

# PHOTO ARTS

February 2018

## The Secret World of Red Pandas

by Sourav Mondal

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The Story of Bodh Gaya  
by Manabendra Gupta

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The Divine Lights of Dev  
Deepavali by Shreenivas  
Yenni

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The Palkhi Festival by  
Dnyaneshwar Prakash  
Vaidya

DISCOVERING THE BEAUTY OF SPITI VALLEY through the lenses of MUKESH KUMAR GAUTAM  
A PHOTO ALBUM ON NEW YORK by AMIT PAWASKAR and AMITHA SHET



**We** know your worth, we recognize your passion, hence our search will be relentless. At Indian Photo Arts we are on the constant lookout for new talents and committed towards providing them with a bigger platform to showcase their work. If you feel your work deserves a special mention or your photographs tell an interesting story which you want the world to know, then write to us at [indianphotoarts@gmail.com](mailto:indianphotoarts@gmail.com) or send your work at [submission.ipa@gmail.com](mailto:submission.ipa@gmail.com). You can also join our facebook group- Indian Photo ARTS and post your creations on the official page of our group and follow us on instagram- @ipamagazine. In this issue we bring to you stories from some of India's ancient tradition- the Palkhi festival of Maharashtra, the Dev Deepavali festival of Varanasi, the experiences of driving through some of the highest and most treacherous roads of Spiti Valley, glimpses into the extremely secretive lives of the adorable red panda, photo albums exploring the soul of Kolkata and the fabric of New York City, the incredible story of Bodh Gaya and much more. We sincerely hope our beloved readers will thoroughly enjoy flipping through the pages of this issue, do send us your feedback, we would love to hear from you.

Regards

Rahul Bera (Editor of Photography & Design)

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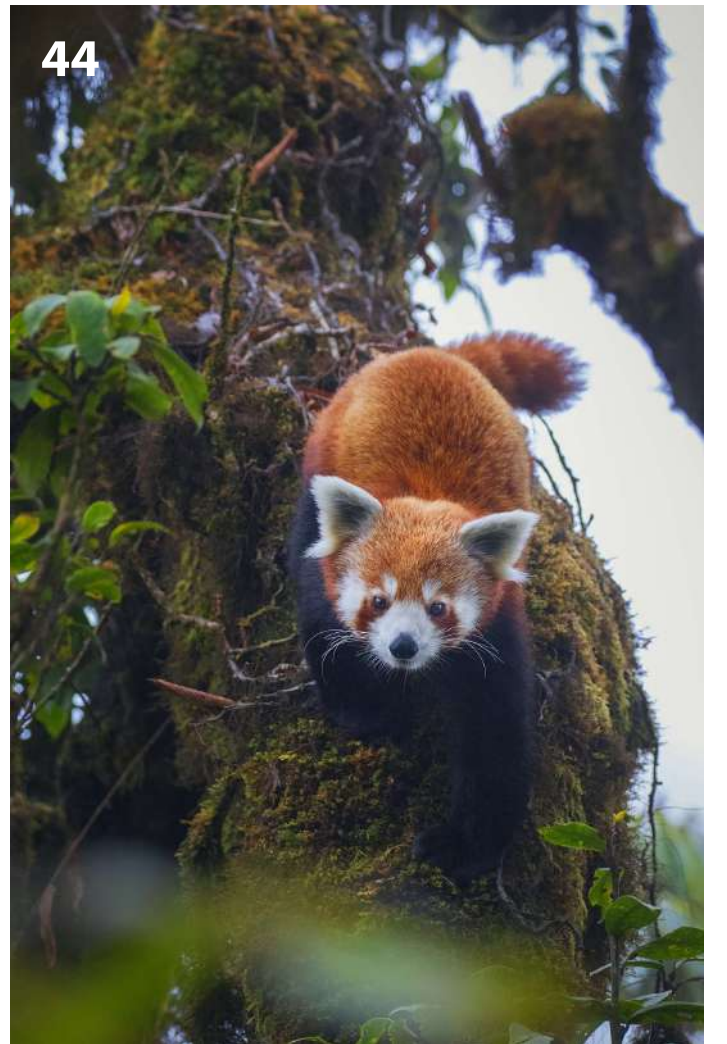
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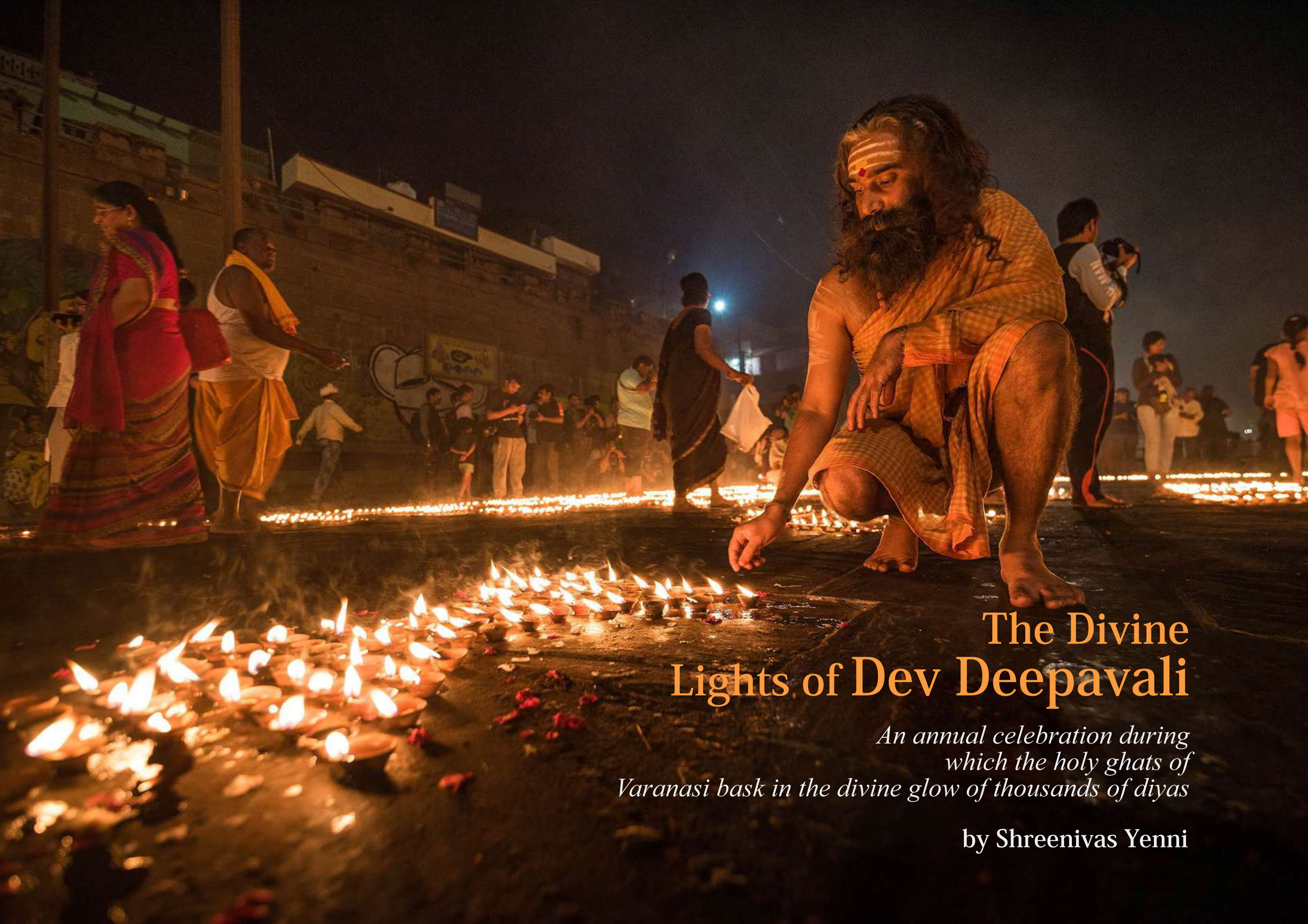
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cover page photograph by Sourav Mondal





# The Divine Lights of Dev Deepavali

*An annual celebration during  
which the holy ghats of  
Varanasi bask in the divine glow of thousands of diyas*

by Shreenivas Yenni



**T**here is something surreal about a full moon night which has enthralled us for generations. An array of traditions, customs, rituals or even festivals across the globe is celebrated against the backdrop of a full moon night. Our religious scriptures, mythologies have often described a full moon night as an auspicious occasion. This is possibly due to the gentle demeanour, in which a full moon illuminates our horizons, the soft gleaming moonlight gently sweeping across the landscape enveloping it with a warm and tender embrace almost in a motherly affection is bound to evoke a sense of reverence. One such full moon night, which has carved a particularly significant niche among the hearts of millions of Hindus across India, falls in the month of November-December which coincides with the month of Kartika according to the Hindu calendar on the occasion of Kartik Purnima (full moon night). On this particular full moon night millions of Hindus gather in the holy Indian city of Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh to celebrate the auspicious occasion of Dev Deepavali or “The Festival of Lights of the Gods”.

The devout Hindus believe on this auspicious occasion amidst the beautiful settings of a full moon night, the Gods descend upon the earth from their heavenly abodes to bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges. The religious significance of this occasion can be attributed to two legends which are parts of the Hindu mythology. One of these narratives depicts how Lord Shiva annihilated the demon Tripurasura and his kingdom thereby relieving the world of a never ending reign of terror and brutality. Lord Shiva is given the epithet of Tripurari because he in his form of Tripurantaka killed Tripurasura on this day which is also the reason why this day is known as Tripura Purnima too. The Gods jubilant with Lord Shiva’s triumph over evil called this occasion as the occasion of light which erased the darkness which had engulfed the planet. In this context this day is regarded as the festival of lights of the Gods or Dev Deepavali. The other narrative related to Lord Vishnu states that Kartik Purnima is the occasion of the birth of Matsya or Matsyavataram, the fish avatar of Lord Vishnu, the first among his ten avatars thereby rendering the full moon night an auspicious meaning.

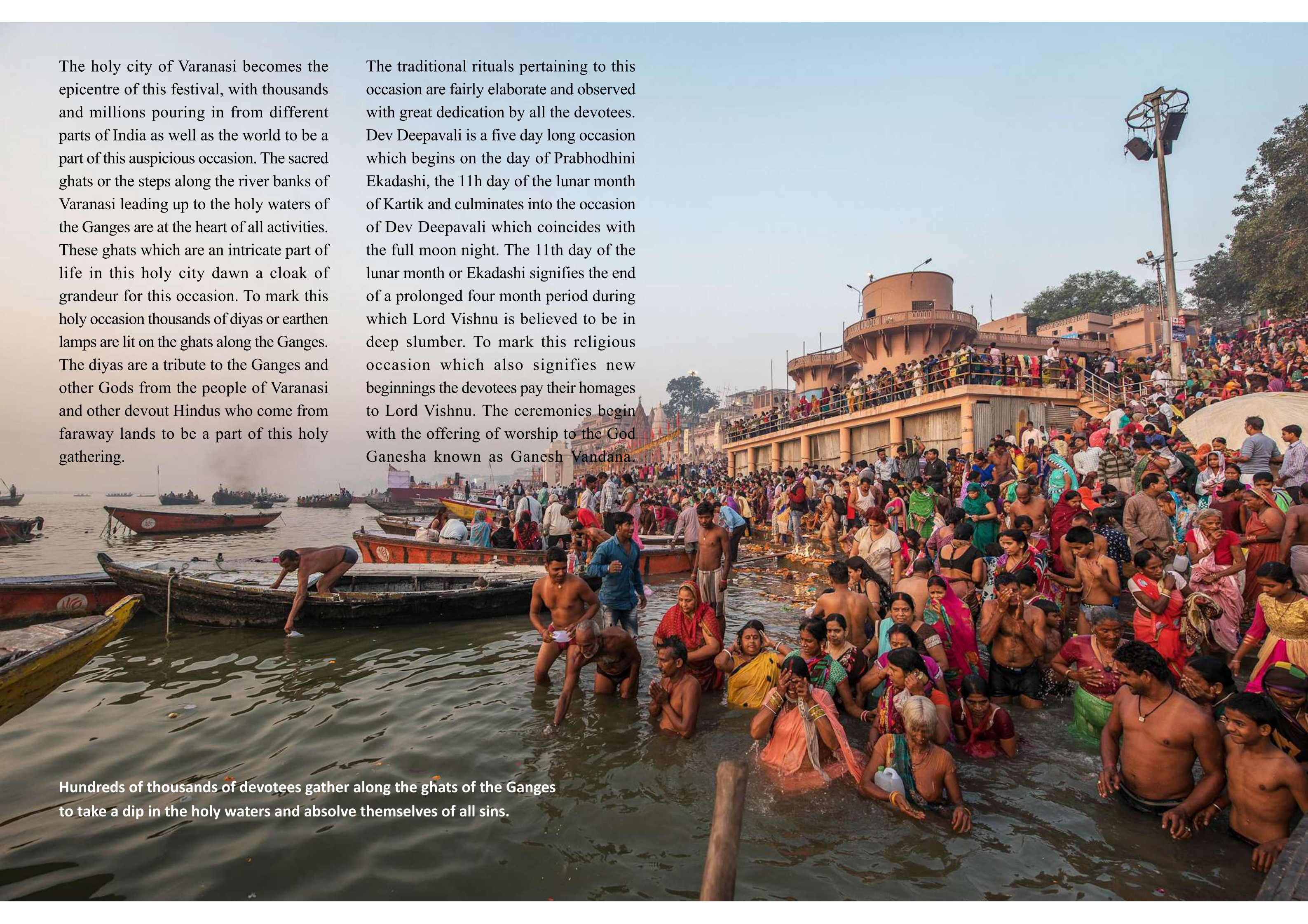




The holy city of Varanasi becomes the epicentre of this festival, with thousands and millions pouring in from different parts of India as well as the world to be a part of this auspicious occasion. The sacred ghats or the steps along the river banks of Varanasi leading up to the holy waters of the Ganges are at the heart of all activities. These ghats which are an intricate part of life in this holy city dawn a cloak of grandeur for this occasion. To mark this holy occasion thousands of diyas or earthen lamps are lit on the ghats along the Ganges. The diyas are a tribute to the Ganges and other Gods from the people of Varanasi and other devout Hindus who come from faraway lands to be a part of this holy gathering.

The traditional rituals pertaining to this occasion are fairly elaborate and observed with great dedication by all the devotees. Dev Deepavali is a five day long occasion which begins on the day of Prabhodhini Ekadashi, the 11th day of the lunar month of Kartik and culminates into the occasion of Dev Deepavali which coincides with the full moon night. The 11th day of the lunar month or Ekadashi signifies the end of a prolonged four month period during which Lord Vishnu is believed to be in deep slumber. To mark this religious occasion which also signifies new beginnings the devotees pay their homages to Lord Vishnu. The ceremonies begin with the offering of worship to the God Ganesha known as Ganesh Vandana.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees gather along the ghats of the Ganges to take a dip in the holy waters and absolve themselves of all sins.







The eighty odd ghats along the city of Varanasi have always been epicentres of various religious activities, particularly during major festivals such as Dev Deepavali.





This is followed by the lighting of earthen lamps or diyas, known as deepdaan, by 21 devout young Brahmin priests and 24 young girls which is accompanied by a symphony of chanting of Vedic mantras in the background. Devotees take a holy dip in the sacred waters of the Ganges on this auspicious day in the early hours of morning to absolve themselves of all sins committed in the past. This custom of taking a dip in the holy waters is known as Kartik Snan. Households and families organise special events during which scriptures or teachings from holy books or manuscripts or mythologies are chanted in a ritualistic event known as the Akhand Ramayan.

This is usually followed a feast known as Bhoj which involves large scale feeding of people. Ganga Arati or offering prayers to the Ganges during the evenings form an integral part of Dev Deepavali and probably results in some of the most iconic moments. The ghats notably the Dashashwamedh Ghat teem with devotees, tourists, volunteers, during these rituals. Priests perform the evening ceremonies on brightly lit platforms decorated with the colourful collections of flowers. The smoke bellowing from the ceremonial fires and incense sticks fill up the evening air and leaves a lasting sweet smell typical to the countless incense sticks being lit.



