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# PHOTO ARTS

October 2021



Cover Story  
by Susan **PARK**

Sydney's  
underwater

**Treasure Trove**

MICHAEL STEVERSON pens his thoughts and views on the nuances of environmental portrait.  
DEBMALYA DAS documents the iconic Chhau dance routine in West Bengal.





*Photograph by Susan Park*

In the deep dark realms of our oceans lies a parallel world, full of life and gigantic in proportions. This underwater domain of our planet is little known to us, with all our technological advancements we have been able to explore only a small fraction of the watery realms of this planet. Yet there can be no denying this fascinating world is full of colours, ancient creatures and incredibly complex ecosystems. The cover story of this issue takes a plunge into this magical domain and explores the secrets hidden in the thickets of the seaweeds or in the sandy beds of the ocean. This is the story of Chowder Bay and Cabbage Tree Bay in Australia and the amazing biodiversity they are blessed with.

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*Cover Page photograph by Susan Park*



# Sydney's underwater Treasure Trove

Sydney's real treasure lies in the depths of Cabbage Tree Bay and Chowder Bay in the form of a rich and diverse marine ecosystem.

by Susan PARK

Often mistaken for trash, a jellyfish floats in the water of Cabbage Tree Bay along the shores of Sydney in Australia. An aquatic reserve, Cabbage Tree Bay is a safe haven for hundreds of marine species.



Cabbage Tree Bay is primarily an aquatic reserve that aims to protect the hundreds of species which call these waters their home. Spread over an area of approximately 20 hectares Cabbage Tree Bay is home to cuttlefish, weedy seadragons, the endangered grey nurse sharks like the one seen here, eagle rays and a wide range of other marine species.





The history of our evolution on planet Earth has left its traces in myriad forms on the surface of the earth. From the appearance of our early ancestors some 7 million years ago to our present day lives where the complex of jobs get done at the click of a button, we have mastered most of the world around us. The modern technology which we have at our disposal provides us access to the remotest corners of the planet, no mountain seems unsurmountable anymore, no waterway appears too imposing to cross and there is very little if none which remains left to our imagination. However there still remains a parallel world which in spite of all our scientific and technological advancements, has remained shrouded in mystery. We often tend to forget the underwater domain of this planet heavily outweighs the planet's terrestrial realms in terms of both its expanse and the diversity of life. We know very little about this world which has fiercely guarded its secrets. This watery realm is a gigantic entity, with an unparalleled diversity seen nowhere on this planet. The seas and oceans of our planet are home to millions of creatures, each unique and magnificently well equipped to thrive in this often hostile set up. This blindingly colourful and mysterious domain is teeming with life, a plethora of species inhabit the nooks and corners of this planet's underwater kingdoms. In this cold, dark world the eternal struggle between life and death appeared billions of years

ago, when much of this planet, at least the terrestrial realms were hostile and nature itself deemed them unstable for life to blossom. In these unfathomable depths, most of which still remain inaccessible to us, some of the earliest prehistoric organisms were the first ones to lay down the protocols of life on this planet. It was much later life successfully ventured into earth's land surface. From its earliest emergence in rather simplest of forms life has evolved, at an unprecedented pace, in a relentless pursuit akin to the zealotry of a maniac this redoubtable force of nature kept on weaving intricate pattern, changing and refining its very own ways, all with the singular purpose of creating a wide array of ecosystems rich in diversity and formidable enough to lay their claims to some of the most inhospitable patches of real estates on this planet. The underwater world of today, which appeared rather simple billions of years ago, is a beautiful tapestry of colours. Home to millions of species numbering in millions to a few hundred our seas and oceans are home to the true giants on this planet where they gracefully glide next to billions of invisible microscopic planktons which in spite of their minuscule actuality form the bulwark of every underwater ecosystem. This possibly is the most comprehensive advert of the incredibly rich diversity of life in the underwater dominions on this planet. Since ages these rich offerings have lured scientist, naturalists and adventurers into their watery domains, offering them

glimpses of what lies beneath the surface of water. However nature never intended to make it easy on those bent on seeking out this underwater treasure trove. Bone chilling sub-zero temperatures which the terrestrial world is a stranger to, absolute zero visibility below certain depths, vigorous currents and increasing water pressure in the face of which even the most inviolable entity known to humans can be found wanting, these are the very few challenges our seas and oceans pose in front of anyone trying to penetrate their secret realms. It comes as a little surprise

environment, the diversity of it can rival that of a rainforest ecosystem. Some of the species know to us are of prehistoric origin and in a remarkable feat have withstood the test of time and have stayed unchanged for few hundred millions of years. In addition to the wide array of species, our seas and oceans are homes to a wide range of ecosystems as well. Among thousands of such underwater eco-systems the ones found in the waters of Chowder Bay and Cabbage Tree Bay along the coast of Australia are home to hundreds of marine species of animals and vegetation.

The picturesque Chowder Bay which is also a part of the Sydney Harbour National Park is known for its wide array of attractions and is a popular vacation destination.

that we have managed to explore only a small fragment of this natural world. What still stays hidden in the dark and cold depths can be even more diverse than our imaginations render to be, this secret world is home to creatures which with their physiology and adaptations can alter the course of science altogether and throw open a wide range of possibilities previously unthinkable.

The underwater world which is fairly explored and known to us is no less fascinating. It is only until recently we have successfully managed to send probes to the deep sea floors devoid of a single ray of sun where the pressure of water amounts to tons per square inch. Yet life has not only thrived in this hostile

The picturesque Chowder Bay which is also a part of the Sydney Harbour National Park is known for its wide array of attractions and is a popular vacation destination. A part of the bay was previously home to a naval base and understandably was off limits to visitors until 1999 when the Sydney Federation Harbour Trust took control of the premises and added it to their conservation projects. The bay was opened to the general public in 2000 for the first time. Still a popular fishing spot, particularly during the summer months, the waters of Chowder Bay was frequented by whalers during the colonial era. In fact the rich supply of sea food in these waters which came to the aid of the whalers for preparing their meals or "chow" led to the coining of the name.





The swimming nets under the jetty at Chowder Bay provide the ideal support for seaweeds to expand their reaches which in turn provide the perfect refuge for the colourful White's seahorses found in the waters of Chowder Bay. The long snout and a head which bears uncanny resemblance to that of a horse, the seahorse belongs to the family syngnathidae and technically is a fish.

In spite of the presence of large scale fishing operations and a fully operational naval base till 1922, the underwater Chowder Bay ecosystem is a thriving one today. What stands out is the diversity in the marine eco-systems in Chowder Bay. Chowder Bay is located several kilometres west of the Sydney Heads (North and South Head), which mark the entrance to Sydney Harbour from the Tasman Sea. The prominent marine and riverine influences which intertwine at some point have led to the Sydney Harbour being classified as an estuarine environment which due to the dual influences is incredibly ecologically diverse. Cabbage

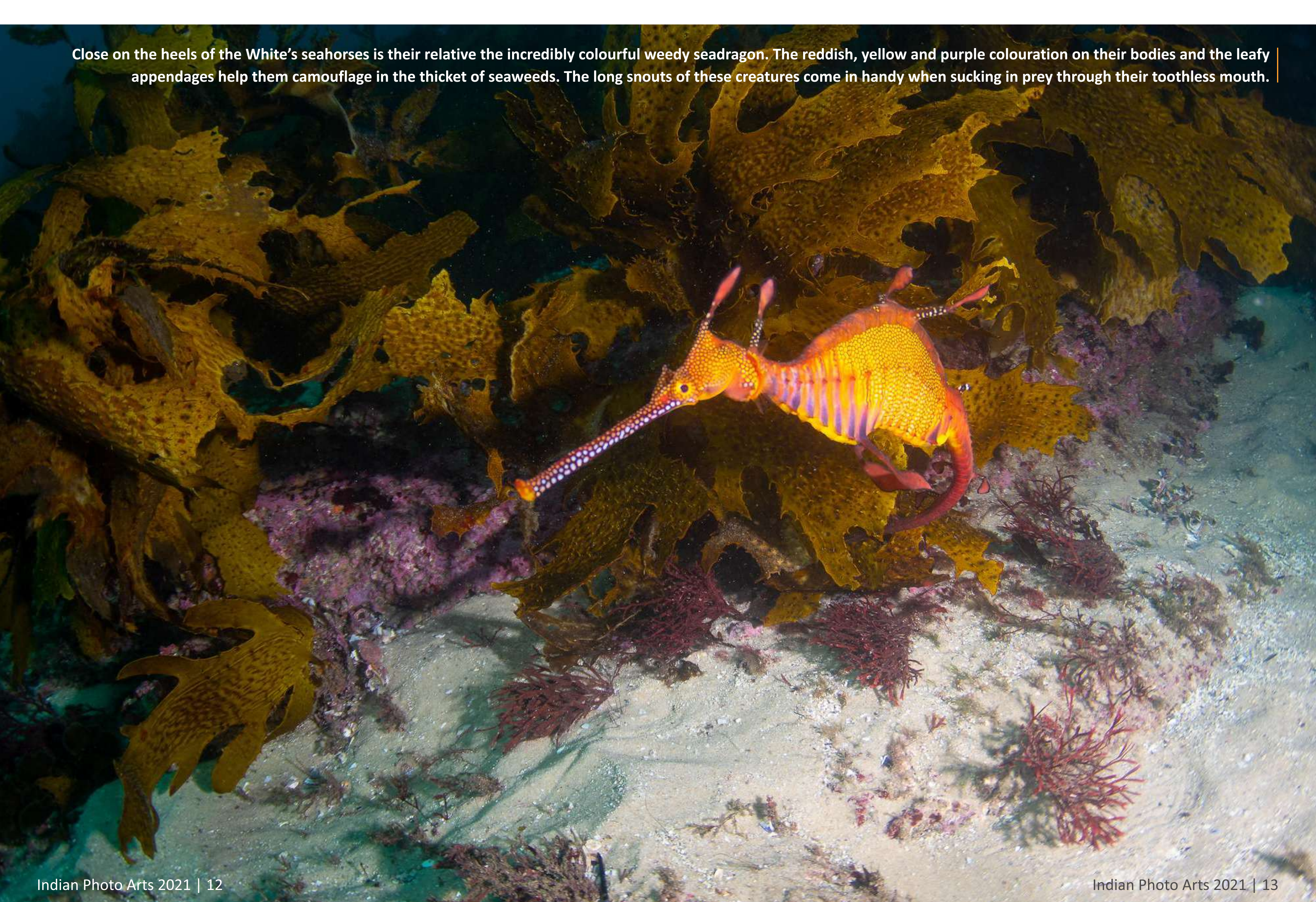
Tree Bay on northern beaches of Sydney at Manly, is an aquatic reserve that aims to protect the hundreds of species which call these waters their home. Spread over an area of 20 hectares Cabbage Tree Bay is home to cuttlefish, weedy seadragons, the endangered grey nurse sharks, rays and a wide range of other marine species. The underwater wildlife in the crystal clear waters of the bay appears to be a world of its own at a stone's throw from a city of 5 million people. The swimming nets set up under the jetty at Chowder Bay provide the ideal support for the seaweed to expand which in turn provide the perfect refuge for the vibrant White's seahorses found in

in the waters of Chowder Bay. The long snout and a head which bears uncanny resemblance to that of a horse the seahorse belongs to the family syngnathidae and technically is a fish. Close on the heels of the White's seahorses is their relative, the incredibly colourful weedy seadragon. The bright reddish, yellow and purple colouration on their bodies and the leafy appendages help them camouflage in the thicket of seaweeds. The long snouts of these creatures come in handy when sucking in prey through their toothless mouth. Closely related, the most incredible thing about seahorses and the weedy seadragon is the males giving birth to the

young ones. In fact in the animal kingdom these are the only species where the male is directly involved in the process of giving birth. An elaborate courtship ritual leads to the female depositing her eggs into the male's pouch where the male fertilizes them. The embryo develops inside the male's pouch and when they are matured enough resembling miniature versions of the adults, the male releases them through multiple contractions through an opening in the abdomen.



Close on the heels of the White's seahorses is their relative the incredibly colourful weedy seadragon. The reddish, yellow and purple colouration on their bodies and the leafy appendages help them camouflage in the thicket of seaweeds. The long snouts of these creatures come in handy when sucking in prey through their toothless mouth.





**T**he rapid adaptive camouflaging abilities of the cephalopods allow these creatures to roam about freely in an environment threatened by the presence of predators.

While the seahorses and seadragons keep to the safety of the weed cover the giants of this ecosystem roam about freely. The shallow water of the bay ideally suits the large, stocky framed grey nurse sharks.

These sharks although not strictly nocturnal tend to be more active during the night.

As the name suggests much of their body is greyish brown in appearance with two large dorsal fins and a tail with a distinctively large top lobe. These sharks usually feed on fish, crustaceans, rays and even smaller sharks and are known for their pacific disposition. Their formidable appearance wrongly attributed a fearsome reputation to these creatures which led to large scale indiscriminate killings of these sharks in the past. Absolved of that reputation, the grey nurse shark now faces the threat of large scale commercial fishing.

The mid-sized Port Jackson shark can be found gliding along the rocky bottom of the bay, its preferred feeding grounds. The large head of the shark is dotted with prominent forehead ridges and a mouth ideally suited to forage off the sea floor. The teeth of the Port Jackson shark are one of its most distinguishable features. The sharp and pointed front row of teeth and the flat and blunt back row together help the shark in gripping and crushing the hard shells of molluscs which comprise

the major portion of their diet. Their greyish brown body is marked with dark brown linings which give them a distinctive appearance.

The eagle ray true to its namesake the mighty eagle soaring high above the ground, glides gracefully and effortlessly along the ocean floor in the waters of Cabbage Tree Bay. Eagle rays with their giant wing like fins glide along the ocean bottom, using its large rostrum – or nose – to sense crabs, clams, snails and other food sources that are hiding in the sand. Once they scoop their prey, their powerful jaws and flat teeth are perfectly designed to crush and grind the hard shells of molluscs and crustaceans before consuming them. The serrated spine at the edge of their sharp whip like tail comes to their defence against predators or intruders. The whiplash is capable of inflicting serious injuries with fatal consequences.

Squid, octopus and cuttlefish also frequent these waters in great numbers. They belong to the large class of Cephalopoda. These creatures share a lot in common, ranging from their eight arms which appear like tentacles which help them in grasping their prey, the sophisticated eye structure to the ink glands in their bodies which aid them

in taking evasive measures. When threatened these creatures often resort to their most handy form of retreat which is releasing a jet of ink from their ink sac.

The ink creates a smokescreen and the chemical composition causes irritable sensations to the predators and helps the cuttlefish or the octopus beat a hasty retreat. Camouflaging with their surroundings, acts as the primary mode of defence for these creatures against lurking predators mainly in the form of sharks. Cephalopods generally are part of an ecosystem which is visually diverse and complex and are dominated by vibrant coral reefs or underwater thickets of colourful seaweeds and kelps. The rapid adaptive camouflaging abilities of the cephalopods allow these creatures to roam about freely in an environment threatened by the presence of predators. Such ability enables them to seamlessly blend in with the surroundings within seconds and escape the prying eyes of their predators. They use their visual perception of their backgrounds to rapidly decide which camouflage pattern to deploy. They do so by rapidly changing the texture of their skin through contractions or relaxations of their subcutaneous muscles to mimic the background topography pattern. Additionally thousands of colour-changing cells known as chromatophores just below the surface of the skin are responsible for these remarkable transformations. An elastic colour filled sac at the centre of these cells stretches out thereby providing

myriad colourations resembling the background. An intricate network of nerve endings and muscles control the elasticity of the sac.

All these creatures, along with hundreds others have weaved an intricate ecosystem in these waters along the shorelines of New South Wales. The survival of this ecosystem largely depends on the delicate balance which is absolutely imperative for the well-being of any ecosystem on this planet. The Cabbage Tree Bay Aquatic Reserve since its inception in 2002 has done a commendable job at safeguarding the future of hundreds of species which reside in these waters. In spite of the increased human activities in the neighbouring towns and cities, most notably in the city of Sydney over the decades, the marine biodiversity in these waters has thrived, which certainly augurs well for the denizens of this watery world.

The restrictions and guidelines put in place by the authorities have allowed Cabbage Tree Bay Aquatic Reserve to become an important site for marine diversity. However, the threat of illegal fishing still continues to plague the eastern boundaries of the reserve. The presence of iconic species in the vicinity and the opportunity to see them has greatly benefitted the local ecotourism industry as well.



The formidable appearance of the grey nurse shark wrongly attributed a fearsome reputation to these creatures which led to large scale indiscriminate killings of these sharks in the past.





The Crested Horn Shark is a medium sized shark found in the waters of Cabbage Tree Bay. They greatly resemble their closest relatives the Port Jackson Shark which is also a denizen of these waters. The exaggerated crests above its eyes and the dark blotch pattern on its body serve as the distinguishing factors for these sharks.





A cuttlefish swims in the depths of Cabbage Tree Bay. Squid, octopus and cuttlefish frequent these waters in great numbers. They belong to the large class of Cephalopoda. These creatures share a lot in common, ranging from their eight legs which help them in grasping their prey, the sophisticated eye structure to the ink glands in their bodies which aid them in taking evasive measures. When threatened these creatures often resort to their most handy form of retreat which is releasing a jet of ink from their ink sac.







The octopus is a skilled hunter and puts all eight of its arms to good use while hunting as this helpless fish finds out the hard way.

