খাসা
আদালতের আশীষ দিল
ঘানি টানার সাজা।
এসো সবাই মিলে করি
উচিত সমাজসেবা
ঝাঁটিয়ে বিদায় করবো আছে
যত ভন্দবাবা।
গলা ছেড়ে গাইবো তখন
আহা আহা আহা।।

Digital India for Aatmanirbhar Bharat: - Apurva Mukherjee

The outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020 has ushered in, the acceleration of Digital India. It has given birth to the Atal Innovation Mission, an initiative taken by NITI Aayog (Planning Commission), which has come up with the Digital India Atmanirbhar Bharat Innovate Challenge.

Just when Indians were losing hope in these trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic, India took an oath of being 'Atmanirbhar' or Self-reliance and the government has come up with the slogan 'Say Namaste'. As clarified by the Finance Minister, "self-reliant India does not mean cutting off from the rest of the world" but empowers India to be more independent. Indigenisation will boost the country's economy and promote local industries.

The Government of India views the Digital India mission as a way to make India technologically advanced, which will lead to the creation of goods and services using more knowledge than means of production. "Indian Talent + Information Technology = India Tomorrow", aptly put by our Honourable Prime Minister. The Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative will encourage various developers to materialise their ideas. It will be a two-track initiative, wherein the existing apps will be further developed, and new ones will be created to foster the country's app ecosystem.

The phrase "Work-From-Home" has been given a whole new perspective. Indians were quick to adapt to the WFH condition. This year has made us realize the importance and advantages of working from home. The pressure of the migrating population on the bigger, tier-1 cities will be reduced. The online system formulated by the organisations can enable

the prevention of environmental degradation and odious traffic snarls, reduction in property prices and pressure on the infrastructure and considerable savings in terms of facilities, transport, and rentals. WFH gives flexibility in terms of the employees' working location. If the department is not concerned with direct customer interaction, it does not matter even if they are far away from their office. In such a scenario, backward areas will slowly be urbanised. One of the world's largest Information Technology Service companies, have envisioned that they will have 75% of their employees WFH by 2025. By the "Vision 25x25 Model", the company believes that by 2025, only 25 per cent of its associates will need to go to work physically and will not need to spend more than 25 per cent of their time at work.

COVID-19 could not stop even the knowledge-thirsty souls of India. Education through technology has helped the country to keep running and keep shaping the young minds. Students, living away from their schools, colleges or universities can now stay in the comfort of their own homes and continue learning. Many Indian students have been taking up online courses on Coursera, Edx, Udemy and Udacity to broaden their mental horizons.

Online transactions have increased, and soon, India's goal of establishing a cashless economy can be achieved. More online payments will lead to the curbing of the flow of black money. Patients can now make online appointments with their doctors and can seek guidance up to a certain extent.

As quickly as it was realized that internet connectivity is required in every nook and cranny of the country to be able to be a part of the virtual world. India's largest (and world's third largest) mobile network operator has announced the launch

of India's own 'Made in India' 5G network. Our PM recently inaugurated the 2,300 km submarine Optical Fibre Cable, connecting Chennai and Port Blair, recently. This 100X increase in internet connectivity will expedite tourism, telemedicine, online education, business, trading, and banking on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The inhabitants can now enjoy the full benefits of Digital India. Also, the up gradation of industrial infrastructure and better connectivity pan-India will help bring about new investments, leading to the growth of the capital market, thereby making India even more self-sustaining.

A celebrated Bollywood actor recently launched the 'Pravasi Rojgar' app to help migrants find job opportunities across India near their residences, aided by dynamic demand-supply analytics. India's National Informatics Centre created the Aarogya Setu app to track and monitor the spread of the virus. This has proved to be an essential aid for millions. Corporates have developed their own Apps to enable employees to keep the company updated on their well-being & safety.

Of course, technology cannot prevent the onset of pandemics, but it can help prevent its spread by providing accurate information. In India, telecom operators are using caller tunes to spread awareness. God forbid, if such a pandemic occurs ever again, India will be better equipped to fight it. The digitally challenged should change their mindset and try and adapt quickly to technology that is advancing exponentially. Thus, the impetus provided by Digital India to sectors like education, healthcare, business and supply chain is even more pronounced in today's disrupted normality.

Konkan Trip - Jayanta Chattopadhyay

It was 6 in the morning when three of my close friends and I, left Mumbai to explore the Konkan coast. Our destination for the day was Ganpatipule, a clean white-sand beach on the Arabian Sea, in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, India.

The conventional way to travel to Ganpatipule is to go via the Mumbai-Goa Highway and take a turn near Ratnagiri. It takes approximately 8 hours by road to reach Ganpatipule. This would be the time taken if one were to drive at a reasonable speed with a couple of breaks in between. But, we decided to take a very different & interesting route to reach Ganpatipule.... through the Coastal Road. What followed was a truly amazing journey.

After driving for an hour or so, we took a break at McDonald's just before the Mumbai-Pune Expressway for breakfast. Apart from partaking a heavy breakfast, we loaded 24 bottles of packaged water in our car for rest of the day's travel. Just after the Khapoli toll gate, we left the Expressway & took a road which led us to Pali, a famous place for Hindu Pilgrimage, the "Asthavinayak Ganpati" temple. We drove for almost 3 hours to touch the Old Mumbai-Goa Highway at Mangaon via Nizampur. Though the road was not so good in a few patches due to a Road-Widening Project, the scenic beauty was superb as we went through the beautiful hills and forests.

After crossing the highway, we started driving towards Harihareswar, a beautiful sea beach, also a known Hindu pilgrimage spot with beautiful ancient Temples of Shiva and Vishnu. After 2 Hrs. of driving, we reached the MTDC Resort on a hill top, on the shores of the Arabian Sea where we gorged on an awesome lunch comprising of king-fish, pomfret & rice. One of our friends was a strict vegetarian and although the restaurant is famous

for fish preparations, the kitchen made excellent vegetarian dishes which he enjoyed thoroughly. After spending an hour or so to enjoy the surroundings, we started our journey towards Bagmandla Jetty which is around 30 min. drive from the MTDC resort.



View of Arabian Sea from the MTDC resort, Harihareswar at 1 PM



MTDC resort, Harihareswar

We had to cross the river to reach our first target destination, Vellas. Our car was a low-bed sedan & I was apprehensive to drive through the coastal route & taking the car into a boat to cross the river. However, with a lot of caution and my driving skills,

I managed to take the car onto the boat without any damage. The lesson was to preferably have a high-ground-clearance car in order to avoid such hiccups.



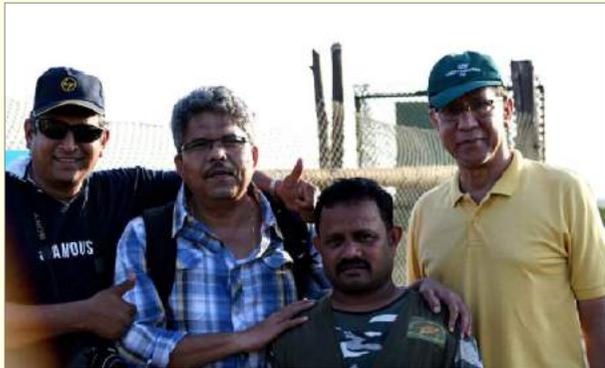
Our blue beauty, on the boat



MTDC resort, Harihareswar

Anyways, the boat ride from Bagmandla to Veshvi (Village other side of jetty) was magnificent. This ferry service was started by Suvarnadurga Shipping & Marine Services Pvt. Ltd. in 2007. Till then, the journey from Raigad to Ratnagiri via Mandangad was very time consuming and hectic. On reaching the other side of the river (the backwaters), We drove to Velas Beach. Velas beach is famous for its 'Kasav Mahotsav' (Turtle Festival). Here we got to

see Tortoise conservation and a beautiful virgin sea beach. On this beach & nearby sea coast, tortoises (or turtles) come to lay eggs & then they go back to the sea. The conservationists collect those eggs, put them under the sand & wait for the hatching to be completed. In front of us, we could see a few small baby tortoises coming out of the sand. One of the conservationists, put those baby tortoises inside jute sacks & left them on the hard sand near the sea water. To our surprise, not a single baby moved towards the shore but all went to the sea with their baby steps ...may be to meet their parents.



With one of the conservationists ...3rd from left



Baby tortoises...walking on the sand after breaking out of the eggs



Baby tortoise going to the sea... may be to meet his / her parents...

Before we realised it was time for sunset which we enjoyed over a cup of tea from a local house & started our journey towards our night halt .Pachavali village in Dapoli, a beautiful and typical Konkan village surrounded by the natural beauty of rivers, jungles and hills. This famous Bollywood Art director Mr. Nitin Chandrakant Desai is a native of this village.



Sunset at Velas

This patch of our journey was mostly through hills and in pitch darkness. One doesn't get disturbed by calls as there is no mobile signal. Our car had GPS which was immensely helpful for navigation as that evening, there was not a soul on the road, to guide us to our destination.

It was around 9 PM when we reached Dapoli town, still 15 KM away from our night stay location. Assuming we will not get any food at that late hour, we picked up dinner on the way. It was well past 10 when we reached the lovely Panchavali village and soon after crashed for the night after a long and hectic day.

Next morning at 8 am, we left for our desired destination...Ganpatipule. This time, the road was along the coast and we had to cross the river twice, once at the. Dabhol Dhopave Jetty and next at the Tavsali Jetty in Tavsali village. Our journey from Panchavali to Ganpatipule was unforgettable since we witnessed lush greenery, the coast line and river as well as the smiling faces of local people whenever we interacted with them for food & direction.



Again on Boat...



Lush Greenery

We reached Ganpatipule around 4 PM. Since it was off-season, we got a good deal with the help of some extraordinary negotiation skills of our team members. But those who wish to visit Ganpatipule during tourist season should book in advance to avoid disappointments and high tariffs. After settling in over a cup of tea we went to the beach where we witnessed another gorgeous sunset. Over dinner, we had a delicious spread of Tawa King fish, Pomfret, Shrimps and of course some wonderfully sauted veggies.



Sunset at Ganpatipule



The Sun Finally goes down

We were halfway through our dinner when suddenly the owner (a lady doctor) came running to us and said, "Run to the beach! If you don't, you will miss it forever". Without wasting any time, we rushed to the beach. It was pitch dark and when we looked at the sea, suddenly we saw a dancing greenish blue light at the tip of the tides. It was an unforgettable sight! We could not understand from where those lights were coming from but like kids we started running on the beach to observe the heavenly scene on the sea. After almost 45 mins, we came back to our resort and excitedly narrated to the owner what we had just witnessed. She explained that it is a very rare phenomena that happens during early winters when some type of algae on the sea bed rolls up with the sea waves and comes in contact with oxygen and gets burnt. What we saw was nothing but the burning of the very same algae. It was really an inexplicable but an unforgettable moment.



Sea Beach at Ganpatipule

We spent 2 lazy days at Ganpatipule soaking in the sheer natural beauty of the place, clean, green and relatively less polluted. However this beach is not advisable for those who love to swim because of

shifting sands which has claimed quite a few. For the religious minded, the neat & clean Ganapati (Elephant God) temple is a must-visit.



Water Sport ... Ganpatipule

We started our return journey to Mumbai via Amba Ghat Road. This route connected us to the Bangalore - Mumbai Highway...an excellent road. For lunch, we stopped near Satara famous for its mutton curry and rice, which we filled ourselves with. By 9 pm, we were back home in Mumbai.



Way to sweet home

Keep Walking... On the Silk Route - Sreemoyee Mukherjee

As I set my eyes on Uzbekistan, the choice of travel destination was met with quizzical expressions from friends and family - Why Uzbekistan - aark on o jay gapelina _/ Is it safe? Can women wear regular clothes?

So first things first. As a history buff, the names of Samarqand, Ferghana, Bukhara, the places that inspired most of my much loved monuments, has been on my wish list since I had been introduced to Babur through history books, much like Iran and Kabul (but those are for another day). What revived that memory was Dalrymple's travelogue of the Silk Route - In Xanadu .

That's how I found myself, in the summer of 2019, bound for the Stans, on a slightly dodgy Uzbekistan Airways flight, with a few like-minded travelers - excited, but also filled with trepidation. The sight of the rudimentary airport at Tashkent didn't do much to bolster my confidence.

However, that was momentary - it only took a look at the famous blue dome of Hazrat Imami complex to tell my heart "All izz well", I'm at the right place. It wasn't just the intricate blue mosaics but the smiling friendly Uzbeks, who as it turned out, absolutely love Indians. If the blue mosaic doesn't

take your breath away as it did mine, this monument also houses one of the oldest Qurans in the world and you get to marvel at a replica with its stunning gold calligraphy.

I had prepared myself for an ugly Eastern Bloc capital with boxy buildings but here was Tashkent - a modern, green, beautiful city where Amir Timur (replacing Karl Marx) and the centuries old Chorsu Bazaar adorn the skyline as much as the very Soviet-style "Hotel Uzbekistan" and Russian Orthodox churches with their golden spires (a fixture from my childhood diet of books from Vostok).

The most interesting part of Tashkent and a poignant reminder of its Soviet legacy, however, lies underground - a fascinating maze of themed Metro stations- Alisher Navoi (after the national poet), Kosmonavtlar (commemorating Yuri Gagarin's foray into space) and Paxtakor (after the cotton trade and the eponymously named football team). These stations adorned with individual artistic element look unique - some resemble grand ballrooms while others belong in a sci-fi movie set.

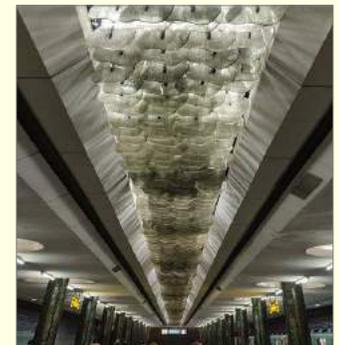
After a day trip to the beautiful Charvoq lake, it was time for the jewel in the crown - Samarqand! If, like me, you are fascinated with architecture, Gur-e-Amir is a place where you can spend some happy hours and days, staring mesmerized at the gilt inlaid interiors of the final resting place of Timur. There's

something for conspiracy theorists too - legend has it that Operation Barbarossa (Hitler's invasion of Russia) began when Timur's body was exhumed by the Russians!

The best that Samarqand has to offer is of course the magnificent Registan Square - standing tall and proud with its 3 colossal madrassahs...I can only imagine how imposing a structure it must have been 500 years back - against the vast Steppe flatlands, a centre for travelers and scholars on the Silk Route. If Registan is imposing by daylight, the place transforms into Aladdin's palace by moonlight. Each of the structures offer something unique - while Ulugh Beg focuses on the marvels of astronomy, Sher Dor is adorned with tigers (if you're familiar with Islamic art, you will know how unique this is), then there's Tilla Kori - with its gilded ceilings and tapestry. And the towers lean almost as much as their famous cousin at Pisa!

This isn't all though - there's Shahi Zinda, the mausoleum of the Timurid dynasty. If you want to experience a million shades of blue singing in perfect harmony, I would definitely recommend you to visit this place. Even if you're not an art aficionado or a history buff, this is a photographer's paradise - DO NOT MISS!

Our next step, Bukhara or Buxoro, is best described by a local Uzbek saying - If Samarqand is the



beautiful lady with makeup, Buxoro is the same lady, without it. Bukhara is anachronous, set in a different millennium, you expect a caravan of camels to land up any moment or to run into the town mascot, Mullah Nasruddin, on his donkey, full of stories from his fresh travels across Asia. For lovers of time travel, this is as close as you can setting the clock back. The bare brick buildings, merchants laying out their colorful ceramic wares in traditional Uzbek robes in an open market with loud bargaining, are, as they have been, for centuries.

This capital of the Samanid empire and one of the holiest cities, was a major intellectual center, home to many Indian merchants and also Genghis Khan's capital. The skyline is dominated by the 150 ft high Kalyon minaret, which, as legend has it, fascinated Genghis so much, that he left it untouched. The only ancient monument across the region that escaped his wrath.

While it wasn't all history - we were also able to catch a glimpse of an Uzbek fashion show and break a leg to Bappi Lahiri's beats cheered on by a large crowd of Uzbeks that made its way on to YouTube (counting on my not so internet savvy parents never to discover it)!

Well, the last leg of our travel, to Khiva (Xiva) took us back a few more centuries, as we travelled over miles of uninhabited Steppe wasteland including an independent republic of Parkal Pakistan (our guide gleefully announced it to grab our attention) to the province of Khwarazm. If you really want to see what the Buyuk Ipak Yuli (the Great Silk Route) might have looked like, you should surely visit Xiva - a beautiful small hamlet in the middle of nowhere. Other than being the birthplace of Al Khwarizmi (Latinized as Algorithmi) who is to blame for all the algebra you couldn't solve, it has, along with stunning blue minarets, an undestroyed 1000 year

old Zoroastrian monastery with both the Swatika and the infinity signs engraved. Also a photographer's delight with stunning sunsets (sunrises have eluded me in this lifetime). This was our the last stop on the trip. But only till the Stan Visas are introduced. I will be back to Ferghana, Dushanbe and more...

Trivia

1. It is one of the only 2 doubly landlocked countries, also with an inland sea (Aral Sea).
2. Every Uzbek tracks weekly Bollywood releases and can rattle off characters from Bahubali.
3. Uzbeks love Indians and will stop you to click pics with a guest from the country of Sharukh Khan, Sridevi, Raj Kapoor and Narendra Modi (I swear, I didn't add this).
4. The popular versions of Laila - Majnu, Shirin - Farhad were written by Alish'ar Navoi.
5. We know Timur mostly as a ruthless conqueror who wiped off a good part of the world population. Here, you will also see him a national hero, polyglot, patron of arts and astronomy

So why travel to Uzbekistan? Important points to ponder since I saw excited as well as despondent faces. Please travel ONLY if at least one of the following fascinates you - history, architecture or photography - not momentarily but keeps you engaged you for hours. Do NOT complain you just saw blue domes - yes, you did - you just saw the inspiration behind the Humayun's Tomb, the Taj and many more marvels.

Uzbekistan is a meat lover's haven - you can gorge on beef samosas, lamb dumplings or even exotic horsemen plot, if you're adventurous!

There are no Indian restaurants but there are Choykhonas everywhere where someone will

welcome you with a cup of tea along with a rendition of "Main Awaara Hoon" or "I am a Disco Dancer"



Lateral Thoughts from a Neuro Surgeon - Dr. Surajit Bhattacharya



Kadha - My Grandmother's Magic Potion

The CORONA pandemic has suddenly made everybody from Donald Trump to Baba Ramdev talk about how to improve immunity. I was feeling a guilty for not knowing enough about the subject as I was always under the impression that these products are market induced gimmicks. Many Ayurvedic products like Chawanprash, Ratnaprash, Amla, Ashwagandha, Panchamritetc are available in the market with very little research behind them but doing brisk business.

While we are trying different medicines and foods to build our immune system, there are many homemade food items from around the world that, while overlooked, can work wonders for your immune health. My grandmother made one such preparation called 'Kadha' and very few of my generation were spared from having it. She was of the opinion that her Kadha was a magic potion which would not only cure cough and the cold and build your immunity but make me fit to go to the moon. The drink originated in ancient India and was

an Ayurvedic concoction and was passed on to her by her mother. It was made with a number of herbs and spices that are boiled in water to extract their benefits.

Interestingly, the practice of preparing kadha is almost five hundred years old. The spice and herbs mixture is considered one of the oldest forms of medicine invented in Ayurveda.

What are the ingredients required for preparing kadha?

The most essential herbs and spices that you would need to prepare a kadha drink are - raw turmeric, basil leaves, cinnamon, black peppercorns, cloves, cardamom, and ginger. All these herbs and spices are natural immunity boosters and are packed with various beneficial nutrients.

- Cinnamon has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.
- Cardamom has several impressive medicinal properties and is known to relieve a sore throat while also having a cooling effect for the body.
- Turmeric has curcumin and is helpful at fighting off a variety of viruses, including herpes and the flu. It is also packed with anti-inflammatory properties. It is particularly useful in boosting your digestion.
- Cloves are loaded with strong antioxidants and are also a good source of a compound called eugenol. Consuming them regularly helps boost your immunity.
- Ginger is one of the healthiest roots on the planet. It has certain chemical compounds that help your body ward off germs and also in halting the growth of certain bacteria.
- Black peppercorns are also high in antioxidants and can combat some respiratory conditions and

rejuvenating the lungs. They also contain piperine, which is an alkaloid like capsaicin and can help relieve nausea, headaches, and poor digestion.

- Basil leaf is a healing herb that helps in treating the cold, nasal congestion, cough, and the flu. These leaves are also great for improving digestion and contain a range of natural antioxidants that can strengthen the immune system.
- Honey soothes inflamed mucous membrane and serves as a carrier of spices. It also has anti-bacterial effect.

You can even add gooseberry or Amla to this drink if it is available in your area. It is rich in Vitamin C, which boosts your immunity. Additionally, it also lowers blood sugar, cholesterol, and blood pressure levels according to Ayurveda. Mulethi too can be added as it is good for both respiratory and digestive systems.

Steps for preparing Kadha

1. Fill a pot with water. Allow the water in the pot (or pan) to boil for a few minutes.
2. Crush all ingredients (except honey and basil leaves) in a bowl.
3. Alternatively, you can also take half a tablespoon of each of these ingredients and mix it in boiling water.
4. All the ingredients, including the basil leaves, should then be cooked on medium heat for about 10-15 minutes or until the decoction is reduced to half.
5. Let the drink simmer down well and once done, cool it.
6. Lastly, strain the mixture into a glass or a cup and drink it while it is warm.

That's it! Your kadha drink is ready.

To improve or sweeten the taste of the drink, you can even add lemon, jaggery, and honey to the kadha. The best thing about this traditional drink is that you can warm it again and have it multiple times a day. Having kadha throughout the season is known to aid digestion, boost your immunity, and fight symptoms of the flu.

There is however a word of caution, avoid adding too much black pepper and ginger in the kadha. It can cause heartburn and a burning sensation in the throat.

Note: While there are various known benefits of kadha as mentioned above, it shouldn't be a substitute for a qualified medical opinion. Always consult a specialist if you have any recurring health issues.

Ayurveda, being the science of life, propagates the gifts of nature in maintaining healthy and happy living. Ayurveda's extensive knowledge base on preventive care, derives from the concepts of "Dinacharya" - daily regimes and "Ritucharya" - seasonal regimes to maintain healthy life. It is a plant-based science. The simplicity of awareness about oneself and the harmony each individual can achieve by uplifting and maintaining his or her immunity is emphasized across Ayurveda's classical scriptures. Kadha is one of the oldest and treasured medicinal secrets of India.

Creating masterpieces during quarantine



How you spend your free time depends on who you are. Creative people often choose solitude to be at their creative best and come up with masterpieces that they would, otherwise, never be able to create in the hustle and bustle of a market place. Combining isolation with inactivity is a recipe for depression but utilizing solitude to meditate and connect with your inner being invariably brings out the best in you and history is filled with examples where even forced solitude has been utilized to perfection.

If there is one thing that the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantines have brought to the forefront, it is free time, and many people around the globe suddenly found themselves with more free time than ever before and limited ways to use it. Of course, a global pandemic is a time to prioritize your mental health and physical well-being above anything else, so I am not asking you to stress yourself. But for some people, being engaged in a project and keeping their mind busy can prove very helpful in hard times. If you read those lines and think 'that's me!' then you have a few historical role models.