As the name suggests Dev Deepavali is a festival of light of Gods during which the lights of thousands of diyas or earthen lamps light up the city of Varanasi.





**On this auspicious occasion of Dev Deepavali thousands of earthen lamps are lit along the steps of the ghats leading up to the Ganges.**



The rhythmic beats of musical instruments accompanied by the collective chanting of scriptures and mantras together create a melody which reverberates into the narrow alleys and back lanes of the city. The whole set up with all its grandeur is befitting for an occasion which celebrates the Gods descending upon earth. On the night of the festival, thousands of devotees from the holy city of Varanasi, surrounding villages, and across the country gather in the evening on the ghats of the Ganges to watch the arati. The local government arranges for several intensive security arrangements to ensure order during the festival. Nearly 100,000 pilgrims visit the riverfront to watch the river aglitter with lamps. Boat rides along the riverfront in the evening are popular among tourists, the attraction of which is ever increasing with every passing year. The full view from these boats of the ghats lit with thousands of earthen lamps combined with the magnificent spectacle of the evening arati truly makes this experience worthwhile and leaves no doubt regarding why these boat rides garner such interests among the visitors.

Apart from being a significant festival, Dev Deepavali is also an occasion to remember the martyrs, those who laid down their lives in the service or protection of this great nation. Diyas are lit in their memories and tributes are paid to them along the banks of the holy Ganges.

These events are organized by various communities and regiments of the Indian military and para-military establishments. Patriotic songs and narratives further add to the patriotic fervour which form the essence of these particular events. The decoration of the 87 odd ghats with diya in Varanasi city forms the lasting impression on everyone's mind. The diyas are lit everywhere, they decorate the courtyards of the homes, the alleys, the by lanes, in other words on this occasion the diyas take the centre stage in Varanasi. The diyas are arranged in various patterns and designs, some depicting various religious symbols, while some are elaborate designs.

For many this is an occasion for a new beginning and the whole city decks up to welcome this auspicious occasion. The homes get a fresh coat of paint, the streets and roads get lit up with bright light and sport other colourful decorations, and a palpable sense of festivity looms large in the horizon. People come out of their homes and celebrate together, it is a time to meet and greet each other, exchange pleasantries, sweets and other gifts are sent, families reunite to celebrate together, firecrackers light up the night sky, people take part in processions along the streets carrying their decorated deities, at many places fairs are set up, in other words for these five days the entire city of Varanasi slips into a celebratory mode.





The diyas are painstakingly arranged in elaborate designs by the devotees, these designs often resemble various religious symbols.



Thousands of devotees enthusiastically take part in arranging thousands of diyas in such elaborate designs.







One such design resembling the sacred "ohm" symbol in Hindu religion.



During the festival the devotees offer their worships to the Gods and place their offerings to the ceremonial fire.

These five days also mean a period of flourishing business for thousands of people. These five days boost the local economy manifold. The huge influx of tourists and devotees means a booming period for the local tourism industry, with hotels, guest houses, eateries, restaurants all revving up for the busy days ahead. The increase in the number of people visiting Varanasi at this time means such accommodations have to be booked a year in advance. For the tourists and devotees alike taking a boat ride in the Ganges is an extremely lucrative prospect. And the ones to benefit from this major attraction are the boatmen whose daily average income during this period exceeds their income of a few months at other times of the year. The price of renting these boats goes up by many times during this time of the year and there is an ever increasing demand for availing their services. Local businessmen and small scale traders too benefit from this occasion. There is an ever increasing demand for things of daily use, items which form crucial ingredients for offering puja among others. In other words these five days mean a period of prosperity for thousands of people plying their trades in this ancient holy city. These five days come as a boon to them.

Along with Dev Deepavali, Varanasi decks up for another big celebration which coincides with these 5 days. The Ganga Mahotsav is a tourist-centric festival aimed at attracting more tourists.

Every year it starts from Prabodhini Ekadashi to Kartik Poornima during the months of October or November. This festival is aimed at showcasing the rich religious and cultural heritage of Varanasi and how life in this city is intricately linked with the Ganges. While the festivities of Ganga Mahotsav are tributes to the river itself and the faith and culture of Varanasi, it is also a celebration of the harmony that exists between different faiths and regions across the country. The festivities include various cultural programs which feature reputed musicians, artists and craftsmen. Sporting activities such as martial arts and boat races too form an integral part of these activities. The final day of these festivities coincides with the auspicious occasion of Dev Deepavali. The previous editions of the Ganga Mahotsav saw stalwarts in the field of art and music such as the likes of Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Chhanulal Mishra, Birju Maharaj, Anuradha Paudwal and several others dignify the podium with their glittering presence enriching the cultural heritage of this city on this holy night. The Ganga Mahotsav also provides the tourists to indulge in a wide array of mouth-watering delicacies which includes the local chaats and bati chokha as well as continental delicacies and the spice laden flavourful authentic Mughlai cuisine as well.

These five days of religious and cultural festivities are bound to leave a lasting impression on the minds of those who





People from all over the country and the world take part in this festival further enhancing the true essence of this occasion which is the celebration of humanity.

choose to be a part of this. This is the perfect opportunity for anyone to explore the true spirit of Varanasi and experience how the entire city plays the most welcoming host to such a diverse gathering of people from all over the world. The amazing spectacles, the evening aratis, thousands of earthen lamps, the boats on the water of Ganges, the huge congregation of devoted Hindus from all over the country, everything contributes towards making this festival an unforgettable occasion. For these five days Varanasi treats anyone who comes within its folds with a multitude of visual and cultural treats which uphold the rich ancient heritage of this city. Dev Deepavali at one glance stands out as an auspicious religious festival of the Hindus, however in reality this is an occasion for the celebration of humanity, an occasion which brings people closer to one another by wiping off their cultural and ethnical differences, this is a festival which forges new bonds among human beings, some of which may last forever. Dev Deepavali, in all its grandeur encompasses the true essence of Varanasi and stands out as a true celebration of human spirit.

## About the Photographer



**Shreenivas Yenni** hails from the town of Gangavathi, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. He is an engineer by profession and is presently working as the Junior Engineer in the Karnataka Power Transmission Sector. The passion which he harbours in his heart for photography compels him to make frequent travels in search of interesting topics or beautiful places to photograph. Most of his photographs are based on street life, portraits, the beautiful landscape and the beauty of nature which he encounters during his travels. He wants to keep travelling with a view of achieving his long cherished dream, which is to document the different cultures, rituals, heritage and tradition across India. More of his work is available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/shreenivasa.yenni>

[https://www.instagram.com/shreenivas\\_yenni/](https://www.instagram.com/shreenivas_yenni/)

<https://www.flickr.com/people/136553948@N07/>



# Warkaris and their Palkhis

*India's ancient luxury mode of transport enjoys its rare found moment under the sun during Maharashtra's Palkhi Festival.*  
by Dnyaneshwar Prakash Vaidya





Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims march across towns and cities carrying the sacred palkhis of their patron Saints Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar for almost three weeks before reaching the town of Pandharpur.



Palanquins or better known as “Palkhis” across India, have always found a special mention in the historical anecdotes of this land. Before the advent of automobiles or even horse drawn carriages, palanquins were the popular means of travel for the upper section of the society including the royals and the nobles and also served as a symbol of one’s status in the society. Simple in its design with one central frame with enough room for usually two people mounted on or attached to scaffolding or a pair of poles on either side, the palanquins were usually carried by 4-6 people on their shoulders over great distances and often rugged terrains. This luxury mode of transport catered to the diverse needs of this ancient society, which ranged from travels undertaken by the rich and the affluent to weddings and other social engagements and even formed an integral part of certain religious rituals and customs too. However all of this was a long time ago, the winds of change over centuries have reduced this ancient luxury mode of transport to nothing more than a relic which forms one of the many connecting dots to our past. Some of these palanquins used by the royals have been preserved carefully in various museums across the country, while their lesser illustrious cousins met with a rather ignominious end at the hands of changing times. Glimpses of this ancient mode of transport can be still seen in parts of rural India where they are still used for certain religious or social occasions albeit rarely.

It seems rather unfair that the palanquins which once were the pride of the royals and the nobles, a mode of transport which proudly served the rich and the famous having been reduced to leading a life of obscurity. However there are certain sections of the society in parts of the country where these ancient modes of transport are still relevant albeit in different ways. One such occasion when the palanquins bask in the adulation and affection showered upon them and briefly enjoy the opportunity to relive the glory days of their long forgotten past is the thousand year old traditional palkhi festival in the Indian state of Maharashtra. For centuries now the palkhi festival is being celebrated in the months of June and July every year. Lakhs of people, known as “Warkaris” who are followers of “Wari” a fundamental ritual take part in this occasion. The origin of this thousand years old tradition can be attributed to a warkari saint, known as Sant Dnyaneshwar. In this context the quaint little town of Pandharpur deserves a special mention. Pandharpur, located in the Indian state of Maharashtra is considered to be the sacred abode of the Hindu God Vithoba. Every year hundreds of thousands of Warkaris embark upon this pilgrimage from their respective places to the town of Pandharpur. The pilgrims carry the “paduka” or footwear of two of their most prominent patron saints namely Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram in palkhis from their respective shrines to Pandharpur.



Fun, games and other sporting activities have always been an integral part of these celebrations.





During the course of these three weeks the pilgrims devise various ways to keep themselves entertained, some of the more adventurous ventures like this one are reserved for the few bravehearts.







During the course of this procession the pilgrims regularly perform their “aartis” during which they sing in unison and call out to their Gods accompanied by various fun-filled activities such as mock wrestling.





During the course of their journey the pilgrims go on about their daily activities as usual such as tending to their laundries.



Thousands of pilgrims singing “bhajans” while offering their prayers to the Gods is a common sight during this procession.



Some believe this tradition is almost 700-800 years old, while others believe this tradition is more than thousand years old. The sacred palanquin carrying Saint Dnyaneshwar's paduka leaves from Alandi, while the one carrying Saint Tukaram's paduka embarks on this pilgrimage from Dehu; both the places located in the Pune district of Maharashtra. Estimates by various agencies and concerned authorities involved suggest a total of over a million pilgrims take part in this holy march on foot from various locations of Maharashtra to the Vithoba temple in Pandharpur. Once the journey commences with the pilgrims carrying the sacred palkhis of Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar over the next three odd weeks till the pilgrimage culminates at the

Vitobha temple thousands of other palkhis along with millions of pilgrims join on this holy march. People, young and old from all sections of the society, belonging to different caste and creed take part in this pilgrimage, travelling barefoot for hundreds of kilometres chanting the holy names of their patron saints and their Gods. Apart from being a massive religious occasion this pilgrimage is a perfect representation of the fellowship and brotherhood which form the backbone of any society. As the pilgrims pass through the villages the local villagers tirelessly strive to provide them with a warm reception, their basic needs such as food, water, shelter even medical emergencies are taken care of by the locals.

The villages dawn a fresh look, with colourful murals or rangolis adorning the courtyards or the walls of the houses to welcome the sacred palanquins. During the course of the pilgrimage the devotees chant and sing episodes from the glorious lives of Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar and pay their homage to Vithoba. The three week long holy march is quite a musical affair, with traditional and local musical instruments such as veenas, mridungas, dholkis and chiplis forming an integral part of this procession. The rhythm and beats of these musical instruments play the perfect foil for the ever so energetic traditional folk dance form “fugdi” performed by the pilgrims. On their way to keep themselves happy and joyous

the pilgrims play musical instruments like veenas, mridungas, dholkis and chiplis. With the saffron coloured triangular 'paatakas' (flags) in hands and tulsi leaves on their heads the pilgrims present a perfect picture of the ancient Bhakti tradition of Maharashtra. The three week long journey finally culminates at the doorstep of the Vithoba temple in Pandharpur on Ashadi Ekadashi, an auspicious day according to the traditional calendar. On the conclusion of their pilgrimage the devotees take a holy dip in the sacred Chandrabhaga River before paying their respects to God Vithoba. Upon the conclusion of the pilgrimage on the Ashadhi Ekadashi day the pilgrims participate in the “Maha Puja” of Lord Vitthala and his consort Rukmini.



Horses too are an integral part of these rituals namely Ringan, during which they gallop around the palkhis either in circular routes or in straight lines paved for them through a sea of devotees seated all around them.







**Pilgrims gather outside Alandi temple from where they carry the palkhi containing the paduka of Saint Dnyaneshwar Maharaj marking the beginning of this holy procession.**

There is no one clear theory regarding the origin of this ancient festival. There are some references to Vitthalpant who was Saint Dnyaneshwar's father as one of the earliest pilgrims to have taken part in this holy march. According to some other narrative which refers back to the events of 1685, Narayan baba, the youngest son of Tukaram was an innovative soul and decided to bring about an overhaul in the traditional ways of dindi-wari tradition by introducing the Palkhi, which is a sign of social respect, is a significant event in the history of this ancient festival. With a view of paying his respect and homage to his father Saint Tukarm and the other most notable patron saint of the Wari sect, Saint Dnyaneshwar, Narayan baba placed the silver padukas (footwears) of Tukaram in the palkhi and embarked on a journey to Alandi. On reaching Alandi he placed the sacred padukas of Dnyaneshwar in the same palkhi and carried on with his journey to Pandharpur. This tradition was in vogue till 1830, until a dispute broke out between the two families. However this environment of animosity was short lived as the elders of the communities decided to arrange for two separate palkhis for Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar. Since then two separate palkhis one carrying the padukas of Tukaram from Dehu and the other one carrying the padukas of Dnyaneshwar from Alandi embark on this pilgrimage before they meet in Pune. After a brief halt in Pune they carry on with their pilgrimage before diverging at Hadapsar only to meet again at Wakhri, a village near Pandharpur. From Wakhri the two sacred palkhis carry on together and finally reach the doorsteps of the Vithoba temple in the quaint holy little town of Pandharpur. Since its humble beginnings almost 800 years ago, the Palkhi festival has steadily grown in stature and importance. Even conservative estimates suggest a total of approximately 2 lakh devotees march along from Dehu village, while a total of 4 lakh devotees march from Alandi village.





**Upon arrival at Pandharpur the devotees take a holy dip in the waters of Chandrabhaga River to mark the end of their pilgrimage.**



Even the number of palkhis taking part in this occasion has increased steadily over time. Apart from being one of the most important religious occasions in the state of Maharashtra, this occasion speaks volumes of the meticulous planning and execution on part of the concerned authorities which ensure the smooth flow of events over the three odd weeks of this occasion. With the number of devotees soaring every year from an organisational perspective this occasion puts even the best of organisers under the toughest of scrutiny. However much of the responsibilities are shared by the devotees themselves, who play an extremely active part in maintaining order and discipline. In order to ensure smooth flow of the procession and to ensure better crowd management the entire group of pilgrims is divided into several subgroups referred to as “dindi” which are usually made up of 100 to 500 members. There can be more than 200 such dindis or sub-groups on each route. The palkhis are usually at the centre escorted by two such dindis, one at the front and the other one at the back of the palkhi. Each and every dindi is assigned a unique number and position in the procession which ensures smooth movement of the heavy traffic and helps in keeping track of the overall progress of the procession. The preparations for this occasion begin well ahead. The organisers and volunteers together meticulously plan everything. The timetable and the route map is published well ahead in advance.

Specific locations where food, water and other basic supplies will be made available, places where the pilgrims can spend the nights or take rest and all the arrangements are put into place well before the festival begins. In order to ensure smooth operation it is absolutely imperative to stick to a well laid out timeline. According to the timetable the procession begins at 6 in the morning. A tutari (a traditional wind instrument) is blown thrice as the first alarm call at which the pilgrims get ready to leave. At the second alarm call the dindis take their position in the procession as per the sequences designated to them after which the third and final alarm call is sounded at which the procession sets off. Every dindi is accompanied by a truck which carries the luggage and the food supplies. These trucks transport bulk of the luggage; the pilgrims carry with them the essential items for emergency purposes. The management is entrusted with the responsibility to set up tents and prepare the meals before the respective dindi arrives at the location. Keeping in mind the medical emergencies which can arise out of nowhere the organisers over the last few years have incorporated the services of doctors and other medical personnel in the procession, which needless to say have greatly reduced the health hazards which previously were pretty common during the course of this event. The organisers avail the services of village temples or large courtyards in the villages to set up camps for the pilgrims to spend the night.