Sydney have been historically subjected to abuse. Some of the damages have been so severe that their ripple effects can be still felt today by researchers and wildlife enthusiasts. In light of this, though well managed, there can be no arguing the battle to protect Cabbage Tree Bay is an ongoing one and any iota of complacency can swiftly reverse the trend of this effort. While the denizens of Cabbage Tree Bay and Chowder Bay are enjoying a secured existence for the time being, sadly the same cannot be said about much of the planet's marine biodiversity. Even after the sincere efforts put in by the authorities at the Cabbage Tree Bay there are other malevolent forces at play which threaten to upend the balance in these waters. The threat of climate change doesn't limit itself to any geographical border and even the most well-meaning management is bound to find itself helpless against such a threat.

Sydney being a city along the shoreline with a substantial population the marine environment is exposed to most of the threats faced by coastal cities globally, including habitat loss, an array of anthropogenic activities, pollution, stormwater run-off and introduced pests. In order to counter some of these threats a series of measures have been adopted

by the authorities. The harbour, for example, is extensively modified, with more than half of the shoreline replaced by artificial structures such as seawalls, jetties and piers. It goes without saying such artificial structures are not conducive for a thriving marine population. To address this issue researchers and scientists have deployed a number of prototype

structures which blend in with the natural environment thus providing shelter and breeding grounds to a number of marine creatures. Seawalls with nooks and crevices resembling the natural environment of seaweeds and crabs are perfect examples of such structures. With a history of human induced activities and pollution the waters along the shore of



Fiddler rays prefer the shallow sandy bed and rocky reefs of Cabbage Tree Bay. They feed on the bottom dwelling shellfish, crabs and molluscs. Along the eastern coast of Australia, Cabbage Tree Bay hosts a decent sized population of these animals. This individual can be seen foraging for food on the sea bed as a cuttlefish gently glides across in the background.







The eagle ray true to its namesake the mighty eagle soaring high above the ground, glides gracefully and effortlessly along the ocean floor in the waters of Cabbage Tree Bay. Eagle rays with their giant wing like fins glide along the ocean bottom, using its large rostrum – or nose – to sense crabs, clams, snails and other food sources that are hiding in the sand.

A healthy sea is crucial for the survival of this planet. Tragically though, our seas and oceans are under an unprecedented threat, one which has the potential to destroy a vast majority of earth's marine diversity and damage the health of the water-world beyond the scope of any repair. A vast majority of this threat is an

amalgamation of various human induced activities, all of which contribute in their own signature manner to erode the planet's marine biodiversity. Every day huge quantities of human and industrial waste flow unchecked into the waters of our seas and oceans, the death of various sea creatures caused by plastic waste has

become commonplace, unregulated large scale commercial fishing is wreaking havoc on the delicate balance which is essential for any marine ecosystem, the change in climate patterns leads to alterations in the currents, the threats to our oceans are far too many to list comprehensively. We have taken

significant steps in addressing some of these problems such as the dumping of untreated sewage waste or radioactive waste into our oceans yet a lot more needs to be done. Our oceans act as natural sinks, absorbing more than half of the carbon dioxide emitted through the burning of fossil fuel. However over the years the amount of carbon dioxide released in the atmosphere through anthropogenic activities has increased manifolds. A significant portion of this gets dissolved in our oceans to form carbonic acid. This in turn increases the acidity of water and creates an environment which is not at all well suited for a large numbers of marine organisms. The natural world is an incredibly resilient place, and life, the most potent force of the natural world has overcome countless hurdles, yet this is one battle it cannot fight on its own. We need to act now and save our oceans, it is vital for each and every one of us to come together and develop a thorough understanding regarding what we can do even on a day to day basis. If we fail to do so that day won't be too far when the frolicking of an adorable seahorse or the sight of a beautiful coral colony with all its colourful denizens or the graceful gliding of the rays, the imposing silhouette of a grey nurse shark wading reassuringly through the waters of Cabbage Tree Bay or Chowder Bay will become a thing of the past, leaving yet another part of our oceans barren, lifeless, robbing the planet's largest treasure trove of life empty.

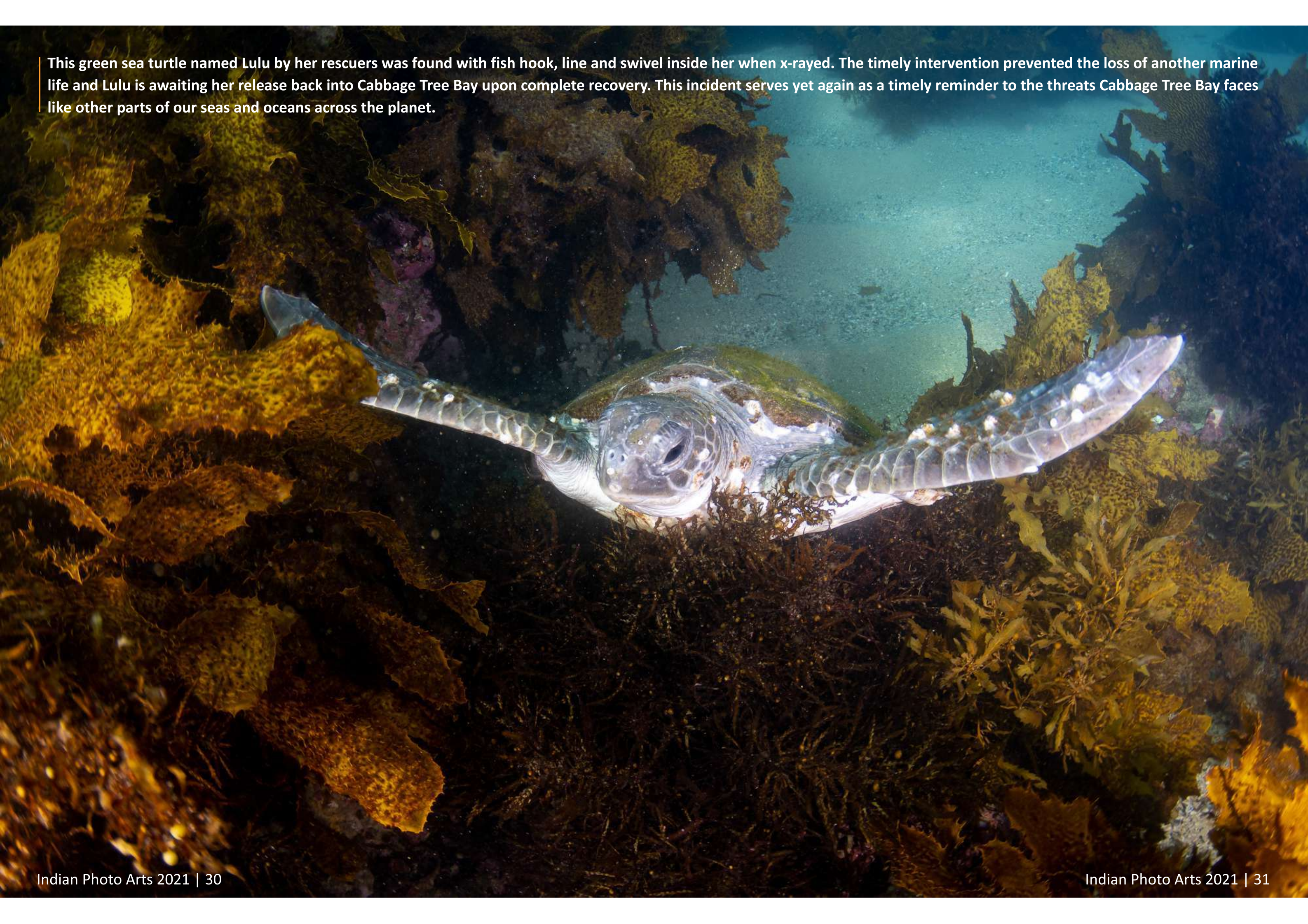




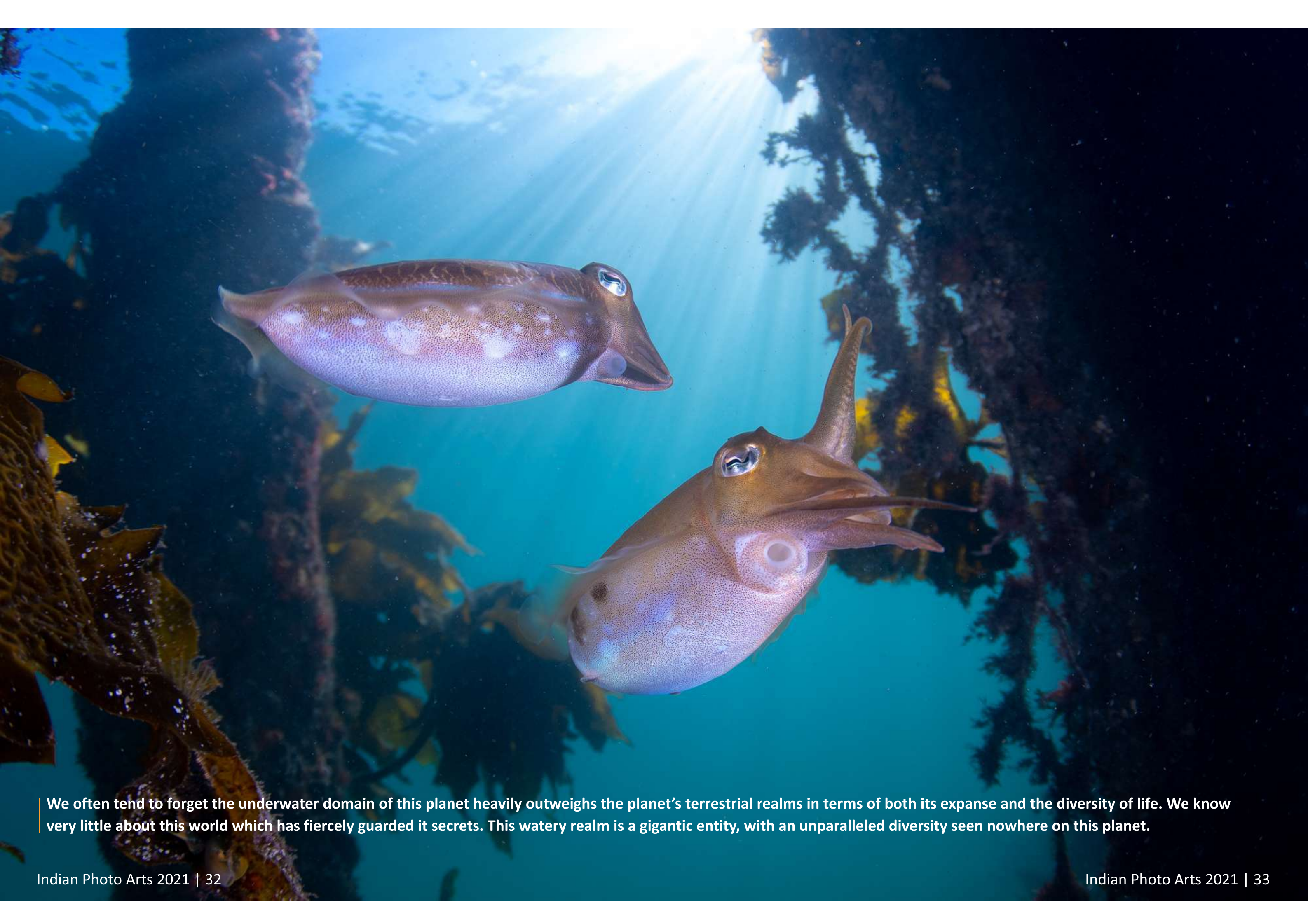
These calm waters can turn into fierce battlegrounds for survival in an instant as demonstrated by these two warring octopuses. These conflicts often arise out of territorial disputes and the ensuing confrontation involves the octopuses grappling with each other using their arms.



This green sea turtle named Lulu by her rescuers was found with fish hook, line and swivel inside her when x-rayed. The timely intervention prevented the loss of another marine life and Lulu is awaiting her release back into Cabbage Tree Bay upon complete recovery. This incident serves yet again as a timely reminder to the threats Cabbage Tree Bay faces like other parts of our seas and oceans across the planet.







We often tend to forget the underwater domain of this planet heavily outweighs the planet's terrestrial realms in terms of both its expanse and the diversity of life. We know very little about this world which has fiercely guarded its secrets. This watery realm is a gigantic entity, with an unparalleled diversity seen nowhere on this planet.

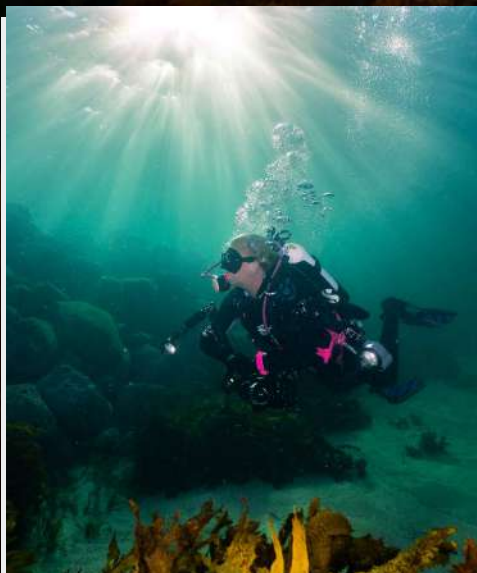


A Port Jackson shark in the depths of Cabbage Tree Bay. The teeth of the Port Jackson shark are one of its most distinguishable features. The sharp and pointed front row of teeth and the flat and blunt back row together help the shark in gripping and crushing the hard shells of molluscs which comprise the major portion of their diet. With a history of human induced activities and pollution the waters along the shore of Sydney have been historically subjected to abuse. Some of the damages have been so severe that their ripple effects can be still felt today by researchers and wildlife enthusiasts. In light of this, though well managed, there can be no arguing the battle to protect Cabbage Tree Bay is an ongoing one and any iota of complacency can swiftly reverse the trend of this effort.



## Susan PARK

**Susan Park** has been an avid scuba diver since 2011 and currently lives in Sydney, Australia. She grew up on the North Coast of New South Wales where she would spend a lot of time at the beach with her family. Her father was a keen fisherman which probably triggered her lasting love affair with the sea. Susan's love of underwater photography began when her husband purchased a tiny little underwater camera with an underwater housing. Furious at him for wasting money little did she know at that point of time how in the years to come this humble camera would snowball into a dream camera set up and she would be touted as a scuba diving addict! Her passion for diving and underwater photography spilled over to her two children and her son's business is in underwater photography. Susan's favourite dive site is Cabbage Tree Bay in Manly, which is a marine park but when the conditions in Cabbage Tree Bay are not favourable she heads back to Chowder Bay in her locality. She hopes her photographs will play a crucial role in raising awareness regarding how diverse and special the underwater world is.





# *Becoming the Deific*

a heart-warming tale of courage and determination and the cruel ways of the society that almost robbed the dream.

by Debasish KUNDU



Ajay Kumar, born in Pendurthi, Andhra Pradesh is a member of the transgender community. On the occasion of the worship of Solapuri Mata - an embodiment of Goddess Durga, Ajay impersonates the deity and enact tales from the mythologies in the outskirts of Kharagpur in West Bengal.





The transgender community in India, marginalised, often neglected of their basic rights and still striving to earn the respect any human being deserves, has surprisingly found many a mentions in Hindu scriptures and mythologies.



Hindu mythologies, which form the basis of the Hindu religion practiced by millions across India, all have one common underlying theme – the triumph of good over evil. There is no bigger and more celebrated anecdote than that of the tale of Goddess Durga slaying the evil demon Mahishasura and ending his reign of terror on heaven and earth. Long before he unleashed his wrath on the Gods in heaven, Mahishasura for years performed severe penances to please Brahma. Brahma impressed by his austerities appeared in front of Mahishasura to reward him in the form of granting him one of his wishes. Mahishasura asked for immortality to which Brahma responded by saying every living creature on this earth has to meet their eventual end one end. Realising he will never be immortal Mahishasura asked Brahma to give him a boon which will ensure he will meet his end only at the hands of a woman. The demon was confident enough that there are no women on this earth worthy enough to challenge his might. Brahma granted his wish and thus armed with Brahma's boon Mahishasura set about unleashing his reign of terror. Mahishasura set his sights firmly on Amravati, the capital of God Indra, the ruler of the heavens. A fierce battle ensued among Mahishasura's army of demons and the Gods under the command of Indra. The Gods comprehensively beaten made a hasty retreat and Mahishasura ascended the throne of the heavens and declared

himself the Supreme Being and the only one who will be worshipped henceforth. Beaten and homeless the subjects of Indra approached the holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and implored them to do something to end Mahishasura's reign. Perturbed by the carnage caused by Mahishasura and his demon subjects, and mindful of Brahma's boon to Mahishasura, the trinity came together to create an all-powerful female form with ten arms. The Gods conjured up the spirit of Goddess Durga from the holy waters of the Ganges and the Gods came together to give her spirit a physical form. Her face was created by Lord Shiva and her torso crafted by Indra. Her breasts were made by Chandra and her teeth by Brahma. The lower part of her body was made by Bhudevi, Varuna sculpted her thighs and knees, and Agni created the Goddess's eyes. Thus the physical form of the Goddess was a combination of the individual powers possessed by each God and Goddess Durga became an embodiment of all the powers in the universe and Goddess Durga also known as Mahamaya arose in a time of utmost crisis to put an end to the destructions caused by the evil forces and restore peace and order in the universe. Armed with the blessings of the Gods and the weapons provided by them Durga rode into battle on top of a mighty lion. After a fierce battle Durga slayed the evil demon king by driving her trident deep into the heart of Mahishasura. Heaven and earth rejoiced at the fall of the demon and once

again forces of evil had been subdued. Peace and order returned to the universe and Goddess Durga came to be known as Durgatinashini – someone who eliminates all sufferings.