1. William Shakespeare

'Shakespeare wrote King Lear in quarantine' is probably something you have heard at least once since March 2020. Well, it isn't an exaggeration. Shakespeare, who has become the face of pandemic

productivity, was an actor and shareholder at The King's Men theatre troupe when the bubonic plague forced London theatres to close in the early 17th century. Public playhouses were shut down and the theatre industry was paralyzed for most of 1606, but that doesn't mean Shakespeare was idle. In fact, as he found himself without a steady job and lots of free time, the playwright composed 'King Lear', 'Macbeth', and 'Antony and Cleopatra' before the year was over.

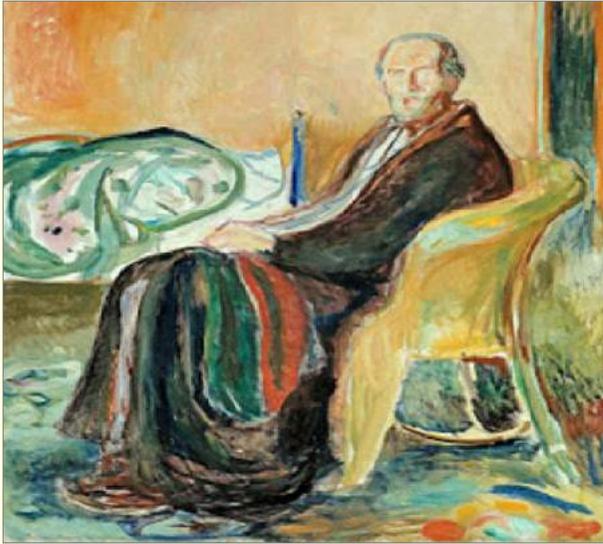
2. Isaac Newton

Just a few decades after an isolated Shakespeare penned some of his most famous plays in history, another outbreak of the bubonic plague hit England, and forced Cambridge University student, Isaac Newton, into isolation. Newton was 20 years old in 1665 and seeing that all classes were cancelled, he returned to his family estate in Lincolnshire. Young Newton didn't have any zoom classes to attend or emails to answer, and despite (or maybe because of) this complete lack of structure, he excelled.

During his time in quarantine, the young mathematician produced what would be some of his most famous works. He developed his theories on optics while experimenting with a prism in his bedroom, laid the ground for an early form of calculus, and even his theory of gravity started to bud during this time. While the apple falling on his head is probably a myth, Newton did have an apple tree outside his bedroom window, which he probably looked at, every day during his quarantine.

3. Edvard Munch

The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, whose most famous work is 'The Scream', didn't just go into quarantine to avoid the Spanish Flu, he actually contracted the disease in 1919. Interestingly, there haven't been many depictions of the Spanish flu pandemic in art, probably due to the fact that there



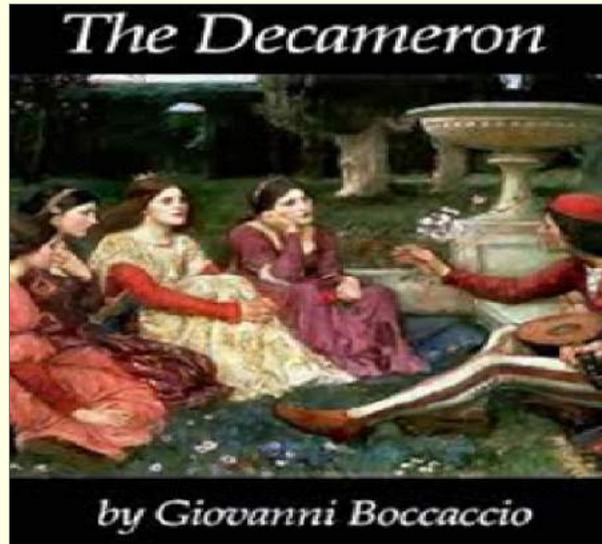
was a world war raging at that time which consumed haven't been many depictions of the Spanish flu pandemic in art, probably due to the fact that there was a world war raging at that time which consumed the attention of artists and thinkers. So Munch's documentation of his quarantine is actually one of the few artworks that recorded the existence of this deadly disease.

As soon as he felt physically capable, the artist gathered his painting supplies and captured his physical state. The result is 'Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu', a painting which shows him with thinning hair and a forlorn facial expression sitting in front of his sickbed.

4. Giovanni Boccaccio

The bubonic plague wreaked havoc all over Europe in the Middle ages. When it hit Florence in 1384, writer Giovanni Boccaccio lost both his parents to the disease. He himself survived the outbreak thanks to his decision to flee the city and go into isolation in Tuscan countryside.

During his time there, he wrote 'The Decameron', a

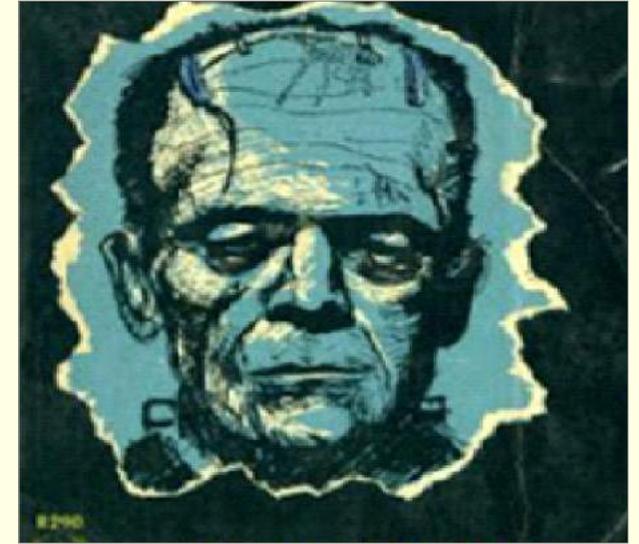


collection of short stories that were framed as entertaining stories told by a group of friends while quarantined inside a villa and hiding from Black Death. This quarantine project came to be considered Boccaccio's masterpiece, and its influence on Renaissance literature in Europe was enormous. 'The Decameron' is also an important historical record for us today, of the physical, psychological, and social effects of the aggressive spread of the previously unknown disease.

5. Mary Shelley

In 1885, a massive volcanic eruption at Mount Tambora in Indonesia killed nearly 100,000 people and choked the sky with ash and dust. But the overall toll turned out to be much higher. The following summer, instead of sunshine, Europe was covered in fog and even frost. This crisis, which had a dire effect on crops around the world, unleashed famine and a global cholera pandemic.

When Mary Shelley arrived at Lake Geneva for a vacation in 1816 the weather was so ghastly after the eruption that she was trapped inside for nearly



the entire time. It was during this time that Shelley crafted her story of Frankenstein, after listening to the long dark debates of her fellow vacationers on the topic whether human corpses could be galvanized, or re-animated, after death. She didn't know it at the time but Shelley's Frankenstein would go on to revolutionize literature and popular culture.

So friends, how have you used this COVID-19 induced quarantine? Did you learn a new skill or sharpened an old one? Did you invent challenges for yourself to stave off the boredom while contributing to your growth? Did you start a new project to keep yourself engaged or finish off long pending ones? Did you find reasons to be enthusiastic about the future despite the present gloom? Isolation and being stuck in a crowd are two extreme social settings. If you find yourself deprived of a social circle, don't just endure but expand. Both the isolation and the free time can be God given gifts to you for you to express yourself to the fullest. It is time to create your own masterpiece.

From the Eyes of a Doctor - Trisha Sengupta

Times are uncertain and I am sure that it has been a struggle for all of us during this pandemic. While I too have been facing a lot of troubles on the professional and personal fronts, I decided to fight it out, basing my life on this quote by my spiritual mentor Daisaku Ikeda: ***"The struggle of life is and always will be a struggle against your own weaknesses. Will you become cowardly and think I can't do this, I'm certain to fail or will you challenge them with the conviction that I am strong and can be stronger! Your destiny in life will vary greatly depending on the spirit that you maintain."***

I have been working as a Casualty Medical Officer at GT (Gokuldas Tejpal) Hospital for about a year now. When the pandemic hit India, some government hospitals were declared as Covid hospitals including ours and thus started an endless fierce battle.

Endless hours wearing the personal protective gear, fatigue due to dehydration and exhaustion, eating food at unearthly hours, working night shifts and the rising number of cases all of these began to take a toll on us. Things got tougher when many of our staff contracted the disease and had to be admitted and as a result we worked harder since we got understaffed.

Putting up a brave face and fighting the crisis is obviously the utmost priority but the fear is still present and very real. Not fear for ourselves, but more so fear for our loved ones and our colleagues. Being quarantined in hotel rooms, we barely get to go home to our families due to risk of exposure and I

go home maybe once every 3-4 weeks, only after getting tested "Covid-negative".

The hardest part of the job is to break the bad news about death to a family or to say "no" to patients if we are at full capacity. During these times of mental despair, I try to focus on the positives like the satisfaction of treating patients and gratitude for my supportive family, friends, colleagues and even our government for taking care of us.

Working barely gives me time to study, plus with all exams being postponed, I began to despair about future career prospects and felt like I was hitting a wall. I reminded myself that ***"we are not defeated by adversity but by the loss of the will to strive"***. I realized that reality can be harsh but no matter how much we grieve, neither our environment nor external circumstances will change. What's important is to forge ahead bravely.

I also had many inner devils coming up in the form of laziness and negative tendencies being directed at my near and dear ones. That's when I realized that I first needed to raise my own inner life state. I started chanting for peace and clarity.

"Prayer is an attempt to merge the inner workings of our life with the rhythm of the universe. When we pray in such a way all the workings of the universe will function to protect us and the endless cycle of painful reality will be transformed into a cycle of victory and happiness. Prayer is the key to unleash our own infinite human potential."

I noticed that every time my faith was in good flow, my life state consecutively followed suit.

Today I am grateful to the Universe for giving me the

chance to help society in the capacity of a front line Covid warrior. I determine to work even harder in both my personal and professional life and keep undergoing my own human revolution, since this is the exact opportune moment to fight my inner demons. I need to create the right causes every moment of every day!

To conclude I want to share from a guidance from Daisaku Ikeda for the pandemic times:

"Every time we lament or complain about our circumstances, we need to remember, in course of our lives there are many times we are forced with challenges and situations of uncertainty but when we believe in ourselves and take action to overcome these, we are able to receive immense good fortune. By winning over ourselves courageously, it gives us a chance of also imparting hopes to all around us enabling them to do the same."

Nature in Colour - Shreeja Mukherjee



Times of Despair - Shourya Mukherjee

Society as we know it,
Exists with a fear,
The fear of rejection,
And the fear of fear.

It eats our hope,
During times of despair,
Ruthlessness and ignorance,
It is what pollutes the air.

Say if humanity died,
At the hands of Man,
Have we killed our own purpose?
I'd say not yet.

Because society as we know it,
Exists with a dream,
Of a world of hope,
During these times of despair.

Age - Amit Ghosh

Age is then
When the hard disk of memory starts to overflow
with timeless thoughts, that have no end.

Shifting still shots that flit on the canvas
of a wrapped existence, lost in a maze of needless bends.

Dark shadows come and go
Ruffling swathes of old calico.

Time was when
The virgin sand
Waited in breathless silence.
Till steps of knowledge
Treaded on it, with disdain.

Can the whorls of knowledge be overcome
Unlearn that which is cumbersome
Stand again in dignified purity.

Looking through the rainswept pane
Waiting for spring to come again.

Unlocking ideas during Lockdown - Nivedita Dasgupta

Oh no! Not another lockdown diary!

That was my instant reaction when a couple of members from Parichay's editorial team suggested that I write about some of the stuff I did during lockdown. They had liked my posts on social media around that time. But then it got me thinking, and I tried to figure out, what were the most memorable things that I did during Lockdown, rather more importantly, being Locked-in.

Just as the lockdown in India progressed stage-wise from lockdown 1.0 which happened in the last week of March, to the current phased Un-Locking, I think people had their behavioral and mental states take different shapes as they maneuvered with the sudden turn of things. I for sure went through a spectrum of reactions, responses, behaviors, emotions, call it what you may...

As the trial Janta curfew became a real curfew, that too for 3 weeks, without any planning or precedence, I began feeling helpless, caged, hopeless and quickly moved on to become a crazy and hyperactive woman, who somehow had to fill up all these long gaping hours that life presented her with. I jumped into webinar trainings and took up every offer that came my way - topic be damned, and value be damned further. I had to be busy, I had to re-invent, I had to be relevant, and (I cringe now when I think of it) I had to be in everyone's face all the time. Even in house work, I was cleaning, scrubbing, cooking gourmet stuff and Lord help me, even baking! I had to be productive and could not let a curfew or a virus get the better of me. And at the end of it all I was exhausted and rather frustrated.

The next phase began with me feeling really exhausted and as hopeless as before. So I decided to rest this tired body and more importantly tired mind. I withdrew, and as days passed, this

withdrawal was complete. I did fewer and fewer assignments. I maintained minimum contact with the people I coached and the relationship with my clients was totally reactive. Social and professional media posts became few and far between and the frenzy of housework reduced. All that talk of the planet healing - Oh, I felt that happening in my internal universe. I don't know whether I healed or not, but I transformed. While there was a sense that I had lost everything, well almost, I discovered that I had gained TIME - and lots of it.

During this time, even though all physical activity was on a snooze mode, my mind was working, and boy, how it worked... My mind was thinking of all the things I have done so far in my life and being the finicky person that I am, the thoughts did not dwell on accolades and accomplishments for long. I started on the long list of things I could have done, or should have done but never got down to actually doing it. Fitness goals, keeping in touch with people, organizing wardrobes and documents (real and virtual), were the usual suspects and diligently I stated working on them. But truth be told, the enthusiasm fizzled out faster than it came. Then one evening, as I was sifting through my laptop hunting for some file, I stumbled upon some videos I had made as a Digital Profile for some platform. Those AV profiles suddenly made me feel so ancient and, they probably were the most clichéd, staid and boring pieces of communication ever. Therein, arose the thought of creating a digital resume which would be "different". I had no clue then as to how I wanted it to be, however I was totally sure that it would NOT be clichéd, staid and boring.

Thus armed with all the ideas of how a 'Digital Resume' should not be, I set sail - and you will all agree as to how great that is, as a starting point. You are rolling your eyes by now and I did the same. Well, to break the impasse, I began brainstorming with a dear friend who is Ad-film maker. And something

started brewing - something that I would have wanted to make many years later, when I was an established Career Coach. Then I told to myself, "why wait for later?" These "Covid" times are strange and it induces people to do strange things, and I went ahead and commissioned my friend to make an 'Ad-film like' resume for me.

She wrote the script, and I loved it and went around gushing about it. When the director (mind you, until then I had only known her as my goofy friend, thee hard-as-nails director persona was not known), began allocating locations in my house and timings for recording different parts of the script, I realized the misadventure that I had embarked on. I have been a facilitator, a trainer, at best a speaker, at certain events - talking came easy to me, engaging audience even easier. But facing a camera!!!! Acting!!!! I had never imagined that giving this creative twist to a staid resume would put me in this spot. It took a combination of gentle cajoling and good old rebuke, to finally face the camera, and shooting commenced with a cell phone, a remote director and an 11 year old cinematographer. It was an extreme combination of fun and frustration - exhilaration at getting the tone and mood right and exhaustion with giving retakes in the summer heat, because the "chit" of a camera-person was not happy with certain angles.

Well, All's well that ends well, as they say. My Digital resume got made, and it received rave reviews. Both the director and I got some interesting projects, and the camera-person got an endless supply of pizzas as remuneration for a job done well.



Glimpses of Scandinavia - Tuhin Sengupta

Scandinavia - the Nordic Countries known for its beautiful sights, lovely and friendly people and delicious cuisine.

5 countries in 11 Days.....**Here we gooooo** !It all started around 2nd June 2016 when I was done packing my bags and Maa was putting all kind of winter stuff in my bags as she thought it would be very cold out there... We left home around 0330 hours for the flight. Mumbai-Istanbul-Helsinki. First father-son trip ! The flight was awesome with really friendly Turkish crew who welcomed and treated me as their friend. This would be my second Mumbai-Istanbul trip, the first one being couple of year earlier during Turkey visit.

Hello Helsinki ! We landed at Vantaa Airport and the approach was awesome. As soon as we reached the exit we were welcomed by a tall and friendly Binoy Lemos, our tour guide. Our Hotel was very close to the docks of Helsinki. What a lovely sight it was. We roamed around the docks in early evening. Though it was sunny, temperature was around 3-4 degrees Celsius. Dad was enjoying his smoke in this crisp weather and it was surely the most memorable birthday he had...dinner however was just 'normal' and early - since we all had a long flight.

Next morning we were welcomed by gloomy skies

and light rains. Breakfast was in Finnish style had a lot of Marimekko designed cutlery, delicious meat cuts and smoked fishes with Finnish berry juices(fresh). After that sumptuous breakfast we headed for Tallinn (Estonia) on a 2 hour cruise. Cruise was too good. Met a Finnish girl, had a good conversation and sang Finnish songs on karaoke. We had a strong Finnish beer known as Lapin Kulta.. OHHHHOOO boy that was strong....

Tallinn, the beautiful Scandic capital with a strong Russian presence due to Soviet history, really captivated us - some signboards in the old part of Tallinn were in Russian. We visited the iconic St. Olaf's Church. The gothic structure reminded me of some dark and scary movie scenes and indeed the weather made it bit more sinister. Then we proceeded to St. Aleksandr Nevsky Church - the other remaining orthodox church of Tallinn.. The awesome and beautiful mosaics and Cyrillic's looking like calligraphy. By afternoon weather had cleared out and we enjoyed the beautiful town square where locals sold their produce and souvenirs. Soon we boarded our cruise back to Helsinki and began round 2 of karaoke and Lapin Kultas. I drew quite some applause from the crowd since I was the only non-European who dared to get to the stage and belt out Finnish songs!

Magical Norway, the country of the mighty Vikings,

breathtaking fjords, ethereal natural beauty and perhaps harboring the most friendly people on this planet! Oslo the capital, has just a population of around 5 million. A bustling city amongst nature! It has mountains on one side, sea on the other, and is surrounded by forests! We visited the Holmenkollen Ski Center and saw a ski jump of almost 160m high. From the top, the views of Oslo city were simply magnificent. At the top there was also a small historic viewing gallery, showcasing the origin and history of winter sport in Norway.

We proceeded to the Viking Museum where we saw different kinds of boats, weapons, artillery used by them. They were so well preserved it was amazing. They say that every Norwegian has Viking blood in them - appears to be true, all of them looked so brave sturdy and did not seem to be scared to take on a challenge. Next we visited the Vingel and Park in central Oslo. This is a contemporary Central Square which shows diversity and openness of Norwegians -people were chilling, playing musical instruments and taking sunbath in the park itself. Thereafter we visited the Contemporary and Modern Amphi the atre which is completely made from glass and composite materials and is located at the Old Harbor. We saw the sun changing colors towards late evening but it did not set. Thus began my experience of getting used to midnight sun!



With these memories we hit the road towards Bergen the next day. It was a day when we would travel some distance by road, then rail, and then also a small ship. A day full of adventure! Twisted two lane roads intertwined between mountains and rivers. Calm lakes showed us perfect reflections of the sun and clouds. We stopped for a coffee break near a small Norsk village by a lake. Instead of drinking coffee I went and sat by the lake taking in the magical sights and feeling the true Norwegian winds hitting my face. Moving on we stopped near the Geilo railway station from where we boarded the train to mountaintop Myrdal, Here we changed trains and proceeded to Flam. As we started the ascent to Myrdal, the landscape changed from green to white..both sides of the track were full of snow. It was really a “wow” to see snow in the thick of summer!

On the train from Myrdal to Flam, we passed through wonderful lakes, villages and trails where cyclists waved to us as we passed them. We stopped near the breathtaking Kjosfossen Waterfall which is a scheduled photo-stop.. A Norwegian folk show also was shown with the roaring waterfall at the backdrop, where they portrayed a typical life of Norsk women through a song and dance. On arrival at Flam, the Norsk crew welcomed us onto the ship and we started the cruise through the fjords of Hardanger region for almost 2-3 hours. Passing these magical fjords, feeling the cool winds hitting my face and making friends with the Captain and the Engineer of the ship, I got to know more about Norsk language and culture. After arriving at our destination, we proceeded by road to Bergen.

Bergen is a typical coastal city with a fiery past when a fire destroyed half of the city in 16th century. We visited the Floyen Mountains on a funicular train which looks like a staircase. The train ride is short but the climb was very steep and it looked quite

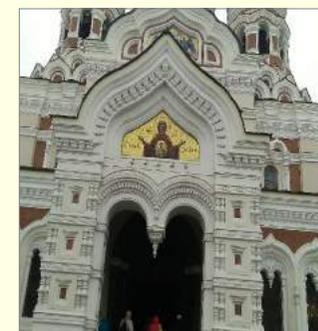
dangerous but thrilling. Floyen has many campsites and trails. There are beautiful views of Bergen city from the top. For lunch we had the Norwegian style fish and chips with smoked salmon which were freshly caught in the morning along with local beer “Hansa”. Best Norwegian lunch devoured by father and son!

Post lunch we proceeded to Flesl and Lufthavn, Bergen for our flight to Kastrup, Copenhagen. Only in videos I had seen the beautiful departure out of Bergen - today I experienced it in reality and indeed I felt blessed! We passed over beautiful fjords, small cities like Kristiansand and Skagen. Beautiful sunshine turned into dull clouds and stormy weather as we descended into Copenhagen. As we got closer I could hear people getting scared. Landing was rough but in this kind of weather it was as smooth as it can be! I personally went and thanked the Captain after the flight. On further conversation I came to know the aircraft we flew in was an ex-Kingfisher Airlines craft. Wow!! What a small world! Best part, our hotel was bang opposite to airport and we got an airport facing room! Sipping morning coffee and enjoying aircrafts take off and land, for me, was living a dream!

Copenhagen is the most populated capital of Scandinavia. We visited the Carlsberg factory where we had almost 5-6 different kind of beers. It was much stronger than our Indian elephant strong! Moving on we visited the little Mermaid which actually glows in the morning sun! Then on to Tivoli Gardens - half of which is almost an amusement park. Next to Tivoli Gardens were the majestic Royal Palaces. Unfortunately, the royal family was away so we could not see the exchange of guards. The evening we had free time, though many from our group decided to stay in the hotel, but me no way! I dragged my Dad to Amager Beach and decided to take a swim in the North Sea. Brrrrr- it was freezing

but I got inspired by locals taking a swim there! They welcomed me and when they heard I was from India they were shocked and even warned me that the water is freezing cold. Along with 2-3 of them, I jumped 15 feet from a ledge onto the sea... swim of a lifetime indeed!

With this I would like to end this travelogue. **Mitt hjem - Skandinavia. Elskerdeg Skandinavia!** In other words - ‘My Home Scandinavia. I love you Scandinavia.



Bhutan & the Winds of Change

- Mohua Das

For this once-isolated country tucked away in the mist-covered mountains between India and China, modern influences are raising its happiness quotient

Bhutan's emerging fashion street is brimming with a band of self-taught designers weaving contemporary silhouettes into their textile heritage. If there's one 'what Kate wore' moment that stood out during the royal couple's Bhutan tour in 2016, it was when the Duchess of Cambridge tried her hand at archery in a half-kira - the traditional yarn of woven fabric that Bhutanese women drape around their body - offering a rare glimpse of the country's rich textile heritage.

Fashion trends come and go but the Bhutanese dressing style has continued to feature prominently in all their looks over generations. In 1989, it was enforced as a strict dress code - men were required to wear the gho, a knee-length kimono-like robe tied at the waist, and women the kira, paired with a short jacket (tego), with violators subject to heavy fines. But ever since the dress code was relaxed about five years ago, the remote Himalayan kingdom has turned into a hotbed of fashion with several independent labels emerging.