**Fugadi dance has been an integral part of this tradition for many centuries and an opportunity among the pilgrims to bond over such social exchanges.**



Like other major religious occasions across the country the Ashadhi wari too leaves a profound impact upon the economy of Pandharpur. The few days of this event see a massive influx of people from all over the state into the town of Pandharpur which in turn means a soaring demand for items ranging from food items, items of daily use to items associated with the worship of God Vitthal. The town of Pandharpur during this period features prominently in the tourism map of the state. As a result of which even independent travellers from all over the country and even the globe start pouring in to Pandharpur during this time, which only spells a period of prosperity for the local businesses ranging from small hotel owners, eateries, tour guides to many others.


More than anything else this ancient tradition is much about celebrating the amalgamation of human souls from all corners of the society. For the three weeks of this procession, the pilgrims irrespective of their caste, creed, social status, come together as one. This is the perfect occasion for the pilgrims to meet new people, to make new bonds, this is the perfect platform to celebrate everything that is humane about all of us.

## About the Photographer



**Dnyaneshwar Prakash Vaidya** describes himself as an amateur photographer from a small village near Kolhapur city in Maharashtra. Being an ancient and historically rich state in India, Maharashtra boasts of a rich culture and tradition which gets reflected through festivals such as Palkhi festival, Haldi festival, Kushti festival, Lord Ganesha Festival among many others. Mr Vaidya started his journey with his camera in 2015. Since then he has extensively worked on these age old traditions and festivals of Maharashtra. In his quest to document the rich culture and tradition of Maharashtra he has since then taken part in a lot of cultural and traditional occasions in and around Maharashtra. He attributes his new found respect for his culture and tradition to his journeys with his camera.





# The Secret Realms of Red Panda

by Sourav Mondal

A sneak peek into the incredibly elusive lives of the red pandas of Singalila National Park along the foothills of the Himalayas in the state of West Bengal in the eastern part of India.



The densely foliated treetops turn out to be perfect vantage points for these wary creatures to keep an eye on the developments on the forest floor.

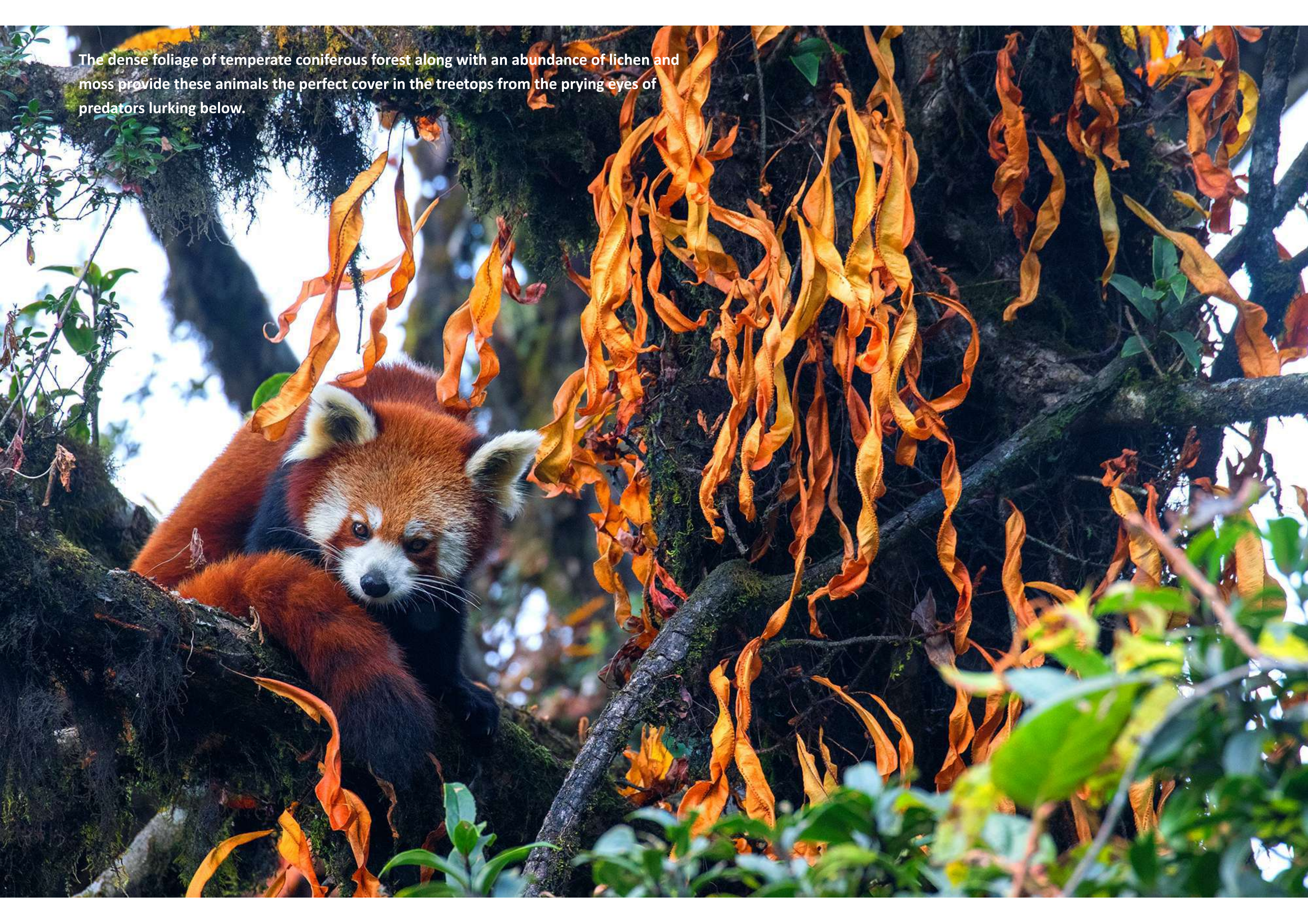


The Himalayas, the world's tallest mountain range, is undoubtedly the finest specimen of the natural world's might, the finest display of nature's unmatched prowess which brings together the various elements of it to create the most awe inspiring spectacle on this planet. One look at this vast natural fence characterized by the rugged terrain, the unforgiving climate and the cloud piercing snow clad peaks and it becomes evident nature in all its might intended this particular domain of its kingdom to stay beyond the reaches of mere mortals, shrouding it in a thick veil of enigma. This well laid out plan seemed to have worked to perfection until one of nature's very own forces managed to sneak past the vigils of the towering peaks that nature seemed to have deployed as watchful sentinels of these ranges. The rugged terrains, sub-zero temperatures, powerful winds, the lack of oxygen were all designed and carefully put into place to oppose life, yet they were no match for the strongest force of the natural world as life conquered this hostile realm and turned these mountain ranges into its very own wonderland. This huge natural barrier which runs along the entire northern borders of India extending well within the confines of the north-eastern part of the country did its very best to push life to the limits granting refuge to only the toughest who could carve a niche for themselves in these hostile mountainous domain. The Himalayas run from west to east along the northern border of India covering a length

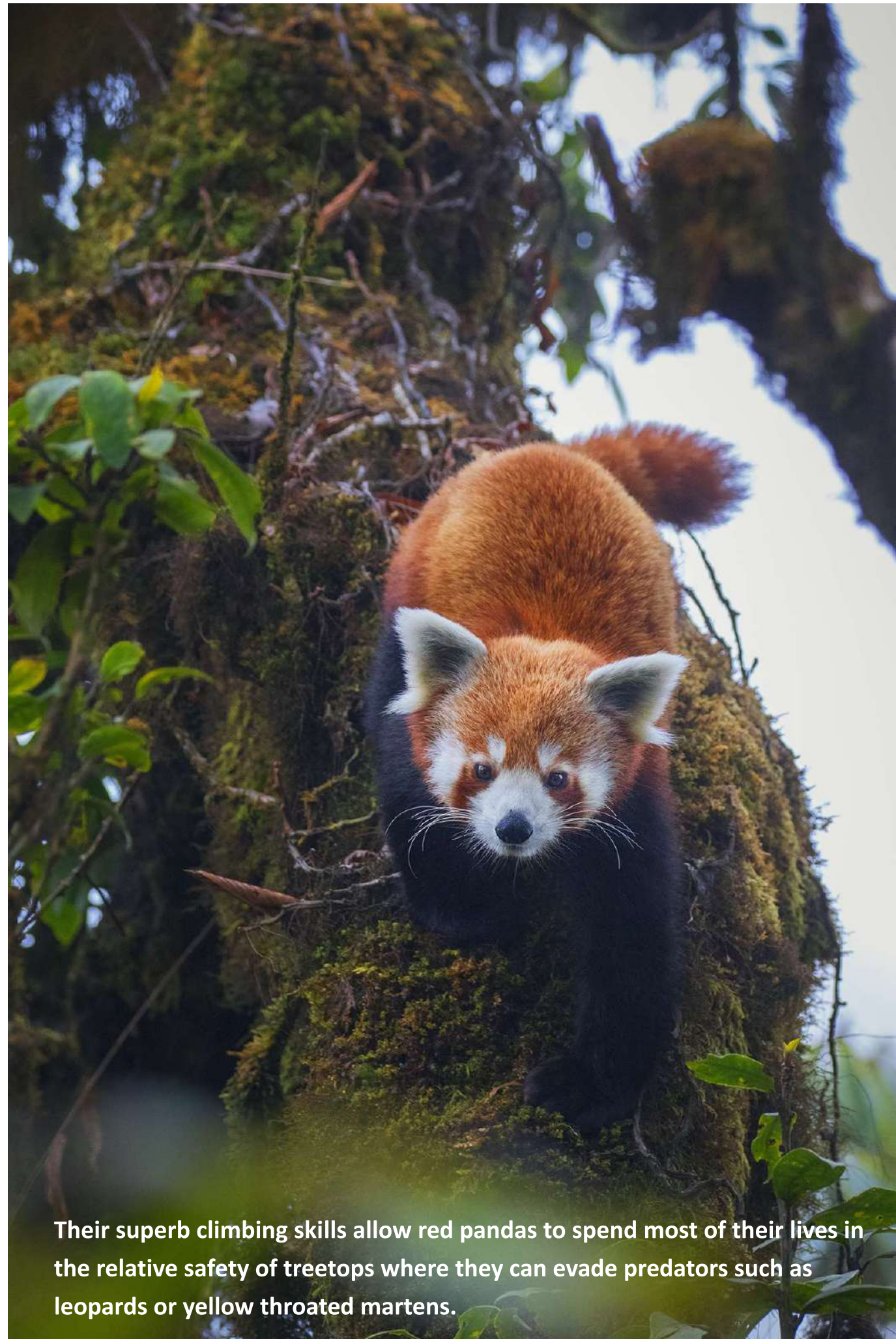
of almost 2,500 kilometres. At a casual glance it seems rather implausible that this gigantic geographical feature on the planet is home to the most diverse range of creatures. These vertigo inducing heights coupled with the hostile setting have deterred human settlements from scaling these heights, however for a vast array of animal species these high peaks and slopes are what they call their homes. Quite interestingly the Himalayas itself exhibit a wide range of climatic as well as topographical features throughout its range from the west to the east. While the slopes are barren and receive little precipitation throughout the year with precious little flora to flaunt in Ladakh the eastern reaches of the Himalayas experience a different climate pattern which supports a wide variety of flora along the slopes of the mountains and in the valleys. Yet life has flourished with the same flair across the diverse geological features of the Himalayas, reaffirming its credibility as the most potent and adaptable force on this planet. The eastern reaches of the Himalayas, where the peaks stand tall along the northern borders of West Bengal, Sikkim and cuts through the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bhutan is home to an incredibly diverse eco-system which houses some of the rarest mammals, birds and quite incredibly some of the rarely found high altitude dwelling reptile species on this planet. This could be attributed to the quite unique climate pattern which this region experiences. While the winter



The dense foliage of temperate coniferous forest along with an abundance of lichen and moss provide these animals the perfect cover in the treetops from the prying eyes of predators lurking below.







**Their superb climbing skills allow red pandas to spend most of their lives in the relative safety of treetops where they can evade predators such as leopards or yellow throated martens.**

months are severe with sub-zero temperatures accompanied by heavy snowfalls, it is during the relatively warmer period of the year the mountains weave their magic. The moderate to heavy rainfall which the eastern slopes receive during monsoon coupled with the relatively warmer temperatures transforms these mountain slopes into a semi tropical terrain with lush green vegetation made up of a wide array of flora enveloping the slopes and foothills of the mountains. This ingenious assortment of cool climate, generous precipitation and the right mix of warmth and humidity throughout the year have shaped this unique eco-system. The mountain peaks shield and nestle in their laps one such Eden, the Singalila National Park in the northern most reaches of Darjeeling district in West Bengal. The park derives its name from the Singalila ridge upon which it is located at an approximate elevation of 3,000 meters and more above the sea level. The wide range of vegetation ranging from subtropical forests which extend up to the altitude of 3,000 meters and the temperate coniferous forests which exist in the altitude range of 3,000 meters to 4,500 meters has made the Singalila National Park the favoured home for a plethora of animal species. Singalila National Park is home to a wide range of smaller mammals in the form of the yellow throated marten, barking deer, the highly elusive pangolin, the ever so skittish Himalayan pika as well as some of the larger and more imposing mammals

such as the leopard, the Himalayan black bear among others. However the incredibly rare red panda is the crown jewel of this amazing natural haven, with the Singalila National Park being one of the few last remaining refuges for this incredible animal for which the threat of extinction is becoming more real and apparent with every passing day. The red pandas are vastly different in all aspects from their much bigger cousins the giant pandas except for sharing the same love for bamboo although the two species have their own preferences when it comes to chewing on parts of the bamboo. It simply defies all logic to see a species such as the red panda which has been unequivocally graced with generous adjectives such as cute, adorable and pose absolutely no threat to humans and other species except for their favoured bamboo leaves, faced with the real prospect of extinction. In other words the red pandas of the world are in serious trouble, which make them such a vital cog in the fragile eco-system of Singalila National Park. Some researches and estimates suggest there are less than 10,000 individuals left in the wild scattered across the forests of eastern Himalayas in Nepal, Bhutan and the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal and parts of Arunachal Pradesh and China where a rather disturbing trend of rapidly vanishing red panda populations has been observed for quite some time now. Biologists and conservationists are of the opinion that the very little knowledge available about the



Singalila National Park unabashedly flaunts its rich bio-diversity. The fire-tailed sunbird is one of the park's most vibrant residents. The males of this species are extremely colourful as this one while the females are duller in appearance.



There is no dearth of colours in the Himalayas as exhibited by this pair of fire tailed myzornis, another colourful occupant along the foothills of the mountain ranges.

The sub-tropical features of Singalila National Park has made it a home to a variety of reptilian species such as this big-eyed mountain keelback known for its rather large eyes. If threatened this snake engages in a display of threat mimicing a cobra, lending it the alternative name of "false cobra".