This mythical tale of Goddess Durga and her triumph over the evil Mahishasura established the Goddess and her many incarnations as some of the most widely worshipped deities in Hindu religion. The festival of Durga Puja – a ten day event pays homage to the miraculous feat achieved by the Goddess and is the biggest festival in the state of West Bengal and

**S**olapuri Mata is one such embodiment of Goddess Durga and she is worshiped mostly in the southern Indian states. The deity is enthroned atop a neem tree is worshipped by her followers...

for the Bengali community all over the world. The festival of Navratri a nine night affair as the name suggests and celebrated across the country is also aimed at worshipping the Goddess. In fact in the Eastern part of India including West Bengal, the festival of Durga Puja is synonymous with Navratri. In the southern Indian states various embodiments of Durga are worshipped and those festivals are celebrated with much aplomb. All of these festivals uphold the underlying common theme of celebrating the victory of good over evil. Solapuri Mata is one such embodiment of Goddess Durga and she is worshiped mostly in the southern Indian states. The deity is enthroned atop a neem tree is worshipped by her followers and devotees throughout the year. The

devotees believe the goddess is capable of bringing an end to all of their miseries and ushering in a period of prosperity in their lives. The tradition of worshipping the deity of Solapuri Mata started in the southern Indian states of India but gradually spread to other corners of the country particularly to places which has a notable settlement of communities belonging to the different southern Indian states. Presently the worship of this deity enjoys a large scale patronage in states like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and parts of West Bengal most notably the eastern

railway head town of Kharagpur. In this railway town the tradition has been continuing for more than 108 years now. Solapuri maata is also known by other names like Muthyalamma Devi, Nikalamma Devi.

The transgender community in India, marginalised, often neglected of their basic rights and still striving to earn the respect any human being deserves, has surprisingly found many a mentions in Hindu scriptures and mythologies. Ancient Hindu scriptures have repeatedly made allusions to members of the transgender community, gender variance and in most of these anecdotes transgender individuals have been crucial to the developments or played significant roles in the outcomes. The most





The tradition of worshipping the deity of Solapuri Mata started in the southern Indian states of India but gradually spread to other corners of the country. Presently the worship of this deity enjoys a large scale patronage in states like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and parts of West Bengal most notably the eastern railway head town of Kharagpur.

notable being the depiction of “Ardhanarishwara” which translates into – a deity or a lord who is half man and half woman. The deity is a manifestation of male and female human form at once, a merger of Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati. The other notable representation would be that of the merger between Lakshmi and Narayana. In the Bhagavata Purana the tale of Vishnu assuming the female form of Mohini and Shiva’s pursuit of Mohini also alludes to the concept of gender variance which has found repeated mentions in Hinduism. The epics – Mahabharat and Ramayana are rife with such references as well. Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers and the great warrior under the curse of Urvashi turned into Brihannala – a member of the transgender community. He would dress up in women’s attire and masquerade as a woman during the last year of his exile and get acquainted to Princess Uttara. In Ramayana when Lord Rama is exiled from his kingdom and condemned to a life of anonymity his loyal subjects decided to follow him. When Rama noticed the crowd following him he ordered all the men and women to return to their homes and families. The loyal subjects tuned back barring a handful of individuals. They were the transgender individuals. The transgender individuals stayed back with Lord Rama. Lord Rama was greatly moved by their love and loyalty and sanctioned them the power to confer blessing on auspicious occasions like marriage, child

birth, and inaugural functions. The chronicle of King Ila is one of those rare anecdotes from Hindu scriptures which highlights a female to male transformation. Although there are several narratives surrounding the origin of Ila, the overwhelming consensus suggests Ila – a girl child, was born to Vivasvata Manu and his wife Shraddha who longed for a son. Unhappy with the outcome, the couple prayed to the Gods and the Gods transformed the gender of the child from a female to a male, thus Ila the girl child was transformed into the man Sudyumma. After mistakenly entering a sacred grove as an adult, Ila is either cursed to change his/her gender every month or cursed to become a woman. As a woman, Ila married Budha, the god of the planet Mercury and the son of the lunar deity Chandra (Soma), and bore him a son called Pururavas, the father of the Lunar dynasty.

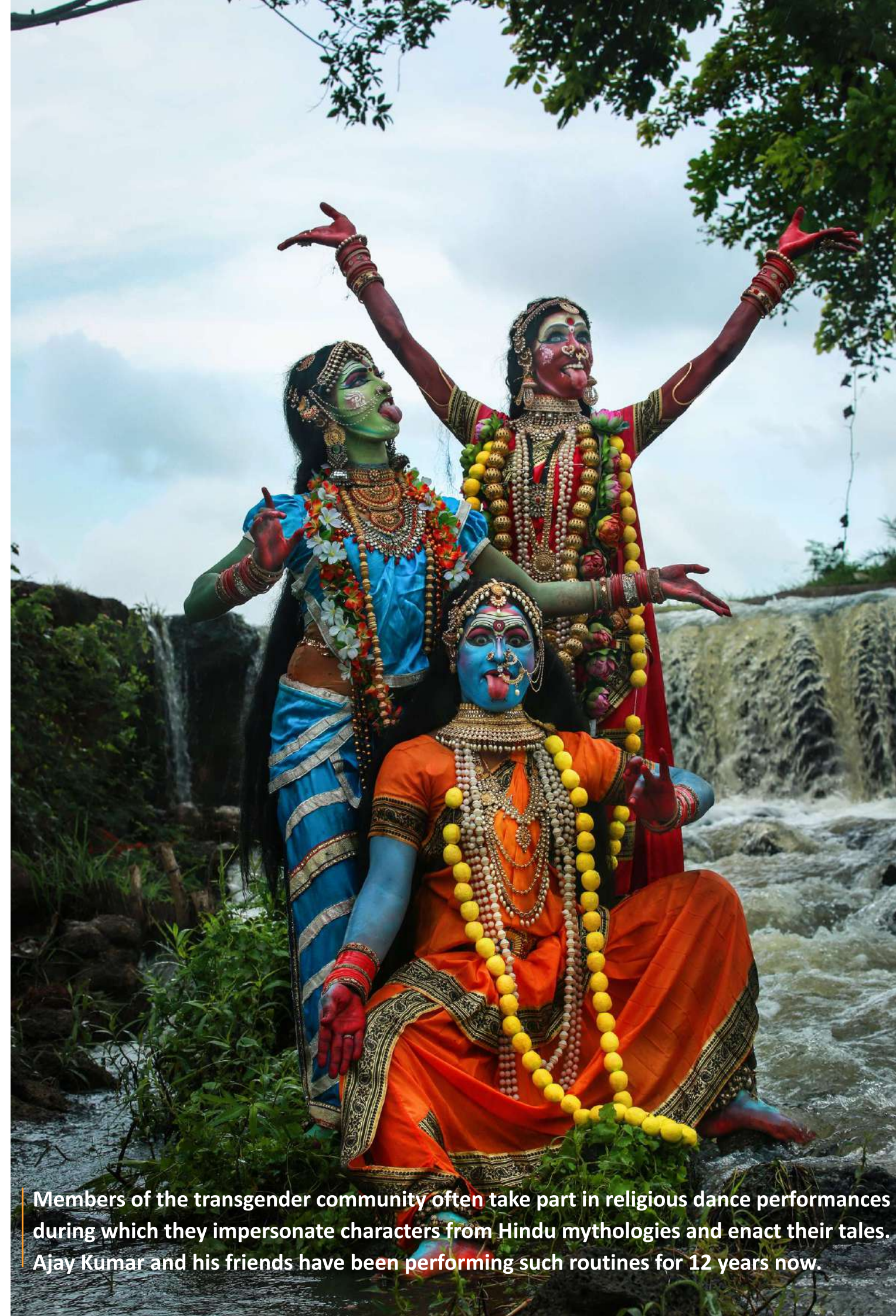
Among the myriad Gods and Goddesses mentioned in the Hindu scriptures there is also the reference of Bahuchara Mata – the patron goddess of the transgender community. A rooster serves as a vehicle for the Goddess and she is depicted carrying a trident in one hand and a copy of the Hindu scripture in the other. Ardent male devotees castrate themselves and take to cross dressing to prove their selfless devotion to the Goddess. Goddess Bahuchara is believed to have been born in the ‘Charan’ caste of people who are renowned for their honour and



**W**ary of Bahuchara Devi being the patron saint of the transgender community the individuals visiting such households are usually treated with dignity which otherwise remain in short supply...

commitment to truth. Legend states during one of her travels Bahuchara Devi was attacked by a bandit who attempted to outrage her modesty. In an attempt to deter the bandit she cut off her breasts and cursed the bandit with impotency. When he begged for forgiveness Bahuchara Devi asked him to atone for his sins by living the life of a woman through dressing and behaving like one. Bahuchara Devi is also worshipped by women longing for motherhood. The devotees believe the blessings of Bahuchara Devi would fulfil their dreams of attaining motherhood. This explains the widespread custom of transgender people visiting the households of a newly born baby with the purpose of blessing the child with long life and prosperity. Wary of Bahuchara Devi being the patron saint of the transgender community the individuals visiting such households are usually treated with respect and dignity which otherwise remain in short supply for them. In fact it is customary to pay them a sum of money as a token gesture of respect and appreciation in return for their blessings. With so many anecdotes, and many more associating them with tales and myths from Hinduism one would be hard pressed into believing in a largely religion oriented country like India the transgender community would be treated with respect

and dignity. However the ground reality often suggests otherwise. In the streets of the cities and towns in India their presence almost always remains unmistakable. Dressed in gaudy attire and heavily made up, they navigate through the traffic at busy intersections knocking on the rolled up window panes of the cars asking for money in exchange for their blessings. Dressed in glittering saris, their faces heavily coated in cheap makeup, they sashay through crowded intersections knocking on car windows with the edge of a coin and offering blessings. They perform at certain religious ceremonies, at weddings and birth ceremonies and in sad turn of events often get tangled in sex rackets. Wherever they go they evoke either a sense of amusement or disgust. It is very rarely these individuals are treated as human beings with the same rights as others. Some succumb to their advances and reluctantly hand them over some token amount of money out of fear while others leave no stone unturned to chase them away. The theatrics which often invoke laughter and have become part of India's slapstick mainstream comedy scenario often hide the much darker underbelly which condemns India's transgender community to unimaginable sufferings - of the sex trade and exploitation, cruel and dangerous castrations, being cast out



Members of the transgender community often take part in religious dance performances during which they impersonate characters from Hindu mythologies and enact their tales. Ajay Kumar and his friends have been performing such routines for 12 years now.



and constantly humiliated. Within India's L.G.B.T. community, the transgender community or "hijras" as they are commonly referred to, in spite of their ancient tryst with Hinduism have been traditionally denied the societal safety nets and sadly in spite of the repeated allusions in the mythologies and scriptures no divine intervention has come to their aid either. Ajay Kumar, born in Pendurthi, Andhra Pradesh is a member of the transgender community. Ever since he was a teenager, make up and dancing appealed to his senses like nothing else. He was fascinated by the world of dancing and the glamorous ways of the fashion world. His earliest initiation to this world of dance, costumes and make up would take place in his neighbourhood temples where he would keenly observe the performers dressed up in various attires impersonating gods and goddesses from the mythologies and performing various dance routines depicting tales from Hindu scriptures. The pomp and grandeur of these performances and his religious bend of mind soon prompted him to follow in the footsteps of these performers. He would soon realise the best way in which he could exercise his devotion towards his patron gods was through his dance routines and performances. He would sneak out of his home, unnoticed by his parents and make his way to the neighbourhood temple - Kalag Durga Mandir in his village. Here he would spend hours observing the performers, everything that went on behind

**Ajay Kumar, born in Pendurthi, Andhra Pradesh is a member of the transgender community. His earliest initiation to this world of dance, costumes and make up would take place in his neighbourhood temples where he would keenly observe the performers dressed up in various attires impersonating gods and goddesses from the mythologies and performing various dance routines depicting tales from Hindu scriptures.**



the scenes, the elaborate make ups, the costumes and the elaborate dance routines. He would be enthralled by each and every aspect of these performances. Blessed with a natural talent and ability and fuelled by unadulterated passion he soon caught the eye of the performers and steadily made his way into the group of performers and started taking part in these performances. As he started out, little support came his way; even his parents were opposed to the idea of performing in the temples in those elaborate costumes and make ups. However in the end his undying passion and dedication towards his craft helped him overcome all these hurdles and he earned the support of his parents. His passion took a much serious turn when he decided to drop out of school while he was in the fifth grade and decided to invest all his time and energy into dancing. Since then it has been twelve long years he has been performing and fine tuning his craft. His two best friends – Pratham and Janardan are as passionate about dancing and performing as he is and the three are compatriots, confidantes and each other's biggest critic and supporter. During his twelve years of dancing and performing at various religious festivals, ceremonies and temples Ajay has adorned the look of a number of goddesses and deities and through his immaculate depiction has brought to life myriad tales from Hindu scriptures in front of worshippers and devotees. He has done it hundreds of times during his career which has already



spanned over twelve years. Yet every time he puts on the costumes, the attires, applies the make-up and slips into the role of a goddess he feels butterfly in his stomach. The whole experience alleviates him above the sufferings and rigors of his daily life and he feels closer to the goddess, in fact in his own words – “dressing up as a goddess makes me feel like I’m goddess myself.”

Ajay’s story is a timely reminder to all of us that talent doesn’t care for the gender identity of an individual. Hard work and dedication do not wait for a person’s gender

**T**he humiliation and discrimination which we as a society have traditionally subjected the transgender community to, have robbed us of many stellar talents like Ajay...

to reveal itself before rewarding that person. Ajay’s journey has been anything but smooth. Faced with all the discrimination and humiliation, which the society reserves for the transgender community, Ajay never had it easy. His grit, determination and passion towards his craft helped him sail through the tumultuous times although it was anything but smooth sailing. He knows there will be plenty of such obstacles waiting for him as he cruises ahead, yet he is determined to live his dream, his passion, one performance at a time. The humiliation and discrimination which we as a society have traditionally subjected the transgender community to, have robbed us of many stellar talents like Ajay forcing them into the darker underbellies of our cities and

towns and eventually rendering our society poorer in terms of talent, diversity and human values. The next ridicule directed towards a transgender individual working alongside us, navigating their way through traffic at busy intersections or performing at a ceremony should hurt our finer senses more, should appeal to our sensitivities, to our every fabric of being which makes us humans for there can be no bigger sin than denying a fellow human being their basic rights.

The heart-warming story of Ajay and his friends chasing their dreams and living life on their terms in spite of all the humiliation and discrimination the society around them cruelly subjected them to, exposes the moral frailties of our societies and highlights the incredible resilience and courage of these individuals whom our insensitivities often reduce to mere caricatures. There is bound to plenty more such inspiring chronicles waiting to be unearthed. These stories carry with them the potential to elevate our societies to richer levels only if we are willing to bring to the fore the humane side of our being.

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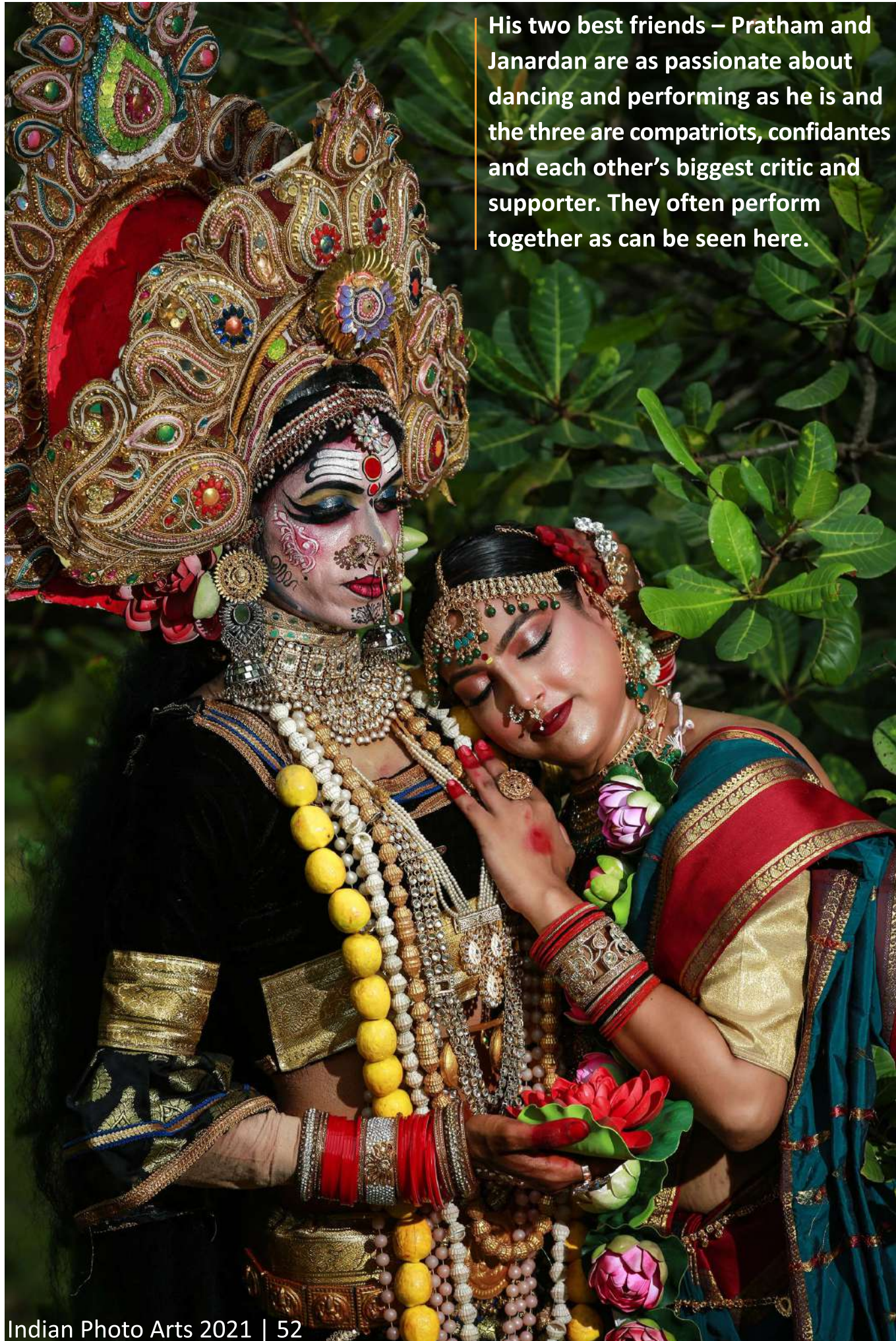




Ajay's passion took a much serious turn when he decided to drop out of school while he was in the fifth grade and decided to invest all his time and energy into dancing. Since then it has been twelve long years he has been performing and fine tuning his craft.