In Bhutan, 'thagzo' or the art of weaving is one of the 13 traditional arts and crafts that developed over the centuries and survive to this day. In 2013, the Royal Textile Academy under patronage of the Queen Mother introduced a national design competition with hefty prize money to encourage young designers to innovate with the living art. "It was exciting for the youth to be part of a fashion show for the first time. It led to designers innovating and weavers competing on better textiles," says Chimmi Choden, a self-taught designer whose designs have sashayed down the ramps at Manhattan, California, Malaysia and India. She

opened her House of Design in 2014 as a socially conscious brand offering employment to local weavers, tailors and craftsmen.

Another designer on Bhutan's emerging fashion block is Chandrika Tamang, who had made her first garment without using a scale or instruments, from a piece of fabric embellished with a bow yanked off her sister's shoe. With the internet as her first guru, Chandrika quit her banking job and studied at National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad before launching CDK, her eco-friendly line committed to curbing the carbon footprint last year. "My current collection is inspired by our prayer flags and the colour of each garment has its own significance," says Chandrika.

Kenchi Wangmo, is among Bhutan's band of self-taught designers moving ahead in full steam with her own clothing brand called 'Kencho Couture' even if that means running a shack in the crafts bazaar of Thimphu.

The cities are full of young designers exchanging trends, which has led to a more diverse mix of conventional and high fashion on Bhutan's streets today. Besides raw talent, what is helping Bhutanese designers steal attention is the "slow approach", a revolutionary process in the current fashion scene but intrinsic to Bhutan's textile tradition. The delicate piece of cloth teeming with thread work takes a pair of ingenious hands and two months to a year to make. Almost every household has a loom and most weavers are women. who begin work soon after harvest for some extra earnings.

The designers are moving ahead on their own steam, be it from a home studio or a shack in the craft bazaar. Aimed at wearable couture, the collections are rooted in the Bhutanese tradition - an abundance of colours and Buddhist and other indigenous motifs - sunrays, mountains, pigeon eye, butterfly, Dorje gong and the eternal knot. Many trends have also trickled down from the royal

family's look-book. Despite the urge to experiment, their ancient weft and warp techniques refuse to go out of fashion. "The silhouettes are still the same but the colour patterns and fabric are changing. Interestingly, the full-length kira fastened by a belt at the waist and a brooch at the shoulder that had been replaced by half and readymade versions is making a comeback. They also have pockets," smiles Chimmi.

Playful interventions in their time-honoured wefts and warps reflect the larger social evolution that the Himalayan nation has been witnessing but Bhutan still lacks the infrastructure that it needs to push its burgeoning fashion industry into the world. "To take things forward we need more skilled people for which it requires institutes and fashion weeks to engage aspiring designers," says Chandrika. Until then, they're keeping their fingers crossed.

Bhutan's first IT park is helping change the fairy-tale perception of this Himalayan kingdom.



It was the late Nineties. A snail mail, a quick prediction about the date of arrival, and an exhausting jaunt through the neighbourhood to the only payphone in a village centre in eastern Bhutan was the most efficient way for Tshering Cigay Dorji's parents to have a quick conversation with their son, then a student at the University of Canberra.

"Today, almost all villages in Bhutan are covered by mobile phone networks. Even farmers in some of the remotest areas of Bhutan send instant voice messages and pictures to their relatives living anywhere in the world using WhatsApp and WeChat. It is hard to think how difficult it was just two decades back," smiles Dorji, now the CEO of Thimphu Tech Park, the country's first IT park perched on Babesa, a lush green hill in the suburbs of Bhutan's capital city.

For a long time, the only attraction of Babesa was its spectacular surroundings with winding roads and emerald green mountains typical of this landlocked Himalayan kingdom. But things are changing in Bhutan, and changing fast. What was once ideal for grazing livestock is almost unrecognizable now with urban fabric making inroads into its pristine, forested hillsides. The new-fangled surroundings, however, do not defy the country's legacies. By royal decree, the tech hub is a powerful blend of latest trends in IT park design and stately buildings with sloping roofs, wooden frontages painted with flowers and Buddhist symbols, and small arched windows reminiscent of traditional Bhutanese architecture.

The idea of an IT Park came from the Royal Government of Bhutan back in 2006, two years before the first democratic elections in 2008 to address the increasing number of jobless youth. With the aim of "private sector-led economic growth to combat rising youth unemployment" the Tech Park was developed under a DBFOOT (Design, Build, Finance, Own, Operate, Transfer) Public Private Partnership model with funding from the

World Bank. While the government provided land on lease and facilities like road access, water supply, fibre-optic and power line connections, the private partner Thimphu Tech Park Private Limited, a joint venture between Assetz Property Group of Singapore that currently owns 70% of the shares and Druk Holding and Investments that owns the remaining 30% – financed the construction of the IT Park at a cost of Nu 300 million.

For a country that became the last in the world to experience television in 1998, it was a giant leap forward when the IT Park threw open its doors to a 250,000sq. ft IT-focused mix-use space spread over 18 acres in May 2012. But it wasn't an easy start. "Potential investors were hesitant about being the first to come in and the space was mostly empty in the initial days. We persevered and 2014 onwards the vision of IT helping Bhutan overcome the challenges of being landlocked materialised to a modest extent. Many including higher-ups in the government did not believe that this would be possible at first."

With an average of 3000 Bhutanese graduates entering Bhutan's job market annually, Thimphu TechPark has managed to absorb over 700 Bhutanese youths who now work for eight foreign companies - US, Canada, Australia, Bangladesh and Switzerland - operating out of the cyber hub. "They claim that Bhutan is attractive for small and mid-sized companies because of our English-speaking talent pool, government support and lower operating costs. Also, attrition rate is lower than India or US," says Dorji who along with a team of 18 steers, what had once been labelled "a white elephant".

The rural landscape has also witnessed spill-over effects - housing and shopping complexes in the barren vicinities of the IT Park to an overall improvement in internet connectivity in the country. The Tech Park houses an incubation centre that frequently hosts workshops and seminars to

promote youth entrepreneurship and start-ups.

'Synergy' is more than a buzzword here. "The peaceful natural environment is a big plus that helps people's productivity," points out Dorji. Yet, the fairytale perception of the Himalayan kingdom that measures national wealth in terms of happiness continues to pose a challenge. "People still think of Bhutan as Shangri-La and find it hard to reconcile its image as an investment destination for IT enabled services," he laughs.

But even as Bhutanese entrepreneurs struggle to find a foothold in the local market, new aspirations are taking root in tech enterprises. Sonam Pelden, 28, from Thimphu made history in 2017 as the first Bhutanese entrepreneur to make it to the Forbes list of young innovators with an online company in Malaysia that allows one to order local services through an app. According to her, "Bhutan is not another planet. It has embraced technology that is generating employment, and encouraging youngsters to take up tech entrepreneurship."



Thoughts & Experiences

- Sangita Marda Agarwal

Bula Da's Little Shop

Bula da's shop was opposite to our house in Entally. It was a small street facing shop, more like a counter, situated on the ground floor of an old Kolkata home. I am not sure how old his shop was, but Pawan says he remembers it being there for as long as he can recall.

For the number of years that I lived in Entally, I saw Bula da in only one kind of attire. He wore a loose, off white coloured pajama which ended a little above his ankles and a non-descriptive cotton kurta which all Bengalis call a 'Fotua'.

Each morning, as I went into our verandah which overlooked the street, to collect the daily newspaper, I saw Bula da ambling towards his little shop to open it sharp at 7 am. (People living in modern high rises may not connect to this delivery system, but in old Kolkata, where almost every house has a street facing window or verandah, a string tied and rolled newspaper is deftly chucked by a new paper wallah's right hand while he manoeuvres the handle of his bicycle with his left hand as he peddles down a narrow street).

Back to Bula Da - the first thing he did every morning after pulling his shop shutters up and unlocking a little wooden gate, was to fetch a bucket full of water from a nearby hydrant and wash the pavement in front of his shop with water and a broomstick. He then dusted his little wooden counter with a cloth duster and lighted an agar batti (incense stick) in front of an old photo frame of 'Ma Kaali'. Having completed this morning ritual, he would buy a cup of tea in a small bhaand (earthen cup) from a tea shop next to his and perch up to sit and begin his daily business.

This included smiling at passers-by, some of whom

would stop to buy a loaf of bread and stay forever to indulge in a passionate debate about the neighbourhood and state politics and ofcourse football.

Pawan often walked down to both buy bread and chat up with Bula da. Bula da's wife too would join him soon and together they managed their little shop.

Every afternoon they would pull down their shutters and walk back home. It is a common practice among local shopkeepers in old Kolkata to shut shop in the afternoon for a good few hours to go home and eat 'bhaat' (a rice lunch) and nap peacefully aka the Spanish siesta!

The same routine followed in the evening when Bula da and his wife returned to their shop.

I often wondered; did he even earn anything? How did he manage his household? But I learnt that his only daughter was happily married to the son of a prosperous shopkeeper in a nearby neighbourhood and the couple didn't need much for sustenance.

Winter is a happy season in Kolkata when the city regales in festivity. Bula da's little shop too looked happily different during winters. He sold freshly baked plum and raisin cakes along with little Christmas decorations and greeting cards.

Urmika and Aashna looked forward to this winter treat in their lunch box, as Pawan would walk down and buy some for them before they left for school.

Six and a half years ago we moved out of our ancestral Entally home and Kolkata and left behind Bula da's quaint shop too.

A few months ago, we learnt that Bula da is no more. After his death his wife decided not to continue with the shop. Though we are told it's not sold yet, the shutters remain permanently down. Someone will soon buy it and will bring down the old charm to set

up a new shop. With it will be the end of so many stories told and untold.

The Tale of Das Babu's Cats and Their Furry Tails

I am not sure when Madhav Charan Das or Das Babu (the name by which the world knew him) first moved into the stand-alone house next to ours in Phool Bagan. But I have vague recollections of being told that he bought the house soon after the Bangladesh war in 1971.

Das Babu came in to live with his cantankerous old mother and his motley crew of cats. They were about 6 or 7 furry ones and he was totally dedicated to them. Feeding them milk in a pan every morning and rice and fish in a shallow aluminium bowl in the afternoon.

We (my siblings and I) would often peep into his home on our way back from school to see his cats play around. They purred and mewed much to our delight.

In fact, so intense was Das Babu's dedication to his cats that he never married or bought any furniture for his house. He had two wooden beds, one each for his mother and him, a few basic wooden chairs. That's it. The rest of his two-bedroom home, living area, backyard and a little patch of garden in front was an empty playground for his darling cats.

Gradually they grew in number. We grew older and busier. His cats no longer held our interest. In fact, their growing number became a nuisance for the neighbourhood and specially us for they would often jump the common wall between our homes and scurry around in our house.

I was in college when I had last enquired from Das Babu about the number of cats he now possessed and I remember him telling me that they were more than three dozen!!

I married, moved homes, had my children. There

was enough on my platter to occupy me but fables of my erstwhile neighbour's feline world were not one of them!

Sometime soon when Urmika and Aashna grew a little older, I wanted to show them Das Babu's home and his brood of whiskers.

Their little eyes were amazed to see these balls of fur everywhere. No one knows the exact number but I assume by this time he had more than sixty of them living with him! In fact, so many were there in number that one could barely see the floor or anything else in his home. It was an endless carpet of furry wool, for as far as one could see.

The neighbourhood had declared him strange. A Bengali's love for the cat is legendary but this love has scaled unprecedented levels!

I peeped into Das Babu's home that April morning when I visited Phool Bagan one last time before moving to Mumbai. He looked weak with age and said his cats were running away as he no longer was strong enough to feed them.

One day a few years later during one of my visits to Kolkata when I casually enquired of him, I was told that age was taking better of Das Babu's health and his cats were disappearing or dying.

Last year when Madhav Charan Das died, his last cat too left him and ran away somewhere. His house stands uninhabited today on the sleepy street. But each brick still reverberates with happy stories of the little lynxes that lived and purred there for years.

Silence Speaks

Lockdown - Day 1, March 25th, 2020

I met Kemala during one of my visits to Bali a few years ago. I was travelling alone, on an official recce and staying at a hotel in Kuta.

Kemala ran a quaint eatery in one of the lanes off Legian street. It was a small shack with Balinese curios and wood work on its walls, with just enough space for 10 to 12 diners to sit on its comfortable wooden chairs.

I normally went there after work and she would cook me a 'vegetarian' nasi goreng and fill me up with local stories in her broken English. She had an amazing collection of country music that she played on request.

I remember this was in March, March 20th to be precise. I was sitting in her tiny restaurant and when she got me my food and lemonade, I slipped a little gift (a stone idol of Lord Ganesha that I had got from India) into her palms, squeezed it with love and told her that I would miss her stories when I flew back to India the next morning.

"Oh, but you must stay", she let out a little squeal in her accented voice. "You can't go. It's 'Nyepi' in two days"!!

'What's Nyepi'? I asked her, a little surprised?

'It's the Balinese day of silence, fasting and meditation. A day when the entire island remains quiet and indoor'.

'Really'? I exclaimed. I couldn't imagine a bustling Bali, with happy tourists from all over, ever doing that.

'Yes', she said. 'Nothing will move for 24 hours, no working, no going out on the beach or streets and even the airport will remain shut the entire day'.

'Then what will I do here?', I whispered, almost in panic.

'Why fear?', replied Kemala. 'Just sit in your hotel room quietly and think.'

She is crazy, I thought.

I was aghast that nothing would move for a day and she was asking me to stay back and experience it.

Nyoman, my cab driver, was at my hotel lobby sharp at 9 am in the morning and I headed to the airport to catch my flight back home.

I couldn't resist chatting with him when I realised that he spoke a little English. I had been thinking about 'Nyepi' almost all night and I had questions that I knew only a local Balinese could answer.

Nyoman informed, that Nyepi was a good day to sit in silence and reflect. A luxury which was otherwise impossible in his busy life while he ferried tourists up and down all year long.

Yesterday, March 25th, 2020- was Nyepi in Bali this year. And the day is followed by the beginning of the Balinese New Year as per their Hindu calendar - (the same day as we celebrate Ugadi, Chetti Chand and Navreh in India).

I had run away from Bali then, in fear of being trapped in isolation, on their day of silence. But, as India experiences a complete lockdown, the heaving JVL below my apartment lies deserted, not a single roar of any aircraft passing above, all I hear are some chirping birds and the sound of stillness within me. But as I experience all this, the magic of silence is gradually beginning to grow inside.

I am starting to hear a quiet inner voice. Silence and halting don't feel so bad.

I also realise, we may have stopped, but nature does not. The sun set last evening and the sun rose again today morning. The flowers are blooming. Some where the rivers are flowing. The birds fly freely in the sky. We may be sitting caged in our homes, but the hemispheres will swap seasons today as it is

equinox time and everything will go on.

As humans, we are just a small part of this cycle, a very small part. We don't own anything. We must learn to respectfully co-exist and be blessed about mother nature's abundance, for this planet does not belong to us.

Let's begin each morning of our life, with this gratitude in our heart

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The Fragrance of Pujo - Kuhu Bhattacharya

Welcoming Goddess Durga, along with her children year after year with grand spectacle, has become a significant part of our lives. The very journey of picking up the idol from the maath (Pujo grounds) to the visarjan (immersion) venue is something that makes Durga Pujo so wholesome.

The atmosphere of pujo outside Kolkata is analogous or similar everywhere. Durga Puja in Mumbai is not completely based on idol worship but also involves a lot of work around making the festival lively with intricate detailing in all aspects. Right from the design and theme of the pandal, to the cultural programs, every preparation is done so much in advance. This makes Durga pujo so much more exhilarating.

Personally, my most cherished aspect of Pujo is the variety of food stalls. 'Anandamela,' the day when we put up stalls and sell a variety of food items, is by far the best part of pujo. Dividing the work amongst each other; Kaun kya layega, who sells what? Who's the cashier? Who makes the banner? What do we name the stall? Just the entire process is so thrilling!

Right from the commotion of preparing the food to handling the cash and then going on to celebrate our success, how splendid is that feeling! And, the first taste of Maa'er bhog (food offering to the Goddess) just hits a different chord. It is a different level of satisfaction altogether. Even giving the bhog to the public is a lovely feeling.

Following that, are the dance programs for which we start planning weeks in advance before putting up an awe-inspiring final show. Just the feeling of going for rehearsals, picking out costumes, coordinating and synchronizing with live musicians has to be one of the most electrifying feelings ever!

Last but not least are the concerts - The main reason

I look forward to Pujo! This usually happens on the day of 'Maha Ashthami' or 'Maha Navami,' where famous performing artists are invited to throw a spectacular show. I love spending time at these concerts with my friends, clicking pictures, dancing and jumping, and going backstage to get autographs!

The saddest part is the Visarjan. After ten days of fun and celebration, it's time to bid farewell. Tears are shed but also the joy of experiencing it all over again the next year, takes over. 'Aashche bochor aabar hobe' is something we all tell each other at the end.

'Shubho Bijoya' after the Ganga water is sprinkled on all of us is the final goodbye to Goddess Durga. The blend of different emotions we feel at the end is just awesome.

The entire ambience and aura of Pujo is a completely different feeling altogether. Splitting the bill to get food and treating each other with goodies, staying up all night and giving a helping hand here and there.

No event brings me the amount of happiness and delightfulness as Pujo does and even when it's over and done with, its everlasting fragrance and joyful memories stay with me for the rest of the year.

Jai Ma Durga!



Hanoi, a place of beauty is a joy forever - Srirupa Sen

Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam is a city with an old-world charm that is also brimming with modernity, hope and happiness. It is a city with centuries old architecture and a rich culture with Southeast Asian, Chinese and French influences. It reminded me of a beautiful lady who has withstood the ravages of time and yet her luminous face and sparkling eyes reveal the joy and hope that she harbours deep within her heart.

In May 2018, I had the opportunity of visiting Hanoi with my family and the excitement of the impending trip made me very thrilled to say the least. South East Asia has always been a favourite travel destination and Hanoi was no exception. There were no direct flights to Hanoi from Mumbai and hence we had a 4 hrs stopover at Bangkok airport. One advantage of travelling to Vietnam is that they have Visa on arrival and hence convenient for travellers who might want to travel on a whim. On arrival, we found the Hanoi airport was small yet functional and was teeming with tourists from all over the world. Once done with the Visa formalities, we took a cab and headed towards our hotel, the Inter-Continental, Hanoi that is housed in the Keangnam Hanoi Landmark Tower (upon its completion in 2012, it was the tallest tower in Hanoi



with 72 floors). This part of the city is a modern, bustling metropolis dotted with skyscrapers and apartment complexes, where the expats live and work.

The first thing that struck me in Hanoi was the sheer number of two wheelers on the road, it was like a sea with gigantic waves of two wheelers crashing in from all directions. The second thing that I found very interesting and intriguing was the happiness quotient of the place, wherever you look in Hanoi you will see smiling, happy faces. And last but not the least Hanoi's delectable cuisine, while in Hanoi you realise that boiled and steamed food could be mouth-watering too. I loved and enjoyed every morsel that I ate, right from Pho (fresh rice noodles with salty broth and a sprinkling of herbs and chicken), to Goi cuon (Vietnamese spring rolls) and Bun Cha (dish of grilled pork and noodles). During our multiple visits to the Old Quarter area in Hanoi (The Old Quarter is the name commonly given to the historical civic urban core of Hanoi, where each street specialized in one specific type of manufacturing or commerce), we found that food everywhere was consistently tasty, be it hawker's stalls or upmarket restaurants. The Old Quarter has a silk street, a shoe street, a gold Street and an art street to name a few, each street selling the commodity that it is named after. The art street is replete with shops selling replicas of masterpieces



like Vincent van Gogh's Sunflower. Here we realised that most people don't understand English and hence if you want to get a good deal while shopping and find your way back when you are lost in the multiple lanes and by lanes of the Old Quarters, Google Translator is your best friend. Another tourist attraction is the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre that is right next to the by Hoan Kiem Lake in the Old Quarters and here we really enjoyed the hour-long water puppet show with accompanying music. In the middle of the city centre or Old Quarters is also the Temple of Literature, a temple built in 1070 at the time of Emperor Ly Thanh Tong, dedicated to Confucius and hosts the Imperial Academy, Vietnam's first national university. While we explored the temple, we found groups of students from various age groups clicking their convection pictures while dressed in their beautiful uniforms. Within the premises, we also found various traditional Vietnamese musical instruments and live music sessions by the local artists.

The jewel in the crown or the most significant highlight of the trip was our visit to Halong Bay. A four hours drive in the wee hours of the morning took us to the destination and the first sight of the emerald waters and thousands of towering limestone islands topped by rainforests took our breath away and swept us off our feet. As our ship



travelled into the interiors of the bay, I was spellbound by the natural scenic beauty, I had never ever seen anything like this, anything that even comes close to the beauty that Halong Bay has. Apart from the scenic beauty, we also enjoyed the moments spent in the ship where we made friends with a Spanish and British couple who shared our lunch table and together, we attended a workshop where the locals taught us how to make Vietnamese spring rolls. Post lunch, we left the ship and took a boat ride into the interiors of the bay and this experience was fraught with excitement, slight fear, nervousness and delight. Halong Bay was the last stop of our trip to Hanoi and the experience of it will always remain etched in my memory.

Like all other good things, our wonderful Hanoi trip also reached its end and while waiting for our return flight to Mumbai, we came across two more Vietnamese delicacies, the Banh Mi, (a baguette filled with chicken and picked vegetables) and Vietnamese coffee (dark roasted coffee with condensed milk and eggs). The flavours of Banh Mi and the fresh aroma of the Vietnamese coffee remained with us for the rest of our flight back home.

My visit to Hanoi reinforced my belief that travel is indeed an eye opener. Earlier the mention of Vietnam used to only conjure up images of the Vietnamese war but boy, what a revelation I had when I visited the place. I realised that Vietnam is an amazing country with natural scenic beauty, warm, friendly and happy people and of course fabulous food.

Hence, if you enjoy any one of the above or all of the above, I would recommend Vietnam as a must visit place in your travel plans for the future. You will see the country in a different light and would have beautiful memories to cherish for life.

Poems - Mitra Das

এসেছে করোনা

এসেছে করোনা মৃত্যুদূত
হেনেছে আঘাত সবে,
ধনী দরিদ্র শক্তিমান
বাদ নেই তার হাতে।
এসেছে সে আজ
মহাকাল হয়ে
শেখাতে অহঙ্কারে,
শ্রেষ্ঠ সৃষ্টি মানবজাতি
তুচ্ছ যে তার কাছে।
পুরানো যত পাপ আছে সব
শেষ হবে তার হাতে।
নতুন পৃথিবী মুক্ত আকাশ
ফুলে ফুলে ভরা মলয় বাতাস,
পাখি কলরব করে সদা আজ
পশু ঘোরে নির্ভয়ে।
কোভিড নাইনটিন শেখালো
সব পরিবার এক হতে
লুকানো যত প্রতিভা আছে
প্রকাশিত হল সবার মাঝে,
বন্ধ ঘর আনন্দে ভরে
গানে গানে হিল্লোল।
'আমরা সবাই' জলসা
যে আজ
উৎসাহ দেয় প্রতিভা প্রকাশ,
নব নব পরিচয়।

ধন্য করোনা, ফিরে যাও তুমি
আর নয় সহবাস।
ভালো কাজ করে ফিরে যাও
করে মৃত্যুরে বলীদান।
যে একতা শেখালে তুমি
দূষণ মুক্ত প্রকৃতি ও ভূমি
চিরকাল যেন মনে রাখি আমি
তোমার এই অবদান।

The City of Joy - Dr. Asitama Sarkar

“Cha cha, Gorom cha”, yelled the energised little boy
The sun had just begun to set in the city of joy
Gathering in little groups of three or four
Enthusiastic lot gobbled their ‘begunis’
while taking a break from their chore.