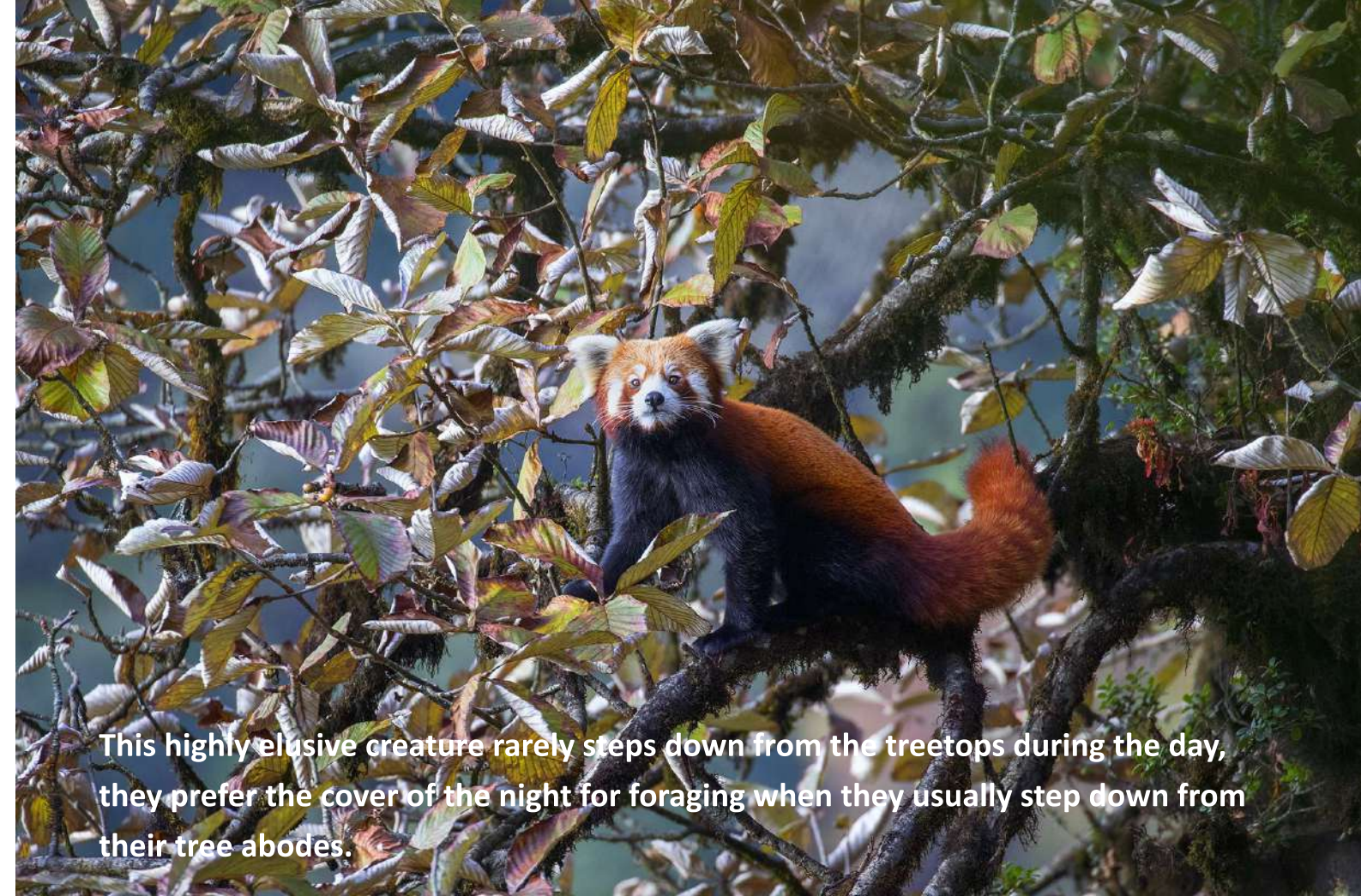




secretive lives of these mammals largely contributes towards the lack of awareness among the local population as well as humans by and large, which in turn has failed to create any awareness regarding this species. However if we dwell slightly deeper beneath the adorable and furry bright exterior of the red panda there is so much to admire about this magnificent animal. The red panda with its extremely bright coloration and an almost puppy faced appearance has been a winner of hearts for ages. These animals grow no bigger than an average house cat, although they boast of a much larger and furry tail. The long tail which measures roughly within 15-20 inches plays a crucial role in establishing their identities as excellent climbers. This long bushy tail doubles up as the perfect warm blanket when the red pandas curl their tails around their bodies to survive the frosty Himalayan weather. The reddish brown coloration of the thick coat of fur almost resembles the colour of rust, with white markings on the side of its head and on top of the small eyes.

**Red pandas lead solitary lives except for coming together for a brief period during mating, cubs though stay with their mother for almost a year or more till they are capable enough of venturing out on their own. The cubs share a strong bond with their mother and also among themselves and spend a lot of time in each others company.**





This highly elusive creature rarely steps down from the treetops during the day, they prefer the cover of the night for foraging when they usually step down from their tree abodes.

These small mammals are usually solitary only pairing up during the mating period for a few days. Apart from being solitary the red panda has often been described as a shy creature, rarely stepping out in the clearing, which makes it incredibly difficult to spot and observe these animals. While the males take very little or no interest in raising the off springs the red panda mother can easily qualify as one of the more dedicated mothers in the natural world. The red panda mother embarks upon the arduous task of building a suitable nest or den when she is about to give birth. The pregnant mother industriously scouts for an abandoned hollow tree or tree stump which she can use as nursery for her young

ones. When one catches her fancy, the mother carefully lines it with leaves, grass, moss and other forms of vegetation. This serves the dual purpose of concealing the den from lurking predators and also keeps the den nice and warm. Red panda mothers have been known to make a number of dens so that they can move their cubs from one location to the next in order to evade predators. The new born cubs spend almost three months in these dens before they are big enough to venture outside. A young family of mother and her cubs ranging from one to four usually stays together for a relatively long period of time, which could last beyond a year from birth or even until the next mating season. Red

panda cubs are born with very little survival skills and pick up valuable life lessons such as climbing trees, foraging for food, detecting and evading potential predators by closely observing their mothers. It would be safe to say red panda mothers are those mothers in nature who invest heavily in bringing up their young ones, and in the face of such adversities staring at them the next generation red panda cubs will be needing all the help they can get from their doting and vigilant mothers to make it to adulthood. The excellent climbing techniques which the red panda is blessed with enable it to forage in the trees and look out for their most preferred food item which happens

to be the bamboo. Bamboo makes up for a vast majority of the red panda diet. However they are picky when it comes to gorging on bamboo, only the most tender shoots and leaves can be deemed palatable as a red panda diet. The presence of a pseudo thumb in their digits enables the red panda to effectively grasp the bamboo while feeding. Since bamboo makes up for the majority of the red panda's diet, it also explains the animal's foraging behaviour and other behavioural aspects of its daily life. The part of bamboo which constitutes the red panda's diet is extremely high in indigestible fibre and low on nutrients enabling them to extract only a quarter of nutrients from bamboo. This in



The yellow throated marten is a superb hunter and often hunts in packs of four or more members. These widely distributed mammals have claimed a wide range of habitat and have superbly adapted to life in the mountainous terrain of the Himalayas. Red pandas have ample reasons to fear these predators as they feature regularly in the diet of yellow throated martens.







The masked palm civet is another commonly found mammal in the Singalila National Park.



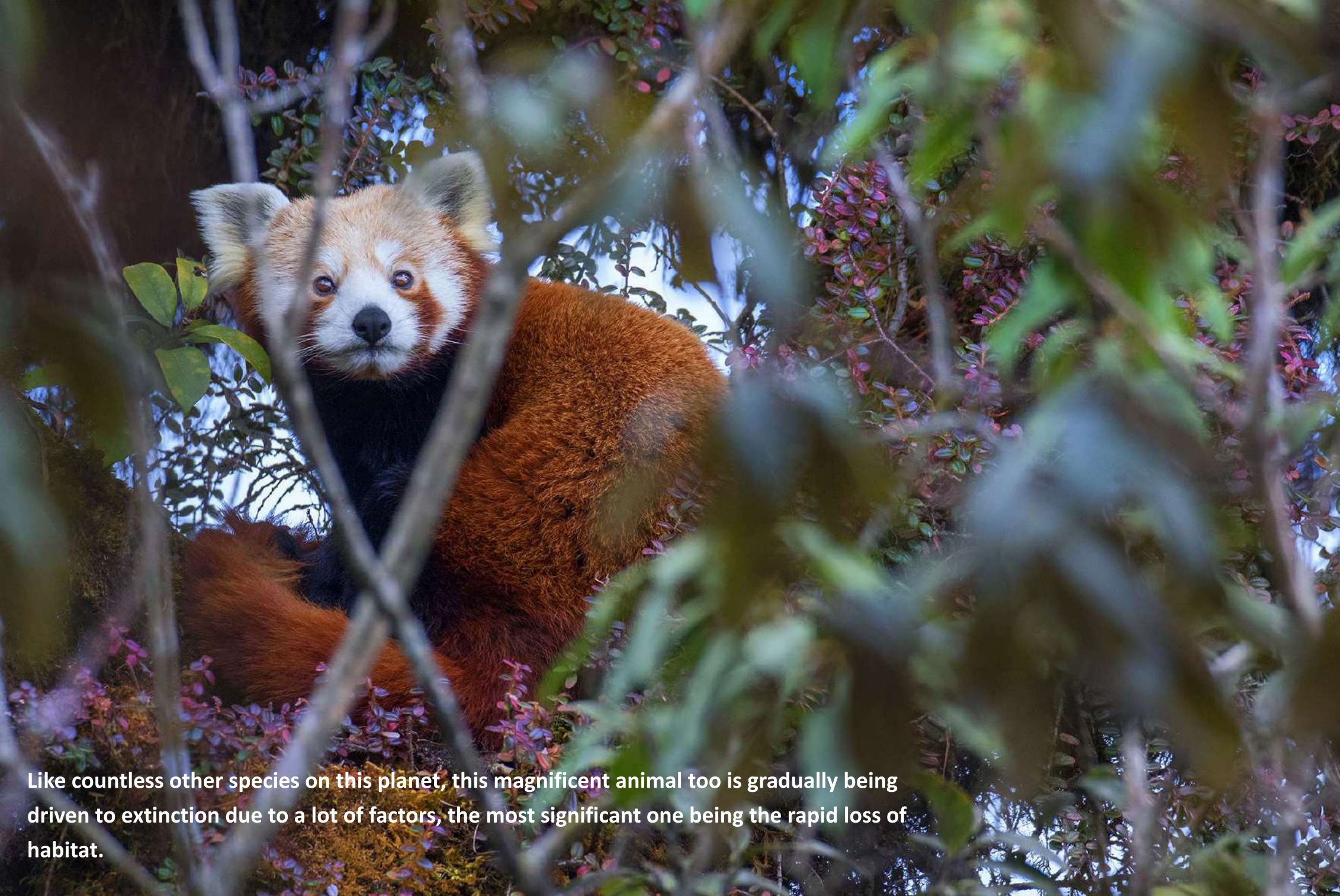
turn means the red pandas have to be constantly on the lookout for foraging or supplement their diet with other nutrients available from insects or even smaller mammals, birds, eggs and other available fruits or berries. Like other residents of these mountainous slopes the red panda too faces tough times during the winter months, when the freezing temperature and depleting food resources force it to confine itself within the protection of a warmer refuge in the form of either a tree trunk, or an abandoned den or burrow. During the winter months a red panda can lose up to more than 15 % of its body weight which it has to make up for during the warmer summer months of plenty. Red pandas usually lead a solitary existence and maintain their own territories. The species is not particularly a diurnal creature, during the day they spend most of their time cowered in the tree holes or curled up high in the branches of the trees. There is a notable spike in their activities following late afternoon or during the early part of the evening. They use the cover of night to forage for food and also marking their territories. The long white whiskers at the top of their snouts prove to be excellent navigational devices which enable the red pandas to find their way even in the dark. These animals use a cocktail of urine sample and musky secretion from their anal glands to mark their territories. Like it is with most mammals a female's territory may overlap with a male's, there can be more than one

female within the territorial range of a single male although males strictly maintain different territories which almost never overlap with one another. The red panda is by and large a quite animal, indulging only in short whistles and squeaks when they feel the need to communicate with one another. These rarely used modes of communications are brought to the fore particularly during the mating period while in pursuit of a potential mate. The red panda with its supreme climbing abilities and secretive arboreal way of life manages to evade some of the prominent predators in the national park, yet red panda diet features quite regularly in the menu of leopards, and yellow throated martens. The young cubs are particularly vulnerable to the raptors and large birds of prey hovering high up in the sky. However the threats posed by these predators amount to nothing when compared with some of the other perils they are faced with. Rapid deforestation in and around the boundaries of the Singalila National Park along with the same at other red panda natural habitats severely threatens the future of this species. The red panda is heavily dependent on bamboo for food and tree cover and treetops for leading its arboreal life. With the ever thinning tree cover and depleting bamboo population the red panda is quickly running out of food as well as the protective cover of trees. This eventually leads to death by starvation or by falling prey at the hands of leopards or martens.

Even the increasing presence of feral dogs roaming freely along the park boundary poses significant threats to the survival of the red panda. To make matters worse for these animals there is an ever increasing demand for these animals in the illegal exotic pet market. Although not so common in parts of India, this disturbing trend has raised its ugly head in the forests of China from where these creatures have been known to be smuggled into the illegal pet trade racket in Laos and other parts of the world as well. In spite of all its expertise to survive in such a harsh unforgiving environment, there is very little the red panda can do to evade these perils threatening its very survival. As a result of which the red panda population has worryingly slipped into the "endangered" from the "vulnerable" category of the IUCN Red List. It goes without saying such activities have successfully paved the way for the eventual demise of yet another magnificent creature from the face of this planet, and if ignored we will lose yet another species at a rate faster than we can possibly comprehend. The low reproduction rate and high infant mortality rate mean the species can do very little on its own to counter the threat of its rapidly dwindling population. The females breed once in every one or two years, which coupled with a relatively long gestation period of more than four months severely limit the species' ability to enhance its population.

Ironically as the seeds of such perils faced by the red panda were sown a long time ago similarly the foundation stones for the recovery of this species were too laid a long time ago. In an attempt to know more about these animals, several captive breeding programmes were set up all over the world. These programmes not only helped in increasing the population also offered the scientists the much needed insight into the secret lives of these animals. This unravelled incredibly significant details from the red panda world previously unknown to humans since studying their behaviour in their natural habitat is a near impossible task due to the secretive habits of these animals. With such precious knowledge at their disposal, researchers and conservationists were able to zero in on the problems plaguing their existence and devise ways to overcome them. With more and more getting involved in such projects the much needed awareness to conserve this species reached far and wide, which opened the doors for local communities getting involved in this daunting task of safeguarding the future of this species. The Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh deserves a special mention in this regard, where the villagers have taken it among themselves to preserve the red panda habitat in order to ensure their existence. A sense of awareness is slowly but steadily creeping into the local population elsewhere, who share the same resources with these animals including within the borders of Singalila National





Like countless other species on this planet, this magnificent animal too is gradually being driven to extinction due to a lot of factors, the most significant one being the rapid loss of habitat.

Park. A number of captive breeding programmes aim at reintroducing the animals once they reach adulthood into the wild with a view to boost the wild population and also to bring about the much needed diversity in the gene pool, particularly in places like Singalila National Park where the reported population of red panda is a meagre 25-30 individual. Various organisations have started community awareness programmes which aim at spreading the knowledge about the forest and its natural resources and the importance of preserving them. While all these are heartening news for the red pandas, the conservationists and naturalists and the red pandas are certain to benefit from them there remains this lingering doubt whether what is being done is enough or not. This one battle, like many others is a race against time, and if history has taught us anything then it is we have lost many such battles in the past and lost many such beautiful creatures of the wild to the same threats which plague the red panda's world today. We have already lost far too many species, far too many creatures have fallen prey to our selfish greed, our narrow outlook, the time is ripe to put an end to it and commit all our resources and intent in saving the wild wonders of our planet. The world will be a much better place if we can bring ourselves to appreciate these unique animals and their unique expertise, all we need to do is step aside and admire them, these creatures are more than capable of taking care of the rest and thrive on their own.

## About the Photographer



**Sourav Mondal** is a naturalist and wildlife tour leader by profession and a passionate wildlife photographer. After completing his degree in zoology he opted for a full time career of a naturalist. Photographing rare animals is his primary area of interest and he has spent more than 3 years in the Eastern Himalayas in his quest to photograph the endangered red panda. His photographic work has been recognized across various platforms and has won him many accolades which include the prestigious winner of Nature in Focus photography awards 2017 among others. His photographs have been published in many reputed publications such as Sanctuary Asia, Saevus, Wildtrail journal among many others.