His two best friends – Pratham and Janardan are as passionate about dancing and performing as he is and the three are compatriots, confidantes and each other's biggest critic and supporter. They often perform together as can be seen here.



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Ajay's story is a timely reminder to all of us that talent doesn't care for the gender identity of an individual. Hard work and dedication do not wait for a person's gender to reveal itself before rewarding that person. Ajay's journey has been anything but smooth. Faced with all the discrimination and humiliation, which the society reserves for the transgender community, Ajay never had it easy. His grit, determination and passion towards his craft helped him sail through the tumultuous times although it was anything but smooth sailing. He knows there will be plenty of such obstacles waiting for him as he cruises ahead, yet he is determined to live his dream, his passion, one performance at a time. The humiliation and discrimination which we as a society have traditionally subjected the transgender community to have robbed us of many stellar talents like Ajay forcing them into the darker underbellies of our cities and towns and eventually rendering our society poorer in terms of talent, diversity and human values.



## Debasish KUNDU

A chef by profession Debasish Kundu took a liking towards photography in 2011. Being the only food stylist in Kolkata, he used his professional knowledge and expertise to master the nuances of food photography during the initial days of his journey with the camera. As time went by he started taking keen interests in other genres of photography and soon started taking an active interest in the genres of fashion and street photography. The two things in life which are of utmost importance to him are – food, his love and photography, his passion.



# Mystic Maidan

A photo essay by [SANTANU DEY](#) capturing the ethos of the famed Maidan - the beating heart of the city of Kolkata.

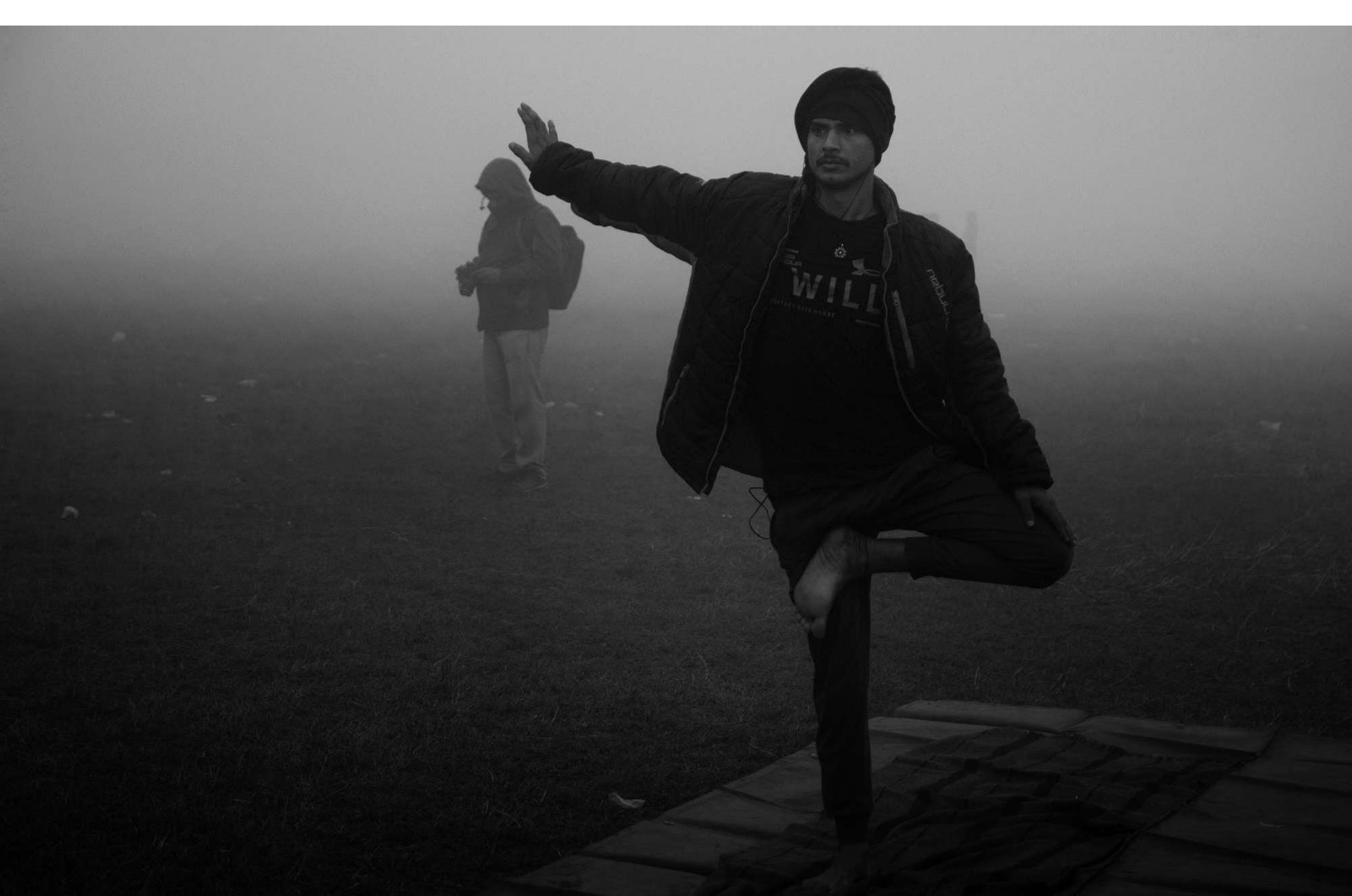




























## **Santanu DEY**

Santanu Dey is an accountant & logistics manager by profession and a street, people & documentary photographer by passion. He is one of the collective members of India Street Art Collective and one of the editors of Exposure Magazine. Since 2016, photography has had a huge influence on his life. His works have been published and featured in a number of national and international magazines, photography websites and articles. 121clicks.com, IPA Magazine, Wonderz of Photography, Chiiz Magazine, Exposure Magazine, Photographic Mercadillo, Inspired Street Photography, Dhaka Photo Academy, World freelance Photographer Society are some of the platforms which have honoured him by publishing his work.



“It’s rare, but sometimes you’ll get lucky and walk upon a scene with everything perfectly laid out in front of you. You’ll round a corner, and someone will be there in the middle of a cool, colorful, maybe chaotic environment. They’ll be there, bathed in perfect light and the sea of humanity will part and voilà... all you need to do is be ready with the camera.”



# Michael Steverson

Numerous collaborations with some of the biggest names in the field of publishing have taken Michael to far-flung corners of the world and enriched his treasure trove of experiences, both as a photographer and as a human being. In this piece, Michael pens his thoughts on the nuances of shooting environmental portraits and provides valuable insights into this particular genre and his desire to travel in search of more portraits once the world frees itself from the evil clutches of the COVID 19 virus.





**A**s a documentary and travel photographer, I've been fortunate enough to travel to some of the most diverse and stunning locations around the globe. I've seen beautiful landscapes, roamed the thoroughfares and back alleys of some of the world's most glorious cities and I've visited iconic landmarks on nearly every continent. Africa and Antarctica are the exceptions, both of which are on the bucket list!

Now, even with all those opportunities to see and photograph these "locations", I still find myself drawn to people. Don't get me wrong, I love a good sunset and I do like the challenge of trying to create a different take on a famous landmark. Still, for me, it's the people I meet and interact with along the way that make a journey memorable. I've made lifelong friends and memories, simply because I started a conversation with a camera in my hand. I've interviewed hundreds of people over the years and many relationships that started as work have evolved into lifelong friendships. I love documenting those encounters, and in particular, I love doing it with environmental portraits.









An environmental portrait is just what it sounds like. A portrait of the subject executed in a familiar environment, perhaps their home or workplace or some other location in which they feel comfortable. The environment serves to amplify the subject. While it certainly can be candid, most of my environmental portraits are not. This isn't pure street photography and I'm not trying to be that fly on the wall.

Including the surroundings can make it easier to convey something of a person's personality or spirit. Combined with a conversation first approach, people in familiar settings are much more likely to open up and be at ease with a photographer. I'm hoping the resulting images go beyond just showing their physical features and radiate something of their essence, and that the viewer might feel a connection.

When interviewing folks on assignment the photography is usually easier. Typically, the subject will know why you are there and have a feeling for what to expect.



Often, you'll only have a few minutes in those situations, so it's best to pre-plan a shot list, as much as you can anyway. Most of the time though, when traveling, you'll be meeting someone cold. It can be intimidating to approach someone we don't know but a smile and gesture will go a long way. The worst that can happen is someone says no. Keep smiling, defer and move on, eventually there will be someone more forthcoming.

It's rare, but sometimes you'll get lucky and just walk upon as scene with everything laid out in front of you. You'll round a corner and there will be a subject sitting in some cool, colorful, chaotic environment, bathed in perfect light. The sea parts and voilà... all you have to do is be ready with the camera. It's rare but it will happen, so as you're moving through a scene or location, constantly be checking your exposure. There are a few such moments included in this set of photos. See if you can pick them out.









Some other things to consider, look for interesting light. It may seem obvious but finding the right light will create a bit of drama and it will enhance the in-camera results, so you'll have to do much less post work. Also, try to avoid going too shallow with your depth of field. That background is full of hints. Go a bit smaller with your aperture so you're capturing all those little details that could help convey something of who the person is.

When you do have the luxury of a willing subject, then slow down and savor the time together. Dial in your setting. Nail the focus. If you've already opened a dialogue or they have otherwise implied permission, don't be timid. Put them in the light, gently direct them to pose. If you've made a genuine connection, you'll know when they've had enough!

Afterwards, don't just rush away gleefully chimping your LCD. Spend a bit of time and make the connection memorable. Show them the images and offer to send them a copy of the file.













Finally, show your subjects in a positive light. If you are genuinely authentic and showing them respect, empathy and compassion, all of that will be reflected in your photograph.

I don't know borders are going to open and we'll be truly free to travel again. Hopefully it's going to be sooner rather than later. The next time you travel, post-pandemic, challenge yourself to engage with a few people and make the time to take some environmental portraits. Oh, and if I'm ever fortunate enough to meet you in person, know in advance I'll be looking to add you to my portrait collection!





**An American documentary photographer based in China's Guangxi Province, Michael's work has been featured in magazines, newspapers and websites around the world, including The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Atlantic, The Smithsonian, CNN and the BBC. He currently serves on the faculty of The Guangxi Arts Institute. He is also the host of the upcoming Clubhouse interview series, Exposed — Conversations with Photographers, in conjunction with the Indian Creators Club.**

**Represented by ChinaScenic, Michael has had solo exhibitions in Beijing, San Francisco, Shanghai, Liuzhou and Cincinnati. He is a member of The National Press Photographers Association, The China Photographers Association and The Royal Photographic Society.**



The concept of Chhau dance has been synonymous with the district of Purulia in West Bengal and dates a few hundred years back into history. One such group of dancers and performers enacting the tale of Goddess Durga.

by **Debmalya Das**

# CHHAU DANCE

a tale of heritage and neglect

Iconic and once the pride of an entire region, Bengal's Chhau dancers are staring at an uncertain future...







Chau dancers impersonating the Goddess and her four children, re-enacting the mythical tale of Durga's triumph over the demon set against the backdrop of the white of kashphool in the sprawling green of the Bengal countryside is a familiar sight during Durga Puja.



It can be a daunting task to put in words what Durga Puja means to the Bengali community all over the world and particularly in the state of West Bengal. It is an amalgamation of a wide array of emotions. For some it is the time for homecoming, while for others the festival bridges the gap between their long forgotten roots and their present being. For some the festival is an opportunity for making merry, catching up with family members, for others the festival provides a refuge from the rigors of everyday life. The week-long celebrations usher in a new dawn of hope. The festival is a lot more than mere celebrations, the glitzy pandals (the often palatial makeshift shrines for the deity), the food, the new clothes, the festival tugs at the emotional chord of each and every Bengali.

The ten day long festivities are observed in the Indian calendar month of Ashwin which coincides roughly with the months of September- October. Fresh from the long spells of monsoon rains, rural Bengal dawns an incredibly pretty look during this time of the year. The rivers flow in all their glory and are a lot more appreciable than their arrogant avatars of monsoon, the rice fields are still covered in the iconic green of rural Bengal, the sky is a pretty hue of blue with fluffy white clouds scattered all over it and the landscape in the countryside is dotted with the signature presence of “kashphool” or Kash flower – a close relative to wild grass or reeds which grows taller than a human

being and are easily identifiable by the white woolly growth on top of the reeds. While the celebrations in the cities are a more glitzy affair where the Puja committees often vie for the tags of superlatives in various segments, the festivities in rural Bengal are more of a family affair. Entire villages gather around as one tight knit community and contribute in their own ways to make the festivities a memorable one for everyone. They lack the pomp and grandeur of their city counterparts but more than make up for it with their earnestness and heart. This is a festival which bridges the divides spanning across class, communities, age and gender and ties everyone with a common thread of joy and harmony. This becomes the most evident in the villages of Bengal. Animosities are forgotten, long standing feuds are put on the backburner for these few days, a sense of harmony becomes palpable and this magical spell is cast which in more ways than one inspires everyone to rise above their petty self and turn a new leaf. There is yet another aspect of rural Bengal which is intertwined with the celebrations of Durga Puja. Chauu dancers in their brightly coloured attires impersonating the Goddess and her four children, re-enacting the mythical tale of Goddess Durga’s triumph over the demon set against the backdrop of the white of kashphool, the sprawling green of the Bengal countryside and the brilliant blue of the autumn sky scattered with white fluffy clouds are familiar sights in the rural

The concept of Chhau dance has been synonymous with the district of Purulia in West Bengal and dates a few hundred years back into history.

parts of Bengal in the lead up to the biggest festival of the Bengali community. The rich history of this dance form and the tradition associated with it is befitting of it becoming an integral part of the grand festival of Durga Puja.

The concept of Chhau dance has been synonymous with the district of Purulia in West Bengal and dates a few hundred years back into history. Over the years the district has earned the distinct reputation of producing some of the finest Chhau dancers. In a way the vibrant Chhau dance masks and attires seem like a carefree splash of bright colours on a canvas which predominantly portrayed rugged and barren landscapes which are so typical of Purulia. The popular notion says the practice of Chhau dance evolved simultaneously in three different Indian states, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal. There are three recognized schools or styles of Chhau. These are the Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj varieties belonging to the three different states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa respectively and named after the district or the village in which they are performed. Though the origin of Chhau dance cannot be traced back with absolute certainty, the gross believe among historians is the word 'Chhau' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Chhaya', which means shadow or image.

In Oriya 'Chhauka' means the ability to make a sudden and unexpected attack. Chhau dance perhaps originated from the martial dance form Phari Khanda Khela (playing with the sword and the shield). According to another school of thought the dance form owes its origin to the efforts of the tribal warriors living in the military barracks, to appease and influence the Sun God. This theory gains further impetus from the meaning of the word ‘Chhauni’ which means military barracks. Some authors or historians have provided in their manuscripts yet another interesting observation related to the origin of this dance form, particularly in the Purulia district of West Bengal. According to them, the secret to understanding the origin of this dance form lies in the outcries of the performers or the drummers during the performance, something which should not be overlooked. Particularly in the Purulia form of Chhau dance, the singer drummer often rushes to the new characters that are waiting to take centre stage by shouting "cho... cho...cho..." with excitement, before they enter into the arena. By doing this he infuses the same enthusiasm in the dancer. During the course of the performance also such excitement and outburst of joy are expressed by the singers and other members of orchestra. Such outcries of excitement and enthusiasm bear a striking





The preparations which go on behind the scenes in the lead up to a performance are as elaborate as the dance form itself. The dancers take great pains to dress them up in the brightly coloured costumes and masks in order to look the part while enacting mythical tales.

resemblance to the utterances made by the hunters in this region who assemble at a particular hill top during the annual hunting expeditions on the full moon day in the month of May. While chasing the game they let out cries of "cho... cho...cho..." (Which can be looked as a broader pronunciation of the word Chhau), in order to confuse the frightened animal and rob it of the possible escape routes or invoke the spirit of the animal with the view of suppressing it with minimum of effort. Going by these anecdotes some claim Chhau dance owes its origin to the practice of hunting, the earliest occupation of the

native communities belonging to this land, which could be thought of as the most arduous areas to penetrate, where the tribal people had no other option but to live off the land. However historians unanimously have accepted that Chhau dance, on a broader scale originally was a form of martial art, which was mainly performed by the tribal warriors in the tribal belts of these three Indian states. Like other forms of martial arts found all over the world, the main purpose of this particular dance form was to keep the warriors fit, agile and battle ready. The winds of change over the years have

touched these tribal areas too, what was once thought of as a hostile terrain covered by thick blankets of forests, home to wild animals in huge numbers, has given way to human settlements, although still considered among some of the lesser developed areas of the state, the Chhau villages of Purulia today are a far cry from what they were during the inception of this dance form. However Chhau dance has survived the winds of change. Although the entire purpose of the dance form today has taken a whole new meaning, with the days of hunting or warfare far behind these people, Chhau

dance of today is viewed more as an art form aimed at the enjoyment of people than as a means to keep the warriors fit or as a simulation to an actual hunting expedition and this dance form takes the centre stage in the lead up to the Durga Puja when Chhau dancers visit different parts of Bengal or become closely associated with various Durga Puja committees and during the course of the festivities enact the tale of the Goddess slaying the evil demon through their performances.