Intense debates on differing political views
Gives the city its unparalleled perspicacious hues.
The youthful poets and singers assemble the instruments
on the sidewalk at Park Street Tagore and Manna Dey tunes
resound as the passing crowd tap their feet.

Tram lines run across owning the landscape of the city
Whilst hand-pulled rickshaws tread the narrow paths with
integrity Choosing to travel underground by metro, the traffic
can be given a miss Because let’s face it, blaring horns of those
yellow taxis are never a bliss.

Clumsy fingers dip into clay pots of spongy roshogollas
And the street shoppers wander through the stalls at
Gariahat’s mohollas. The bookworms eagerly ponder over
their muse at College Street And young lovers romance under
Victorian edifice in the sultry heat.

One cannot dismiss the richness of the warmth
and culture, surely The spirits here are always buoyant
and lively. The hustle- bustle of the city is not extraordinary
Yet, it has a unique charm, rather arbitrary.

Of Matches, Mahalaya & Musings...

- Devraj Brahmachari

I am an unabashed cricket lover. I can watch any match with equal enthusiasm and interest, be it a Ranji or World Cup telecast or gully cricket.

The only game I play on my iPad is also cricket. My love for this game is only matched by my extreme inability to play it for real. Something which folks at home constantly use as an argument to snatch away the TV remote as I sit watching the proceedings ball by ball.

Very naturally, for a fan like me, these 6 months of COVID-induced lockdown seemed like the prohibition era. No matches to watch – even in the gully!

The only saviour was YouTube. I would have watched & re-watched highlights of all past World Cup matches, best of Wasim Akram's swing bowling, Sachin's Aussie-domination at Sharjah, Sehwag's 300+ against Pakistan, Mark Greatbatch's pioneering batting, Jayasuriya's blitzkrieg, lofted cover drives of Brian Lara, Dada's inimitable shirtless swagger at Lords and Dhoni's T20 triumph.

So, here I was, after 6 months of starvation, hoping to see some live cricket action as IPL 2020 was about to commence. I have never been particularly star-struck, but here I was smiling, on seeing the faces of Dhoni, Rohit, Faf, Boult, Watson as if they were familiar buddies who I am "meeting" after a long time.

The match lived up to its billing as a humdinger, ebbing and flowing, turning & twisting for 4 hours - and yet, something was different. A deserted stadium in the desert. Loudspeakers trying their best to whip up enthusiasm levels by artificially recreating the crowd cheer and roar.

But alas! The ambience and chutzpah which go into the making of an IPL match were starkly missing. Cheerleaders on LED screens can never substitute for the real ones, can they! Even the players, professional as they are, seemed to miss all this, and their body language showed.

It made me wonder: who are the real stars? Who do I

watch cricket for? Is it the 20 internationally acclaimed and feted players slugging it out in the arena - or the ten thousand strong unknown faces who throng the stadium to watch these 20?

The obvious answer was now oblivious. For the first time, I did not enjoy watching cricket. Not because I was watching it alone from the confines of my living room, but simply because I knew no one was else watching it live from the stadium - the mighty IPL reduced to a mere, meaningless mobile video game in the absence of the "real stars"!

Digital connectivity, for all its hype, can never substitute the genetic coding in our system. One, that makes us social animals who seek completeness in the company of other living beings. Our sense of success and achievement, while being a product of our own hard work without doubt, is meaningless if not acknowledged and shared with the greater humanity around us. Which, despite being nameless, gives us our name & fame, our sense of being, and our existence.

Autumn is that time of the year when the quintessential Bengali blood in me releases chemicals that trigger feelings of irrepressible positivity & joy.

Time for upcoming festivities of Durga Puja. And, Mahalaya marks the beginning of this.

Congregations, chants, prayers & celebrations start in the wee hours of the morning. Not to mention the allure of freshly made Phulkopir Shingara (cauliflower samosa) and Jalebis. There is indeed magic in the air.

However, despite all the seductions, I have never ever been able to attend Mahalaya celebrations. Not because of anything else, but simply because I have never been able to wake up on time - honest to Maa Durga!

And yet - this time, strangely enough, I woke up on time! Despite all the lack of sleep and morning office calls, which have now become a routine and replacement for alarm clocks in these "Work from Home" times.

Despite knowing there is no gathering this time, no prayers & chants, and no celebrations, I still drove down to the venue and got the Samosas & Jalebis, which were still thankfully on offer. But this time, their magic was missing. Not being able to attend Mahalaya was a far better feeling than it not happening!

Mahalaya marks the end of a protracted battle between Maa Durga with the evil, shape-shifting demon Lord Mahishasur. She descends from Her heavenly abode upon Earth to partake the devotion and love of Her people for the next 10 days and celebrates the victory of good over evil.

By now, saying that circa 2020 is an aberration is a gross understatement.

In a first of sorts, which even our grandparents are finding hard to recall, never before have celestial arrangements been such, where the time-lapse between Mahalaya and Vijay Dashami is 35 days instead of 10.

Call me unscientific, but is this a mere coincidence? Could our science have seen "Evil" coming eons ago? For all the ritualistic regression that our culture has suffered from, could this incident be proof that the scientific principles underlying our beliefs are still intact and sound? The metaphor is uncannily complete, and the parallels obvious.

At a time when cities of the real world disturbingly resemble dystopian frames of 'Resident Evil Apocalypse', it is indeed a protracted battle that human civilization wages against the shape-shifting, mutating "Coronasur."

It is a stark reminder, a harsh wake-up call for us about how tumultuous our world still is. And how insignificant our daily challenges, petty squabbles, and even existence as a species is, in the grand scheme of things.

This year, more than ever, we will need Maa Durga to be with us for a longer time. This year, it will take a lot more before we can rejoice in the victory of good over evil - of existence over extinction.

This Lockdown, Unlock your Kindness **- Paramita Banerjee**

The coronavirus lockdown has not only forced the entire world indoors but has put our four-legged strays in extreme distress. The unavailability of food and water in the scorching summer and totally wet monsoons is impacting stray animals all over the country.

They don't know whom to turn towards for food and some water. In the beginning, people believed that they could be carriers of the coronavirus and were shunned, but thankfully that was set right by a WHO circular, and better sense prevailed.

I was taken aback to see how strays were dying out of starvation all over the country. But we (me and a couple of my friends) didn't let a single animal die out of starvation in Powai across Hiranandani and places surrounding Hiranandani.

The day the countrywide lockdown was declared, we got onto a call and decided upon our plan of action. We all have families with children, senior citizens, and yet we promised ourselves not to stop feeding stray animals a single day.

Every day in the mornings, we stepped out with our feeder card and our own vehicle, and the Mumbai Police deserves a note of thanks for letting us feed the fur babies without any interference whatsoever.

But can we do miracles? No, I guess. There were accidents, hit and run cases during the lockdown. Unbelievable, isn't it?

When a small 4-month-old pup was playing happily in full daylight with his tummy full, one so-called human drove over him and didn't even stop to check what happened to him. I rushed there, picked up the baby, but we lost him right on my lap. Who do I blame? What do I do? I buried him and told him,

"Run freely, baby across the rainbow bridge". I broke down, but again, the next day was a new day.

I visited one of the places where I could see beautiful newborn pups. What a cycle of life? We took them out from a small drain outlet, and again a new journey started.

Feeding them, medicating them when there was hardly any vet except the one who is our friend in our group, vaccinate them, and make them live.

They are now 8 months old healthy babies. They are very special to me. Yes, they are "strays" since they are born on the road, but their love and loyalty are no less than that of a pet. Who determines that it is a "stray" so don't touch, he will be untidy? It's a myth. They are much cleaner from within than most of us.

They can't express, they can't post their depression on social media, they can't go for a protest march, but they can get equally hurt. They also suffer when hit or end up being roadkill, and they can't express much except those two drops of tears that remain largely unnoticed.

This lockdown broke me into pieces when I lost my senior girl Suzy, who died in my arms but held her last breath till the time I told her to go peacefully. She waited for me to reach after being hit by a car an hour back.

But I believe she is in a better place now. She is enjoying and jumping around exactly the way she used to, upon seeing me. She would follow me across the entire Eden Market and drop me to my car. Now when I go to Eden, there is no one to follow me. I look back, but she is not there.

We can't change destiny, but we can change the world, the way people think. A little bit of empathy and co-existence can make a better world. The lack of those qualities in humans is the only reason that has me wondering how??

I have taken an oath of helping these stray animals be it dogs, cats, bulls, cows or birds. They are God's blessing to us, they give us back unconditional love, many times the little something we do for them. I will keep on doing this till my last breath. It's a feeling of happiness that can't be expressed in words.

P.S: I am not much of a writer. I have expressed above what I feel on a daily basis. Construction, articulation, etc may please be excused. Our group is called 'Feed the Soul' as we believe that we are feeding our souls and not the fur babies. If you would like to help or contribute, do connect with me.



*Boochki,
the Glamour Girl of Galleria*



*Shiva, who was rescued
after being hit by a rod*



*Chchutki,
the tiny lovable one*



The Gunda Gang

The Red Sands of Namib - Dr. Suranjan Mukherjee

The warm winter sun cast its rays on us as we started the trek up the dune. As we slowly ascended, a cloak of blue fog began to recede, revealing the red sands of the Namib. Straight ahead, "Big Daddy" was floating in the blue fog, creating a surreal image. Looking down to the left and right, we saw naked trees frozen in time, lifeless in a white, desolate expanse. This was Deadvlei.

Deadvlei, which means dead marsh, is surrounded by some of the highest dunes in the world, including "Big Daddy", which stands more than 320m tall, and "Crazy Dune".

Situated beside the Atlantic Ocean, the Namib Desert is the oldest desert, approximately 43 million years old. The shapes of the dunes are constantly changing, especially near the coastline. With very minimal rainfall, the lifeblood for life in the Namib is the fog, formed by the Benguela current.

Sossusvlei, a salt and clay pan, contains some of the most spectacular and sensational sights in Africa and the world. It is located in Namib-Naukluft Park, the largest conservation area in Africa. Deadvlei is roughly 2km from Sossusvlei.

The sand dunes of Sossusvlei are, unarguably, one of the finest creations of nature. Westerly winds from Naukluft collide with eastern Atlantic winds, preventing the advancement of the dunes, and the sand is pushed up to gigantic heights. The prime time for viewing these dunes is during sunrise and sunset when the colours are strong and change constantly, creating probably one of the most spectacular sights in Namibia.

Dune 45 is the most popular and easily accessible dune to climb and where most people view the bewitching sunrise and sunset. The colours of the dunes change every instant from vivid pink to brick red. Shadows slowly brighten from black to dark blue, creating a stark contrast.

It is astonishing how life can exist in this extremely hostile environment where the daytime temperature exceeds 40-degree centigrade and the night temperature plummets down to below freezing. Survival requires adaptation to both of these extremes of temperature.

Getting there

Sesriem is well connected from Windhoek, Namibia's capital, and Walvis Bay; both cities have an international airport. The car drive takes about four and a half hours from either of the cities. Sesriem gate (the entrance to the park) is around 60km from Sossusvlei. The park opens at dawn and closes at dusk. It is advisable to take a 4x4 car, which is easily available for rent, since the conditions of the roads are not up to par.

Accommodations

There are a wide variety of accommodations available from camping grounds to admirable lodges in Sesriem. Inside the park, there is the Sossus Dune lodge and Sesriem Campsite, which allow the visitors to view the dunes before sunrise and after sunset. Outside the park, Sossusvlei lodge is a ravishing lodge very close to the gate. Warm clothing is essential as temperatures can plummet down to zero degrees in the morning.



*Skeletons of
Camel thorn Trees*



*An Oryx in the foreground of
a towering dune*



*Blue hue of the Atlantic fog embracing
the towering dunes in Sossusvlei*



*Condensed fog from air cooled by the
cold Benguela current*



Reddish Brown colour of the dunes from the rich Iron oxide



Panoramic view of the Namib desert from atop the golden dunes

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Lighthouse - Raj Dakshit

I am stuck in the ocean of numerous tides,
Where every bit of me seems distorted and confused.

Neither do I know where I am,
Nor why I am so bemused.

The once tranquil tides of ocean,
Abruptly turn into a violent set of waves.

There I am in my boat of abstract thoughts,
Concealed in my dim and isolated caves.

Suddenly, my sight falls upon a
bright spark of light, Flashing in all four
directions incessantly.

It is a lighthouse with its blazing beacon,
Rekindling my dying aspirations brilliantly.

Passion rekindled and senses heightened,
I carry on with my journey called life.

Learn to embrace my strengths,
Sharpened like the edge of a knife.

What doesn't kill me,
Just makes me stronger.

I am ready for the world,
Cannot wait a moment longer.

One can't always stay in comfort.
One day you will have to leave your house.

Sometimes you just need a nudge,
Or a flashing lighthouse.

Reflections - Deboshree Gupta

Monsoon blues
heady breeze
tranquil shores
choppy seas

Today's joy
tomorrow's grief
follow one another
the long, the brief

Defeat faced
victory won
day end dusk
shining dawn

Anger, glee
two sides to
a coin the expert,
the learner
connected,
conjoined

Give hope a chance
despair let's ditch
sad but true
they too co-exist.

Blushed the cheeks
Pursed the lips
Kohled the eyes
Coloured the lids

Painted the nails
Straightened
the mane Uff,
these months
Have just been
insane

Teamed the dress
With sparkling gems
Fixed the heels
Dabbed the
fragrance

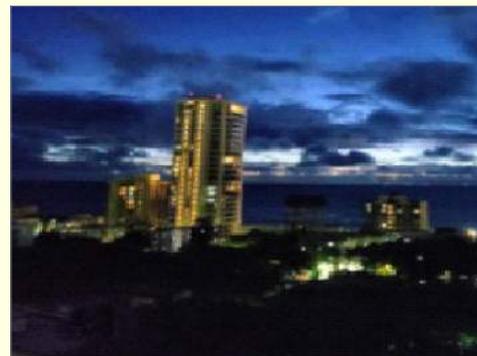
Slung the bag
Here I go
Oh, have to
Wear the mask
Oh, no!

Yet another sunset
the sky on fire
the beautiful world
in a queer quagmire

I pause to reflect
the year passes by
autumn arrives
in the pathway
scattered leaves lie

Banish the thought
am I next in line
wash, mask, distance
All's going to be fine

Curtailed we may be
this wasn't our choice
festivities beckon
make most of it
cheer up, rejoice!



Kolkata: A city through the eyes of a Mumbaikar - Kashmira Dakshit

Being a woman born in Kolkata, I feel guilty for inadequate association with my roots. Although I think the short-term visits, made after a significant time, made me truly treasure my acquaintance which wouldn't have been possible if I visited the city more recurrently.

Over the years of multiple visits, I envisioned the city as a huge bubble which preserved every aestheticism with gradual and minute changes. I guess that's the reason why it efficaciously effused the homely vibes, making me nostalgic.

To have a true taste of Kolkata, I believe one should travel there by train rather than plane. The journey of discovering the city starts early in the morning when it touches the outskirts. It's not the alarm clocks waking you up, but the long hauls of the hawkers, the mouth-boggling scents of freshly cooked vegetable chops and *phulgobhir singhara* (cauliflower samosas) and the hot brewed Darjeeling tea served in small brown earthen cups. Trains seldom arrive in the city at this hour of the day. Hence, lucky are the ones who get this opportunity.

Despite being a city, its atmosphere has a different persona: more freshness, more sweetness. It's serene, making one feel indigenous to this place. It helps to forget the fast, chaotic urban-life and pollution. The random sightings of *Kaash phool* by the tracks dignifies the therapeutic beauty, completing the welcoming process.

As a Mumbaikar, spotting porters as soon as the train touches the platform has always surprised me. It reminded me of what I had witnessed in old movies: people wearing red kurta, short white dhoti, a red-white checked *gamcha* (towel) wrapped around their heads with a big round

golden disc, with their identification number carved on, tied around their arm. This reflected the convenient, simple and easy life in Kolkata.



Every city has a list: a to-do list to feel the spirit of a city. For Kolkata, it begins with riding the yellow taxis: old, yellow-painted ambassadors running in the city for years, and are as iconic as the rare *kaali peelis* (black and yellow ambassador taxis) Mumbai has, yet more spotable. They are the city's own fireflies.

Right outside the station is one of the proudest architectures of Kolkata: the Howrah Bridge. It beautifully transitions from nothing on one side to everything the city consists of on the other. Reminds me of Mumbai's Bandra-Worli sealink. Both are majestic in their own ways: one is new and huge whereas the other one is the oldest and ever-standing. There can be no comparison.



On crossing this gateway, we arrive at my most adored part of the city: North Kolkata. Yes, similar to Mumbai, Kolkata is divided into North and South too. On the contrary, the North preserves the heritage here. If desired, one could breathe in Kolkata's true essence here. The packed dwellings, narrow alleys, unpretentiously-clothed people and archaic English architecture reflect simplicity and pristine beauty.



While being known for its vintage culture, it also showcases urbanisation at the famous Park Street and South Kolkata. Although filled with streaks of famous store outlets, malls, handicraft shops, eateries and comparatively tall buildings, they are less dense concrete jungles than Mumbai. Irrespective of modernisation, something still holds onto its nature. Maybe it is the air, the sand, or the water.

On further traversing into the city, all kinds of rickshaws can be witnessed. Right from the unique *Tana-rickshaw* (Hand-pulled rickshaws) to cycle rickshaws, and *Toto* (cycle-motorized rickshaws) to *Tum-tums* (fully motorized rickshaws). Unlike Mumbai, the *tum-tums* work with a twist here: car-pooling.

Kolkata can be called a museum of transportation. Adding to the collection are the metal boxes with windows and a Bengali route description board

called buses. They are similar to the red ST buses of Mumbai, only older, smaller and more colorful. Tourists resembling me, who struggle reading Bengali script, would have a tough time knowing where the buses would lead them to. Similar to a truism or epigram: nobody knows where life will take us.

Trams and metros equally intrigue me. One runs on roads, alongside cars and buses, with their tracks camouflaging into the roads; and the other's lifeline dwells underground. Kolkata is the first and oldest city to have both of these. All these modes run within short ranges thus making the network compact. Even though they are old, they run on the concept of reducing pollution quite significantly, thus, successfully keeping the air so unadulterated.



This city is meant not only to live simple and clean, but also to savour lavish food which one cannot resist. Each time I am back in Mumbai, I long for the famous *puchkas*, street rolls, *chaats*, and kebabs, fish fries and biryanis. They are not just food. They lead to a trail of undiscovered cravings and deep-seated taste buds. Even after their obsession with fish and mutton (which is totally justifiable), I have never seen a non-vegetarian being more experimental with the non non-vegetarian part of it. Kolkata is

also known to be the epicentre of devising varieties of sweets. I feel that each sweet portrays an emotion. Bengalis celebrate food.

Besides food, they also celebrate festivities with all their heart. During this season, every corner of civilization has a small pandal with an idol in it. It is decorated with some lighting and music, with local people dancing and enjoying themselves. This modesty fascinated me as it emphasized on worship of the idol by people of all kinds. I have always missed this amongst the pompousness and grandiosity of the festivities in Mumbai. Big fiestas only seem to digress from the true reasons.



Even though life there is slow-paced, the time to embrace what's happening around us is more. Contradicting Mumbai, where life moves in a flash and one is left behind without a choice. I do not know which is an efficient way of living. But if I had to reconnect with the basics of life and humanity, I would always travel back to Kolkata.



Love & Marriage - Then & Now - Bratati Sengupta

THEN

“Love is Eternal, Love is God, the Creator created the universe out of love”. At the core, all creative activities are fueled by love and joy. Love maybe Divine (spiritual), universal or maybe between a man and a woman. Hierarchy-wise, love without reciprocal expectation, with expectation but driven by goodwill, and with expectation and driven by desire, can be seen as a continuum in the man-woman relationship variant.

From time immemorial, love has been happening; while some culminate in union (marriage), some go unrequited. In mythology, there are myriad stories of love. King Sambaran and Tapati, Sage Vishwamitra and Menaka, Agni and Swaha, Lord Shiva and Parvati - fall in the first category. Then there are the ones of unrequited type like Kacha (son of Devaguru Brihaspati) and Devyani (daughter of Daityaguru Shukracharya).

Later in this era, similar unrequired examples are plentiful: Rami - Chandidas, Vidya - Vilwamangal, Heer - Ranjha, Laila - Majnu etc.

There's much prose, poetry and drama with love as a theme.

Tagore's love-poems and songs having that characteristic eternal meaning and melody are cherished by most of us. Equally memorable would be Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and Sharat Chandra's novels, often with a tragic ending.

Come to think of it, "Puja" and "Prem", in the era's bygone, were inextricably almost two sides of the same coin.

During our childhood, "love", of the man-woman type, appeared to be taboo. May be the tragic outcome of quite a few literary creations of repute, like Sharat Chandra's "Devdas", played their own role, in shaping social perceptions of "love". Devdas resorted to

alcohol and began an irreversible downslide to death, when he could not get his love Parvati. Parvati had asked - "Devdas, is there not enough water in this river to wash away my kalanka (sin)?"

Thus, love started getting equated to sin, free mixing between boys and girls were frowned upon and discouraged. If discovered, the families and community would make all out efforts to even separate the boy and the girl, even at the cost of predictably sad outcomes.

Society failed to see that no one knows who will be pierced by the Cupid's arrow, and when. No one seems to have realized that it was futile to grapple with an "uncontrollable" emotion.

NOW

To varying degrees, in some cultures and geographies, the myopia and social stigma attached to "love", still does persist. Even today, we do get to read about honor killings. However, in most of the urbanized geographies at large, reasonably free mixing of boys and girls, from quite an early age, is no longer an oddity.

There is also this trend of a consciously chosen experiential trial-period of "live-in", in liberated metros, where couples test it out for an agreed time period before they decide to take the relationship forward to culminate into marriage, or continue the status quo of "live-in", or go their own separate ways. In quite a few occasions, these incidents are with the full knowledge and support of the respective families.

However, unlike yesteryears, when an unrequited love more often than not, did not end up with a violent ending (albeit a tragic one), in modern times, the streaks of violence in instances of unrequited love seems to be on the rise. Even amongst the "educated" masses.

We often read in the media gory tales where shunned / jilted / unrequited lovers, mostly males, indulge in acid attacks, knifing, murder - resulting in either deformity or loss of life of their loved ones. In few

cases, there are incidents of rape, with quite a few miscreants getting away scot-free.

Apart from these aberrations, there also seems to be an increasing sense of impatience in partners who have decided to culminate their relationship to marriage. Call it the stressful existence, role of social media, and many other influences of modern times, without giving each other adequate space and time to understand each other, partners decide to divorce at the drop of a hat. In case they happen to be parents when the divorce happens, fight for custody of the child have also become commonplace, causing serious enough psychological damage to the child.

This is not to really end up criticizing the modernity and free-mindedness of youngsters and their families. For instance, it does seem to be common logic that whether through live-in or otherwise, today's society is permissive enough to allow youngsters to fall in love, and test the waters first through a "trial" period, whether exclusively spelt out or not, before deciding to part with each other or consummate the relationship into marriage (in case they have started looking at each other from point of view of plausible life-partner). In a way, this seems to be better than bringing two unknown people together in an institution of marriage, before even giving them a chance to know each other well enough and vet the compatibility angle.

To conclude, it has become evident that whatever may be the changing complexion and trajectory of man-woman relationship in the history of mankind, love will continue to be the cornerstone of man-woman relationship of the non-platonic kind. Irrespective of whether love converges with marriage or not, love has been, and might continue to be the foundation on which respect and trust, the two other essential virtues, can rest and bloom.

Love was there, is there, and will be there. Love is eternal, love is beautiful, love is God, love is the creation...