A man in a white t-shirt and blue jeans is sitting on a wooden bench, seen from behind, looking out over a large green field towards a city skyline at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. In the background, several buildings are visible, including a prominent tall skyscraper under construction with a crane on top. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, and the foreground is filled with green grass and the branches of a tree on the left.

# The Soul of Kolkata

The narrow alleys, age old marketplaces and  
the riverfront reveal the true soul of Kolkata.

by Souvik Banerjee



The huge patch of greenery at the heart of the city, locally known as “Maidan” apart from serving as the lungs of the city is also a hotbed of various sporting activities from dawn till dusk.




Much like a skilled actor on stage who seamlessly transits from one character to another, the city of Kolkata seems to flummox its visitors in a similar fashion by portraying its multi layered persona. For some the city is a huge canvass of contradictions where poverty and pride thrive simultaneously, while others feel the city is yet to completely shed off its once colonial ways and for some the city still remains one of the last few places whose streets and alleys are still resplendent with the old world hypnotic charm. The truth remains the city of Kolkata is possibly a sum total of all of these feelings, it will be unfair to assign one particular adjective which will successfully define the true fabric of this city. Ever since its humble origins on the banks of Hooghly River when a few shanties and mud houses laid the foundation of Kolkata, the city has been the nerve centre of the subsequent political and cultural upheavals the country has experienced. From being one of the major trading centres and business hub of the East India Company to becoming the capital of the erstwhile British ruled India till 1911, the history of Kolkata is intricately linked with that of the rest of the country. This pronounced British influence is evident all over the city even today, notably in its architecture which has retained Kolkata’s past. While the administrative and political significance of Kolkata diminished

manifolds when the British government decided to shift their capital to Delhi in 1912, the deep seated cultural and intellectual influence of the British kept flowing unhindered through the city’s arteries. The cultural aspect of its past is possibly the one thing which the city has clung on to dearly even till this date. It is not without any reason people term Kolkata as the cultural hub of India. The city has produced a steady stream of writers, artists, filmmakers, reformers and most importantly a wide pool audience with a fine taste and appreciation for these crafts.

As it is with so many other cities in India, the winds of change have brought about many changes in the daily life of Kolkata too. The Victorian era buildings now share the same neighbourhood with their modern day swanky high rises which flex their architectural might by peeping into the clouds, while the colonial administrative buildings still remain a hot bed of administrative activities their modern day counterparts in the information technology hub of the city project a picture of surgical precision and the new age professionalism, the rambling trams from the British era still remain the preferred mode of transport for many while they jostle for space on the newly laid roads with the newer and faster modes of modern day public transport. The new, the modern, the swanky are gradually marking their own territories. While the city has been embracing the new with open arms, it is yet to allow the winds of change





to usurp its old, the charm of which gave the city its very own identity, which carved a lasting endearing impression in the hearts of so many. It is quite unbelievable how the city has still managed to successfully hold on to so many of its past traditions as well as ways of life in the face of the rapidly changing times around them. Therein possibly remains ingrained the true essence of this city, a sense of all-inclusiveness which is the soul Kolkata. This photo-album highlights some such aspects of Kolkata which may not be in sync with the changing times which are sweeping across the city but a perfect portrayal of the synergy which exists between the city's past and the future, which somehow despite all the contradictions manage to bind the various aspects of the city with a common thread, a common bond which makes this city a place for everyone.

The banks of Hooghly remain witness to a plethora of activities throughout the year. People depend on these waters for their daily chores while these banks become the immersion grounds for the idols after various pujas.





Workers handle their stocks in a busy fruit market in Kolkata. The solid foundation upon which this city stands today is laid down by such hardworking people.





The busy marketplaces, including the famous pet market of the city still bear the same look as they did a few decades ago, a testament to the city's well preserved past.







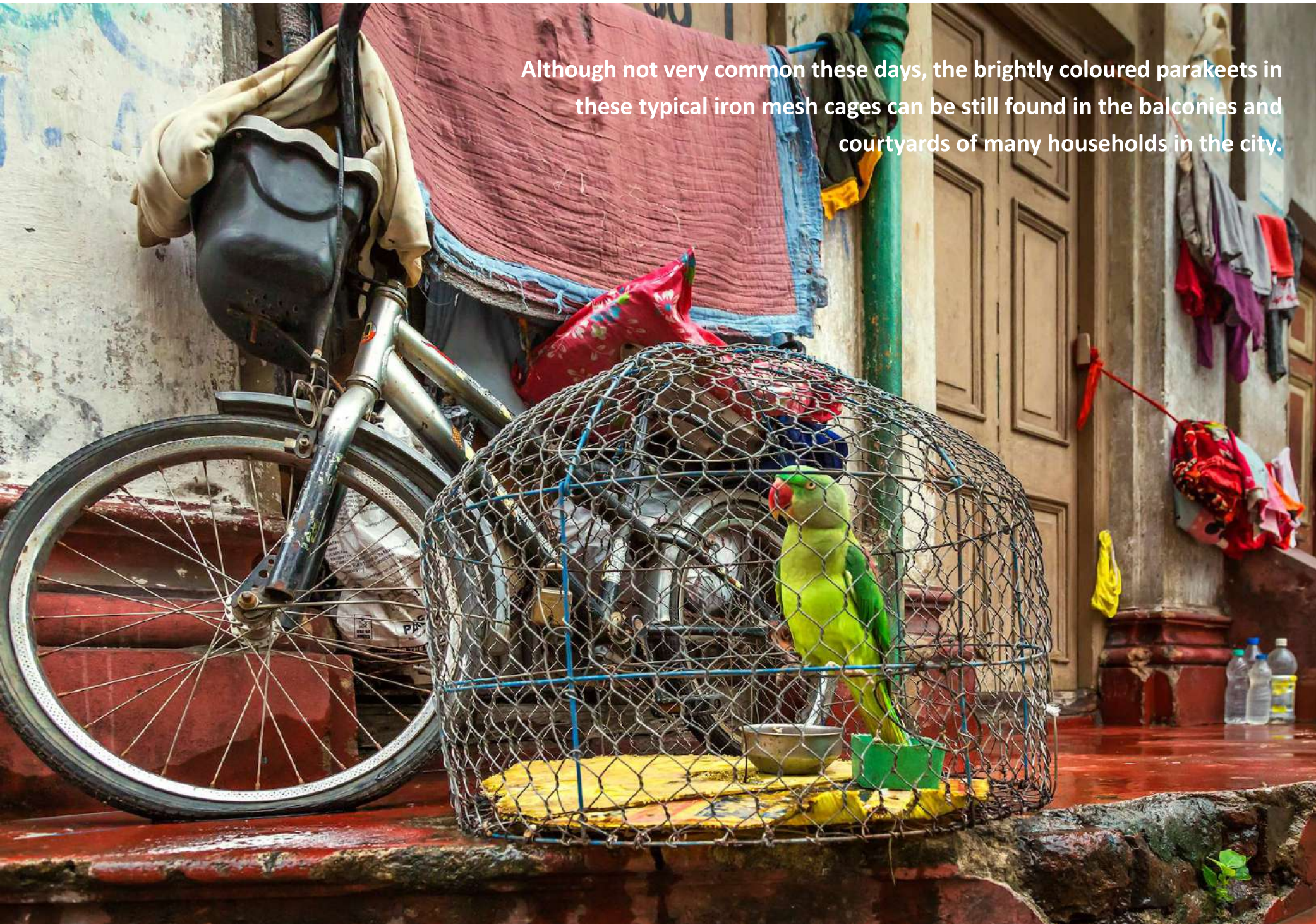
Makeshift salons such as this one still remain the preferred destination among many in the city for a much needed grooming.





The city bursts into life during the festive season, the highlights of which are the Durga Puja followed by Kali Puja preceding the occasion of Diwali.





Although not very common these days, the brightly coloured parakeets in these typical iron mesh cages can be still found in the balconies and courtyards of many households in the city.

More of his work is available at:

instagram account-@souvikbanerjee21

facebook link - <https://www.facebook.com/souvik.banerjee.9237>

National Geographic Your Shot profile -

<http://yourshot.nationalgeographic.com/profile/205191/>



## About the Photographer

An engineer by profession, **Souvik Banerjee's** love affair with photography dates back to a long time ago. He is an outdoor person whose job and family commitments take him to different places. It is during these travels he finds his photographic subjects which revolve around travel, people, landscapes, monuments and

various cultures and their rituals. Primarily self-taught, he finished a course in photography from the School of Fototechnik in New Delhi. Having started off with a manual Pentax K-1000 SLR camera, a gift from his father, he took up digital SLR cameras after shifting to Abu Dhabi pursuing his career as an engineer in oil and gas. A regular contributor to various travel magazines he has taken part in many Salons and has won many acceptances, certificates and awards. Some of his noteworthy works include, regular selection as Editor's Favourite in National Geographic Yourshot profile, getting featured regularly on reputed Instagram handles such as Creative Image Magazine, Yourshot India, IG Calcutta, Amar Kolkata, Insta Abu Dhabi etc, winning the prize of most influential instagrammer in the Contest Stories of Durga Puja 17 organized by Stories of Kolkata on Instagram in October 2017, being declared as Best Instagrammer of the month by IG Calcutta in July 2017, winning the Soul of Kolkata Competition under the category "Greenery of Kolkata", getting featured at Photograph Adda at Camarena in January, 2016 and Dubai Photoworld, in Dubai in April 2007. His photographs were exhibited at the exhibition "Safar" on Travel Photographs of Delhi held at AIFACS gallery, in Delhi in September 2006 and also at the exhibition "Darpan" held at the Lalit Kala Gallery, in Delhi in May 2004. He is also a lifetime member of India International Photographic Council (IIPC), in New Delhi.





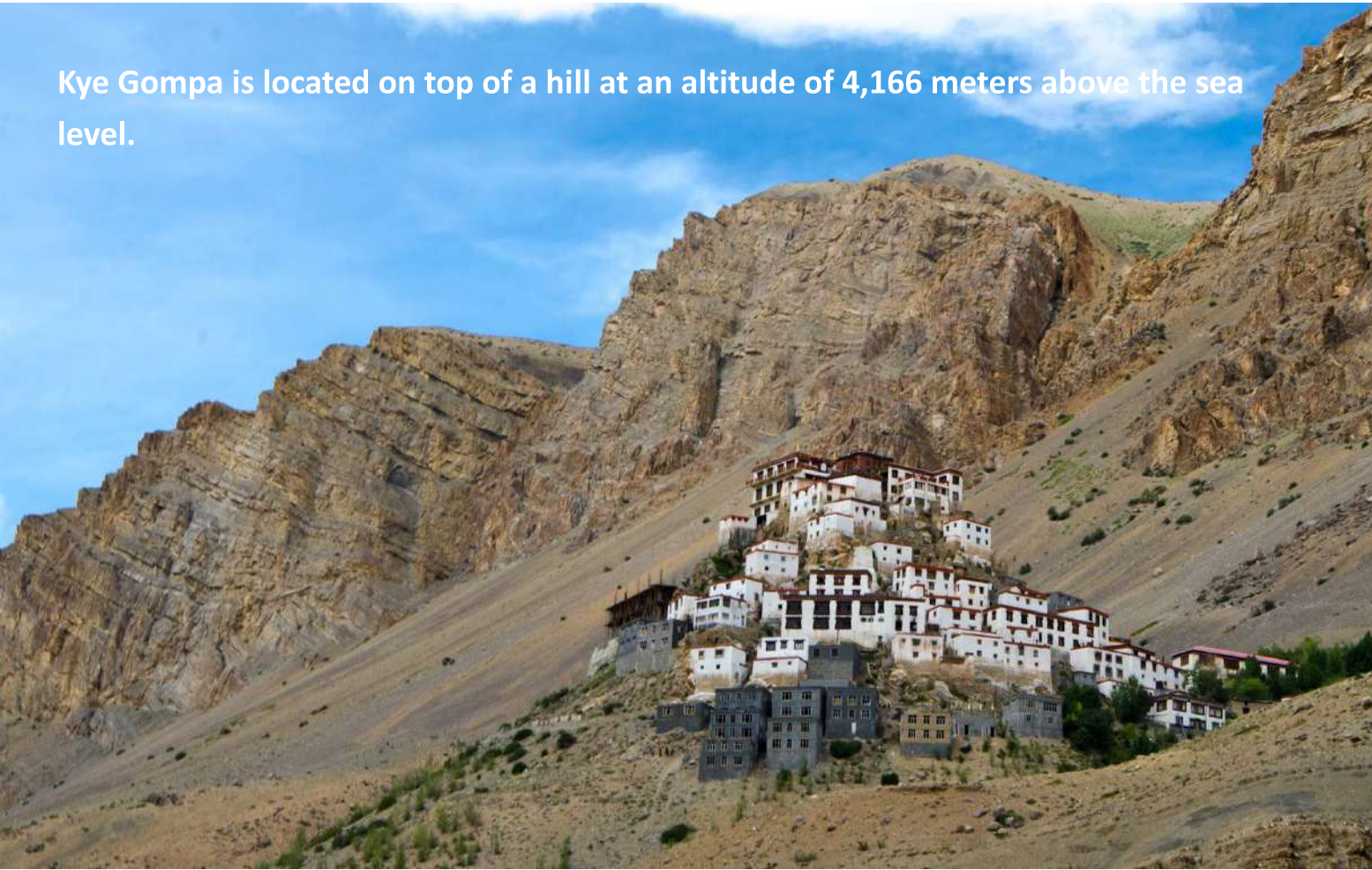
# The Magical Realms of Spiti Valley

An avid traveler chronicles his road trip across some of the highest and most treacherous roads on this planet while unravelling the surreal beauty that lies hidden along the slopes.

by **Mukesh Kumar Gautam**



Kye Gumpa is located on top of a hill at an altitude of 4,166 meters above the sea level.



Beautiful scenarios such as this one are extremely common across the entire Spiti Valley.



Every passionate travel photographer has the insatiable lust for travelling coursing through the veins which forces the person to set out in the quest for the unknown and bring the world closer through the photographs. From my long list of things to do before setting out on the ultimate journey, recently the opportunity came my way to tick one very close to my heart, which was “driving through one of the world’s most treacherous roads” of Lahaul and Spiti Valley. The burning desire to travel through the remotest “Buddhist circuit” on this planet overtook my economic intelligence as I bought a new SUV and convinced my elder brother who has more than five decades experiences on this planet and a young mutual friend as partners in crime for my life’s most adventurous road trip. Passion for photography and travelling brought three individuals from a wide range of age group and taste together for the journey of their lives.

Our journey began on the early hours of the first day, as we started gathering our road miles as per the pre-fixed itinerary. On the first day it was almost nonstop beautiful drive on the NH-1 until we reached our first night halt at the quite little town of Narkanda around 60 kilometers from the beautiful hill station of Shimla. The scenic beauty which kept us company through the entire duration of our journey cannot be described in words, one has to experience and live it.

A small market with a handful of staying options with wooly clouds hovering above it welcomed us. The cloud cover was only a prelude to the thunderstorm which nature unleashed upon this small hilly town only to pave the way for the beautiful morning with scattered clouds embracing the green valley the next day. After breakfast, before starting our further journey we decided to refill our essential supplies as resources would be scarce along the way. Our journey commenced after a short visit to the “Hatu Temple” at Hatu Peak, in Narkanda. As we set out our driving skills were put to the sternest of tests on narrow winding treacherous trails, gracious enough to allow only one vehicle to climb at a time. We soon realized our wanderlust has lured us into something nothing short of sheer madness. At the top of this climb, there was a typical wooden structure, similar to various other temples in Himachal Pradesh surrounded by dense forest serving as the ideal playground for the band of monkeys swaying from one maple tree to another. Quite interestingly the resident priest told us the temple belonged to “Mandodari”, the wife of “Ravana”. From here as we made our way to our next destination Sangla, we were greeted by the magical views of Kinnaur Valley. To our pleasant surprise along the way, the meandering tracks of Sutluj River kept us company and guided us till Karcham. The dark misty veil of evening had embraced Sangla when we reached.