One of the most popular presentations of the Purulia Chhau Dance is the mythological tale of Mahisasur Mardini - the incarnation of Goddess Durga who was created by other Gods to put an end to the devastation caused by the king of demons Mahisasura.



The brilliantly coloured masks of the Chhau dance form of Purulia, possibly precedes the reputation of the dance form itself. As an outsider, one may never witness this brilliant spectacle, but a sight of those masks is always enough for that person to attribute it to Chhau dance. In a way these masks are symbolic to the entire elaborate ritual of Chhau dance. Charida, a quaint village in the foothills of Ajodhya is home for some wonderful artists making Chhau mask. The village of Charida is completely dedicated to the task of mask making, and this profession has passed on from one generation to the next in many families for hundreds of years. The principle raw material used for making these masks is the clay collected from the neighbouring river bed, which is pounded for hours and made smooth and malleable. The smooth clay is then moulded into various shapes and forms suitable for different types of masks. Using water and wooden tools the clay is then sculpted into a human face and left to dry in the sun for days. These form the moulds from which using recycled paper mache masks are made. When the mask dries up the clay mould is broken in order to free the mask. Once the mask is dry, an initial layer of primer paint is applied, which is usually followed by more layers of paints adding to the details of the mask resulting in the finished product. Each mask resembles a particular character from the ancient epics, the Puranas, the Gods and Goddesses and other characters from mythologies. The

Gods and Goddesses are usually depicted as having sharper facial features with a fair complexion, whereas the indigenous people are usually depicted as large and course with an abundance of facial hair. In a similar manner the masks depicting the Aryan invaders who invaded these lands centuries ago, are painted with light colours and have sharper features, whereas the masks depicting indigenous people are painted in darker shades and conscious effort is put in to make those masks less appealing to the eyes even giving it a monstrous appearance. This is largely a reflection of the conflict that existed between the Aryan invaders and the indigenous populations in the epics and mythologies. While Chhau dance form is a typically male dominated arena, where female representatives find no place whatsoever to showcase their skills or talents, female members of the families involved in the craftsmanship of making masks and attires are entrusted with the responsibility of stitching together the attires of the performers and their ornaments, which are usually of extremely bright colours comprising of a lot of brightly coloured beads in order to create a striking spectacle. The entire process of mask making is an elaborate one and one that is evolving every year. With competition growing in every second house or family in the village artisans try their level best to outdo their previous best efforts. The end result of this ongoing healthy rivalry is clearly visible in the



masks produced, which grow bigger and brighter in their appearance every year, with careful attention paid to every finer details, so that nothing appears out of place, everything is in perspective, the colours become bolder, the demons and Asuras appearing more menacing with every passing year. In other words the competition has forced the artisans to shun their once conservative ways and become bolder in their usage of resources. Young children of these families are introduced to this world of craftsmanship at a very early age. They are expected to pay attention and learn from observing the elders of the family while they are at work. It is from these early observations they are going to unlock a plethora of secrets of this trade so that when the baton is passed on to them they can carry the family legacy forward.

In Purulia, Chhau is performed on the Sun festival, which falls in the Chaitra month of Hindu calendar, during the month of March-April. Nowadays Chhau dance makes an important element of some major function or programme, for instance in 1995 Chhau dance was the approved theme of West Bengal's tableau during the Republic Day Parade. In the countryside performances of Purulia Chhau, there is no elevated stage and the dancers usually perform on the flat ground in an open arena, with people sitting encircling them. While performing in some show or on a wider platform, an elevated stage is used for the performance. The three different

genres of Chhau dance maybe different in various aspects, but the background music which accompany these different formats of Chhau dance is quite similar to one another. The underlying theme of the music is a strong percussion which is a symphony of a variety of drums of which Dhol and Dhumsaa are the most essential. Again, between Dhol and Dhumsaa, the former leads. Dhol can be easily thought of as the driving force behind a Chhau performance. It not only provides the much needed rhythms and beats to an essentially dance performance which Chhau is, but also lays down the foundation for the Chhau music. While Dhol provides Chhau music with a solid foundation and acts as the backbone of the performance, the nuances of Chhau dance are brought to life by other musical instruments such as the Chadchadi, a short cylindrical drum and a small hemispherical drum known as Tikraa. The music produced by these instruments compliments the Dhol by carving out the finer details on the solidly laid platform by the Dhol.

A Chhau dance performance is usually preceded by an invocation to the Hindu God Ganesh. The basic premise of most Chhau dance performance is the triumph of good over evil as depicted in the various episodes of Hindu mythologies or Indian epics. A distinctive feature of this dance form is the acrobatic use of the body; something which when combined with the elaborate masks, headgears and the costumes can present itself as a mighty

difficult proposition to deal with. Chhau dancers spend hours and years in training their bodies so that they can meet the physical demands of this highly specialized form of art. Powerful movements, intense concentration, building up of the energy level leading to a final but powerful release are the characterizing features of this dance. One of the most popular presentations of the Purulia Chhau Dance is the mythological tale of Mahisasur Mardini the incarnation of Goddess Durga who was created by other Gods to put an end to the devastation caused by the king of demons Mahisasura. Tormented by the

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devastation caused by the demon Mahisasur, the Gods and Goddesses sought help from Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar who joined forces to create a supreme power in the form of Goddess Durga. In a fierce battle which followed Goddess Durga put an end to the woes of the Gods and Goddesses by slaying the demon king Mahisasura and brought peace back to the universe.

In 2010 Chhau dance form found a place in UNESCO's elite list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a much needed impetus for an art form which is on the verge of decay and possibly suffering a slow death. Over the years the popularity of this dance form has eroded significantly due to a combination of

various factors. During the course of last five years, the number of Purulia Chhau dance troupes has dropped from 300 to 100, due to a severe lack of funding and performance opportunities, as well as changing lifestyles in the region which was once home to this dying art. The greatest threat to a Chhau dancer's future is the harsh economic reality which he has to encounter. Considering all the arrangements which go into a Chhau dance performance it can be an expensive affair for a poor farmer who is perennially entangled in the loop of debt. The dance form which once enjoyed rich patronage

from the feudal lords has failed to strike the same chord with the present generation, especially the youngsters who in this age of globalisation and rapid urbanization have other means of entertainment readily available, often quite literally at their fingertips. In the light of such developments and in an attempt to engage the younger audience, Chhau performances too have evolved in order to keep up with the changing times. The dances have become faster and more acrobatic, costumes have become brighter and masks more dramatic in an attempt to mimic and reproduce some of the spectacles seen on a television screen. However these evolutions and attempts at rediscovering itself hasn't gone down all too well with



Chhau performances have evolved to keep up with the changing times. The dances have become faster and more acrobatic, costumes have become brighter and masks more dramatic in an attempt to mimic some of the spectacles seen on television.



some of the older masters of the art who are of the opinion that the dance has lost some of its subtlety in adapting to a younger generation influenced by popular media. With interest among the locals dwindling at an alarming rate, Chhau dancers are now dependant on invitations or contracts to perform on special occasions in front of a more urban audience

which come their way during the celebrations of Durga Puja. Many puja committees or organisers invite Chhau dance troops or enter into contracts with them for performing during the festivities. In the concrete urban settings of the cities and towns such performances bring to the fore a slice of the rich history and tradition from the hinterlands of Bengal. Although

the returns are good, such invitations are few and far between, without the promise of being a long sustaining model for solution to the financial problems faced by the Chhau dancers.

A highly specialised local form of art cannot always bank on its exotic value when the patronage from the locals is eroding at a fast pace. However amidst all

the negativities concerning the future of this dying art, there are glimmers of hope for the Chhau artisans. Various attempts made on the part of the government to promote the works of Chhau artisans as exhibits and souvenirs in different melas, exhibitions, trade fairs have met with considerable success. The miniature masks usually priced at around 200 rupees while the larger ones rated at 3000 promise a good return for their efforts and have found sizeable followers in the form of art lovers and enthusiasts from all over the state as well as the country. Proper marketing and methodical implementation of further measures can go a long way in bringing this threatened genre of art back from the verge of extinction. To further safe guard the interests of Chhau dancers and artisans the Sangeet Natak Academy has taken up the initiative to set up a National Dance Centre for Chhau Dance at Baripada, Orissa. Chhau dance is much more than a mere performance for these people, over the years Chhau dance has become a part of their existence, whether actively involved with it or not, if someday this dance form goes extinct, this region along with its people will be robbed of their souls. The onus lies with all of us to keep this wonderful tradition alive, to keep the indomitable passion of these wonderful people burning for many more years to come.





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## Debmalya DAS

Debmalya Das is a Panchayat Audit Officer with the West Bengal Government by profession and a passionate documentary photographer. He frequently travels in search of stories to the farthest corners of the country. He has featured in Vogue Italia on several occasions and has been awarded by National Geographic Travellers India on multiple occasions besides being featured and honoured by World Photographic Forum. He has been featured by many print and digital publishing houses. He is presently part of an ongoing assignment called – Project Bismillah.







A  
REVIEW OF  
BHASKAR KUNDU'S  
“KOLKATA - LIFE AND THE CITY” BY RAJ SARKAR



**A**t the outset, I would like to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude to Mr. Bhaskar Kundu for gifting me a slice of his passion in the form of the coffee table book – “Kolkata – Life and the City”, comprising of photographs taken by Bhaskar in the streets, alleys, nooks and corners across the length and breadth of the city. As I flipped through the pages of the book with a sense of bewilderment, I realised it would only be fitting to pen my thoughts as an ode to Bhaskar’s Herculean effort and I took the liberty to review the publication.

We all know that the city of Kolkata, with its rich assortment of colours, mood and diversity, is nothing less than a street photographer’s dreamland. The city is one of the best places to explore various aspects of everyday life on the streets, something which street photographers have been pursuing keenly through ages. It is perhaps these vibrant streets of Kolkata with no dull moments which have earned the city the moniker – The City of Joy. In my view, this book clearly portrays the combination of raw and candid moments of human life on the streets of Kolkata the unique nature of which has earned the city its distinct reputation.

The name of the book, “KOLKATA- Life and the City”, gives an impression of the contents of the book. The cover page is sublimely portraying a juxtaposition of mood and colour. The book captures various facets, starting from the clay art of Kumartuli to the celebrations of Vijaya



*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*

Dashami, Eid, Christmas, Dandi and covered almost every aspect of lively moments of Kolkata and its people. Kolkata is also considered the cultural capital of India, and Bhaskar’s work portrays multiple slices of the myriad cultural aspects of the city. Meticulously curated images bring to the fore the true

spirit of Kolkata that will certainly establish a visceral connection between the reader and the content of the book.

When you will hold the book in your hand, you will be able to realize the actual meaning of the word “SPIRIT” which flows through the veins of each and every page of the book. The cover page is very

simple, yet elegant and offers a hint about the content. In my opinion, in the years to come, this book will serve as a cornerstone for street photographers visiting the city with the purpose of exploring and photographing its lanes. This book works as a time travel machine if you see the book after a certain time gap.





*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*

The book reflects various moods of Kolkata and portrays its rich culture and diverse religious history. The book consists of a total of 95 photographs. Each photograph has a distinct character of its own thus craftily depicting a unique story. The vibrant colour of the city captured optimally offers various emotions which appear to be impeccably synchronised with the emotion of the people as well as the city. Sharp and crispy colourful images are the actual portrayal of the joyful nature of the city which the artist has depicted with great aplomb. I would recommend you all to grab a copy of this book at the earliest for the photographs in this book

are bound to take you on a joy ride across the nooks and corners of Kolkata and acquaint you with the true spirit of this grand old city.

Lastly, I would like to congratulate the family members of Bhaskar Kundu for their support and inspiration. Not only that, his wife Mrs. Anindita Kundu deserves special credit for having breathed more life into the photographs through her beautifully penned captions for each photograph in this book. I would also like to congratulate the curator this book Shri Dinesh Khanna for curating photographs in a very simplistic manner that helped this book to encapsulate the perfect and



*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*

true spirit of Kolkata. Lastly, thanks to my friend Bhaskar for showing the courage to publish his first book, which inspires and encourages many of us to think in similar lines.

It was an absolute joy to flip through the pages as one photograph after the other riveted my attention. It further highlighted to me the endless possibilities which Kolkata still hides in its nooks and corners only for the most passionate street photographers to unearth.

I firmly believe that one needs tremendous mental strength, courage, support, understanding and ability to publish a photography book especially on Kolkata

where the possibilities are immense and very challenging. Bhaskar has masterfully converted his dream into reality.

The book is a “must have” for every artist, traveller, blogger and for people from all walks of life.

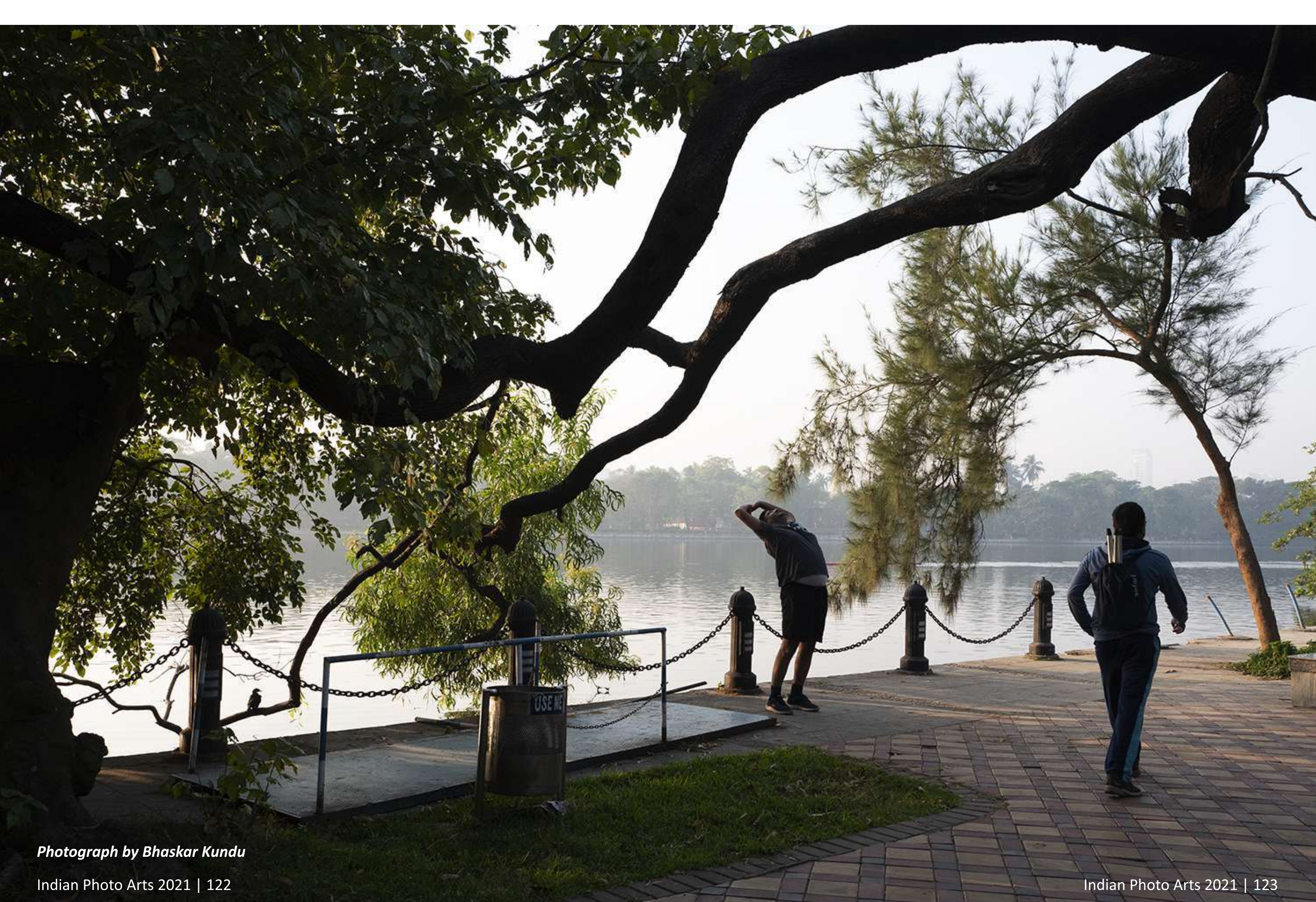












*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*





**BHASKAR KUNDU** is an Indian photographer, based in Kolkata, West Bengal. His photography journey started long back during his college days, however interest in street photography developed gradually during the last five years. His works have been published in the form of articles, interviews and photo series in several online portals as well as print magazines like 121 clicks, Eycshot Magazine, Dodho Magazine, Smart Photography, Lonely Planet India, National Geographic Assignment and Daily Dozen, Indian Photo Arts, APF Magazine, Exposure Magazine, Indian Express Newspaper, Deccan chronicle, etc. He has also won several awards in his photography career and featured as finalist in prestigious contests like HIPA in 2017, Italian Street Photography Festival in singles as well as mobile category in 2019 and Singles in 2020, Miami Street Photography Festival 2020. His works have also been exhibited in different International and National Salons. He has been awarded with the prestigious EFIAP distinction in 2017 from Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique, France. He is the founding member of "India Street Art Collective", a collective of street and documentary photographers from India. Bhaskar currently works as a Senior executive at Nestlé India Ltd. Post his retirement, he plans to take up photography as a full-time job.