The Journey of life - Dr. N. G. Sengupta

This is a true story narrated to me by a very close friend. The story is regarding a hardly literate poor village boy and what he achieved in life, with little assistance from others. He is Ramu, the hero of this story. I will now proceed to narrate the story in first person, the way I heard it from my friend.

QUOTE

One autumn night about thirty-six years ago, a haggard boy aged ten or eleven years landed at the front porch of my bungalow a little after 10 p.m. He told me that he was sent by a person known to me, who used to work at my residence as a domestic help quite some years ago. When I mentioned this boy's arrival to my wife, she said, "Let us take him in; let us feed him and ask him to sleep in the kitchen tonight".

With just one side bag that constituted his meagre belongings, the boy gingerly stepped in. When asked about food, he politely declined. Just drank some water from a lota (pot), and drifted off to sleep in the kitchen.

The next morning onwards, he worked relentlessly till noon. Post lunch, we decided to go in for a small siesta and advised him to do so. After nearly an hour, I woke up to some noise outside. Tracking the source of the noise, I found him digging the land at the rear of our house. When I asked him, pat came the reply, "Saab, I will sow some vegetable seeds, water and till the land well, and develop this area into a proper vegetable garden". I heard him mentioning to my wife the next day "Memsaab, home grown vegetables are much tastier than what you get in the market, wait and see". Very soon hereinafter, the produce from this vegetable garden made my veggie buying trips to the market redundant. By this time, my wife had already named him, Ramu.

Soon he started accompanying me to the market for grocery and provisions, fruits, eggs, fish and meat etc.

and within a year, expertly got the activity transferred to himself. He started taking pride in the fact that he had outperformed me in terms of "buying the best at lowest price". The boy did not have any addictions and used to hardly spend about Rs.25/- a month on himself for basic necessities. I taught him how to count properly, and sold him the idea of savings. I got a Rs.50/- a month term deposit opened for him in the nearby Post Office.

Incidentally, the boy had parents and siblings and relatives in his village at Bihar, but did not visit them for the first three years.

After three years, he went to his village for the first time for about a week, and gave all the Rs. 3000/- to his parents, whatever had accrued to him through the term deposit till then. Thereafter, he continued visiting his village once every two years and continued giving away his "savings" to his parents.

After he spent nearly ten years with us, I recommended his candidature for a prospective lower grade entry level job in the government with a great deal of difficulty and lo and behold, he passed the screening and got selected.

However, despite getting a full-time government job, his sense of loyalty towards us remained intact and he continued working for us at our house.

Then came my transfer orders to another city, in a different State. I asked him whether he wanted to be posted near his village or stay back in the current city. He declined both and said, "Saab, aaplog jahan bhee jayenge, main aaplog on ke saath hee jaoonga".

Though managing this inter-State transfer for him necessitated quite a few appeals and lobbying, I had little choice, knowing his mind. Eventually, his transfer could be secured and he moved with us to the new location.

Even when I had retired, I asked him well in advance about his future plans. His stand remained

unchanged.

In the interim, he found a girl whom he wanted to marry and who belonged to a local family with similar background. We catalyzed the event to the best extent possible.

Apart from being sincere and diligent in all his ventures, he learnt investing widely in different instruments and grew his savings manifold. Picked up small stakes in local businesses including milk and fruits vending, tourist cars, and even an auto-rickshaw that got him a reasonable return. He demonstrated true streaks of entrepreneurship and wealth creation, without a so-called formal education to do so.

Though he himself was just a matriculate, he deeply revered the importance of education and over the years could not only read Hindi fluently but also English, though bit unsteadily. One area of reading where he was perfect in both Hindi and English was NUMBERS.....!!! He never ever made any mistake in counting money.

He could add, subtract, multiply, divide, quite deftly, without much of a paper pencil. By now, he had children, and had put his daughters through school and college."

UNQUOTE

Recently, I happened to bump into my close friend and casually asked him about Ramu. My friend pleasantly informed me that Ramu was just fine and had two houses, out of which one was in fairly upmarket Society with independent swimming pool and gym! He had given out this house on rent and continued staying with his wife and three daughters in his modest 2-BHK, the first flat that he had purchased.

He has bought over the auto-rickshaw and the tourist car both, and was earning regular proceeds from them which were sent directly to his village.

He had upped his stake in several other smaller side businesses. He has purchased additional agricultural land in his village, and had constructed additional rooms and renovated existing ones of his parental house.

He had slowly and steadily, due to his sheer dedication without dereliction or negligence of duty at any point, moved up the ranks in his government job and was earning a handsome enough salary that was sweetened further by the multiple pay revisions in between.

However, in this entire tenure, never ever did he give us any chance to complain about his devotion to our household chores, which he continued to do and supervise. Nor did any of the government authorities ever questioned him about his on-the-job performance.

His working hours had become longer, but he was brilliantly multi-tasking and not just managing, but growing on all fronts.

It is really a rags-to-riches saga, a story of how passionate and unrelenting determination makes a difference. The tale of the intrepid small village lad, who dreamt big in life and made it happen.

An incredible journey indeed!

Shopping in New York - Neha Neogi

New York City is renowned for its world-class shopping but less so for its malls. The city is dense, spaces are small, and it doesn't seem like the sort of place you'd find a giant, sprawling malls -but they do exist.

Some are tucked deep in the concrete jungle of Manhattan, while others take up expansive parts of outer boroughs. No matter which you prefer, if you're looking to get some major buying done, this guide is for you.

Instead, New York's streets are designed to be a type of walking mall that spans the city. Still, there are some neighbourhoods and centres where locals head when they're looking for that perfect something.

Take So Ho, for example. A previous haven for artists, warehouses and loft spaces, this block of streets has now been taken over by some of the best shopping in the city. You'll find everything from Bloomingdale's to Brooks Brothers, plus high-end designers and vintage stores.

Visitors also would be remiss to skip Fifth Avenue, especially during the holidays. The window displays alone are enough to pull you close, and all the biggest names in fashion are headquartered here.

For a more local experience (and more palatable price tags), visit The Brooklyn Flea. Not only will you find up-and-coming designers selling their wares, but you'll also be able to sample the delicious goods from the borough's best food stalls.

Brooklyn Flea Markets are the best to go when you actually want good stuff at a low price, and good food. Its fun to hang around in these flea markets.

Although Brooklyn and Manhattan were once pegged against each other, it's high time that we see there's great value in both districts. Extremely hip

and fashionable, the streets of Williamsburg have an impressive array of street murals and art.

Hipsters congregate here, whether they are composing a song in a trendy cafe or scouring flea markets and food bazaars. For vintage clothing or local independent stores, even Manhattanites have to admit that it is worth making it over to Brooklyn.

Ignore the chains and try something different, like Desert Island, a must for any comic book nerd, or catbird, a boutique shop featuring local jewellers and designers.

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Silver Lining of a Pandemic

- Sanjukta Lahiri

On 24th March, 2020, when our Prime Minister announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown due to Coronavirus, little did we know, that this announcement would bring our lives to a complete standstill, changing most things around us. At first, this news seemed to be a blessing for a student like me. After all, I was getting a vacation and exams were postponed. But as time passed, 21 days became 42 and soon it seemed like a never ending 'vacation' that no one wanted anymore. Our lives began to revolve around wearing masks, sanitizing hands and maintaining six feet distance.

They say that news travels fast but fake news travels faster. As we kept getting bombarded with unsubstantiated 'WhatsApp forwards', articles on print, electronic and social media, it led to a state of complete confusion and soon the 'happy vacation' feeling disappeared and was replaced with tension and anxiety. Cure was nowhere to be found, cases were on the rise and living in the 'city with the highest coronavirus cases' fuelled our fear and uncertainty over this invisible predator.

But every stormy cloud has a silver lining.

Waking up everyday during this crisis, I looked out of my window only to realise how the chaos from the roads, caused by traffic noise and air pollution had disappeared. A pleasant cacophony of birds accompanied by a fresh breeze greeted me every morning as I tried recollecting the last time I felt nature outside my window. At dawn, as the sun begins to rise, an orangish, yellow glow casts over the city skies, reflecting off every building. It had been a while since Bombay skies looked this pretty. Its beauty has always been my weakness. This lockdown had indeed begun the process of healing Mother Nature.

It took a pandemic for us to realise that our safety lies in our hands, literally! From the mother reminding their child to wash their hands before a meal to a factory worker signing off after a long day with clean hands and a splash of water on the face-washing hands and face has been a part of our daily routine for as long as we can remember. Yet, when the pandemic began, it once again reminded us just how important hygiene and sanitation is.

I decided to work on a few healthy habits myself and ensure regular hygiene in my daily routine once again. I began to follow a strict skin care routine, did daily workouts, washed my hands and face every time I came from outside, followed by a nice long bath. During this period, due to the absence of our daily help, the chores were divided among the members of the house. My father and I were responsible to sweep and mop the floors, while my mother took over the kitchen in terms of cooking and cleaning. My grandmother, despite her health condition, helped out by washing her own cup in the sink and sometimes, went ahead and did the dishes while making sure she's not caught in the act. This was her small way of contributing to the family chores.

While the lockdown has been challenging for many, it has also been about picking up a hobby or polishing a skill that was lost amidst the hustle of our busy lives. I, too decided to indulge in polishing some of my skills and learn a few more.

I took my time to explore the contemporary style of dance and fell in love with its graceful ways which in turn helped me to express my feelings through movement and music. I also participated in online dance performances, some of which were telecasted live on Zoom while others were pre-recorded and then played later for the audience. Transforming my house into an online stage and moving around furniture to make space, practicing with my friends

over Zoom calls, and making my mother the 'video grapher' did come with its challenges but I would not trade this amazing experience for anything.

Like dance, I like expressing my thoughts through my drawings and paintings as well. I decided to capture every emotion I felt and painted every aspect that inspired me during this period through art. On days when I felt a little too patient, I drew detailed mandalas, while other days, my inspired self painted the Bombay sunset. My mother noticed my rekindled interest in painting and asked me to make something for her as well. In such times, the role of art becomes more central to our lives, whether we realize it or not. Art can set your imagination free and help you come out of this house arrest for a while and that's what it did to me.

Cooking and baking has turned out to be my escape from this scary reality and sometimes, from studying. It all started when I participated in the 'Dalгона Coffee' trend. My first attempt turned out to be so delicious that it motivated me to try out more complex recipes and dishes from various cuisines. Being a foodie, I missed being able to satisfy my cravings by just 'Swiggy-ing it' or make an impromptu dinner/lunch plan. I began cooking various items with the help of Maa and YouTube videos. As I dived into the world of food blogs and recipes, it got pretty intimidating but I was always up for a challenge. During this lockdown, my mother and I have cooked food items that we would never even bother to make, using cuisines that we eat only at a restaurant. Watching my cooking skills upgrade from making a mean plate of 'Butter Maggi' to whipping up something decent for the family has boosted my confidence. There is something really genuine about having people appreciate your food. It gives me more and more reasons to continue exploring the culinary world, one amateur step at a time.

Lockdown has taught us various ways to love and bond with our family. Extra hours at work, tiring commutes and additional work/ college responsibilities prevented us from spending quality time with our loved ones. Here at the Lahiri family, we came up with new traditions in order to bond. We sat together at the dining table every day to eat our meals and discuss various topics. Every night post dinner we transformed the family hall into a theatre room, commencing 'Movie time' and during the day we completed the house chores while dancing and singing along to Bollywood hits - 'Laila Laila' and 'Garmi'. Doing things together as a family made us realise how ignorant we have been to the little things in life and how important it is to appreciate and cherish every moment we spend with our loved ones.

This lockdown has indeed been a boon in disguise in a certain way for most of us. Life isn't always 'Rainbows and Sunshine'. It has taught me to evolve, upgrade and be resilient to change. The world is going through an unprecedented period but challenges like these are the ones that test and define us as the person we are today and we owe it to our future self to keep moving onward and upwards!

Busting The Myths - Sanchita R. Chowdhury

It goes without saying that this pandemic has been a life changing event for most of us and has taught us so many things. Most importantly, it busted several myths and misconceptions that I believed in before this whole thing started.

First and foremost, myth was that life cannot function without maids and that they are our lifelines. I could never dare to imagine my life without maids. Come March and I was devastated by how the upcoming days would be like without a maid. But now, after 6 months of doing all the household work with of course the much needed help of my family, I can proudly say that I can live without a maid for now at least.

Another myth that got busted was that 'Work From Home (WFH) is not possible'. Turns out it actually is very much possible for most of the sectors.

I used to think before that my dear husband cannot handle household workload and that my daughter can't cook anything beyond Maggie and Omelette but I am surprised at how both of them have proven me completely wrong. While my husband has shared our household responsibilities, my daughter with the help of cooking videos can now cook many varieties of dishes. And I am so relieved and happy about it. Infact we both together have tried many new recipes which did match up to the taste of the much missed hotel food. It was indeed a boon for us during the lockdown when the hotels were shut.

Sadly, the myth that I wished was true but it is unfortunately not, is that TV news channels give us "unbiased news". I have observed that most of

them care more about raising their TRPs. Most news channels support a certain narrative dictated by either the ruling party or the opposition. It is rare to find a good news channel nowadays that tells us news and not narratives.

Before the pandemic, ordering food or outings or shopping was mandatory for us at least once in a week to feel rejuvenated but Corona times proved that spending time with your family, watching TV Series or movies or making exquisite food, pursuing an old wrapped up hobby could do good too and most importantly save money which is an unavoidable, positive side effect.

We used to think that we humans are the most superior species of this planet. But this also was a myth that got busted way back in March 2020. This entire year was not how we expected it would be. Most of it has been spent in lockdown and we still continue to be in the captivity of this virus. While we still continue to live in fear, we are hopeful that this too shall pass soon and we will get through this. We definitely will.

Aamar Pujobela - Parama Sen Majumder

আমার পুজোবেলা

আমি হলাম যাকে বলে চিরকালের ঐটুলি পোকার মতো পুজোর মজা নিঃশেষ করে চুষে নেওয়া পাটি। জ্ঞান হওয়ার পর থেকেই আমাকে এই ব্যাপারে টেক্সা দেওয়ার মতো আমার ধারেকাছে অন্তত কাউকে পাইনি। আমার বাবা অবিশ্যি অনেকটা কম্পিটিশন দেওয়ার জায়গায় ছিলেন, কিন্তু ভদ্রলোক আমার চেয়ে অনেকটাই আগে জন্মেছেন, ফলে আমার চেয়ে আগে বুড়োও হয়েছেন, তাই উনিও বয়সোচিত কারণে এখন রণে ভঙ্গ দিয়েছেন। ফলে আমার কাছে ফাঁকা ময়দান, আর আমি একা মারাদোনা, হাত-পা, সবকিছু নিয়ে পটাপট বল জালে!

এবার সকলকে বলে দেওয়া ভাল যে, আমি কেন পুজো চ্যাম্পিয়ন। অনেক ভেবেচিন্তে দেখলুম, ব্যাপারটা বেশ কালটিভট করে তবে সিদ্ধান্তে পৌঁছনো যাবে। আমি নিজেই মুকুট পরিয়ে ফেলেছি বটে, কিন্তু যাঁরা আমাকে এখনও হাউডুগুডিতে চেনেন না, তাঁদের জন্য আমি তিনটি লেভেলে আমার পুজোবেলাকে ভাগ করছি। পড়ুন, বুঝুন, আত্মস্থ করুন, তারপর ভিন্নমত হলে বরং আমাকে ফোন করে নেবেন, তা নিয়ে চায়ের কাপ-শিঙাড়া সহযোগে তর্কে বসা যাবে।

বিশ্বকর্মা শুরু

ছোটবেলা, মানে যবে থেকে ঘটনাবলী মনে আছে, তবে থেকে শুরু করে এই ধরন ক্লাস এইট পর্যন্ত। মানে, যদি বাবার হাত ধরে ঠাকুর দেখতে বেরিয়েছি। তখন আমার পুজো শুরু হত দু'ভাবে, একেবারে ছোটবেলায় যেদিন বিশ্বকর্মা পুজোর দিন আকাশে ঘুড়ির লড়াই দেখতে পেতাম, পাড়ার বিভিন্ন একতলা-দোতলা বাড়ির ছাদ থেকে কিছুক্ষণ পরপর শোনা যেত 'ভোওওওওকাট্রা...', যেদিন সকালে বাবার হাত ধরে তাঁর ফ্যাক্টরিতে যেতাম (বাবা ছিলেন CESC-র নিউ কাশীপুর জেনারেটিং স্টেশনের ইঞ্জিনিয়ার, ফলে বাবার অফিস হল পাওয়ার স্টেশন, মানে গোদা বাংলায় ফ্যাক্টরি), বিশাল ফ্যাক্টরির মধ্যে গুচ্ছখানে ক ডিপার্টমেন্ট আর তাতে বড়-মেজো-সেজো, নানা সাইজের ঠাকুর, প্রতিটা ডিপার্টমেন্টে বাবাকে সকলে 'সেনসাহেব আসুন, বসুন' বলে ডাকত আর তাতে আমার পুঁচকে ছাতি ইয়া চওড়া হয়ে যেত, সেখানে বেঁটে বোতলে কমলা গোল্ড স্পট আর শুকনো বাঁদে দিয়ে তৈরি লাডডু খেতাম আর বেশ কয়েক বাস্ক মিস্ট্রি নিয়ে বাড়ি ফিরতাম। এই মিস্ট্রির বাস্কের ভিতরের জিনিসগুলো পরে বেশ কয়েকদিন আমার স্কুলের টিফিন বাস্ক জায়গা পেত... যাক গে, সেই দিনটিতে বুঝতে পারতাম, বিশ্বকর্মা ইন, অতএব মা দুগগাও কৈলাসে বাস্ক-প্যাঁটার গোছাতে শুরু করে দিয়েছেন আর কী...বাড়ি ফিরেই মাকে জিজ্ঞেস করে নিতাম পুজোটা ঠিক কবে আর তারপর থেকে দিন গোনার শুরু। যেদিন বিকেলে স্কুলবাস থেকে নামার পর গলির ঠাকুরের প্যাশ্বেলের বাঁশ বাঁধা দেখতে পেতাম, অমনই মনটা খুশি হয়ে যেত, কারণ, ব্যস, আর হাতে গোনা কয়েকটা দিন, তারপরই অফুরন্ত মজা-ছুটি-শাসনহীন দিনগুলোর শুরু...

আসলে পুজো মানে তখন বেহিসেবি মজা। ফুচকা খেলে মা বকবে না, প্যাশ্বেলে বসে ক্যাপ ফাটলে বকবে না, তেঁতুলের আচার খেলে বকবে না, তার উপর প্রতিদিন দুপুরে ভাল-ভাল রান্না, রাতে বাইরে খাওয়া, বাবা-মা'র সঙ্গে ষষ্ঠী থেকে ঠাকুর দেখা শুরু, ষষ্ঠীর দিন বাড়িতে আসবে একটা বড় কোল্ড ড্রিন্কার বোতল, যেটা পুরো পুজো ধরে আমি একটু-একটু করে খাব...উফফ, তখন মনে হত, বছরের সবক'টা দিনই প্যাশ্বেলে মা দুগগা থেকে যান না, ক্ষতি কী!

ঠাকুর দেখার 'শিল্পকর্ম', ছোটবেলায়

এবার আসি আমার ঠাকুর দেখার গল্পে। এই ব্যাপারটাকে আমি আর সেনবাবু পুরো শিল্পে পরিণত করে ফেলেছিলাম। আমরা থাকতাম উত্তর কলকাতার দমদমে। বাবার ইলেক্ট্রিক সাপ্লাইয়ের সঙ্গে জড়িত থাকার কারণে পুজোয় ছুটি থাকত না। তা হলেও, ষষ্ঠীর রাত টু দশমীর সকাল, ঠাকুর দেখা থেকে কেউ আটকাতে পারবে না। আমাদের ঠাকুর দেখার রুটিন থাকত, সেটা তৈরি করা হত বাবার অফিসের শেডিউল অনুযায়ী। ষষ্ঠীর দিন বাবা ডিউটি করে ফিরবে বিকেলে। স্নান-টান করে ছ'টার মধ্যে বেরিয়ে পড়া হবে, বাসে করে সোজা গিরীশ পার্ক। সেখানে থাকতেন বাবার মাসি, যাঁর তিন কুলে কেউ ছিল না। মাসিআম্মাকে সেদিন পুজোর কাপড় দিয়ে, একটু গল্প করে আমরা বেরিয়ে পড়তাম, সেদিনের গন্তব্য মহম্মদ আলি পার্ক, দমকল আর কলেজ স্কোয়ার। যাঁরা আটের দশকে কলকাতায় নিজস্ব বাহন ছাড়া ঠাকুর দেখতে বেরিয়েছেন, তাঁরা বুঝবেন, এই কাজটি কতটা দুঃসাধ্য। সেন্ট্রাল অ্যাভিনিউয়ের একদিকে ঠাকুর দেখার লোকের ভিড়, অন্যদিকে অফিসফেরতা লোকের ভিড়। এই জনসমুদ্রের মধ্যে খাবি খেতে-খেতে আমরা অকুতোভয় হয়ে এগিয়ে যেতাম। তিনটে ঠাকুর দেখে, একটা এগ রোল (চিকেন নয়, কারণ, বাবার বন্ধমূল ধারণা ছিল ওতে কুকুরের মাংস দেওয়া হয়) খেয়ে, হা-ক্লান্ত হয়ে ফের বাসে চেপে সিআইটি-র মোড়, সেখানে অবধারিত কোনও রিক্সা থাকত না, অগত্যা নতুন জুতোর ফোকা নিয়ে খোঁড়াতে-খোঁড়াতে, হেঁটে বাড়ি। সপ্তমী হল দমদম, চিড়িয়াঘাড়া, সিঁথির মোড়ের ঠাকুর, কারণ সেদিনও বাবার অফিস থাকত। অষ্টমীর দিন সকালে অঞ্জলি দিয়েই সোজা আমি আর বাবা টইটই করতে বেরিয়ে পড়তাম। ৩০বি করে শ্যামবাজারে নেমে শ্যামপুকুর পার্ক, রাজবল্লভ পাড়া, কুমোরটুলি, আহিরীটোলা, সব পায়ে হেঁটে। দুপুরে ফিরে একটু ঘুমিয়ে নিয়েই সন্ধ্যাবেলা আবার নর্থ কলকাতা স্পেশ্যাল। তখন বাগবাজার, সিমলা ব্যায়াম সমিতি, হাতিবাগান ইত্যাদি দেখে রাতে যে-কোনও চিনা রেস্টুরাঁর সামনে লাইন দিয়ে দাঁড়িয়ে মিক্সড চাওমিন আর চিলি চিকেন খেয়ে বাড়ি। নবমীর দিন সকালে ছুটি, সেদিন পাড়ার আশেপাশে বন্ধুদের সঙ্গে ঘুরঘুর, বিকেলে সো-জা দক্ষিণ কলকাতা, তা-ও ট্রেনে চেপে, বালিগঞ্জ স্টেশনে নেমে পায়ে হেঁটে গড়িয়াহাট-রাসবিহারী-বালিগঞ্জ চত্বরের সব ঠাকুর দেখে ক্রিস্টাল চপস্টিকে ডিনার। তারপর সেদিন লাক্সারি চূড়ান্ত, মানে, ট্যাক্সি চেপে ফুরফুরে হওয়া খেতে-খেতে বাড়ি। পাড়ায় নামার সময় অহেতুক আওয়াজ করে সকলকে জানান দেওয়ার চেষ্টা করতাম যে, আজ আমরা বড়লোক, ট্যাক্সি চেপে ফিরেছি দ্যাখো! দশমীর দিন সকালে আবার বন্ধুদের সঙ্গে এদিকওদিক আর কে ক'টা ঠাকুর দেখল, তার চুলচেরা হিসেব। আমি বরাবরের বুদ্ধিমতী, গুনে রাখতাম, বাকিরা বরাবরই গো-হারান হারত!