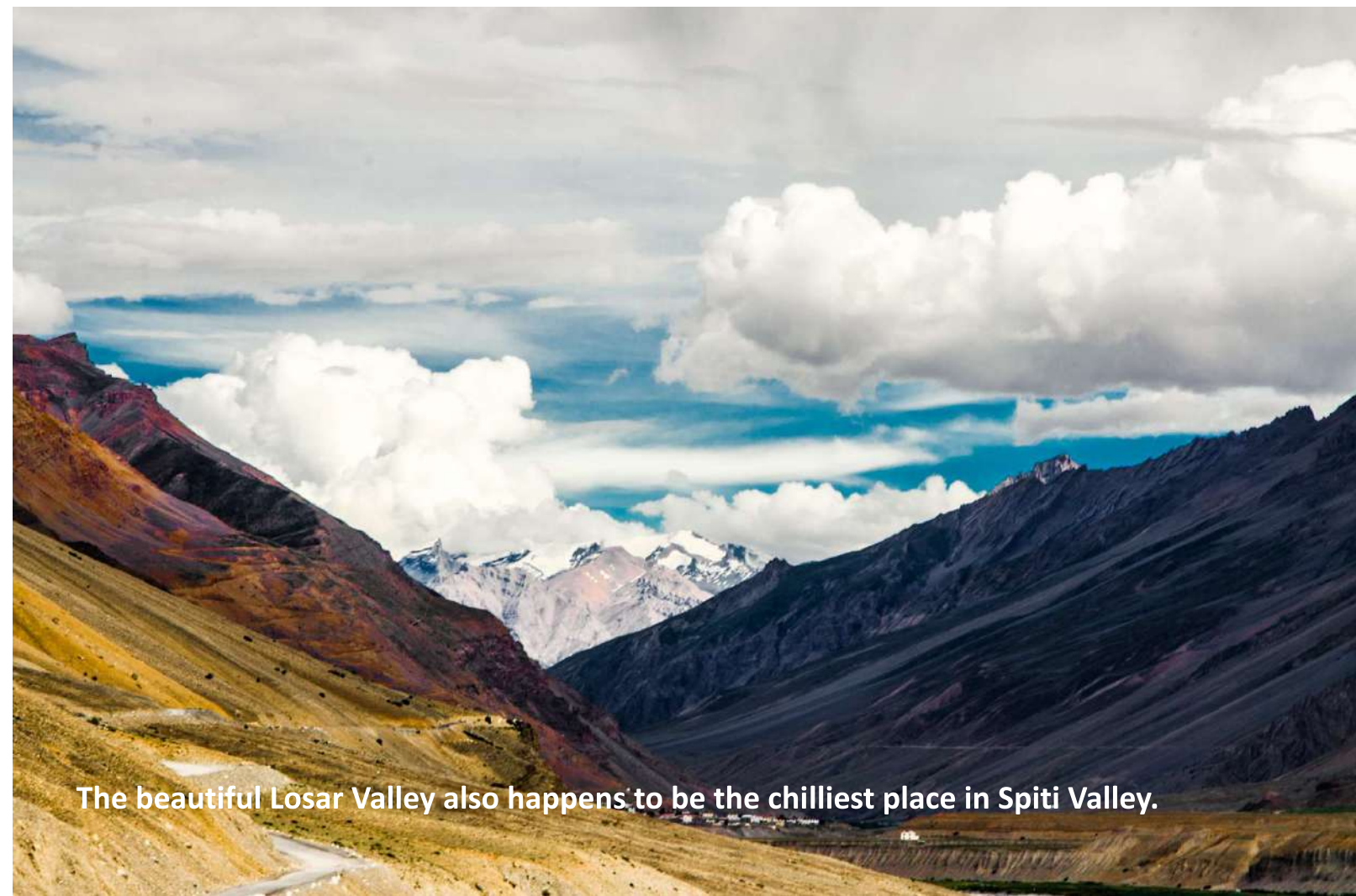
The natural forest at Brelenji near Reckong Peo hides this 10 meters tall statue of Lord Buddha.



Driving through this beautiful landscape requires supreme skills and is not well suited for the faint hearted.

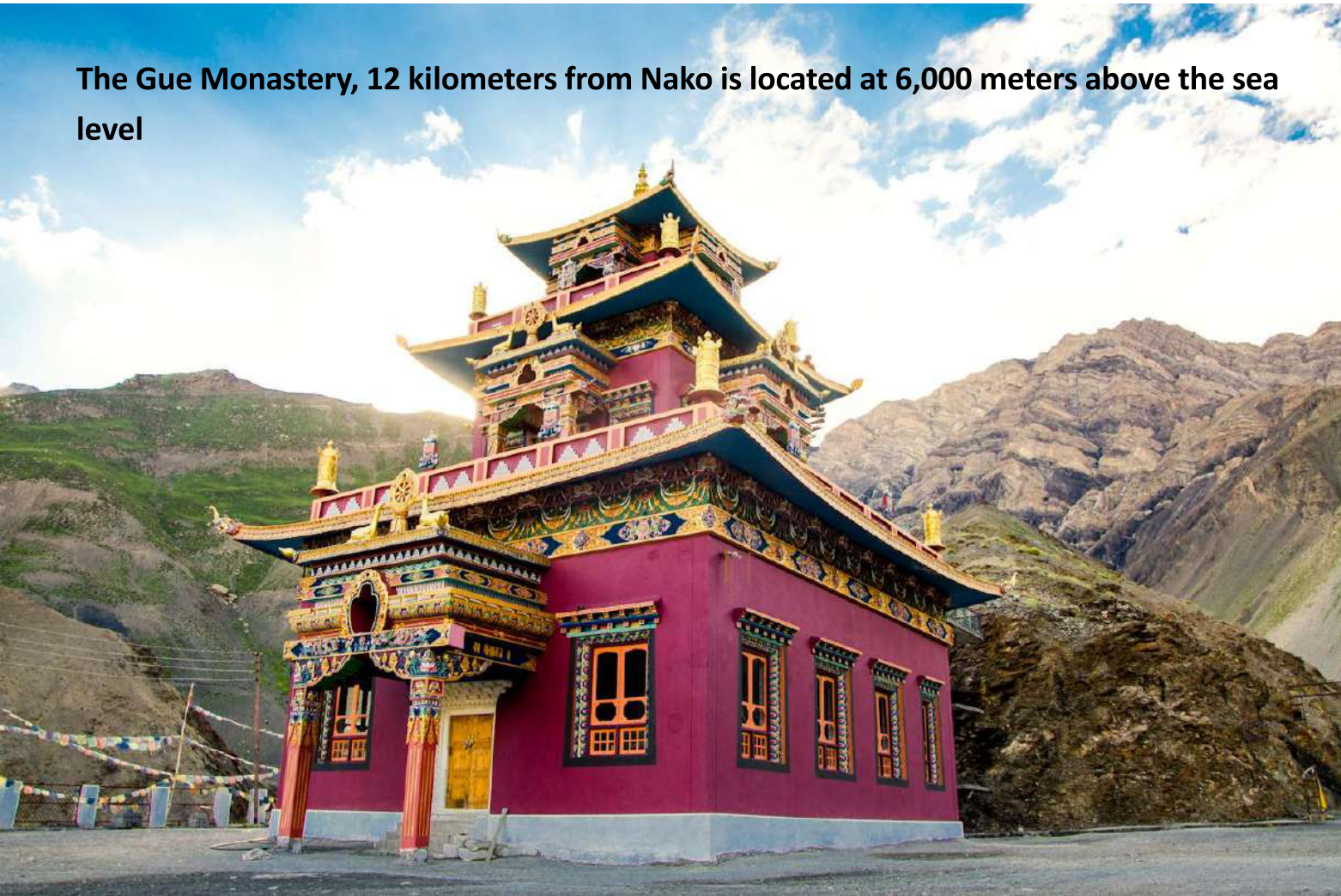


The beautiful Losar Valley also happens to be the chilliest place in Spiti Valley.





**The Gue Monastery, 12 kilometers from Nako is located at 6,000 meters above the sea level**



**The mummy of Lama Sangha Tenzin inside Gue Monastery is believed to be the only mummy in India in sitting position.**



After much deliberation and swinging back and forth between our options we settled for a beautiful government house with basic amenities at a reasonable rate, which would be our refuge for the night. My fellow travelers had gone out to arrange for dinner and I was going through the photographs I had taken during the day on my laptop. My concentration was broken by some strange noise coming from the washroom, although upon inspection I found nothing. After a modest dinner as we were getting ready to retire for the night, we felt somebody moving the mouse of the laptop in a noisy manner, although my elder brother didn't feel anything. Needless to mention these two incidents had left me slightly jittery however we all decided it would be best not to ponder upon these occurrences and focus more on getting a good night's rest. Our long cherished rest was interrupted in the middle of the night by the shaking of bed, which could have been a mild tremor as there was nothing else to be found in the room. As morning lifted the darkness, at the wake of the few incidents from the previous night before leaving I said sorry to the unknown forces as we failed to understand the message if there was any. As per our itinerary our next stop was a beautiful 28 kilometer drive to Chitkul, the last inhabited hamlet along the India-China border, which was reason enough for all of us to feel excited before embarking on our next drive.

Heavy snowfall and other elements of nature in this harsh and unforgiving setting allow the road leading to this last frontier to stay open for a brief period of a few months during the year. The trail laden with countless waterfalls, dotted with dilapidated bridges and the ever so vigilant army check points leads to the village which produces the best potatoes in the world. As per our itinerary, we were supposed to spend the night at the village of "Nako" and we were almost on time. On my insistence we agreed to make the most of our schedule and made a small detour to "Kalpa Reckong Peo". It was worth every penny as a beautiful evening and the sight of a life-sized statue of Lord Buddha further enriched this amazing journey so far. This little detour however came at a price; we failed to reach our destination Nako and had to settle down at the village of Spillo, 60 kilometers short of Nako. We managed to cover the extra 60 kilometers next day and reach the village of Tabo by sunset. The highlight of our next day was the visit to the ancient, more than 1000 years old Tabo Monastery. The place, the monastery, the ambience seemed an artifact from some ancient civilization. The peaceful atmosphere, the serene setting would take anybody's mind to some unworldly realms, far from the grasp of our everyday beings. This ancient place seemed to have the incredible power to heal even the most troubled soul, to rejuvenate all of us and bring peace.



The ethereally beautiful Losar Valley lies approximately 50 kilometers to the north of Kaza.







Spiti Valley happens to be the place of the highest from the highets retail outlet (L) to the highest post office in the world.

This ancient place of worship was built in the 996 A.D and the interiors of the monastery had stayed true to its ancient origins. Amidst the absolute silence and the complete darkness was a small “diya” placed before the main statue of “Vajradhatu”.

Every inch of the wall was engraved with intricate works of art I had never seen before with as many as 36 life-size statues perched on the walls. The paintings, sculptures, inscriptions and extensive wall text have been preserved with utmost dedication through centuries. It is of little surprise that this monastery is known as "the Ajanta of the Himalayas" because of its frescoes and stucco paintings. It was

not at all easy leaving such a calming environment of the monastery behind us, but we had a schedule to maintain. Over the course of the previous 4 days and 850 kilometers later we finally reached Kaza the next evening.

The elevation of Kaza at 3,800 meters is palpable in every step of the way along the long narrow winding lanes of its marketplace as the rhythmic beats of the heart get prolonged and they slow down significantly. Frequent road signs like “Don’t be a Gama in the land of Lama” reminds the spiritual prowess of this mountain town which has lured the Buddhist monks into its folds for centuries.

We almost agreed to a stranger’s unsolicited advice to spend a night at Kibber instead of Kaza to witness a starry night. Tempted and excited I sat on the driver’s seat to race down but a wrong turn took us to the beautiful “Key” monastery. Kye Gompa (also spelled Ki, Key or Kee) is a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, founded in the 11th century and located on top of a hill at an altitude of 13667 feet above the sea level close to the Spiti River.

From Kaza our next destination was the highest village of the world. Negotiating the incredibly narrow width and the hairpin bends of the treacherous trail which leads

to the world’s highest village is a daunting task and embarking on something like this is nothing less than sheer madness. On our way we chanced upon the small village of Langza, curiously known as- The Village of Fossils. The cool breeze gently caresses the precious few of lush green patches guarded by snow peaked mountains in this largely barren landscape. Estimated to be more than 1000 years old, the immortal grand statue of Buddha keeps a watchful eye on the meagre population of 137 souls under its shadow in this village. Spellbound with the glamour of nature, my head bowed with great respect for the simple, hardworking people who brave the ruthless elements of nature during



A lama outside the Tabo Monastery, the oldest operational Buddhist enclave in India as well as the Himalays.



The picturesque Manali Highway connects Chandrataal to Manali.



the harsh winter months while they remain completely disconnected from the rest of the world. The local kids are always eager to take any visitor on a walk, and the little archaeologists are quick with excavating a fossil of ancient marine animals. It defies all logic to find such a rich haul of fossilized remains of ancient marine creatures so close to the world's highest village. My subsequent researches on this topic told me Spiti Valley is said to have submerged in the Tethys Sea millions of years ago. I was most excited with the mythical green paradise as my fingers on camera worked faster than my heartbeats. Since my elder brother was feeling uncomfortable in almost "no oxygen" zone I had to drive to our next destination Komic, the highest village in the world. A few miles drive from Komic and we reached Hikkim, another highest, the highest post office in the world. The son of the postman informed us that every alternate day letters are exchanged from the nearest town i.e. Kaza. The significance of this post office is not in terms of its altitude but as the connecting dot celebrating the resolute spirit of a small brave population.

Like the place, life in Spiti valley is difficult and amazing at the same time. "Primogeniture" is the answer for sharing the limited available resource for survival. The eldest son enjoys the right to marry and inherits the major portion of the land upon attaining adulthood. The parents with younger siblings move to the subsistence holding. The eldest daughter inherits all the jewelry upon marriage and younger brother and sister are expected to become monks (lama) and nuns (chomos).

After completing the Kaza outskirts, we took some time off for some much needed rest at the hotel. Next morning we started for "Chandertal", en route lied the beautiful Losar Valley. It was indeed one of the most scenic and isolated routes I have driven on this planet. Barely a 40 kilometers ride towards the north of Kaza ushers in the most beautiful landscapes. Symphony of the air whistling through magnificent mountains and the melodious crackling of cascading waterfalls and rivers is musical extravaganza to the soul.



The incredibly beautiful Losar Valley in many ways encompasses the beauty of this majestic landscape.



Few miles before the Moon Lake, we reached Kunzum Pass or Kunzum La, a separator between Spiti and Lahaul Valley and a connector with the Kullu Valley. Just 7 km from Kunzum La is the Moon Lake (Chandertal). Spectacular views of Bara-Sigri, the second longest glacier in the world leaves one breathless at the towering height of 15000 ft. The dark gigantic mountains standing tall under the clear blue sky wearing white snow caps with the smoke of white clouds around them represent the arrogance and might of nature at its best. Precision drive with no margin of error over the millions of stones, broken bridges, water falls, takes you from Kaza to Chandertal. On our way to Manali we were honoured to meet the brave couple at their famous Chacha Chachi Ka Dhaba at Batal. The famous couple saved life of hundreds of tourists stranded last year when the elements of nature took unexpected turns and wreaked havoc on this region.

The entire journey was a roller coaster ride for us where things turned on their heads within the span of a few kilometers. It was an exhilarating experience, a plunge into the unknown with humorous road signs such as –“Don’t be a Gama in the Land of Lama” along with the company of nature in its finest form keeping our spirits high. This dream journey would have not been possible without all those strangers met en route, smiling faces, small waiving hands of kids, the lamas blessings for good health and many more. It’s a life time journey and one must cross the road less travelled because it is the only life we have to make such memories.