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Instagram handle: [streetphoto\\_bhaskar](https://www.instagram.com/streetphoto_bhaskar)

Links for purchasing the book "KOLKATA- Life and the City" available on Amazon. Link below -

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*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*



*Photograph by Bhaskar Kundu*

## Reviewed by Raj Sarkar

**Raj Sarkar** is a street photographer and educator. He holds an MBA Degree in Finance and Post Graduate Diploma in Computer Application. He is the curator of APF magazine Street Photography and co-founder of World Photographic Forum (the biggest group in Facebook with above 450K members) apart from being a Fujifilm Mentor .He loves exploring possibilities on street. His main object is to freeze the emotions and actions of people. He delivers lecture on photography in various colleges and institutions like IIM (Indian Institution of Management), Union Chapel School among others. He also conducts countless workshops on street photography. He has curated various exhibitions and he has also been appointed as judge in numerous competitions. Raj is a recipient of various awards, recently he has won the International Puskar Mela Contest, Finalist of Garuda World Photo contest and HIPA and his work has been exhibited worldwide. He reviews various gadgets and cameras including the FujiX camera for Fujifilm. His article has been published in all renowned magazine and websites in the world like Fujilove, Street Photography Magazine, USA, Viewfind, APF Magazine, Smart Photography, Better Photography, Asian Photography, Chiiz magazine, Saveus, 121 clicks, National Geographic, CNN London TV and more. His photographs and their compositions have been used as study materials. Raj is based in Kolkata, India. He is an avid traveller and keeps himself immersed in his photographic endeavours.





# THE BIG THREE

Kaziranga National Park and Manas Wildlife Sanctuary - the unique wilderness home to the three giants of the natural world.



by **Antarjit SINGH**

In addition to being the last remaining strongholds for the one horned rhinoceros, Kaziranga and Manas happen to be the two most notable wilderness where the three giants of the natural world share the same habitat.





Kaziranga National Park – a World Heritage Site spans across an area of 430 square kilometres along the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra River to the north and flanked by the slopes of the Karbi Anglong Hills to the south is widely known for being the last major stronghold for the great one horned rhinoceros also known as the Indian rhinoceros. The national park is home to a staggering 90% of the global population of great one horned rhinoceros and also boasts of being home to a healthy population of Asiatic elephants and Royal Bengal tigers.





**T**all grasses towering well above a human being and tall enough to conceal even the mighty frame of an Asiatic elephant dominate this wilderness. Quite understandably this lanky vegetation is known as elephant grass. For most part of its existence this maze of green appears to be a peaceful setting to a casual observer, devoid of any action and a vast expanse of green tranquillity. A keener observation however, will be quick enough to defy any such assumption. Every once in a while a ripple waves its way through the thick grass cover parting the thick green curtain to unveil the gigantic frame of an Indian rhinoceros quietly chomping on the succulent shoots and tubers which grow aplenty on this marshy terrain. Not too far away, the swaying and rustling of the grass cover would indicate to the trained eyes the presence of a herd of Asiatic elephants going about their daily business of addressing their truly enormous appetite. And on that fateful occasion, when the wilderness holds its breath, when every denizen in this wild world strains every muscle and nerve of its body engulfed by an overwhelming sense of fear and alarm, a fiery orange streak glides across the grass cover, the intermittent black stripes doing their very best to break the bulky frame and camouflage it in the grass cover, it becomes obvious one of the most fearsome and formidable predators on this planet the iconic Royal Bengal tiger is on the prowl. It can be hard to imagine a setting

where the natural world has pitted three of its most redoubtable subjects against one another. Individually all of these creatures are formidable entities, capable of holding their own and warding off almost any threat, however things take a very different turn when they are condemned to share the habitat. It goes without saying, such a setting serves as the ideal platform for some of the natural world's unique dramas to unfold, something which cannot be witnessed anywhere else on this planet. This is the story of Kaziranga National Park and Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, two such unique wilderness tucked away in the north-eastern corner of India in the state of Assam and most notably home to what would be quite accurate to call the “big three of India” – the famed Royal Bengal tiger, the gigantic Asiatic elephants and the endangered one horned rhinoceros for whom these wilderness remain the last remaining strongholds. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say when nature was shaping this wilderness it certainly went a little overboard and wanted everything to exist at a scale never seen before. From the choice of three of the most formidable and gigantic creatures to the vast networks of rivers which criss-cross the region including the mighty Brahmaputra to the vast swathes of ridiculously tall grasses, everything here pans out at a grand scale. Kaziranga National Park – a World Heritage Site spans across an area of 430 square

kilometres along the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra River to the north and flanked by the slopes of the Karbi Anglong Hills to the south. Kaziranga is widely known for being the last major stronghold for the great one horned rhinoceros also known as the Indian rhinoceros. The national park is home to a staggering 90% of the global population of great one horned rhinoceros and also boasts of being home to a healthy population of Asiatic elephants and Royal Bengal tigers. Among zoologists, scientists and wildlife enthusiasts Kaziranga holds a special place for its mind boggling

**K**aziranga National Park and Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, two unique wilderness tucked away in the state of Assam and most notably home to the “big three of India”...

diversity in species and the inter species interactions which pan out in this natural theatre on a daily even hourly basis. Vast expanses of dense and tall elephant grass dominate much of this landscape with sprawling intermittent patches of marshlands. Large clumps of semi evergreen forest stand out as oddity amidst the huge stretches of grassland. The Brahmaputra which flows along the northern confines of the wilderness is notorious across the state of Assam for wreaking havoc during the monsoons. The river in the wake of India's famed monsoon assumes gigantic proportions which even dwarfs its otherwise massive disposition and overflows its banks flooding the entire Brahmaputra valley. Kaziranga along with its denizens to falls victim to this wrath

of Brahmaputra. Vast stretches of the national park get washed away in the ensuing floods, hundreds of creatures lose their lives as others struggle to reach the elevated corridors in the Karbi Anglong or Mikir Hills to the south only to return once the flood water has receded. As cruel as it may appear, this repeating cycle of death and destruction is nature's way of ensuring a fresh beginning. The silt and other nutrients deposited by the flooding waters of Brahmaputra enrich the fertility of the Brahmaputra valley and once the water recedes ensure an ensuing season

of plenty upon these fertile plains. Kaziranga and the animals living in this wilderness greatly benefit from the nutrient rich fertile soils of Kaziranga National Park. There seems to be to plenty of food and resources for every creature calling this wild part of India their home. Manas Wildlife Sanctuary on the other hand, although separated from Kaziranga National Park by a distance of almost 300 kilometres, shares quite a few similarities with its more illustrious cousin. Apart from being home to the three giants of wild India in the form of the Bengal tiger, the Asiatic elephant and the one horned rhinoceros, Manas Wildlife Sanctuary like Kaziranga is nourished by the waters of the Manas river which borders the wilderness to the south while the gently



**M**anas too enjoys the distinction of being a UNESCO World Heritage Site having earned the prestigious recognition back in December 1985.

rolling slopes of the Himalayas traverses through Bhutan and flank the wildlife sanctuary to the north. The nutrient rich water of Manas River ensures the alluvial soil of the sanctuary is fertile and promises prolonged seasons of plenty. In addition to these, Manas too enjoys the distinction of being a UNESCO World Heritage Site having earned the prestigious recognition back in December 1985. In spite of these accolades and the sprawling biodiversity the journey of Manas Wildlife Sanctuary has been anything but smooth. In the late 1980s and early 90s widespread poaching and insurgency activities gripped this pristine wilderness. The ensuing destruction of wildlife, natural resources and the poaching of the flagship rhino species had cast their evil spell on this natural wonderland. In the wake of such ominous developments UNESCO in 1992 put Manas Wildlife Sanctuary in the list of World Heritage Site in danger. Since then Manas has successfully ward off the tumultuous times and unprecedented conservation efforts saw the sanctuary slowly yet steadily claiming much of its former glory. As a result of such herculean efforts undertaken by the concerned authorities on 21 June 2011, it was removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger and the efforts to preserve Manas Wildlife Sanctuary's biodiversity

were lauded universally.

What makes Kaziranga National Park and Manas Wildlife Sanctuary special and crucial to the cause of conservation not only in India but globally? To begin with, Kaziranga and Manas remain the two last remaining beacons of hope for the survival of the great one horned rhinoceros. Once poached extensively for their horn which finds extensive use in traditional Chinese and South East Asian medicines in spite of having no medicinal properties whatsoever, these magnificent creatures were pushed to the brink of extinction. Their formidable presence and courageous disposition stand little chance against sophisticated weapons and traps. Once threatened to extinction, stricter laws, vigilance, awareness programs and increased protection lend by the forest officials have resulted in a steady increase in the population of this species. During the latest census exercise conducted in 2018, a total of 2650 rhinos were found across the protected areas of Assam of which 2401 were recorded within the confines of Kaziranga National Park. Fragmented populations of great one horned rhinoceros can be found in other parts of Assam and also in the wilderness in the northern reaches of neighbouring state of West Bengal and the Terai grasslands bordering Uttar Pradesh and



**Kaziranga and Manas boast of a healthy population of Asiatic elephants. These giants peacefully co-exist with other formidable denizens of this wilderness and spend most of their time foraging in the cover of the tall elephant grass.**



the country of Nepal. However it must be noted these populations are small with a not so diversified genetic pool. In light of this it becomes absolutely imperative to safeguard the rhinoceros populations in Kaziranga and Manas to ensure the survival of the species. As per a recent claim by the Ministry of Wildlife incidents of poaching have reduced by almost 86% in the past 3 years.

In addition to being the last remaining strongholds for the one horned rhinoceros, Kaziranga and Manas happen to be the two most notable wildernesses where the three giants of the natural world share the same habitat. This alone earns them a special place in the wildlife map of India. Asiatic elephants and Bengal tigers share the same habitat in multiple wildernesses across the country, however with the introduction of another giant in the form of the one horned rhinoceros the ecological significance of these wildernesses increases manifold. This is not to say Kaziranga or Manas should be given precedence over other sanctuaries in terms of conserving them, but it certainly makes these two safe havens stand out in terms of the incredible biodiversity. The secret to this largely peaceful coexistence among the tiger, rhinoceros and the elephant lies in the strict natural order which every creature ranging from the largest to the smallest follows. While it is true all three giants slither effortlessly into the tall grass cover and spend most of their time either foraging within it or stalking or resting, they rarely

deliberately cross each other's path and are always mindful of maintaining a safe distance from one another thus steering clear of a potential collision course. The formidable built of these creatures and their abilities to defend themselves against one another also play a crucial role in maintaining the natural order. Each of these creatures is incredibly capable of inflicting serious injuries in the wake of the most unfortunate or rarest of encounters and they are astutely aware of this. Quite understandably peace is something which proves to be the most beneficial for all three of these animals.

Elephant herds are exclusively made up of females who happen to be related to one another in some form or the other. The herd is led by the matriarch who often happens to be the eldest member of the herd. Adult males lead a solitary existence only to come in contact with a female of its species during the mating season. New-born elephant calves, like every other infant, are helpless against the numerous dangers which await them during the initial months of their lives. Thankfully the young calves enjoy the safety which the herd provides. The incredibly complex social dynamics of an elephant herd which include remarkable traits such as compassion, empathy and kinship ensure the young calves are well looked after not only by their mothers but by every member of the herd. Understandably even for the stealthy Bengal tiger lurking in these tall grasses a few months old elephant calf in

There can be no denying the threat of poaching has been successfully contained by the authorities to a large extent; however it must be mentioned, incidents of poaching are far from becoming a thing of the past. The war against poaching is an ongoing one. In a recent development officials burnt close to 2500 previously seized rhino horns to dispel any myth surrounding their medicinal utility in one of the largest anti-poaching drives in Asia.

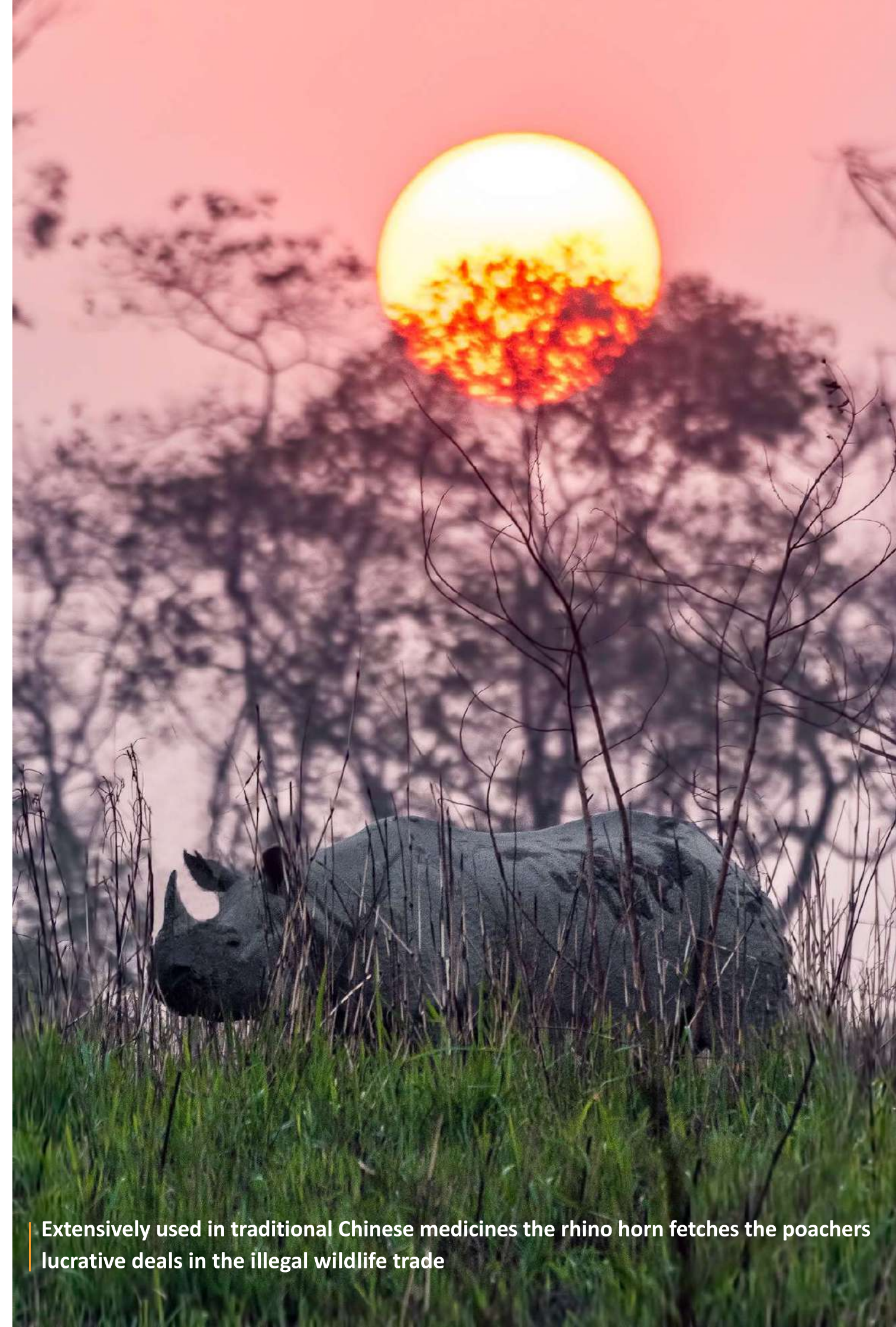




spite of its potential of being a hearty meal seems an insurmountable challenge and such attempts made by the predator are incredibly rare. A rhinoceros calf on the other hand is a different proposition altogether for the stealthy predator. Unlike elephants, a rhinoceros leads a solitary existence. The females are entirely responsible for raising the solitary calf (on most occasions) which they give birth to. The young rhino calves are entirely dependent on their mothers for protection during the early stages of their lives. While the mother is busy foraging a wandering calf can turn out to be easy pickings for a lurking Bengal tiger in the thicket of the tall grasses. The dense grass cover provides the lurking predator with the ideal cover to sneak close to the mother calf duo and stage a surprise attack and run away with the helpless calf. Such incidents of adult tigers attacking unsuspecting rhino calves and in doing so seriously injuring the mother who came to a last minute defence of her calf have been recorded on multiple occasions in the habitats shared by these two formidable species. The tables however turn on young tiger cubs left to the mercy of good fortune while their mother is away hunting. Elephant herds or adult rhinoceros do not take too kindly to any presence of the apex predator in their vicinity and it is not unlikely if they stumble upon a litter of unattended tiger cubs these giants will put their bulk to good use to trample and maul the young felines to death. In spite of such

possibilities, it must be said such incidents are not at all commonplace. In their normal course of life the big three maintain a respectful distance from one another and even for the tiger rhinoceros calf doesn't feature anywhere in the top half of its diet chart. With resources aplenty in the form of lush green nutritious forage and a wide species of ungulates the big three of Kaziranga and Manas lead a rather peaceful co-existence.