বড়বেলার পুজো পরিক্রমা

নাইন-টেনে ওঠার পর থেকে আমি লায়েক, তখন বাবার হাত ছাড়াও বন্ধুদের সঙ্গে পুজো দেখার পালার শুরু। সেটা আবার অন্যরকম আনন্দ, অন্যরকম স্বাধীনতা। সেটাও কিন্তু শিল্প। তখন ষষ্ঠীর দিন আমি আর আমার ওই যাকে বলে লঞ্চেটিয়া ইয়ার মিঠান। গন্তব্য একই, কিন্তু বাহন বদলে গেছে, মেট্রো, সেটিতে চেপে মহাত্মা গান্ধী রোডে নেমে ভিড়ের মাঝে দুই ঢ্যাঙা (আমরা দু'জনেই পাঁচ সাত, তার উপর তিন ইঞ্চি হিল) স্ট্র্যাটোফ্লিয়ারের আবহাওয়া বুঝে নিতে-নিতে ওই তিনটে বাঁধাধরা ঠাকুর দেখে, আবার মেট্রোয় চেপে দমদমে নেমে স্টেশনের মোড়ে সাতভাই কেবিনের রোল (এবার চিকেন, কারণ বাবা নেই!) খেতে-খেতে বাড়ি। যখন কলেজে পড়ি, তখন এর সঙ্গে যোগ হয় সপ্তমী কিংবা নবমীর দিন সকালে ম্যাডব্ল স্কোয়্যারে আড্ডা। কলেজটি ছিল পার্ক সার্কাসে (লেডি ব্রিবোর্ন), আমি দমদমে, বন্ধুরা সকলেই হাজরা-বালিগঞ্জে, ফলে আমাকেই বেশি ঠেঙিয়ে যেতে হত, কিন্তু তাতে দুঃখ নেই। ওখানে বসে আড্ডা দেওয়ার এবং ঝারি মারার যে কী অনাবিল আনন্দ, তা যাঁরা মেরেছেন, তাঁরা বিলক্ষণ জানেন! তারপর দুপুরে লেক মার্কেটের বিজলি গ্রিলয়ে চাইনিজ খেয়ে তিনটের সময় ফার্স্ট মেট্রো ধরে বাড়ি। আমার কলেজের বন্ধুরা সাউথ ক্যালকাটার তথাকথিত ট্যাঁশ, তারা হেঁটে-হেঁটে ঠাকুর দেখার লোক নয়। ফলে আমাকেও একগুচ্ছ প্যান্ডেল সুড়সুড়ি দিলেও, মনের সুড়সুড়ি মনেই চেপে পরিশীলিতভাবে আড্ডা দিয়ে, খেয়ে বাড়ি ফিরতাম। রাতে আবার সেই দক্ষিণ, তখন আমি বাবার সঙ্গে, ফুল ফর্মে, চলার পথে একটা প্যান্ডেলও ছাড়ি না...

এর পর ঢুকলাম চাকরি করতে, আনন্দবাজার পত্রিকায়, তাও আবার সাংবাদিক হিসেবে। ব্যস, লাও ঠেলা, জীবনের পরের দশটা বছর পুজোর সঙ্গে ব্যস্ততাও আমার অমরসঙ্গী হয়ে গেল! কিন্তু, দিল থাম কে, কাউকে শুনেছেন, আপিসের কোলিগদের সঙ্গে হোল নাইট ঠাকুর দেখতে বেরোয়? হুঁ হুঁ বাওয়া, আশ্মা বেরিয়েছি। উনিশ-কুড়ি এবং আনন্দলোক, দুটো টিমের সঙ্গেই বেরিয়েছি। সারা রাত, সারা কলকাতা, খবরের কাগজের আপিসে চাকরি করার ফুল ফায়দা তুলে, প্রেস কার্ড দেখিয়ে লাইনে না দাঁড়িয়ে, গম্ভীর মুখ করে প্যান্ডেলের পিছনের ইসপেশাল গেট দিয়ে বুক চিতিয়ে ঢুকে এক রাতে সারা কলকাতা মেরে দিয়েছি। তারপর ভোরবেলা শ্যামবাজার পাঁচমাথার মোড়ে দাঁড়িয়ে কচুরির গুমটি খুলিয়ে, গরম কচুরি টা সহযোগে খেয়ে পরিতৃপ্তির টেকুর তুলে বাড়ি ফিরে চিতপটাং হয়েছি। বলুন দিকি বুক হাত দিয়ে, এমন রেকর্ড কারও আছে?

অবশ্য এতেই আমার পুজোর কেরদানি শেষ হয়ে যায় না অবশ্য। আমি নিশ্চিত, পাড়ায় পুজোর লাইট ঝোলানোর সময় কেউ সারা রাত ঘরের জানলা দিয়ে সেটা দেখে বোকার মতো খুশি হননি, নিজে 'স্বেচ্ছাসেবক' লেখা ব্যাজ তৈরি করে সেটা সেফটি পিন দিয়ে জামায় আটকে পাড়ার প্যান্ডেলে বসে থাকেননি, কেউ পুজোতে কবে কোন জামাটা পরবেন, সেটা নিয়ে রুটিন তৈরি করেননি, পুজোর রাতে কেউ উল্টোডাঙ্গা, মানে বিধাননগর স্টেশন থেকে ট্রেনভাড়া বাঁচাবেন বলে রেলওয়ে ট্রাক ধরে হেঁটে বাড়ি ফেরেননি, প্রবল বৃষ্টিতে শহর ডুবে যাচ্ছে, এই সময় কোমর জল ভেঙে ঠাকুর দেখতে যাননি, স্রেফ ভোগের ট্যালট্যাল খিচুড়ি

খাবেন বলে বেপাড়ায় কাঙালীভোজনের লাইনে দাঁড়িয়ে পড়েননি, পুজোয় একটাও প্রেম করেননি ঠাকুর, দেখে হাতে সময় পাননি বলে, দশমীর দুপুরে পায়ে আলতা পরে মা-জেঠির সঙ্গে বইখাতা হাতে ঠাকুর বরণের লাইনে দাঁড়াননি আর দুগগা মায়ের দুটো পায়ের পাতা খুঁজে পেয়ে মনে-মনে ভাবেননি যে এবার অ্যানুয়াল পরীক্ষাটা তা হলে ভালয়-ভালয় উতরে যাবে...

শুরুতেই বলেছিলাম না, আমি মারাদোনা? কি, এবার বিশ্বাস হল তো?

For the Mother around Us - Sukanya Roy Ghose

From chaos to cosmos,
As the globe slowly settled down;
Life kept emerging and evolving,
Till the sapient form wore the crown ;
Praying in the deep for daily fare ,
Was a basic need then;
Till one day when wisdom dawned,
They turned towards the terrain;
In grateful worship and prayer,
They bowed down to the Earth;
The soil that provided for them,
was akin to the mother, who gave birth;
Thus rose the Mother Goddess,
To be appeased and to be honoured;
At times a divine consort she was,
But in need, a slayer of demons,
armoured;
With the mother's care,
through the sands of time,

The human creed, they spanned;
The simple, earthly, mother figure,
Surely grew into the Goddess grand;
Centuries went by unnoticed,
In flashing lights and glitzy parade;

Devotion lost its way into pomp,
And faith sadly was frayed;
The deity stood on her pedestal tall,
Watching over in unrest;
As her children misused the Earth,
That she created for them to nest;
Tired and hurt as she was,
The goddess turned her head away;
She retired on a long break,
And let the humans have their way;
Havoc takes over,

As the children do finally realize;
They need to take care of the
mother too,
With all the nature under her skies;
Time now to atone for our wrongs,
As Mother Earth heals on her own;
Time to pray through our actions now,
That alone can save our Home.

A Tale of Friendship on the Ghats of Varanasi - Sudipta Mukherjee Mandal

On an ancient city of unfathomable depth. A realm to get lost and found. My journeys into Varanasi have been a few. Each one as enchanting as the other.

I was back on an assignment to write content on specific segments of weavers from Varanasi. Simple, factual, and everyday kind of stories, as perceived by me. Meanwhile, I have ticked off all historical monuments and other places of touristy interest and more. This time I was simply going to blend in and soak in the thriving, breathing, throbbing, mystical Varanasi.

I made Yoga House my home a little distance away from Assi Ghat, the last of the Ghats. The ground floor houses a yoga institute and on the first floor is the boarding - bright, spacious and simplistic, perched on the edge of the Ganges. The choice validated by the fact that - Yoga Cafe in Bandra, Mumbai is a favourite haunt and has the same owner. Habib was the in-house man Friday and now, a mate.

It was early evening. Unpacked and refreshed, I headed for the Ghats, the life centre of this alluring entity and its people. This is where one wants to be. Efforts have been made towards cleanliness and safety. And there is vigilance.

The sound of conch and temple bells, the scent of incense drew me towards the Ganga aarti at Assi Ghat. If one wants to avoid the humongous crowd and chaos at Dashashwamedh Ghat, you can simply park yourself on the steps here and say your prayer accompanied by the visual splendour. I did on this day.

Assi and all the other Ghats are lined up one after another and cutting across them along the Ganges is an incredible whirl of sounds, scents, aroma, emotions, visuals and a feeling that one carries long after having left Varanasi.

Having paused for the Arti at Assi, I strolled along the

banks to the next. Leaving behind the dance of the fire, passing by a group of art students, drawing inspiration from the gorgeous cocktail of visuals. A little ahead, a young girl was performing kathak, for a gathering of tourists, an initiative of the tourism department.

As I walked on, the sound of guitar strumming grew louder, a group of youngsters jamming, seated under one of the many wall arts, were in a frenzy. There were also groups huddled doing the "chillum" and "ganja" wrapped in their own world.

Soon I arrived at 'The blue lassi', my destination, a little beyond Dashashwamedh Ghat. The lassi is not blue at all! Everything in the shop is. It was abuzz with chatter, a melting pot of people from across the world, a space where one tends to bond over shared stories.

A glance at my watch brought an abrupt end to an interesting discussion. I took leave with a promise to catch up soon.

The air felt heady, a slight chill, a gentle breeze - the ghats were less populated. I strutted along. The jamming was still on, they waved out and I smiled. Little joys!!

It was getting late and there are my own ground rules of travel, time deadlines. It was dark by now and there was one odd guy who would ask you "Spanish?", "hash?". A gentle refusal with a "no, thank you" was enough. I was into a brisk walk, when I almost stumbled over a litter of puppies, huddled together on a sack for warmth. I bent over to fix the sack to cover them.

Lockdown has taught us various ways to love and "Time kya hua?" - someone asked from behind me. I turned around to find this lanky young boy with a tea caddy in hand - his face was dark and determined, his eyes as bright as a star, and a smile that lit up the darkness. "7.30"! And I went ahead. On second thoughts, I told him to come along and walk with me.

Dilip introduced himself and went on to tell his story - that he was selling tea only because it was his day off, and the caddy belonged a friend who was unwell. He never let go of an opportunity to earn more.

His aim was to earn enough to take care of his mother and follow his passion - dancing. So rare in these times, reverence for his mother. How he never loses sight of what his mother taught him. How hard his mother worked. How she insisted education was important. But his mother was not in good health. Like many such stories, Dilip had to drop out of school after tenth, so he could support and take care of his family.

What was inspiring was, he had no remorse. He was proud to be able to take responsibilities. He did not think, it was the end of everything good. He was hopeful he would set things right. He would pursue his studies again. He would continue dancing, that was his happy space. How blessed I felt for this encounter with another creative soul. We stopped a couple of times, clicked photos, inspected a parked boat - studying the hand prints that lined the boat, apparently it is a ritual.

Soon we arrived at the sit out under the Banyan tree at Assi, a landmark and eventually my tea place every evening, starting that day with a cup of tea made by Dilip...

I sat and dealt on the encounter with a happy heart, as he waved at me, walking away an epitome of hope.



Season's Meatings - Raja Sen

Every year I feel bad for someone at a Durga Pujo pandal. The obvious suspect may appear to be Mahishasura, the monster with the sculpted abs perpetually being trod on by the Goddess, but my pick is someone else: someone who cannot partake in the festivities with complete abandon, someone who cannot savour the entire Pujo experience the way it is meant to be, someone who we must look on forgivingly, for they know not what they don't eat. Every year at Pujo time, I feel saddest for the vegetarians.

Now now, this isn't a knock against the glorious khichuri heaped onto the bhog plate, and a finessed labda can give any dish a run for its curry, not to mention luchi-alu'rdom, the single greatest culinary combination of all time... Yet, the plain undeniable fact must be stated: the goddesses we worship are ravenous and all-powerful, creatures of dominance not mercy, and therefore unlikely to be soothed by lady fingers and onions. How could Ma possibly be vegetarian?

Feasting is not only integral to our festival but arguably the most vital aspect of those joyous days of new clothes and competitively designed idols, and much of what is hastily bought (and gluttonously consumed) involves fish and meat and eggs. Unlike our North Indian cousins who abstain from the most delicious proteins during their nine festive nights, the Bengali who is niramish during Pujo is - unquestionably - compromised.

Bengal's greatest poet would agree. In the 1860 play Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata, Michael Madhusudan Dutt conjured up the noblest of pranks. In that satire about a Vaishnava man who followed young men to observe their ways, a young chap (not coincidentally named Kali) decided to sneakily feed

the vegetarian Vaishnava some fowl cutlet and mutton chop - not to sabotage his religious beliefs, but simply in order to give his life meaning. A cutlet and a chop. Has sacrilege ever been as mouth watering?

So much to choose from, so much to gratuitously overeat with the knowledge that Gelusil will heal all wounds: from kobiraji cutlet to kosha mangsho, from chaap to chicken curry. Ours is a menu that has gratefully borrowed from the world. The sinful orly, for instance, those fried fish fillets that invariably run out the fastest every Anandamela, gets its name from the French dish, the L'orly. We have sampled it, approved of it, made it our own. We do all have our favourites, but there is one specific Pujo item no self-respecting Bengali can possibly do without: the Calcutta roll.

The roll as we know it - wrapped snugly in a flaky paratha- was born at Nizam's, the famed New Market eatery dating back to 1932. Kebabs at Nizam's were the stuff of local legend, but fastidious Englishmen and well-dressed babus found it irksome to eat the grilled and smoked meat with their hands. Realising that this could become something a working commuter could eat on the go - perhaps when hopping across to the neighbouring business district of Dalhousie Square - some genius at Nizam's decided to wrap the kebabs tightly in crisp parathas, and then wrapping the roll in wax paper. The idea proved a smash, and in 1964, once Nizam's started using bamboo skewers for their grilling, this roll became known as the kathi roll.

Rather like those persnickety foreigners from nearly a century ago, we blessedly buy into the convenience of our rolls, eating them one handedly while on the move: be it while waiting for cultural programmes to start, scrambling from pandal to

pandal, or entertaining visiting cousins. The greatest thing about the roll - besides the brittle exterior of an immaculately, indulgently fried paratha - may be the fact that it is never considered a meal in itself, which is why we guiltlessly indulge in them through the Pujo days and nights, before and after lunches and dinners. Let the demons have their abs, give us those double-mutton egg rolls.

By now you and I both want one, and the ultimate compliment for this humble tribute would be for me to see this pageful of carnivorous words wrapped tightly around a roll itself, staunchly soaking up drops that would otherwise besmirch your brand new outfit. As for the vegetarians reading this, my heart sincerely and sympathetically goes out to you all, and I personally urge you to at least consider momentarily setting boundaries and vows aside. Bite into the complete Pujo experience. Mangsho, after all, begins with Ma.



The Driftwood Sculptor and the Mountain Tea Shack - Sudipta Mukherjee Mandal

This was a well-planned trekking trip to the Garhwal Himalayas above Uttarkashi. Dodital, a freshwater lake, the birthplace of Lord Ganesha, a mystical world set around the Lake at 3024 meters above sea level.

A group of trekkers, marathoners, their teenage boys and girls and younger siblings. The interesting mix of people made this journey even more enticing.

We landed at Dehradun, traveled to Sangam chatty near Uttarkashi to camp for the night. A sort of a base camp. The trek took us through Agora, Bebra Chatti, Mangi, Dodital, onto Darwa top.

My story is set in Bebra Chatti, a pit-stop for camping and rejuvenating. There is a basic setup for campers by a mountain stream amidst the valley of abundance and scenic beauty.

We pitched our tents, freshened up, and broke into groups of our choice. Some rest-ing, some exploring the surroundings. I took off on a little leisurely walk. It was cold, though the sun can be harsh during the day. The sharp drop in temperature by evening was beginning to bite, the light slowly fading.

I came upon the tea stall and a few local villagers basking in the warmth of the fire from the "chulha" within the shack. The clear ringing laughter

resonating in the si-lence of the mountains, the thought of warmth and a hot cup of tea nestled between my palms was too tempting.

So here I was, seated among a group of strangers, feeling perfectly at home and al-ready into conversations as if I was here every other day.

I smiled - everyday people and the connect of the soul evidently works!

This was a family-run enterprise - the husband ran the tea shack and was the man behind the "Manna" from heaven on a cold Himalayan evening. I was seated be-tween his beautiful wife Sonu, and charming younger sister, among other occupants of the shack.

Their home was at Agora, a well-known village among trekkers and mountaineers. All three trekked up here for the day. His wife collected firewood for their daily needs here and carried it back by evening, a ten-kilometer trek every day. In fact, I tried carrying her load for bit, and believe me, it was not a trivial task.

The husband ran the shack and entertained the visitors. The sister accompanied them sometimes if housework was done. Simple living, abundant happiness.

As I sat there and shared tales of my travel, my eyes fell upon some wooden arte-facts and simple tools

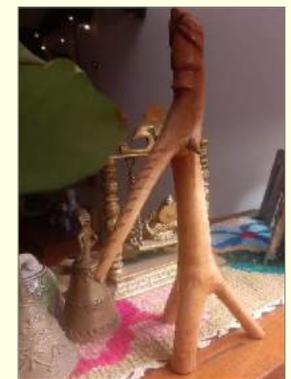
at the far corner of the shack. I moved over to find some cu-riously interesting sculptures crafted out of driftwood. Wasn't I delighted to find an artist?!

The tribe grows, the kind who creates for the passion, who uses resources around him and is gracious for the everyday moments, and who stays productive in the given situation. I threw him a questioning glance. With a twinkle in his eyes and the most heart-warming smile he held out one of his prized creations, a Ganesha.

How overwhelming this was is difficult for anyone to comprehend. My mind traveled through stacked memories. A tradition back home, between my son and me, since he was a little boy, was now even more special.

Ganapati festival is incomplete without him bringing home the elephant God in some form or the other. There have been many over the years, a cloth puppet, wood carved, stone carved, hand painted, embroidered and many more. This year it would be one made with love by the driftwood sculptor from the mountain tea shack.

A bit of my soul lingers there and every glance at his work of art unfolds scenes of snow-capped mountains, gorgeous meadows, pine cones on trees and the sound of mountain streams.



From “Dal-do-na-Coffee’ To ‘Dalgona Coffee’ - Gayatri R. Chowdhury

It was somewhere in January 2020, when I first heard of a certain ‘local outbreak’ in Wuhan, China in a short quick read news article and moved on to read the next article after of course, believing that this problem will soon be solved. My First thought - ‘Oh it’s in China? Alright science ache, shob theek hoey jabe’. Come February and India had recorded the first few cases of Coronavirus. I remember my Boss saying, ‘Very soon, this could be at our doorstep too.’ Those words at that point of time, seemed like a thrilling punch line we see in Marvel movies. But I soon thought, ‘Oh no, this is just a passing phase, Indians are too cool for all that.’ Little did I know that this little thing had the power to wipe out more than half of the World’s population, just like Thanos did, with a snap of his fingers in the previous year in The Avengers - Infinity War movie. Never underestimate the Power of a common cold.

Coronavirus went straight from Corona to COVID-19 in a couple of weeks and then we saw various phases that most of us collectively went through in this lockdown. Phase 1 involved making jokes of the virus and it continued until the virus made a joke of us.

Phase 2 was when we got influenced by the quirky marketing strategies of various OTT platforms and succumbed to subscribing to more than 1 platform. I think I have over 6 platforms that I have subscribed to and having an Amazon Fire TV stick was soon a boon for us. Now, my Mom has also become an OTT buff and she suggests to us various series or movies that we could watch. Another phase was the most delicious phase of all – cooking and baking. Dalgona coffee, bread baking, we all did that at one point of

time. I got more involved in the household activities and realised how big a task it actually is. I also realised that cooking is not that complicated after all. Before Corona times, I believed that I could cook, but only for survival. But now, with so many recipe videos around – cooking tasty food is not so complex, cooking tasty food without a recipe does require experience and skills but for now I can proudly say that I have made some real nice relishing dishes in the past few months and my family can now officially deem me ‘Not kitchen dumb’.

Our Phase 4 was influenced tremendously by Bollywood, the death of a very talented actor Sushant Singh Rajput changed the way we perceived Bollywood as a whole. My generation found it very difficult to accept this loss even when we didn’t know him personally.

Phase 5 was my creative phase. I have been a part time creative and content writer since over 9 years now (I am not so old, I just started early : P) and I decided to put my creativity and imagination into my YouTube channel and started creating several comical and witty videos on YouTube. I also created a video titled ‘BACK TO THE FUTURE || DIGITAL TIME TRAVEL TO MEET MY FUTURE SELF’ on YouTube where-in my future self from 2060 does a digital time travel to meet my present self to warn about yet another outbreak in the near future, ‘Pollutionovirus’ that exists in areas with an AQI (Air quality Index) of 60 and above and the outcome of such a virus would be drop in the male fertility rates by 50% in India. Does this symptom sound familiar? I released this video in July and just a few days back in September there was news of ‘Brucellosis’ disease outbreak in China and a consequence of this disease is a lasting damage to the male reproductive system rendering the affected males infertile. Hey, I

am not an astrologer but I happened to predict a different disease with a similar symptom. As cool as that prediction being right sounds, the disease part is horrific. I believe by the time this article is published, we will know enough about this disease and I genuinely hope that by then, with the grace of Maa Durga and science, things will be under control and all the countries will be safe from this disease. Like we did with Covid19 initially, we should never underestimate the power of a local outbreak because we never know, ‘It could be at our doorstep soon.’



Stone Sculptures of Mahabalipuram - Sudipta Mukherjee Mandal

A gift I asked of my family on my fiftieth birthday was to go away on my own for a trip, not to any exotic, exclusive location, but just get away to assimilate thoughts and feelings that needed sorting due to a sudden unfortunate turn of events, my mother in law's untimely demise. It took a while to simply get on with life.

Chennai it was for a couple of days! Why? Like I told everyone JLT with a smile. Also, like I said at the start, it is so invigorating to make a destination out of any surrounding. A dash of history, a museum, a heritage home stay and maybe connect with a friend young or old, (if around) and a food trail.

I took an evening flight to Chennai, checked in for the night at the Hyatt, to unwind. This was suggested by the husband. Morning after, moved into La Casa Roja, a heritage homestay off the East Coast Road on the outskirts of Chennai. Settled in, relaxed and engaged in a little chat with the gardener, while on a barefoot stroll in the meticulously landscaped garden.

After a shower and a quick brunch, I headed for the Dakshina Chitra museum not far away. Will enlighten all of you about this fascinating space,

another time. As my story is in Mahabalipuram.

The museum is extensive and engaging. I was done only by late evening. A lot of it is outdoor, so the sun might get to you. I love the sun.