## About the Photographer



**Mukesh Kumar Gautam** also known as MKG is a traveler, photographer, writer and a runner. MKG under his banner “MKGpictures” is on a mission to bring the world closer to you through his photos and travel stories. MKG has travelled extensively in India and abroad. His unique frames have already been featured in many photography exhibitions held in different parts of the world and have won him 59 awards and recognitions so far. Being a deep thinker of life, his spell bound travel stories and speaking frames have been published by various prestigious newspapers and magazines. Born and brought up in Haryana, MKG is paying tribute to his motherland by promoting Haryana’s rich culture and heritage through his photos and travel stories. He has participated in many running competitions including half marathons and has a Guinness world record in running against his name.





The George Washington Bridge during the evening rush hour.

# *New York, the Enchantress*

a photo album by  
*Amit Pawaskar* and  
*Amitha Shet*  
depicting the beauty of  
New York City.





Our cities, across the globe, if they had voices of their own would have unequivocally stated how they have been made to wear thorny crowns since their inceptions. In so many ways the big cities of the world are always under constant scrutiny, their growth and expansion are often met with a deep seated notion of cynicism, quite often our cities are portrayed as these rampaging giants whose insatiable lust for expanding their empires have invaded the quiet and beautiful countryside and how often they lure the dreams and aspirations of thousands into their glittery realms only to crush them unceremoniously, often in a cold and ruthless manner. On the other hand a dying city is almost always made to bear the brunt of everything that went wrong with the economy or prosperity of the region. Life beyond the obvious glitz and glamour, behind the veil of skyscrapers, beyond the clamour and rush on its streets

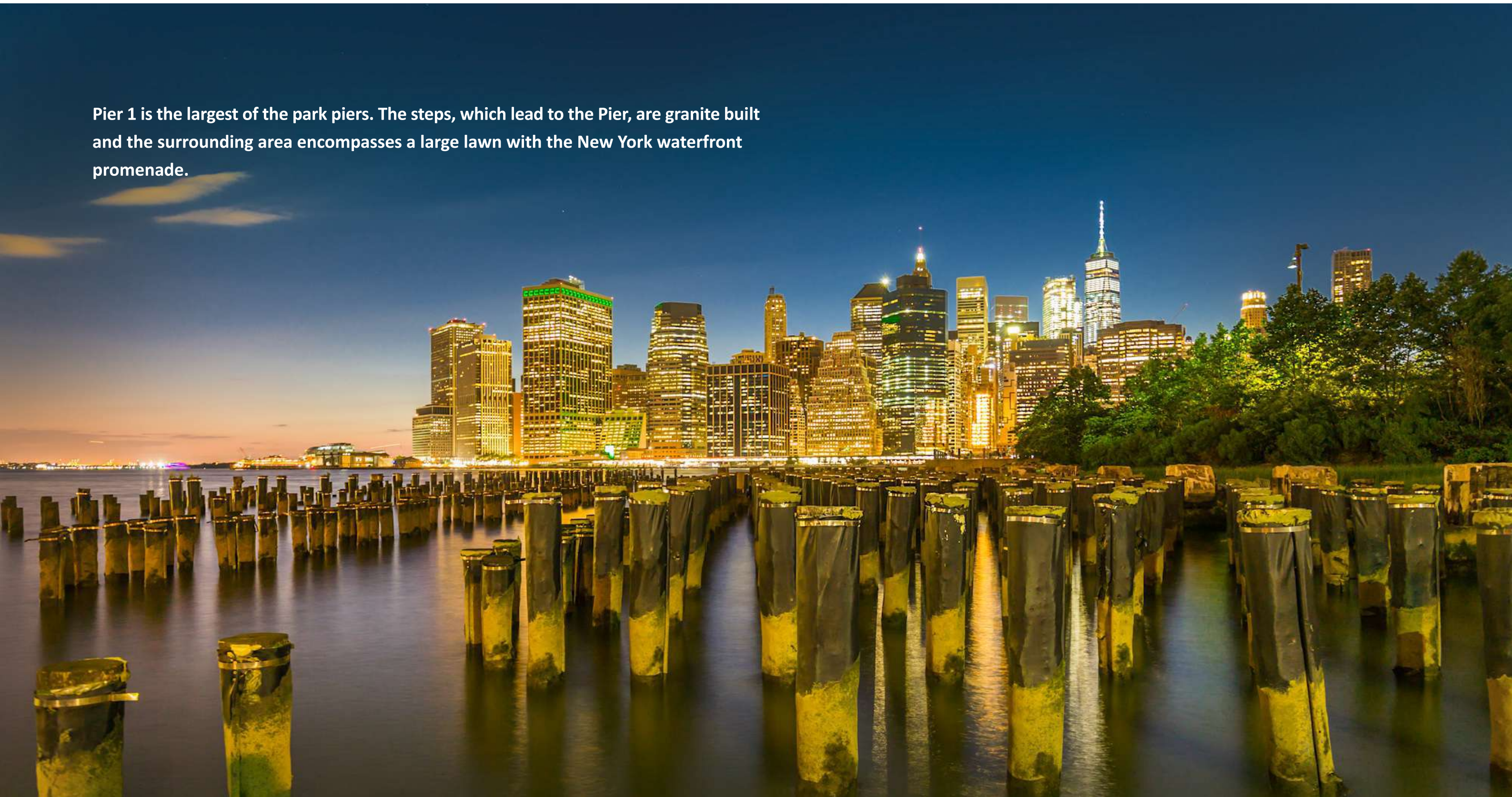
and avenues as a city would tell you is hard. It certainly gets harder if you are the most populous city in the United States and possibly the most recognised city across the globe. New York or widely known as the “Big Apple” is possibly best acquainted with the intense scrutiny that comes with being one of the biggest and modern cities. The city since its humble origins have been plagued with its fair share of problems, the city had to bear the brunt of the worst of humanity on several occasions and despite all the criticisms that it has been subjected to has never quivered. Situated on one of the world’s largest natural harbours the city and its metropolitan area constitute the premier gateway for legal immigration to the United States, lending a hand to hundreds of thousands every year by bringing them one step closer to realising their “American Dream”.

It comes as a little surprise that New York has the largest foreign born population of any city in the whole world and with approximately 800 languages spoken boasts of being the linguistically diverse city. Such diversity always had the potential to be the undoing of this city, yet somehow the city has managed to amalgamate its diverse occupants and turn them into its biggest and most formidable workforce, which in turn has quite literally taken the city’s skyline to vertigo inducing heights today. There has always been a special place in the heart of this city for the dreamers, for the visionaries, for the hard workers, for the ambitious. Its ability to identify the achievers and lead them to success result in thousands of people landing up on its shores every year. Among them who come to this city chasing their dreams and aspirations were the husband wife duo of Amit Pawaskar and Amitha Shet.

They have been living together in this great city since 2012. It was not too long before the city cast its spell upon them and bewildered them. The whole aura, the ambience, the thousands of years of history associated with this city compelled them to explore the city, and its nooks and corners. This team of husband-wife felt the best way in which they could get to know this city better was through the viewfinders of their cameras. Since then they have been shooting the different locations of the city, its architecture and iconic monuments. This photo album features some of their prominent works documenting the beauty that lies hidden among the steel and concrete of New York City, waiting only to reveal itself to those who are truly looking for it, much like the bounty the city holds close to its heart only to shower the one with it who with all honesty and sincerity carve their way towards it.



Pier 1 is the largest of the park piers. The steps, which lead to the Pier, are granite built and the surrounding area encompasses a large lawn with the New York waterfront promenade.

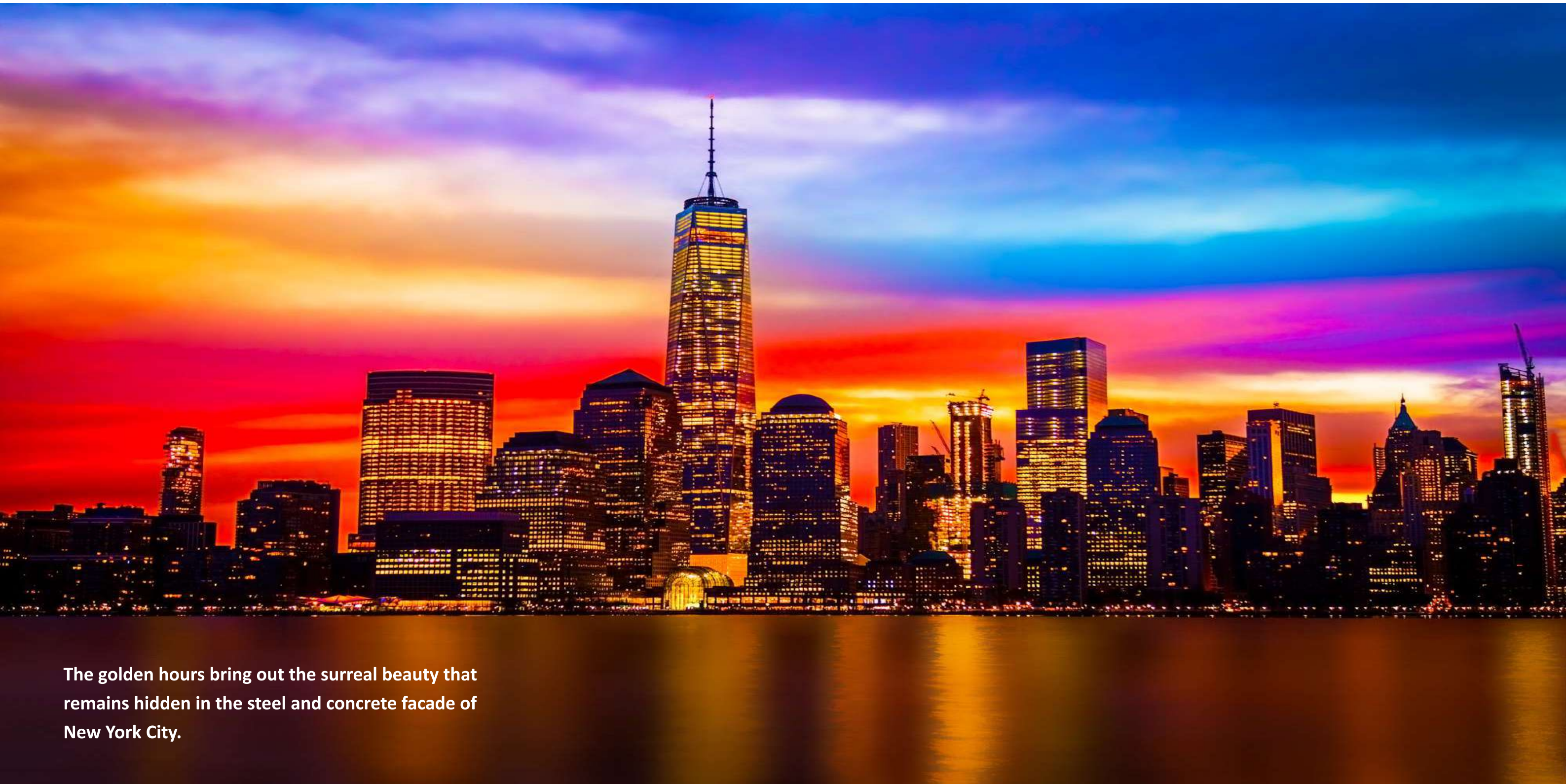




The first light of dawn on a clear day paints the New York skyline in myriad hues of blues and purples.







The golden hours bring out the surreal beauty that remains hidden in the steel and concrete facade of New York City.





On a rainy morning a mysterious veil of fog thick as heaps of clouds put together surrounds the One World Trade Center, the main building of the rebuilt World Trade Center complex in Lower Manhattan.



Port Imperial is a transit hub on the Weehawken, New Jersey waterfront of the Hudson River. It is spread across from Midtown Manhattan, which is served by different modes of transit light rail, buses and NY Waterway Ferry. The Manhattan skyline dominates the entire waterfront view and it is almost as if the buildings are people, jammed shoulder to shoulder, rushing towards midtown, with its towers and citadels spreading out.







The Statue states “Liberty Enlightening the World”. America’s most valued American Dream of Liberty. The ferry tour to this Island flaunts the complete industrial shoreline and skyways of New Jersey. From this particular angle, the Statue of Liberty was a fluorescent green fleck against the sky, and beyond her sat Ellis Island. It is beautiful to watch her corroding flame held high in the air, which symbolizes ‘the fight for human rights’.

## About the Photographers



A team of husband and wife, **Amit Pawaskar** and **Amitha Shet** are passionate Nature Photographers. Amit is an IT Consultant by profession from Goa and Amitha a Marketing Professional born and brought up in Mangalore, Karnataka, India. The love for capturing photos started when Amit moved to USA through job transfer in 2010. He met Amitha, his wife in 2012 who was based in Dubai, UAE on work purpose. They married and she shifted to USA in the same year. Fortunately, they discovered they shared the same passion for photography. They focus on one-shot series capturing the split-second moments that define entire experiences. While Amit is great in choosing the perfect locations, Amitha is also skilled in moving the camera lens for getting the perfect angles to shoot and editing the images with the software such as Adobe Photoshop. Put together they are famous in the photo retouching arena for their skill of highlighting tones while maintaining a strict balance between all other color spectra, thus highlighting skin glow while shooting life.

They are serving as freelance photographers in United States. Along with their passion for photography, Amit and Amitha are greatly involved with the community. They have volunteered for several volunteer works with non- profit organizations like Arts to Grow for motivating children towards arts, Liberty State Park Beautification Program for saving plants and trees, fundraising events like “Celebration to Benefit New York Kids Gala” etc. They have also educated many young photographers to use their love for capturing moments through art to depict the world around them.

They are currently based in New York and are available for photo assignments.

Zoom in on for more of their work on:  
[www.amitandamitha.com](http://www.amitandamitha.com)  
[www.facebook.com/amithashetpawaskar](https://www.facebook.com/amithashetpawaskar)  
[www.facebook.com/theamitpawaskar](https://www.facebook.com/theamitpawaskar)





# The Story of Bodh Gaya

by Manabendra Gupta

The incredible story of how a medieval village  
in the heart of India became the spiritual edifice of Buddhism.



Monks pray in front of a statue of the Buddha depicting his worn out state after months of starvation during his quest to achieve enlightenment





A series of events a few thousands of years ago lined up in succession to make the small temple town of Bodh Gaya the spiritual edifice of Buddhism in today's world. It all started in the ancient 528 B.C, when a young ascetic of noble origin, arrived on the outskirts of the small village of Uruvela nestled on the banks of the Neranjara River. The young noble, Siddhartha had been wandering in the wilderness for years having renounced all forms of worldly pleasure in order to attain spiritual enlightenment. He had put his body and mind through the sternest of tests, yet he was no closer to attain the truth he was looking for. Having subjected himself to years of severe deprivation and austere meditation, Siddhartha had pushed his body and soul to such limits that they were on the verge of falling apart. As death stared him in his face he realised subjecting his body to such rigours for the sake of attaining spiritual knowledge was as ludicrous as indulging in excesses. Amidst the picturesque setting of the beautiful countryside which spread far and wide ahead of him, the symphony of clear flowing water in the nearby river and the quiet little village in the horizon he felt a calm descending upon him as he prepared to settle down under the shade of the spreading branches of a large peepal tree nearby. As he was preparing for his meditation, his frail structure caught the attention of a local village woman named Sujata who was passing by. Appalled at

Siddhartha's physical condition Sujata rushed back to his aid with a bowl of "kheer", a sweet dish made out of rice, milk and honey. The nourishment provided Siddhartha with the much needed resources to settle for his meditation under the peepal tree on a grassy bed facing towards the east. He resolved not to rise from his meditation until he achieved the supreme enlightenment. As he meditated the sun disappeared over the horizon, the moon gradually made its way to the highest point in the night sky, the gentle cool breeze of the night swept across the surroundings. Eventually as the first rays of dawn gleamed through the leaves and branches of the trees, the horizon was painted in the crimson-golden hue of dawn Siddhartha attained his long cherished dream of supreme awakening. With that knowledge he ceased to be Siddhartha any longer, and became the Buddha- the Enlightened One. Having spent the next few days in and around Uruvela, the Buddha set off for Sarnath near Varanasi, to spread to the rest of the world the supreme knowledge which he had attained with the view that it would help liberate thousands of people from the worldly agony which they face in their everyday lives. A few months later upon returning to Uruvela he met three old ascetics who were brothers by birth. The brothers Nadi Kassapa, Gaya Kassapa and Uruvela Kassapa, widely revered, during the course of their lives and experiences had achieved considerable amount of

knowledge, yet they were taken aback by the philosophy proposed to them by the Buddha and the unhindered almost childlike joy which he experienced. The three brothers, followed by their thousand disciples, bowed at the Buddha's feet and asked him to ordain them as monks. This was only the prelude to what was to follow next, as his preaching spread far and wide the waves of people looking for salvation kept coming and they would devout themselves at his feet to share the supreme knowledge which the Buddha had to impart to them. Thus the previously unknown village of Uruvela gained prominence among his followers with more and more people visiting the spot under the peepal tree where the Buddha attained the supreme enlightenment laying the foundation for the Buddhist tradition of pilgrimage. There is no clear account of how the original name Uruvela became obsolete and was subsequently replaced by other names such as Mahabodhi. Since the very origin, Bodh Gaya has been widely accepted to be the birthplace of Buddhism and attracted pilgrims from all over the world. Some of the notable early visitors were Fa Hien the Chinese monk, who chronicled his visit to Bodh Gaya in details. The most famous among them all probably was the Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar Hiuen Tsang. During his stay in India he visited Bodh Gaya on two different occasions and documented his journeys and his experiences in Bodh Gaya in great details.