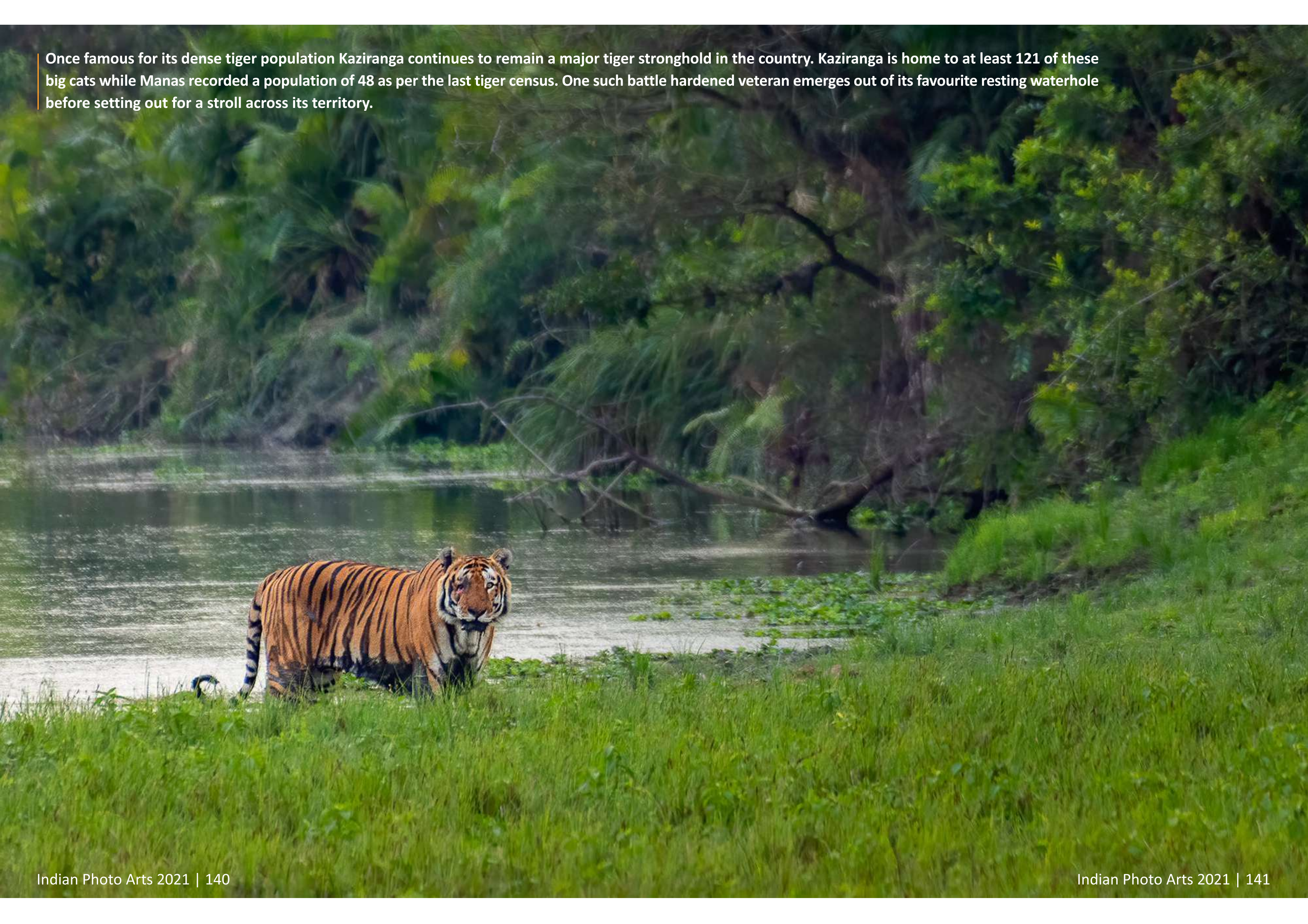
There can be no denying the threat of poaching has been successfully contained by the authorities to a large extent; however it must be mentioned, incidents of poaching are far from becoming a thing of the past. The war against poaching is an ongoing one. In a recent development officials burnt close to 2500 previously seized rhino horns to dispel any myth surrounding their medicinal utility in one of the largest anti-poaching drives in Asia. While it is true such measures and enhanced vigilance and anti-poaching measures have significantly brought down incidents of poaching, threats of different nature and ones with the potential of far serious consequences are looming large over these wild paradises. As is the case elsewhere across the country there is severe pressure on these habitats from the ever expanding and at times encroaching human settlements in the fringes of these sanctuaries. Cases of human animal conflict are on the rise and it goes without saying that irrespective of the outcome no party emerges victorious.



Extensively used in traditional Chinese medicines the rhino horn fetches the poachers lucrative deals in the illegal wildlife trade

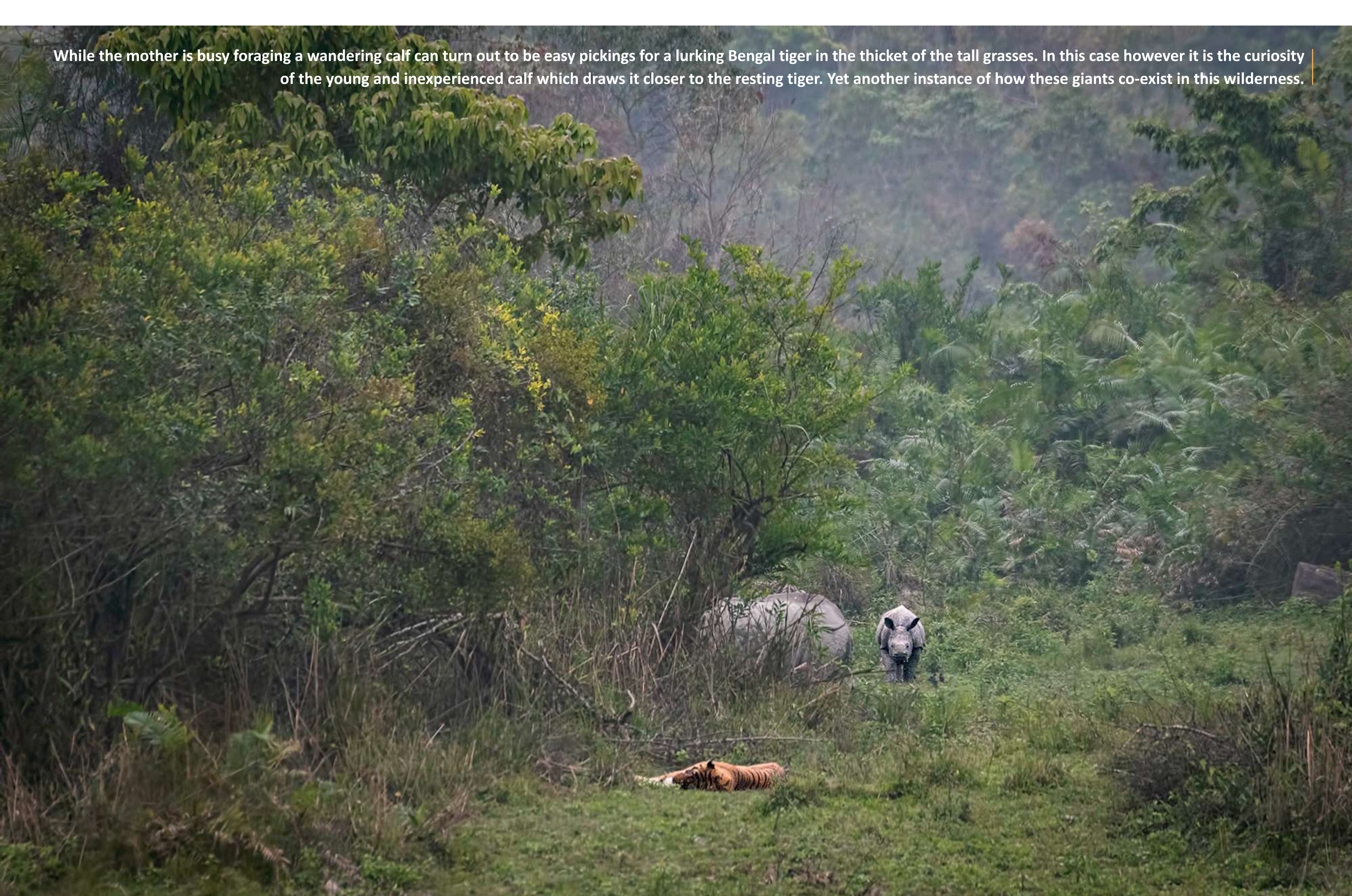


Once famous for its dense tiger population Kaziranga continues to remain a major tiger stronghold in the country. Kaziranga is home to at least 121 of these big cats while Manas recorded a population of 48 as per the last tiger census. One such battle hardened veteran emerges out of its favourite resting waterhole before setting out for a stroll across its territory.





While the mother is busy foraging a wandering calf can turn out to be easy pickings for a lurking Bengal tiger in the thicket of the tall grasses. In this case however it is the curiosity of the young and inexperienced calf which draws it closer to the resting tiger. Yet another instance of how these giants co-exist in this wilderness.





**T**he once lush green slopes along the Karbi Anglong Hills have long been transformed into tea gardens and the human settlements along these slopes have increased manifolds.

These encounters assume their worst form during the monsoon when the annual flooding of Brahmaputra forces the animals to seek refuge in the higher grounds. This migration brings the animals in direct collision course with the dense human settlement in the Karbi Anglong Hills. Most animals are well suited to move around in flooded terrain however the intersecting highways and other road networks with heavy traffic plying on them often restrict their movement and the animals are forced to wander into human settlements due to the lack of other routes. Herd of elephants, straying rhinoceros, huge herds of gaur, straying tigers and leopards amidst panic stricken mob lead to violent clashes with loss of human lives and properties and eventually the animal being lynched to death unless intervened by the forest officials at the opportune moment. While flood further worsens the situation reports of such conflicts ring alarm bells at the forest officials' doorsteps on a regular basis. The once lush green slopes along the Karbi Anglong Hills have long been transformed into tea gardens and the human settlements along these slopes have increased manifolds. The tea gardens and estates have robbed the wild creatures of their natural habitat and have forced them to establish territories in the tea gardens which unfortunately bring

them in direct conflict with human beings. In a worrying trend incidents of leopard attacks on tea garden workers and estate officials have been on a steady rise. In addition to these the bulging cattle and livestock population in the adjoining villages of Kaziranga and Manas has added to the woes of the forest officials. A steadily growing human population in these parts have contributed directly to the growing livestock population in their possession. However due to the lack of adequate grazing pastures the herds of cattle often venture into the wilderness. The forest vegetation bears the brunt of these extra mouths to feed while the cattle often become easy pickings for hungry predators. For the villagers the loss of a cow or a goat translates into huge financial losses and driven by rage and vengeance they often seek out the animal whom they have deemed as the culprit and avenge their losses, often through brutal means. Under such circumstances the forest officials in Assam, like elsewhere in India, are faced with the mammoth task of mitigating human animal conflict. With a fast growing human population and the added pressure on the forest for natural resources, the task certainly appears to be an unsurmountable one. The officials often have to face the fury of an angry mob while on a mission to rescue and



**It is a common practice among elephants to spray themselves with dust and mud. The dust cover serves the dual purpose of protecting their skin from the scorching sun and warding off insects and flies.**



As is the case elsewhere across the country there is severe pressure on these habitats from the ever expanding and at times encroaching human settlements in the fringes of these sanctuaries. Cases of human animal conflict are on the rise and it goes without saying that irrespective of the outcome no party emerges victorious out of such conflicts. These encounters assume their worst form during the monsoon when the annual flooding of Brahmaputra forces the animals to seek refuge in the higher grounds.



rehabilitate any wild animal which has strayed into human settlement. Short staffed, overworked, overburdened and severely ill compensated the fate of pristine wildernesses like Kaziranga and Manas lies in the hands of these hardworking and brave individuals. With the limited resources made available to them the forest department has been doing a commendable job at safeguarding the last remaining bastions of the one horned rhinoceros and the Bengal tiger. The officials have been tirelessly engaged in raising awareness

among the local population regarding the significance of preserving the forest. Several NGOs, wildlife groups and enthusiast have been lending their much needed support. In the midst of many heart-breaking developments arising out of human animal conflicts there has been the occasional streak of hope arising out of these outreach programs. The locals have started realising the importance of conserving the wilderness and are realising the importance of co-existing peacefully with wildlife. For every instance of an

angry mob taking matters into its own hand the forest officials have heart-warming tales of selfless rescue operations voluntarily conducted by the locals to grant safe passage to a trapped wild animal. One can only hope such acts of courage and compassion will serve as the blueprint for us and will establish new norms in the days to come which will ensure the survival of not just the tiger, rhino and elephants but a plethora of species which call Kaziranga and Manas their homes. The giants of Kaziranga and Manas are

not driven by greed, they do not lust after power and they adhere to the rules laid down by nature for a peaceful co-existence. The fate of Kaziranga and Manas is intertwined with the fate of these three. If these creatures thrive, the forest and its other denizens will thrive as well. There is a lot for us humans to learn from these magnificent beasts, who despite the formidable prowess at their disposal have mastered the art of restraint, the philosophy of tolerance, something which the human society today is in dire need of.

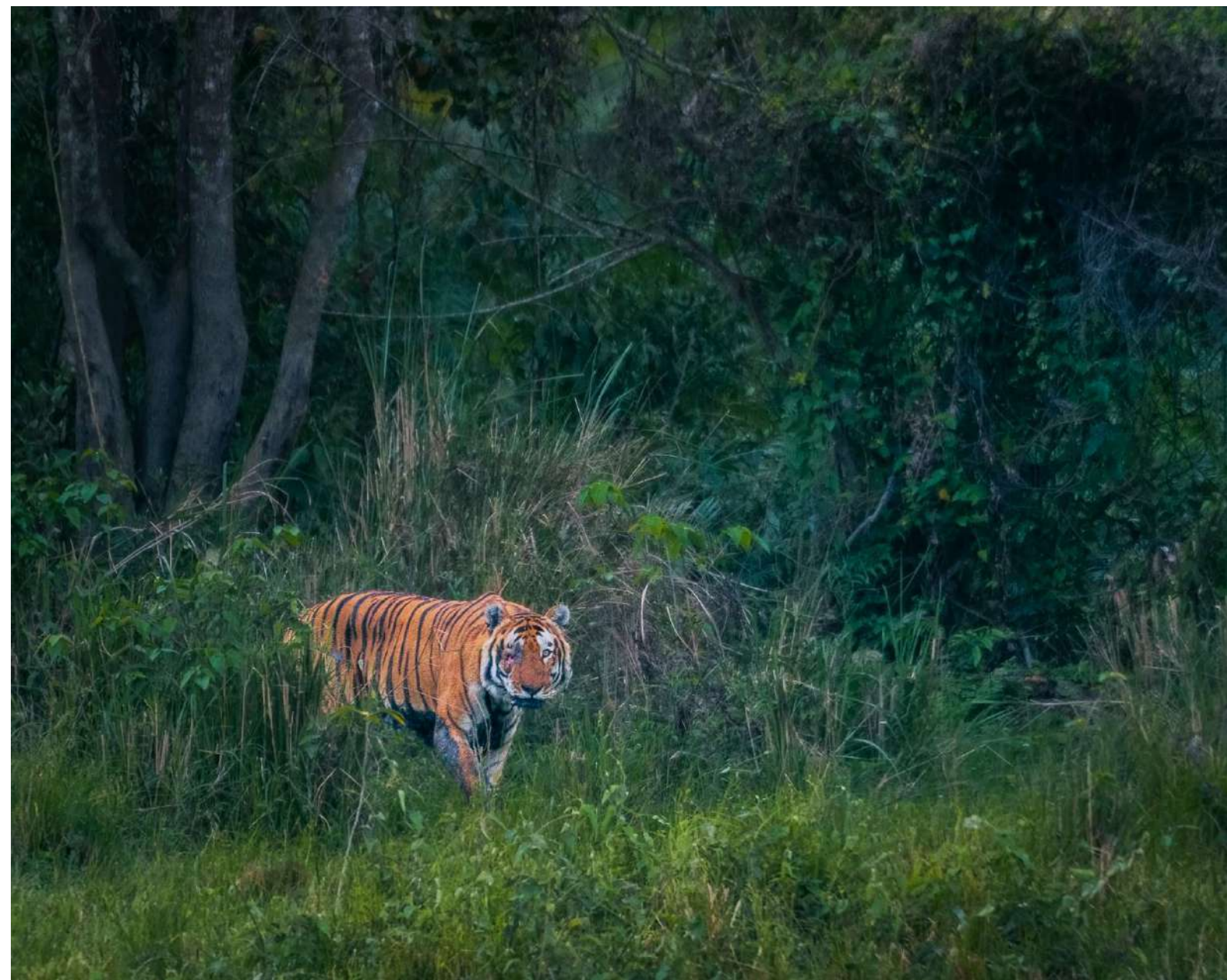




The pristine wildernesses of Kaziranga and Manas are home to a plethora of species other than the big three. The gaur (above) is yet another giant of this kingdom, in fact the gaur is the largest among wild cattle species. The forest canopy on the other hand is home to a wide array of winged denizens. The instantly recognizable great hornbill (right) is among the most notable ones among them. These large birds can be spotted from great distances courtesy their massive and colourful beaks.







The fate of Kaziranga and Manas is intertwined with the fate of these three and a healthy population of these three magnificent creatures serves as a fine marker of the overall health of the forest. If these creatures thrive, the forest and its other denizens will thrive as well.



## **Antarjit SINGH**

Antarjit Singh is a 28 years old businessman and an ardent nature lover at heart. When it comes to the natural world the passion for big cats holds a special place in his heart. He loves to explore the wilderness and document the special moments in natural history through his photographs. He strives to document the denizens of the wild world in their full glory and document their ecology and behaviour.