Back at the beautiful bungalow, freshened up, I made myself a cup of tea and stepped into a little grassy sit out with benches. Simply sipping tea and staring at the sky, watched the birds fly by and the clouds floating through. It was kind of a calming trance, broken eventually by a phone call.

Next day was a drive down to Mahabalipuram, about sixty kilometres from Chennai. It is a UNESCO world heritage site known for its rock cut architecture of the Pallava dynasty. The car picked me up at 10am, just enough time for a relaxed homemade breakfast.

It was a smooth ride into the ancient seashore site. It is indeed awe inspiring kind of architecture. Also, on display in plenty, were stone carved artefacts and statues by hugely gifted craftsmen, along the streets.

I stepped into many, looking for a ridiculously tiny piece of stone cut tool, a mortar and pestle, that too not the pair - just the pestle, I had misplaced the original one. Yes, you are right to think, am out of my mind.

The next shop I stepped into left me dumbfounded

by the kind of sculpture that adorned the shelves. All I was witness to so far were inspired by mythology, gods and goddesses mostly. Beautifully crafted no doubt.

Here I was staring at space stations, an assortment of mind-boggling alien heads, weapons, footwear and more!

Individuals who follow their heart and mind and hold their own, do stand out. There is always that glint in their eyes and a smirk on their face.

I smiled again, this time at Adavan and shook hands. Thinking to myself, another of the tribe, a creative soul, living his passion.

Hope he is making enough money, not a lot. Adavan seemed happy. He was indeed inspired by aliens and did such a marvellous job of showcasing it. I listened with intent to his stories behind each piece of art, and tools he used, how many hours he spent, while slurping hot filter coffee, which was my treat.

A unique and cherished art conversation over coffee!!

I can't describe in words, how my satiated heart was, as I bid adieu to another creative soul, who stands his ground with pride and much joy.



I-Detectors - Ashna Bose

If I were to be a scientist, then my first invention would be...

My first invention as a scientist would be a machine that I will call the I-Detector.

Background

Monsoon months are one of the most beautiful months in India. However, monsoon also poses its fair set of challenges to citizens of the country and is also known as the "Disease month". Due to poor drainage system or excessive rains, water logging has become a serious concern in many cities. And even greater concern are the diseases caused by water logging. People often unknowingly wade in contaminated water (dirty or water with germs and chemicals in it). I-Detector is an attempt to solve issues caused by contaminated water.

What is an I-Detector

I-Detector can be used to solve problems of diseases caused by contaminated water. I-Detector is like a robot which can fly as well as swim to test the purity of water. It can also measure the depth of water and warn the public about it. It has GPS for location tracking, camera with flashlight and a sound card for alerting when physically tampered by man or an animal. Multiple I-Detectors are connected on a real time basis with a central data lake on a big data environment. Advanced machine learning algorithms backed by best in class Artificial Intelligence are used to process huge amount of data coming from multiple I-Detectors. The information collected by the I-Detector can be made available to citizens via an app. Additionally, multiple I-Detectors can be managed by the civic authorities or citizen welfare groups and spread across the city with specific focus on the low lying areas.

How does it work?

I-Detector is shaped like a small fish with a streamlined body. The device is light in weight so that it can fly. I-Detector first senses areas that are flooded where the water is say above ankle length. Then it flies over that place and sends sound waves in the flooded water to check its depth. Next it dives into the water and starts gulping some of that water through its mouth. The machine inside the I-Detector is capable of testing the water for diseases and chemicals like bacteria, fungus, virus and can also check the acidity level of water. After the molecular test is completed, all the raw data is sent to the common server by the antenna. This raw data is further processed and is available to the public via an app. Eg- If a flooded area has water containing bacteria which causes leptospirosis then on the app this will be shown as 'bacterial water'. If by chance an I-Detector is spoiled or damaged then the server immediately understands as it stops receiving real time signals from that I-Detector. Multiple I-Detectors will be needed in a city for quick and efficient testing.

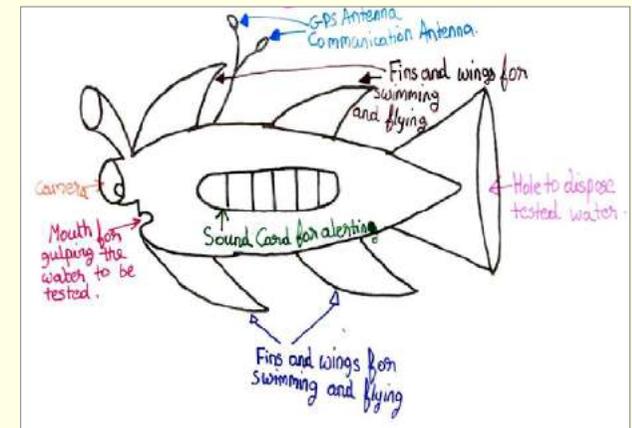
Advantages

The various advantages of I-Detector are

- The app will give real time information to civic authorities and citizens on the water level and purity in various parts of the city. Civic authorities can thereby take immediate action.
- Government can use the data given by the I-Detector to build better drainage systems
- People and civic authorities can use the app to plan their travel during monsoons as the app informs people about the depth and quality of water across the city.
- Parents can advise their children if the floods are safe to play in using this app.

- No one will have to walk in floods to control the I-Detector.
- I-Detector can be used in other seasons to test water in swimming pools, beaches and tanks.

Diagrammatic Illustration of I-detector



A Feast of Memories - Anindita Ghose

This year we'll be missing Pujo as we have known it. But we can take solace in knowing that each year's Pujo is only a totem for all the Pujos past

Why does reading someone else's memoir strike a chord? Nostalgia, when presented on a page, is a sticky and bittersweet thing, like aamshot to. Reading someone else's version of the past lights up parallel memories in us. It's an invitation down a rabbit hole, sometimes slippery, but mostly filled with wonder.

The title of Ernest Hemingway's celebrated memoir *A Moveable Feast*-about his years as a struggling writer in 1920s Paris is best explained by his quote: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

This year we won't be gathering to buy sarees together, to rehearse dance dramas, to put aside our work gloom every evening and have an adda on the grounds until our eyes beg for rest. But that is fine, is it not? Because Pujo, with its consequent days of celebration, is a moveable feast too. We carry it in us.

Can one undercooked dish mar a lavish feast spread over all the years? Can this uncharacteristically bleak year blot Pujo? No, because even as Pujo occurs every year, its sentiments are in continuum. Each year's Pujo is only a totem for all the Pujos past.

While my abangali (non Bengali) friends believe in the inherent goodness of fish fry and moghlaiporota, they have never quite understood the Bengali fascination with bhog. "Why stand in line in the heat for some khichdi on a plate?" they ask me. But bhog is not rice on a plate. Bhog is a memory of you and your brother (who is now only a figure on video calls), sweating in line, dressed in new clothes, with your mother who assures you you'll be reaching the bhog counter soon. Your mother who has remembered to carry steel spoons so your tiny fingers don't get scalded from the bhog when it is ladled on your leaf plate.

Each year's new saree purchase is not just the chic silk paired with the anti-fit blouse that it is, it is a sign of how far you've come from struggling to walk in your first Pujo saree at age 14.

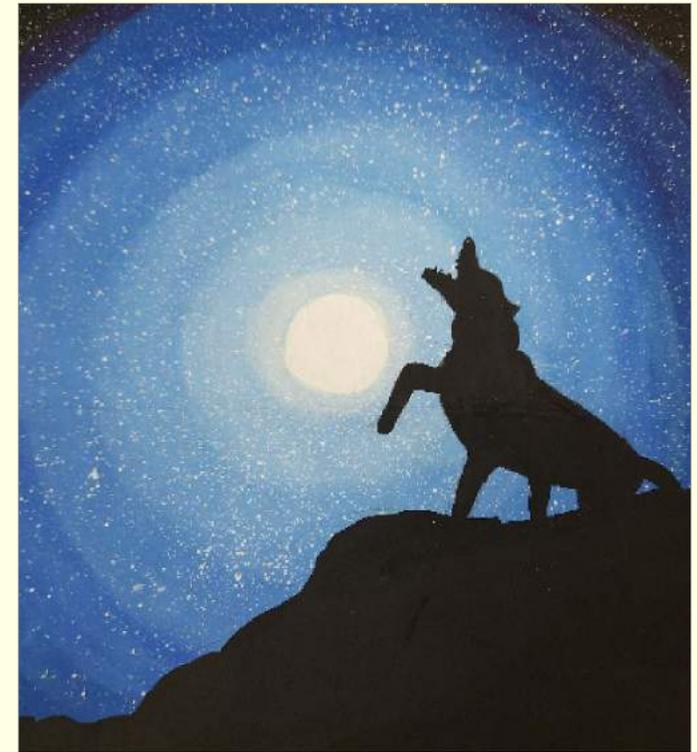
Each year's dance performance by the littlest of the girls in their yellow half-sarees is not just another time you'll hear Dhitang Dhitang Bole being played, it is a mnemonic tool to take you back to when you were six, and the did is backstage tied garlands of flowers around your wrists before your performance.

Each year, when the smell of the dhunuchi fills your nostrils, the smoke only helps to clear the memories of a time in the past, when you were so short that your father had to hoist you on his shoulders to see the dhaakis and the dancers.

Each year, you think of what Pujo means to your brave and graceful grandmother, who gets dressed in her white silks to celebrate with her friends and you.

The more things change, the more they remain the same, as they say. The sound system might have become better in quality, anjali might have become more streamlined, bhog even comes with bowls and spoons and bottles of water, but Pujo is about none of these things. What Pujo is about is memories. They are buried deep in us, and no event, no pandemic, can take that indescribable sweetness away from us.

Brushes with Colours - Swarnali Chowdhury



Full Moon Howl



Village in Warli

Sita O Drapaudi - Sumita Ghosh

সীতা ও দ্রৌপদির কাল্পনিক কথোপকথন

ভাই সীতা তোমার ও আমার মধ্যে বেশ মিল তাই না?
কি রকম?

তুমি যেমন কোন মানব কন্যা নও আমিও তেমন।

হ্যাঁ, আমি তো মাটির কন্যা

রাজা জানকী আমায় তুলে এনে মানুষ করেছেন

উনি আমার পালিত পিতা। আর তুমি?

একটা দীর্ঘশ্বাস ছেড়ে দ্রৌপদি বলল

আমার জন্মটাই একটা অঘটন, অস্বাভাবিক

শুনেছি আমি নাকি এক যজ্ঞ থেকে উঠে আসা মানবী।

দ্রুপদ রাজা আমায় মেয়ের স্বীকৃতি দিয়েছিলেন...

তুমিতো বরমাল্য পড়িয়েছিলে রঘুপতি রাজা রামকে

যিনি ছিলেন সূর্য বংশীয়

আর আমি মালা দিয়েছিলাম বীর শ্রেষ্ঠ কৃষ্ণবর্ণ অর্জুনকে,

ধনুর বিদ্যায় শ্রেষ্ঠতা প্রমাণ করে

যিনি ছিলেন চন্দ্র বংশীয় রাজপুত্র।

আমরা দুজনেই ছিলাম রাজ বধু

লোকে বলে দুজনেই পরম ভাগ্যশালী।

আমাদের কারণেই নাকি দুই মহাকাব্য

সম্ভব হয়েছিল।

এই পর্যন্ত আমাদের মিল,

কিন্তু এর পর আমাদের দুজনের জীবনই

অমাবস্যার মত নিকষ কালো মেঘে ঢাকা।

ঠিকই বলেছ দ্রৌপদি

তোমাদের রাজা রামকে বিয়ে করে

ভেবেছিলাম কি এক তীর মেরেছি

কিন্তু দেখ আমার কপাল

বনবাসী হয়ে সব সুখ ত্যাগ করে

ঘর ছাড়া হলাম

কি লাভ হলো বলত?

পিশাচ রাবণটা আমার জীবনটাই পালটে দিল

এক লহমায়

ওর সর্বগ্রাসী লোভের আগুন থেকে

বাঁচতে পারলাম কই?

অশোক বনে শুধু নিপীড়িত লাক্ষিত হয়েছি আমি।

আমার চোখের জল, আমার আতর্নাদ

শোনার মত কেউ ছিলনা।

রাজা রাম আমায় উদ্ধার করে ফিরিয়ে আনলেন ঠিকই

পরে জানলাম ওই যুদ্ধটা উনি আমার জন্যে করেন নি,

করেছেন ওনার চরিতার্থে

প্রজাকুলে ওনার আধিপত্য বিস্তার করতে,

সমাজে উনিই যে শ্রেষ্ঠ বীর

তার প্রমাণ রাখতে।

আর আমি? আমি যে ওনার লজ্জার পাত্রী

নিজের ভাবমূর্তি বজায় রাখাটাই

ওনার সবচেয়ে প্রিয় ছিল।

বউ যাক চুলোয়!!!

এয়ে চূড়ান্ত অপমান

যার অভিঘাতে আমার পায়ের তলার

মাটি গেছে সরে।

আমার অপমানের কথা ভুলে গেলে তুমি সীতা?

পাশা খেলায় সর্বশাস্ত হয়ে

ধর্ম পুত্র যুধিষ্ঠির

আমাকে বাজি ধরেন নি?

আমাকে প্রকাশ্য দিবালোকে

চুলের মুঠি ধরে রাজসভায়

উলঙ্গ করবার প্রচেষ্টায় ছিল

আমারই ভাতৃসম দুর্জধন

তখন কেউ কেউ আমাকে রক্ষা করতে এগিয়ে আসেন নি

না... এমন কি পিতামহ ভীষ্ম ছিলেন নিশ্চুপ!

আমার হাহাকার আকাশে বাতাসে ছড়িয়ে পরেছিল সেদিন।

কিন্তু আমার হাজার চোখের জলেও কারো মন ভেজেনি।

সেকি অপমান, সেকি লজ্জা

ভাবলে এখনও গায়ে কাঁটা দেয়।

আমার জন্ম থেকে

ভাগ্য শুধু বিড়ম্বনা করে গেছে

যাঁকে বরমাল্য দিলাম

তার সাথে আরও চার স্বামীকে

আলিঙ্গন করতে হলো একই সাথে।

প্রতি বছর আগুনে পুড়ে শুদ্ধ হয়ে এক স্বামীকে ছেড়ে

অন্য স্বামীর কর্তৃত্ব হওয়া..... এর থেকে বেশি

শারীরিক আর মানসিক যন্ত্রণা কি আছে বলতে পার?

যেদায় আমি নিজের মরমে মরি প্রতিদিন।

ইতিহাস যদি লেখা হয় কোনদিন

নারীত্বের এই ছিনিমিনি খেলার

সাক্ষ্য থাকবে চিরদিন।

যুধিষ্ঠির থেকে সহদেব

প্রত্যেকের ঘরে এক বা একাধিক স্ত্রী

আমিই শুধু এক মাংসের পিণ্ড

যাকে শুধু ভোগ করা চলে

স্ত্রীর মর্যাদা দেওয়া যায় না।

এর থেকেও ভয়ানক শাস্তি

বিধাতা আমার জন্যে লিখে রেখেছিলেন

সীতা তোমাকে শুনতে হয়নি

তোমার পুত্রের মৃত্যু সংবাদ।

আমার পঞ্চপুত্রকে হত্যা করলো

পাপিষ্ঠ অশ্বথামা

নিতে গেল আমার শেষ সহায়

চলে গেল আমার শেষ পাখিটির ডানা।

এর পর আর কি থাকে বলতে পার?

থাকে শুধু মৃত্যু কামনা.....

সীতা তাও তো তোমার স্বাস্থ্য

তোমার দুই ছেলে তোমার সঙ্গে ছিল।

তুমি বলছো আমার দুই পুত্রের কথা?

কতটুকু পেলাম ওদের ?

বনবাসের চোদ্দ বছর

তারপর আর হাতে গোনা কিছু সময়

তাদের পিতা তাদের নিয়ে চলে গেলেন

রাজপ্রাসাদে

মহাসমারোহে।

চোদ্দ বছর বনবাসের পর

আবার যখন ফিরে এলাম

রাম আমায় স্পষ্ট করে জানিয়ে দিলেন

আমার চরিত্র সম্বন্ধে উনি সন্দেহান

এই অবমাননা এই লজ্জা আমি কোথায় রাখি?

চিংকার করে প্রতিবাদ করতে পারিনি

মুখ বুজে নিজেকে সঁপেছি

আগুণের মধ্যে

আগুনই ছিল আমার মুক্তি

আগুনই ছিল আমার প্রতিবাদের ভাষা।

আপন নারী জীবনে

পুরুষ প্রেরিত সব অপমানের

শিক্ষা দেওয়ার চেষ্টা করেছি মাত্র।

আর কিছু করতে পারলাম কই?

সীতা, তুমি জয়ী করেছ তোমার নারীত্বকে

আর গর্বিত করেছিলে সব নারী জাতিকে।

সেই দৃঢ়তা আমার নেই

আমিতো পারিনি সব ছেড়ে দিয়ে

চলে যেতে?

এই মুহূর্তে আমি মৃত্যুর জন্যে প্রস্তুত

তবুও

অনাহুতের মত পঞ্চপুত্রের পেছনে

হাঁটতে হাঁটতে আমি ক্ষতবিক্ষত,

রক্তাক্ত আমার সারা শরীর

পিছলে পড়ে গেছি বার বার,

তবুও পেছনে ফিরে তাকালেন না

আমার পঞ্চ স্বামীর একজনও।

আমার শেষ যাত্রার সময়টুকুও

সাক্ষর হয়ে থাকল

নারী জীবনের পরাজয়ের, অগৌরবের

হায় বিধাতা, হায় আমার ব্যর্থ জীবন।।

সুমিতা ঘোষ

Fan of Durga Puja - Nandita Pal

নন্দিতা পাল

উত্তরবঙ্গ থেকে মুম্বাইতে উচ্চ শিক্ষার জন্য এসেছি সেবছর। প্রায় বিদেশ আসার মত ই ব্যাপারটা সেই ল্যান্ডফোনের সময়ে। পূজোর দিন গুলোতে পুরোদমে ক্লাস চলছে। একদিন সন্কেবেলায় পড়ছি, এমন সময় বেশ সুন্দর একটা গান, তার সাথে বাজনার আওয়াজ পেলাম। কয়েক জন বন্ধু হাঁটতে হাঁটতে গেলাম সেই গানের উৎসের দিকে। গিয়ে পৌঁছলাম প্রফেসরদের কোয়ার্টারসের সামনে গোল মাঠটায়। সেই আমার জীবনের প্রথম দেখা ডান্ডিয়া উৎসব। অবাক চোখে তাকিয়ে দেখলাম সেই রঙ্গিন মোড়কে মোড়া ডান্ডিয়া নিয়ে সেই বাজনার তালে তালে অপূর্ব নাচ। সেদিন বাতাসে অনুভব করলাম মিলনের সুর, হাসিগুলো প্রজাপতি হয়ে উড়ছে সেদিন চারপাশে। আমার বিকেলের মন খারাপ তখন ভালো লাগার তারা হয়ে আকাশে মিটিমিটি হাসছে। মহালয়া থেকে দশমী ডান্ডিয়ার আনন্দ যজ্ঞে এরপর যোগ দিয়েছি বারবার।

এরপর মুম্বাইতে বেশ কয়েকবছর। মুম্বাইয়ের দুর্গা পূজো তখন এক অপরূপ ভাবে চিনলাম। বোরিভালি ইস্টয়ের পূজোর সদস্য হলাম। যেটা মন কাড়ল, পূজোর চারদিন বাড়ীতে কোন রান্না বাণা নেই, সকাল থেকেই প্রায় মন্ডপে সবকিছু। সাংস্কৃতিক অনুষ্ঠান তার রিহাসার্ল চলছে, মেতে উঠলাম একসাথে সবাই। সন্কেবেলা দল বেঁধে পূজো দেখতে গিয়ে একটি পূজোয়, শ্রী ভূপেন হাযারিকার গলায় ‘গঙ্গা আমার মা’ শুনে পা আটকে গেলো। মন পাড়ি দিল যেন তিস্তা তোরসার বয়ে আমার মায়ের কাছে। মুম্বাইতে দেবী শুধু দশভুজা হয়ে নয়, তিনি আমাদেরই মতো একজন মানুষ হয়ে যেন, বছরপরে ছেলে মেয়েকে নিয়ে আসেন বাপের বাড়ী, আর সবাই মন উজাড় করে আনন্দ করে, মায়ের সাথে থাকে একসাথে। এ এক অদ্ভুত নতুন উপলব্ধি।

এরপর চলে যাই বিদেশ, আমেরিকাতে পূজোর সে সীমানা ছাড়িয়ে বাঙ্গালীর দারুণ অভিজ্ঞতা। ফিরে এসেছি কলকাতায় বেশ কিছু বছর। এখানে পূজোর দিনগুলো যেন আলোর বর্ণার দিন। তেমনি কখন ও মনের মণিকোঠায় মুম্বাইয়ের আমার প্রথম সংসার করার দিনগুলো আর একসাথে আত্মিক হয়ে পূজোকে উপলব্ধি করা স্মৃতি আজও ভারী যত্নে রেখেছি।

গত ক বছর মুম্বাইতে পাওয়াই বাঙ্গালী অ্যাসোসিয়েশন ও টাইমস সার্বজনীন দুর্গা খুব মন টানে। আমার কাছের বন্ধু পরিবাররা, আত্মীয়, কলিগ অনেকের মুখে এই পূজোটার জমজমাট গল্প শুনেছি। এই পূজোর অনলাইন খবর দেখতে আরম্ভ করেছি, আর নিজের অজান্তেই ফ্যান হয়ে গিয়েছি যেন। দেখতে দেখতে চোদ্দ বছরের এই পূজো নিজের গরিমাতে এক অসামান্য জায়গা করে নিয়েছে মুম্বাই বাসীর মধ্যে। পাওয়াই বাঙ্গালী অ্যাসোসিয়েশন অনলস চেষ্টা খুশি ছড়িয়ে দিতে সমাজের বিভিন্ন স্তরে আর সাংস্কৃতিক ভাবে সবাইকে শিকড়ের সাথে ধরে রাখার সম্পূর্ণতা এই পূজোতে। এই পূজোর সদস্যরা কখনও অত্যন্ত সাধারণ স্কুলে গিয়ে পড়ুয়াদের নিয়ে অনুষ্ঠান করছে আবার ধারাবিতে গিয়ে বাচ্চাদের সাথে আনন্দ ভাগ করে নিচ্ছে নাচে গানে। যারা দুরারোগ্য রোগে ভুগছে ও দীর্ঘদিন হাসপাতালে তাদের সাথে পূজোর কর্মকর্তারা সময় কাটাচ্ছেন একটু খুশি ভাগ করে নেবার আশায়। দুরের কোন গ্রামে জলের সমস্যার কিছু সমাধান করার চেষ্টা। এই পূজো এই ভাবেই স্বয়মসিদ্ধা হয়ে ওঠে। আর দেবী দশভুজার আশীর্বাদ যেন এখানে নেমে আসে সাদা মেঘ হয়ে।



শিকাগো পূজো ২০০৫



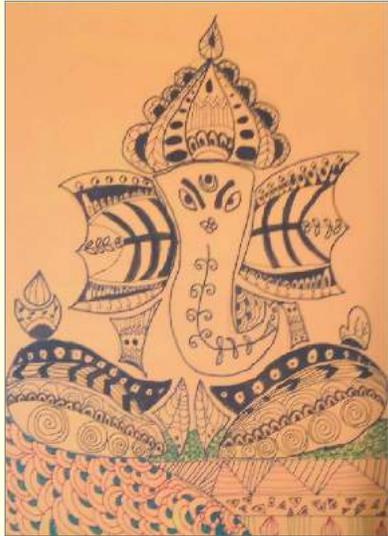
আমার খুব ভালো বন্ধু অমিত আর সুপর্ণা দীক্ষিত, ওরা এই পূজোর ঝকঝকে সদস্য। এবছর একদিন ওদের বাড়ীতে সবার সাথে পূজো নিয়ে কথা উঠতেই, গল্প আর ফুরোতেই চায় না। এই পূজোর কটা দিন সদস্যরা সবাই একদম হাতে কলমে কাজে মিশে যায় আনন্দে। প্রান্তিক মানুষদের জন্য কাজ থেকে শুরু করে পূজোর কাজ, একসাথে বসে সিনেমা দেখা আর অক্লান্ত রিহাসাল করা। বুঝলাম সবার এই ঐকান্তিক ইচ্ছেয় এই পূজো মুম্বাইতে সবার মনের বড় কাছাকাছি। ছোটখাটো কারিগরি হাট ও বসে যায় এ সময় পসরা সাজিয়ে। এক ই কথার অনুরণন শুনলাম আমার বোনের ও মুখে, ওরা চেম্বুর থেকে যাবেই এই পূজো দেখতে। পুরো বাংলা, ভার মনন ও সংস্কৃতি চলে আসে এখানে এক অপরূপ ছন্দে। এই ছন্দ শিকড়ের কাছে ফিরে যাবার, জন্ম প্রজন্ম কে প্রবাসে থেকেও তার গর্বিত পথ গুলো দেখানো।

এবার শরত এসেছে সাদা মেঘের নৌকো বেয়ে, কাশফুলে ঢেকে যাচ্ছে সেই অ্যান্থ্রলেপের স্মৃতি। ধুনি নাচে ছেলেটি ঐ একমনে পা মেলায়। বউটির অত হেঁটে আর জল আনতে যেতে হয় না। এখন সে পাঁপড় বানায় ঢাকের তালে তালে। শিশির ঢাকা ঘাসে শেফালী ছড়িয়ে। আর দূর থেকে দেখি তোমায় মা দুর্গা। তোমার ছোঁয়াতে হিমেল হাওয়া ভালবাসার বৃষ্টি হয়ে টপ টাপ বরে পড়ে অবিরাম।



পাওয়াই বাঙ্গালী অ্যাসোসিয়েশন ও টাইমস সার্বজনীন দুর্গা পূজো ২০১৯

Creations - Ashna Bose



দুঃখ : কোরোনা

হ্যাঁগো নন্দীদা, এ বার নাকি মর্ত্যে পূজো হবে না ? ভূঙ্গী কঙ্কেটা বাড়িয়ে দিয়ে জিজ্ঞাসা করলো।

কেনো রে , সেখানে আবার কি হলো ? ওদের সব সমস্যা মিটে গেছে ? না হলে পূজো করবে না কেন - তাও আবার দুর্গাদেবীর - অমন কথা তো ছিল না - নন্দী কঙ্কেটা আবার ভূঙ্গীর দিকে এগিয়ে দেয়।

ভূঙ্গী কঙ্কেতে একটান মেরে বলে - তুমি কোনো খবর ই রাখো না দেখছি। তাই বলি দিনে একবার হলেও স্বর্গটাইমস টাতে চোখ বুলিয়ে নিও। এখন তো একটাই খবর সেখানে - কি একটা নতুন দানবের উৎপাত হয়েছে সেখানে - কোভিড নাকি যেন নাম।

নন্দী খবরটা শুনেই আনন্দে হাততালি দিয়ে ওঠে - পাগলের মতো তাথই তাথই করে নাচতে থাকে।

ভূঙ্গী কিছু বুঝতে না পেরে অবাক হয়ে জিজ্ঞাসা করে - পাগল হয়ে গেলে নাকি !