Such visits by notable scholars and travellers firmly established Bodh Gaya's position in the world map of Buddhism and reaffirmed its unparalleled spiritual significance in the history of Buddhism. Over the centuries with the spread of Buddhism to different corners of the world and with more people coming within its folds, the spiritual significance of Bodh Gaya as a pilgrimage and also as the birthplace of the Buddha has increased manifold. The Bodh Gaya of today in the eastern Indian state of Bihar stands proudly as the spiritual capital of Buddhism. As centuries rolled by the inconspicuous village of Uruvela too metamorphosed into the much bigger and illustrious Bodh Gaya, impressive enough in stature to successfully carry forward the legacy of the Buddha which it had given birth to. One such significant cornerstone in the history of this region was the construction of the Mahabodhi Temple at the spot where the Buddha attained his enlightenment. Historians credit Emperor Asoka with the construction of this temple in the 3rd century B.C after which the temple has undergone several changes. The present structure dates back to the 6th century. Emperor Asoka is also believed to have constructed a diamond throne known as the Vajrasana at the foot of the Bodhi Tree, where the Buddha experienced his much sought after spiritual awakening. The Vajrasana is considered to be an extremely sacred site in Bodh Gaya.





An average day inside the monasteries of Bodhi Gaya reveals pictures such as this one.



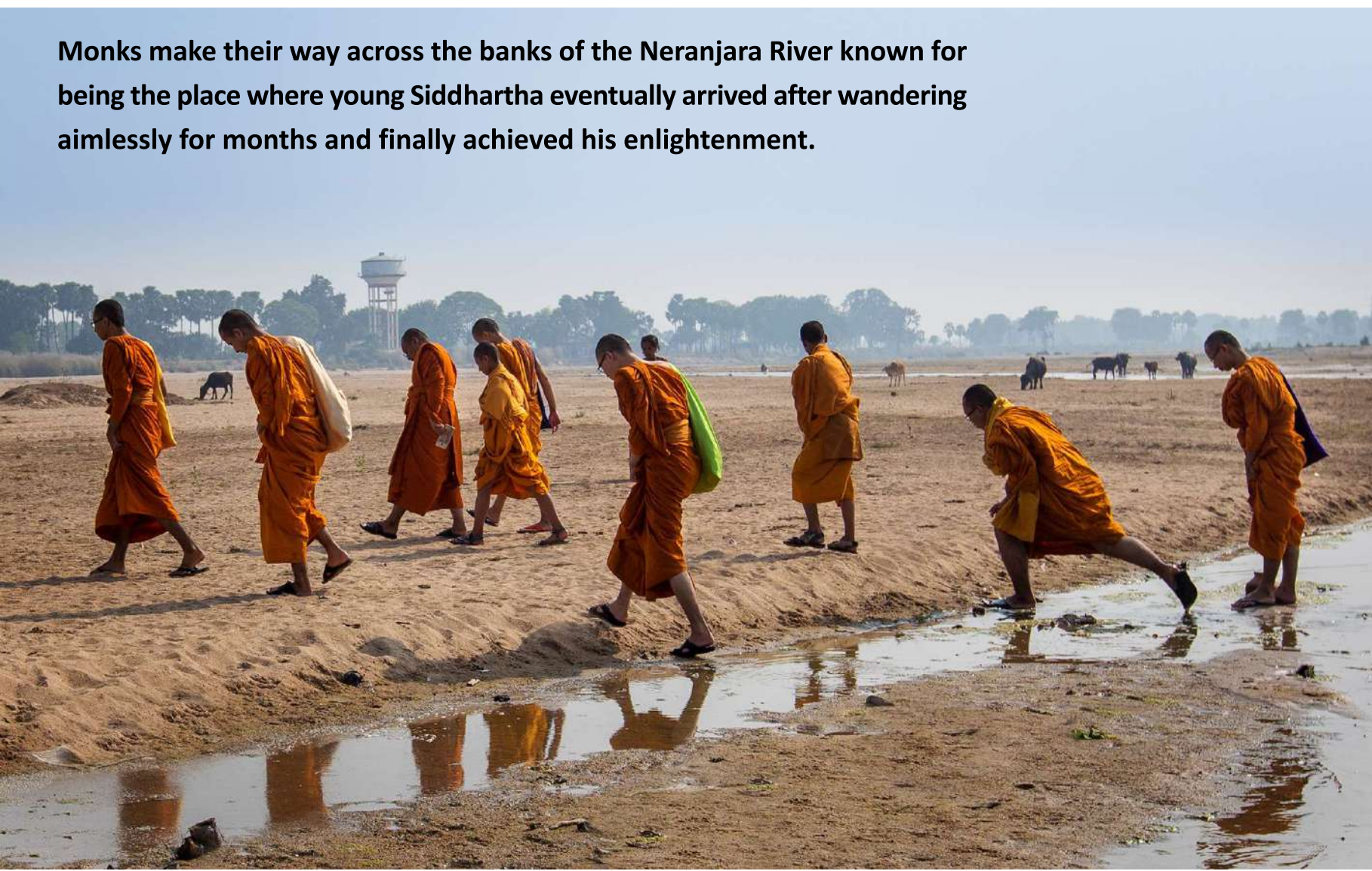


Hundreds of monks gather to read from the religious Buddhist scriptures propagating the teachings and philosophies of the Buddha.





Old age poses little hindrance to these elderly devotees who push their ageing bodies to the limit to experience the spirituality of Bodh Gaya.



Monks make their way across the banks of the Neranjara River known for being the place where young Siddhartha eventually arrived after wandering aimlessly for months and finally achieved his enlightenment.

The present day Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya which in June 2002 was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site comprises the 50 meter high main temple, the Vajrasana, the sacred Bodhi Tree and other six sacred sites of the Buddha's enlightenment, surrounded by numerous ancient stupas and structures. The Lotus Pond located towards the south of the temple complex is also considered to be sacred and constitutes the seventh sacred site. The other significant aspect of the Mahabodhi Temple which has attracted millions of pilgrims for centuries is the Mahabodhi Image, a statue within the premises of the temple which was believed to be an exact replica of the Buddha himself. The Mahabodhi Image was the most revered statue in the Buddhist world and is mentioned in records for nearly a thousand years. The statue finds its mention in the records of notable scholars and travellers during the ancient times. However there is no chronicle of this statue after the 15th century. The present statue which is worshipped inside the realms of the Mahabodhi Temple was unearthed in 1880 by Alexander Cunningham who pioneered the founding of the archaeological organization which would later come to be known as the Archaeological Survey of India. In more recent times the unveiling of an imposing 80 foot tall statue of the Buddha in meditating pose or "Dhyana Mudra" has further enriched the heritage of Bodh Gaya. The statue also known as the Great Buddha was consecrated by none other than His Holiness Dalai Lama on the 18th of November 1989. As Bodh Gaya grew in stature as the spiritual hub of Buddhism, it started attracting more and more Buddhist pilgrims and worshippers from all over the world and also from neighbouring Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. The waves of worshippers, devotees and pilgrims from Ceylon left a lasting impression in the annals of Bodh Gaya. The most notable of them can be seen in the architecture of the region, which gets reflected in the temples and the monasteries. The architecture of this region reflects the architectural styles from all over the world wherever Buddhism is a dominant religion. Several Buddhist temples and monasteries have been built by the people of Bhutan, China, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sikkim, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Tibet and Vietnam in a wide area around the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. These buildings reflect the architectural style, exterior and interior decoration pattern of the respective countries and cultures.





Glimpses into the lives of the monks in Bodh Gaya.



Devotees from all over the world visit this place of worship and offer their homages to the Buddha.







**An elderly monk offers his worships to the Buddha inside the premises of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex.**

The Bodh Gaya of today apart from being the nerve centre of Buddhism is a place of great attraction among tourists from all over the world. Each year apart from the tourists and the pilgrims thousands of Buddhist monks from all over the world take part in the annual International Tripitaka Chanting, a traditional Buddhist ritual. This tradition first originated in the year 2006, with only 250 devotees attending the ceremony. Over the last decade the number of devotees taking part has increased to more than 25,000. The ceremony which lasts for 10 days involves chanting of the Buddha's teachings from the religious scriptures at the sacred location of the Bodhi Tree. The monks who live in the monasteries of Bodh Gaya too take part in this ritual. Life within the premises of a monastery is devoid of any excess, the residents lead a simple life the ethos of which finds its inspiration from the teachings of the Buddha. Since Buddhism has no central authority the monastic practices may differ from one region to the other. However all of them adhere to the preaching and the way of life of the Buddha.



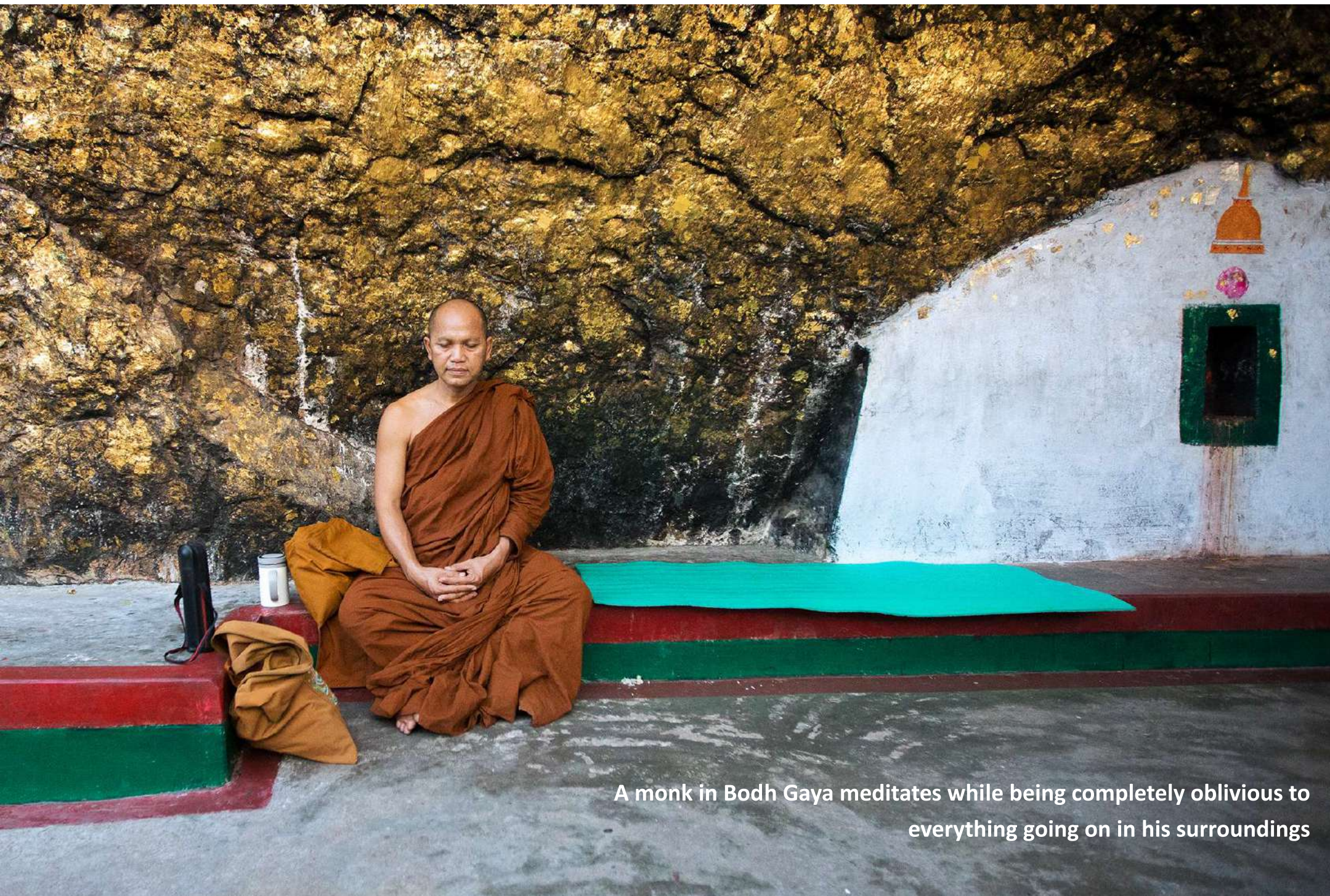


A devotee performs one of the rituals with great care and dedication in Bodh Gaya.

The Buddhist monastic way of life is heavily influenced by the lives of wandering ascetics belonging to earlier sects. It is believed even the Buddha gained considerable knowledge in the company of these wanderers. These wandering communities would travel from one place to the next spreading their ideas and teachings while depending on the communities with whom they would be interacting with for basic provisions and resources. As is the case with the Buddhist monks and nuns these ascetics too led a life of austerity depending only on the resources provided to them voluntarily by their followers.

Tragically this place of worship which promotes and uplifts the message of peace and tranquility came under barbaric attack on July 7th 2013, when a series of low intensity blasts within the premises of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex shattered the peaceful domain. This heinous attack left two monks seriously wounded although the temple or the Bodhi Tree didn't suffer any damages. A tragedy of greater proportions was averted when the security personnel uncovered and diffused two other bombs, one of which was placed under the 80 foot statue of the Buddha and the other one was recovered from near the Karmapa Temple. However this was not the first time this place of worship and spirituality had to endure the worst of humanity.





A monk in Bodh Gaya meditates while being completely oblivious to everything going on in his surroundings

Historical records suggest the temples and monasteries of Bodh Gaya suffered serious damages at the hands of the Muslim invaders in the 12th century. Some historians are of the opinion that the Buddhist centres of worship and the monasteries faced two massive waves of attacks by the Muslim invaders.

In spite of all the upheavals its history had to endure, this ancient place of wisdom and spirituality has stood firm and only prospered even in the wake of scenarios which threatened to tear apart its very foundation. Bodh Gaya of today is synonymous with Buddhism all over the world and has come a long way from its modest beginnings. It attracts millions today from all over the world, some come within its folds in pursuit of the Buddha's philosophy while for some being at the heart of one of the most prominent religions of the world is an experience worth their pains of covering thousands of miles. Their objectives may be different, but they all share one thing in common, the unforgettable experience which the place treats them to once they enter its spiritual realms.

## About the Photographer



**Manabendra Gupta**, a self-taught photographer and a businessman from the city of Durgapur in West Bengal discovered his love for photography four years back. Since then he has been on a constant journey to discover and re-discover himself as a photographer while honing his photography skills and developing a thorough understanding of the nuances of this subject. A well-travelled person, he wishes to spend more time in the company of his camera and take it along with his on many more of his future journeys in days to come.



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Featuring the best entries made by our readers.



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Mansi Tejas  
Chauhan







Photograph by  
Ratnadeep Mitra





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