নন্দী একটু ধাতুস্ত হয়ে কঙ্কেতে একটা লম্বা টান মেরে বিজ্ঞের মতো বলে - শুধু খবর পড়লেই হবে , বিশ্লেষণ করে তার অনরতনিহিত অর্থটা বুঝতে হবে না ? ভূঙ্গী এবার ও কিছু বুঝতে না পেরে বোকার মতো ফ্যালফ্যাল করে তাকিয়ে বলে - আর হেঁয়ালি না করে পরিষ্কার করে বলতো কি বলতে চাইছো।

বেশ গম্ভীরভাবে টেনিদা যেমন প্যালারাম কে রাগিং করে সেরকম ভাবে বললো - তবে শোন , মহিষাসুরদার চাকরিটা গেলো। খুব মায়ের সাথে প্রতিবার মর্ত্যে গিয়ে যুদ্ধ যুদ্ধ খেলা খেলে লোকদের মন ভুলিয়ে আবার স্বর্গতে ফিরে আসে....এবার ওই চাকরিটা খেলো ওই সাহেব দানব। আর ওই মহিষাসুরের জন্যই আমাদের যাওয়া হয় না মর্ত্যে মহাদেবের সাথে। প্রতিবার ওই এককথা, সবাই স্বর্গের বাড়ি ছেড়ে চলে গেলে কি করে চলবে বল - কাউকে তো থাকতে হবে দেখাশুনার জন্য - তাই তোরা দুজন স্বর্গেই থাক এবার - দশ দিনের তো ব্যাপার , দেখতে দেখতে কেটে যাবে। তাছাড়া তাদের তো বড়সড় চেহারা। অতজন গাড়িতে উঠলে দুর্গাদেবীর অসুবিধা হবে - এতটা পথ। এই অজুহাতে প্রতিবার আমাদের যাওয়া ক্যানসেল। মহিষাসুরদা সারাবছর জিমে গিয়ে কিরকম চেহারাটা বানিয়েছে - সেটা কেউ দেখতে পায় না।

ভূঙ্গী এতক্ষনে ব্যাপারটা বুঝতে পেরে বলে - ঠিক হয়েছে , মহিষাসুরদার চাকরিটা এবার গেলো।

নন্দী জিজ্ঞাসা করে - তা দানবটার নাম কি বল্লি ?

Covid গো কবিড -১৯ - ভূঙ্গী বলে। নন্দী বেশ চিন্তিত মুখ নিয়েই বলে - সাহেব দানব মনে হচ্ছে, তা নামের আগে আবার নম্বর কেন ?ওতো মর্ত্যে সম্রাটদের নামের আগে থাকতো - লুই- VII , ফিলিপ - XI এইরকম।

ভূঙ্গী বলে - অরে না না - এটাতে চাইনীজ দানব।

বলিস কিরে - ওরাও আজকাল চিং , মিং , সিং ছেড়ে ইংলিশ নাম রাখছে নাকি ? নন্দী জিজ্ঞাসা করে।

ভূঙ্গী বিজ্ঞের মতো বলে - নিচ্ছয় ইউরোপ বা আমেরিকা থেকে পড়াশুনো করেএসেছে - তাই অমন নাম।

নন্দী বলে - তা নামে আর কি যায় আসে ? তা দেখতে শুনতে কেমন রে দানবটাকে ? যাই বলিস, আমাদের মহিষাসুরদাকে কিন্তু দেখতে দারুন ! কি সুঠাম চেহারা , কি সুন্দর গোঁফ - সারা বছর জিমে গিয়ে বাড়ি ভেঁজে ভেঁজে বেশ ইয়ং রেখেছে কিন্তু নিজেকে !

ভূঙ্গী হো হো করে হেঁসে ওঠে ! নন্দী রেগে গিয়ে বলে - এতে ওতো হাঁসার কি আছে ? নতুন দানব - তাই জিজ্ঞাসা করছিলাম কিরকম দেখতে - তাতে ওতো খ্যাক খ্যাক করে হাঁসার কি আছে ?

ভূঙ্গী একটু জিরিয়ে নিয়ে বলে - ওরে বাবা ওটাকে তো কেউ দেখতেই পাচ্ছে না।

নন্দী আবার রেগে উঠলো - কি আবেল তাবোল বকছিস - একবার বলছিস মর্ত্যে নতুন দানব এসেছে , নাম covid না কি ! আবার বলছিস কেউ দেখতে পাচ্ছে না তাকে - ঠিক করে বলতো কি বলতে চাইছিস।

ভূঙ্গী বেশ গম্ভীর মুখ করে বললো - ওটাই তো মর্ত্যের লোকের প্রধান সমস্যা। স্বর্গটাইমস তো তাই লিখছে। তোমার মনে নেই সেই যে গো ১০ কোটি বছর আগের কথা।

নন্দী কঙ্কেতে একটা সুখটান দিয়ে বললো - এই গাঁজা টেনে টেনে আমার মেমারিটা একটু প্রলম্ব করছে - এবার ভাবছি একা একাই মর্ত্যে গিয়ে Alzheimer ট্রিটমেন্টটা করিয়ে আসবো। হ্যাঁ , তা কি বলছিলিস বল ১ কোটি বছর আগের কথা।

ভূঙ্গী বলতে শুরু করলো - সেই যে গো ইন্ডিয়া প্যাশের দেশে রাবণ নাম এক দানব খুব উৎপাত করছিলো - ইন্ডিয়াতে গিয়ে এর ওর বোয়ের হাত ধরে টানাটানি করছিলো। একবার ইন্ডিয়ার এক রাজার , কি যেন নাম - হ্যাঁ মনে পড়েছে , রাম ! তা রাম রাজার বৌকে উঠিয়ে রাবণ লংকায় নিয়ে গেলো। ব্যাস , সাথে সাথে রাম দুর্গাদেবীকে ট্র্যাংকল করলেন। দুর্গাদেবী সাথে সাথে স্বর্গের সব কাজকর্ম ছেড়ে কাতু, গনেশ , লক্ষ্মী , স্বরস্বতীর স্কুল কামাই করে চললেন মর্ত্যে - রাবণ বধ করে, রামের বৌকে ফিরিয়ে দিলেন রামের হাতে - আর তারপর থেকেই তো এইসময়ই তিনি বাপের বাড়ি যান। তাই মর্ত্যের লোক যদি Covid দানবকে দেখতে পেতো , তাহলে কি ওরা দুর্গাদেবীকে কল করতো না - ছমাস হয়ে গেলো, একটাও কল করলো না কেউ।

নন্দী বেশ চিন্তিত হয়ে পড়লো - সত্যি তো যদি দেখতেই না পায় , কি করে মারবে দানবটাকে ?

ভূঙ্গী বললো - যুদ্ধই তো হবে না। তুমিই বলো না নন্দীদা, সেই যে রাবণ বধের সময় হনুমানদা কত সৈন্য সামন্ত নিয়ে পৌঁছলো শ্রীলংকাতে - কি যুদ্ধটাই না হলো দশ দিন ধরে , তবে না রাবণ বধ হলো। এই অদৃশ দানব কে দুর্গাদেবীই বা কি করে মারবেন বলো ?

নন্দী হঠাৎ করে বললো - তুই Mr. India সিনেমাটা দেখেছিলিস ?

কথা শেষ হবার আগেই কাতু এসে হাজির - হ্যাঁ , আমি দেখেছি সিনেমাটা।

ভূঙ্গী কৌতুক করে বললো - তুমি তো দেখবেই, শ্রীদেবীর সিনেমা বলে কথা!

কাতু বললো - তা সকাল সকাল তোমরা সিনেমা নিয়ে আলোচনা করছে!

নন্দী বললো - অদৃশ্য দানব! তার একটা similarity খুজিছিলাম। কিন্তু Mr India তে যে দানব বধ করেছিল সে অদৃশ্য হতে পারতো। ভূঙ্গী বলছিলো, মর্তে নাকি এক অদৃশ্য দানবের উদয় হয়েছে!

ভূঙ্গী বললো - দানবটা অদৃশ্য বলেইতো মর্তের লোকেরা দুর্গাদেবীকে ব্যাপারটা জানায় নি। নাহলে একটু কিছু হলেই তো ওখানকার লোকেরা "মা দুর্গা বাঁচাও", "মা দুর্গা বাঁচাও" বলে ডাক ছাড়ে।

কাতু বললো - ভূঙ্গীদা তুমি তো শুধু স্বর্গটাইমস পড়ো, তাই সব খবর ঠিকমতো পাও না। উৎফুল্লবাজারের এক সাংবাদিক তো গত সপ্তাহে ১ ঘন্টা জুম কল করে মাকে মর্তের সব কথা জানালো।

তাই - গদগদ ভাবে ভূঙ্গী বললো। আবার গম্ভীর হয়ে বললো, কিন্তু ওখানেতো সব লোক বাইরে নাকি বেরোতেই পারছে না - বাড়ির বাইরে বের হলেই, দানব টা লোকদের নাক-মুখ দিয়ে মানুষের শরীরে ঢুকে পড়ছে অরে মানুষ মারা পড়ছে।

কাতু বললো - সেটা ঠিক, আর তাই তো মাকেও বেশ চিন্তিত দেখলাম খবরটা শোনার পর। উৎফুল্লবাজারের সাংবাদিক তো বললো চীন নাকি বানিয়েছে দানবটাকে - তারপর দানবটা সারা পৃথিবীতে তাণ্ডব করে বেড়াচ্ছে।

ভূঙ্গী সাথে সাথে বললো স্বর্গটাইমস ও সেই রকম একটা আভাস দিচ্ছে। আর তাই তো সব দেশ ওই চীন ব্যাটাকে চেপে ধরেছে। একঘরে করবে বলছে, যদি না দানবটাকে ধরে বেঁধে ঘরে না নিয়ে যায়।

কাতু সায় দিয়ে বলে - যতদিন না দানবটাকে বশ করতে পারছে ততদিন তো সবাই ঘর থেকেই কাজকর্ম করছে - ওই জুম এর মাধ্যমে।

নন্দী বেশ চিন্তিত হয়ে বললো - কিন্তু কাতু ভাই, জুম দিয়ে কি চাষ করা যাবে? চাষা মাঠে না গেলে ফসল হবে কিকরে - আর চাষা খাবেই বা কি? শ্রমিক কারখানাতে না গেলে জিনিসপত্র তৈরী হবে কিকরে - আর কেই বা তাকে ঘরে বসিয়ে মাইনে দেবে - কি করেই বা তার দিন চলবে কাতু ভাই!

কাতুও বেশ গম্ভীর ভাবেই বললো - সেটাই তো সমস্যা, জুম দিয়ে টেলিভিশন এ সব বড়ো বড়ো কথা বোলে চলেছে ওখানকার নেতারা - প্রথম প্রথম তো সবাই কাঁসর-ঘন্টা বাজিয়ে দানব নিধন করতেও গিয়েছিলো - এখন সব চুপচাপ!

লক্ষ্মী ও গণেশ একসাথেই ঘরে ঢুকলো বেশ চিন্তিত মুখ নিয়ে - অবস্থা ভালো নারে কাতু। এবার মামারবাড়ী যাওয়া হবে কিনা ঠিক নেই - মর্তের অর্থনীতি পুরো ভেঙ্গে পড়েছে, একটার পর একটা দেশ মুশকিলে পড়ছে। মানুষের চাকরি চলে যাচ্ছে। দানবে মারছে আবার বেশকিছু লোক অনাহারে মরছে রে কাতু। সেটা বড়ো দুঃখের! উৎসবের মানসিকতা নেই কারুর।

কাতু বেশ গম্ভীরভাবে বললো - তাতো ঠিক। নিয়ম রাখার জন্য যাওয়া যেতে পারে এবার মামারবাড়ী - উৎসবের জন্য তো একেবারেই নয়।

এই সময় স্বরস্বতী এসে জানালো "হাওয়াই বেঙ্গলি ওয়েলফেয়ার এসোসিয়েশন" থেকে invite এসেছে - ওরা আমাদের জন্য সব ব্যবস্থা করেছে। কিন্তু মা পরিষ্কার করে ওদের বলে দিয়েছে যে আমাদের দেখতে আসার জন্য লোকে যেন ভিড় করে না আসে। ওখানে "ভন" টিভির মাধ্যমে যেন পূজো দেখানোর ব্যবস্থা করা হয়। আর সবাই যেন এক এক করে এসে আমাদের সাথেই দেখা করে যার যার বাড়ী চলে যায়। এবং "হাওয়াই বেঙ্গলি ওয়েলফেয়ার এসোসিয়েশন" তাতে সম্মতি দিয়েছে।

তাই - আমাদের এবারও মামারবাড়ী যাওয়া হচ্ছে।

সবাই একসাথে হাততালি দিয়ে ওঠে - নন্দী আর ভূঙ্গী ছাড়া.....



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Organic Food & Good Health - Jiban Dutta

Organic food refers to food products that are produced, prepared, and processed without the use of any chemicals. It means organic food production prohibits the use of chemical pesticides, chemical fertilizers or chemical preservatives. Consequently, the general public belief is that organic food is healthier compared to the conventional ones, and hence has gained immense popularity and thus, resulted in increased demand over the past decade.

However, people have been confused about the accurate facts about organic foods thus resulting in varied opinions regarding its benefits as a whole. This article defines the most accurate facts about the top 15 health benefits of eating organic food:

1. Better overall health

Because organic food is not produced or processed by the use of chemical pesticides or chemical fertilizers, it does not contain any elements of toxic chemicals and may not affect human health in harmful ways. The use of natural techniques such as green manure to fertilize the lands and crop rotation in pest and disease control work absolutely well in producing safer, healthier, and aromatic final food products. Besides, healthy foodstuff simply means healthy people and better nourishment for a better living for both people and animals.

2. Antioxidant content

The positive effects of antioxidants on overall health have been established in a number of scientific studies, especially those derived from organic foods. This is because organic foods are free of foreign chemicals that normally react with vitamins, organic compounds and minerals thus lowering the essential positive impacts of antioxidants in food products.

Latest studies propose that the consumption of

organic food can contribute to more intake of nutritionally advantageous antioxidants and limited exposure to heavy metals. The positive impacts of antioxidants obtained from organic foods include prevention of heart disease, cancer, vision problems, premature aging, and cognitive malfunction.

3. Improved Heart condition

Exclusive grazing on natural grass increases the amounts of CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) found in animal products. The sun's energy is well taken in by natural grass through photosynthesis and is converted into the most desirable organic CLA by the herbivores that feed on it. CLA is a heart-healthy fatty acid with the potential of bolstering cardiovascular protection, and it is found in higher quantities in the meat and milk products of animals that have been pastured in free range.

4. Antibiotic resistance

Humans are susceptible to various health issues and disease, and most of the time they have to take precautionary measures to ensure they remain healthy. This is achieved by getting a variety of vaccinations and antibiotic drugs when a new strain of virus or bacteria is realized. Similarly, non-organic food sources (especially livestock and feeds) use vaccines, growth hormones, animal byproducts and antibiotics to treat and feed the animals. When humans consume the non-organic food products, they indirectly consume the antibiotics, growth hormones and vaccines which weaken immune systems on the account of antibiotic, vaccine, hormones, and animal byproducts overdose. This may alter the immune system thereby rendering humans unable to defend themselves against diseases. The benefit of organic foods is that their production processes does not involve the use of antibiotics, growth hormones,

animal byproducts, or vaccines.

5. Better taste

Apart from nutrition, the mineral and sugar structures in organic foods are tasty because the crops are given more time to develop and mature. The use of natural and environmentally friendly agricultural production techniques is revealed to be the reason for the better taste in organic food products. It is commonly reported that organic vegetables and fruits are tastier as compared to those that are conventionally grown.

6. Pesticide cutback

Chemical pesticides consumption is linked to a variety of diseases and disorders namely cancers, digestive dysfunctions, headaches, ADHD, birth defects, weakened immune system, and even premature death. Organic foods are free of pesticides and that is why they are preferable for attaining better overall health. As much as pesticides have the power of keeping certain pests away from crops, they also have potent chemicals like organo phosphorus. These chemicals are unnatural and they are the mineral compounds that bring about several health abnormalities in humans. Organo phosphorus, for instance, is associated with various developmental disorders such as ADHD and autism. Organic food products therefore offer a better healthy living, especially for children who are potentially affected by the pesticide toxins during their developmental ages.

7. Stronger immune system

The traditional or industrial farming practices aim at enhancing production and farm output by all means necessary. For example, the notion of producing more cereals, more meat and bigger fruits through genetic modifications and use of growth hormones seems to solve some of the world's food

insecurity concerns. The effects are not yet visible, but in the long-term, the consequences are sensitivity to allergens and a major reduction in immune system strength. By eating organic foods, the risks of decline in immune system strength are significantly reduced because organic foods are not altered at all. Furthermore, organic foods have quality and higher vitamin and mineral contents that help to strengthen the human immune system.

8. Organic products are poison-free

Organic farming does not use any kind of dangerous chemicals to keep away pests and diseases. All the practices are natural and thus do not harm the consumer. Aspects such as bio magnification are lessened via the practice of organic farming as chemical pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides, and artificial growth hormones are all prohibited on an organic farm. Therefore, organic food products are free of contamination with health harming chemical substances.

9. Consumption of highly nutritious food products

Organic food products such as organic meat, organic milk, organic fish, and organic poultry contain very high nutritional content because they do not contain modified ingredients compared to the conventional agricultural food products. Another factor that makes them highly nutritious is that they are given time to develop and are provided with the best natural conditions for growth. The vitamin and mineral contents of organic food products are always high as the soil life and health offers the most suitable mechanism for crops to access soil nutrients.

10. Organic foods are not genetically modified

Organic foods are GMO free, that is, they are not genetically engineered in nature. Genetic engineering of food products is a huge concern in

the current era. They are foods or plants with altered DNA in manners that do not take place in nature, usually to enhance resistance to pesticides/herbicides. While there is lack of conclusive evidence of its dangers, food safety advocates are concerned that long-term research has not been conducted to confirm their safety. The food safety advocates believe GMOs are a leading cause of slowed brain growth, internal organ damage, gastrointestinal disorders, and the thickening of the digestive tract. Thus, the health benefit of consuming organic food is that they are free of GMOs, a very common component in non-organic foods.

11. Environmental safety

Organic foods are locally grown and pose very minimal interference to the environmental resources that support healthy living. Since harmful chemicals are forbidden in organic farming, there is minimum water, air, and soil pollution therefore ensuring a healthier and safer environment. To be precise, organic farming lessens the long-term human health implications caused by air, water, and soil pollution.

12. You have the certainty you are consuming fresh food

Organic food products are guided by very strict standards of production, processing and preparation. Not at any time will you find chemical preservatives used in organic foods. As such, organic food is often fresher and full of flavor since it doesn't make use of preservatives to make it have a longer shelf life. Majority of organic food products are sold or availed locally next to where they are produced.

13. Lessened chances of food-borne illness

There have been several reported cases of food-borne illness outbreaks. Eggs, spinach, peanut

butter, melons, and foods from fast food restaurants have topped the list as their production is primarily centered on agribusiness gains. Even the animals are sick as a big percentage of them are drugged, vaccinated, and fed on animal byproducts to enhance their productivity so as to meet the ever growing agri-business demands. This practice is known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and it causes deadly drug-resistant infections which are acquired by the end consumers when the food products are consumed. The best way to prevent the food-borne illness outbreaks is to opt for Organic food.

14. Consumption of higher quality meat and milk

Organic meat and milk is of the highest quality. There are claims that meat is not good for human health. However, it is the CAFOs that normally worsen meat and milk quality by introducing foreign and unhealthy antibiotics as well as other drugs in the final food product. When you consume milk and meat that is organically produced, prepared and processed, you are guaranteed of products with higher quality vitamins and minerals. For instance, organic milk is proved to have 60% more omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, vitamins, and CLA than non-organic milk. Also, organic cows are pasture grazed which results in the better meat quality.

15. Lower levels of toxic metals

By now, it's clear that whatever we ingest indirectly comes from the soil together with other physical environmental interactions. So, the fact that organic farming doesn't use agri-chemicals for crop production means minimized consumption of toxic metals. New studies confirm that organic crops have 48% lower levels of the toxic metal cadmium than conventional crops.

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