# The cost of clean Streets

Societal apathy and stigma along with neglect from the authorities have condemned sewer cleaners of Bangladesh into the same darkness into which they take a plunge on a daily basis.

by Md Saiful AMIN

A cleaner emerges out of a waterlogged drainage system in the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh. Underpaid, overworked and under equipped this is the workforce which keeps the country's streets free of filth and sludge.



The waterways of undivided Bengal, comprising of present day Indian state -West Bengal and Bangladesh on either side of the International Border, in the 16th century was frequented by marauding pirate fleets belonging to the infamous Portuguese and Magh pirates – belonging to the Mrauk-U in the present day Rakhine Coast of Myanmar. The carnage unleashed by these marauding hordes fuelled by a hugely flourishing slave trade market across the globe prompted the Mughal rulers to take a stock of the situation and it soon became evident to them the savagery unleashed by the pirates, particularly the Magh pirates was to be dealt with in a swift and decisive manner. In 1665, under the leadership of Shaista Khan who was appointed as the governor of Bengal by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, courtesy the two pronged attack led by the army and the navy after securing some much needed assistance from the Portuguese through a series of diplomatic negotiations, Shaista Khan's forces were able to oust the Magh pirates and dealt them a crippling blow from which they could never recover, thus freeing the waterways of Bengal along major towns such as Chittagong from the scourge of pirates. The resulting defeat of the Magh pirates at the hands of Shaista Khan's forces left in its wake another mammoth problem albeit of a different nature. The severity of the clashes between the two forces was evident from the heaps of dead bodies and severed limbs lying

scattered all over the provinces and in the water. The stench from the rotting corpses and the ever growing threat of an ensuing epidemic from the decaying corpses soon made the removal and disposition of the corpses the most pressing issue. However there were very few people who were willing to get their hands dirty and take part in such a morbid affair. For the very first time, the absence of a dedicated work force involved in cleaning up the wastes of the city was felt by everyone and with a view of disposing off the decaying corpses the first generation of sweepers or cleaners were formed in Bengal. In 1905, under the administration of Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, the first partition of Bengal took place, splitting the Bengal Presidency into the Muslim majority Eastern half and the Hindu majority Western half. Although annulled in 1911 which led to the unification of Bengal, the partition of 1905 saw huge influx of cheap labour force dedicated at cleaning the cities and towns from parts of India such as Madras, Kanpur and Nagpur. Most of these people belonged to the marginalised section of the society and were often deprived of fair opportunities or treatment by the upper castes in a rigid caste dynamics which still remains prevalent in many parts of the Indian society. These people were often referred to as “Dalit” or “Harijan” (a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi which translates into “son of God”) and were traditionally relegated to the outskirts of the society

*These people were often referred to as “Dalit” or “Harijan” (a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi which loosely translates into “son of God”) and were traditionally relegated to the outskirts of the society and treated as untouchables.*

and treated as untouchables. Denied of other opportunities, they were forced to live under conditions typically not suited for any human being and were compelled to take up jobs which were either too dangerous, undesirable or filthy for the rest of the society. It is believed these people were lured into coming to Bangladesh and take up the job of cleaners through a series of persuasive means in the form of bribery and generous offerings of alcohol. Rehabilitation centres and establishments were built at Tikatoli, Aga Sadek and Azimpur of Dhaka. Even today the descendants of the early settlers from parts of Tamil Nadu, Kanpur and Nagpur are scattered across the city of Dhaka in these neighbourhoods and unsurprisingly are engaged in the same profession as their predecessors.

This rather undesirable profession of cleaning up the waste produced by the cities and towns, traditionally reserved for the lower castes, went through a sea change after the World War in the 1940s and the great famine of 1974 which swept across vast swathes of the country claiming millions of lives. Both these events exacted huge tolls from the society and at the end of them the survivors were left scraping for the bare minimum in order to merely

survive. The severe economic crisis which resulted out of both these historical events and the ensuing turmoil possibly forced countless people to engage in this profession in order to eke out a living. Thus alongside the migrant cleaners from parts of India, the local Bengali population started getting involved in this profession and as the years rolled by the lack of better opportunities and an ever increasing population gradually saw increased participation from the local population in this profession. During the years under the Pakistani regime when Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan and the years after the country achieved its independence in 1971 the economy of Bangladesh was in a fledgling state. There was little employment options available to the mass and a huge chunk of the country's unskilled workforce was struggling for employment. The local population was left with no other choices but take up whichever work came their way and many ended up in this particular profession.





A worker equipped with the bare minimum in the form of a bucket and a rope tied to his waist enters a Dhaka manhole to scoop out the filth and the sludge.





**The lack of protective gears which have been made available to a handful of workers such as this particular individual, forces the workers to enter the sewers bare bodied, which often exposes them to the risk of a multitude of skin diseases, mosquito and other insect borne diseases and the harmful effects of coming in direct contact with the acidic sludge.**

In the recent past, over the past couple of decades to be precise, Bangladesh's progress both economically and socially has been nothing but meteoric. Quite understandably, being the capital of the country, the city of Dhaka has been at the

forefront of it. In a remarkable turn of events, the country which was born barely half a century ago amid war and famine presently boasts of a GDP per capita significantly higher than two of its more prominent cousins – India and Pakistan.

The garment industry of Dhaka has gained global prominence and Bangladesh is well poised to become the newest I.T hub in South Asia. Bangladesh which registered a GDP growth rate which surpassed that of its aspirational and more resourceful

neighbour India, such developments in the eyes of the analysts and economists across the globe come as little surprise. They accredit such progress of the nation to meticulous planning, formulation of policies which have attracted investors from all over the world and creating a system which churns out skilled workforce in huge numbers. Quite understandably, being the capital of the country, the city of Dhaka has been at the forefront of everything glittery and glitzy associated with the significant rise of Bangladesh in the recent years and the city in keeping tune with the changing times has taken giant strides towards becoming a modern day metropolis. Yet, as is the case with most developing nations, the stark contrast between the lofty ambitions which dominate the skyline of the city and the abject poverty which rules its underbelly is all too obvious in the city of Dhaka itself. This contrast rears its ugly head in no uncertain terms when workers often not even equipped with the bare minimum emerges out of the city's sewage holes drenched in the filth which the city has discarded.

In the city of Dhaka, mainly the local Bengali population is engaged in the dangerous task of cleaning the blocked manholes and the sewage facilities of the city. Most of them are not employed on a permanent basis and earn a meagre sum of 400 to 700 taka on a daily basis, equivalent to 5-10 US dollars a day. Majority of them belong to the rural and



impoverished outskirts of Bangladesh and find themselves homeless in the confines of Dhaka, the makeshift shanties come closest to what they call their homes in the city. In resemblance to their humble establishments and the meagre income, the equipment and the infrastructure provided to these workers often fail to meet the bare minimum criteria of safety standards. For the citizens of Dhaka, these hardworking men armed only with a rope and a crowbar plunging half naked into the filthy dungeons of the city to scoop put the sewage with their bare hands using buckets is a far too common sight, which everyone including the workers have grown accustomed to. One of the most densely populated cities in the world the sewage problems of Dhaka multiplies manifolds during the prolonged Bangladeshi monsoon. As the torrential downpour inundates the city this workforce is called into action on a daily basis, often multiple times a day. They wade through the waterlogged streets of Dhaka poking into the manholes trying to gauge the level of flooding and armed only with a bucket plunge into the depths of these manholes to scoop out the liquid filth and sewage blocking the free flow of water. Often dubbed as one of the world's worst and the most dangerous jobs, such monikers however do little to deter these hardworking people from plunging into the depths of the city, all out of a compulsion to make ends meet. Ironically, the concerned authorities too have adopted

an indifferent approach towards the perils of this job. For many decades now the basic safety and security of the workers have been a burning issue among this workforce. After years of appealing gas masks were introduced by the authorities, but were made available in short supply. As a result of which most workers go about their daily business without the protection of a safety mask, thus exposing themselves to the toxic gases which constantly brew in the filthy underbelly of the city. The lack of protective gears force the workers to enter the sewers bare bodied, which often exposes them to the risk of a multitude of skin diseases, mosquito and other insect borne diseases and the harmful effects of coming in direct contact with the acidic sludge. The lives of these workers are often plagued by long term medical issues such as nausea, skin diseases, respiratory illness and a host of other issues. However, very little has been done over the years to address these problems and provide a safer working environment for these people. The hazardous working conditions which culminated in the death of seven such workers in 2008 during a similar cleaning operation still persist. In addition to the threat to their lives and well being, the indifference and apathy from the authorities, the workers are faced with the harsh reality which the human society around them drives home. These hardworking individuals are often ostracized from the society and are treated

as untouchables, the city and its people depend entirely upon these people to clean up their mess, yet never acknowledge the immense contribution these people make in order to keep the wheels of the so called civilised society rolling. In the outskirts of Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh, there is still a sizeable force of Dalit workers engaged in various cleaning activities. They are the descendants of the Dalit workers who migrated from parts of India during various periods of the 20th century. A rough estimate puts this workforce at anywhere

between 4 – 6 million. The Dalits in parts of India as well as in Bangladesh have traditionally been subjected to extreme forms of discrimination, torture and ostracization by the elites or the upper class of the society. The Dalits in India were never considered a part of the four tier Hindu caste system and were deemed as untouchables. They were forbidden to enter the towns or the cities, pray in the temples, come within the vicinity of anyone belonging to the upper class and were often relegated to the fringes, their children were denied admission in schools and traditionally these people have been denied their fair share of opportunities at

*The lives of these workers are often plagued by long term medical issues such as nausea, skin diseases, respiratory illness and a host of other issues. However, very little has been done over the years to address these problems and provide a safer working environment for these people.*

in spite of a few sporadic unrests and protests, the society made peace with such developments, in fact in most cases felt at ease at the thought of not having anything to do with the community who cleans their filth. Decades of activism by various organisations, an increased awareness among people and steps towards creating a more liberal society freed from the clutches of bigotry have brought certain changes in the lives of these individuals over the past few decades. While some of the rigid societal norms have gone extinct, it must be said, there has been little development in terms of providing the communities with a healthier way of life.

various white collar jobs. During the initial years the situation for these people remained the same even in Bangladesh. They were looked down upon and their settlements would usually centre on the most downtrodden parts of the city where living conditions were far from ideal. Apart from being incredibly filthy, their housing facilities were often deprived of the basic facilities such as gas and electricity connection and access to drinking water. This organised social exclusion based on their profession gradually became a norm in their lives and the society by and large,



In the city of Dhaka there are about 18 Dalit neighbourhoods which are locally known as colonies. Although the same term is used for housing facilities for government employees and officials, the Dalit colonies stand in stark contrast with no access to water, sanitation and other basic utilities and are among the least desirable places to live in.







*The housing colony in the outskirts of Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh, which house a sizeable Dalit population still remain in shambles. The age old problems in the form of waterlogging, lack of toilet facilities, crippling buildings and poor gas and electric connection still persist, yet little has been done to address them.*

younger generation. Ground reality however, suggests the solution is not that straight forward. Educated and qualified young members of the Dalit community have repeatedly alluded to the discrimination they are subjected to at workplaces and even on most occasions how recruiters blatantly refuse to hire them since they do not want somebody from the lower caste to become a part of their organisations. Faced with such rejections and discriminatory treatments, the young generation is often left with no other alternatives but follow in on the footsteps of their elders and take up the same job which confines them to the dark filthy sewers and the stench filled garbage dumps of the cities and towns. After years of neglect and indifference the government has finally taken note of the issues primarily related to housing which the community has been facing in the outskirts of Dhaka.

**Plagued with a number of problems the housing colonies which house the sanitation workers and their families are often devoid of enough space for a regular family and force the members to cramp into small and dingy rooms.**

The housing colony in the outskirts of Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh, which house a sizeable Dalit population still remain in shambles. The age old problems in the form of waterlogging, lack of toilet facilities, crippling buildings and

poor gas and electric connection still persist. The dingy households are often cramped with family members jostling for that extra inch of space. In other words life in the Dalit colonies of Bangladesh paints a rather sordid picture. In the face

of such issues one would assume education would prove to be that panacea for all these issues plaguing the Dalit community and the baton for the elevation of the community out of poverty and societal exclusion lies in the hand of the educated





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The authorities are finally planning to build a new colony for the workers and rehabilitate them. Although it must be mentioned such government welfare measures benefit only a small percentage of the workforce which is employed under the Waste Management Department. A vast majority of this workforce is employed on a contractual basis under the supervision of a third party to whom such responsibilities are outsourced by the government. It goes without saying, the government's welfare schemes and other benefits do not reach these workers.

In the city of Dhaka there are about 18 Dalit neighbourhoods which are locally known as colonies. Although the same term is used for housing facilities for government employees and officials, the Dalit colonies stand in stark contrast with no access to water, sanitation and other basic utilities. Repeated surveys have revealed that the Dalit colonies were



**The living conditions in the housing colonies are far from ideal and unfortunately young children are condemned to this unhealthy environment by a cruel twist of fate.**

among the least desirable places in the city to live in. The largest among these colonies is the Ganaktuli Colony which is temporary home to about 14,000 people belonging to about 2000 families. Almost all of them are landless and face at an uncertain future with the ever present threat of eviction looming large. Since these

colonies are built upon land owned by the government or the railway board these people can be evicted at any time if the authorities feel the need for land for any upcoming projects. Those not living in such colonies find themselves cooped up in crippling abandoned government buildings.

These hard working individuals who provide one of the most essential services and keep the wheels of the society rolling find themselves caught in this vicious loop of oppression and discrimination in which indignity seems to be the constant fixture. With the younger educated generation also subjected to similar discrimination despite





In the face of such issues one would assume education would prove to be that panacea for all these issues plaguing the Dalit community and the baton for the elevation of the community out of poverty and societal exclusion lies in the hand of the educated younger generation. Ground reality however, suggests the solution is not that straight forward. Educated and qualified young members of the Dalit community have repeatedly alluded to the discrimination they are subjected to at workplaces and even on most occasions how recruiters blatantly refuse to hire them since they do not want somebody from the lower caste to become a part of their organisations. Faced with such rejections and discriminatory treatments, the young generation is often left with no other alternatives but follow in on the footsteps of their elders and take up the same job which confines them to the dark filthy sewers and the stench filled garbage dumps of the cities.

their obvious qualifications, there seems to be no end to this cycle. Although some organisations and activists are working tirelessly to bring an end to such discrimination, there is little to suggest that a change is on the way. To further complicate matters the traditional Dalit jobs comprising of various cleaning

assignments are slowly being taken away by others. In the wake of such developments the Dalit community in Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh is faced with an uncertain future with no respite in sight. In spite of the job profile at the heart of such fate lies the issue of discrimination, the concept of

untouchability propagated through generations by a caste based system which was formulated by elite few, to cater to the needs and greed of few. It is a collective failure on part of the society which allows its fellow citizens and other human beings to be treated with such disdain and robs them off of their basic rights and dignity.



Even in the midst of such uninspiring developments the brighter aspects of life peep into these colonies and the celebration of Durga Puja is one such occasion. The residents can be seeing enacting a chapter from the mythology during the festivities.







For the citizens of Dhaka, these hardworking men armed only with a rope and a crowbar plunging half naked into the filthy dungeons of the city to scoop put the sewage with their bare hands using buckets is a far too common sight, which everyone including the workers have grown accustomed to. One of the most densely populated cities in the world the sewage problems of Dhaka multiplies manifolds during the prolonged Bangladeshi monsoon. As the torrential downpour inundates the city this workforce is called into action on a daily basis, often multiple times a day. They wade through the waterlogged streets of Dhaka poking into the manholes trying to gauge the level of flooding and armed only with a bucket plunge into the depths of these manholes to scoop out the liquid filth and sewage blocking the free flow of water.



## Md Saiful AMIN

Md Saiful Amin is a Dhaka based freelance photographer. His body of work primarily comprises of street and documentary photography. He has been working tirelessly for the development of photography which he calls his only passion. He is fond of photography books and publications and loves collecting them. He closely follows and admires the works of Anwar Hossain from Bangladesh and Raghubir Singh and Raghu Rai from India.



Pradiptamoy PAUL's photo essay highlights the alarming elements of air pollution which are steadily pushing our societies towards an impending health emergency.

# A Future up in Smoke...









**W**inters in India previously used to be associated with a lot of things, mostly pleasant.

Winters in India also mark the arrival of some of the most prominent festivities in the country, notably the carnival in Goa, the celebrations of Lohri in Punjab, the festivities surrounding Magh Bihu in Assam and the festival of Thai Pongal in Tamil Nadu. Lately though, winters in India, particularly in the northern part of India surrounding the capital city of Delhi, have earned a rather undesirable reputation. Winter in these parts of the country as well as in most of the big cities across the land has become synonymous with the toxic smog which engulfs the horizon and casts an evil shadow on the towns and cities over which it looms large. It has been identified that stubble burning at the onset of winter to rid the cultivable land of the remnants of the previous harvest and in order to prepare it for the next sowing of crop is the major contributor towards the toxic smog which winter brings with it. The plumes of smoke arising from acres of cultivable lands in Punjab and Haryana mix with the cold dense winter air and travel hundreds of kilometres and appear as an ominous sign over the Delhi sky. Over the past few years this has been the national capital's single biggest concern during the winter season. In an unprecedented move the Delhi Government addressing the rising concerns over the well-being of the vulnerable section of the society particularly young

children had to shut down all schools for a few weeks during winter. Like the children, the elderly as well as people with a history of pulmonary diseases happen to be the most affected due to the toxic smog which seeps in to every citizen's lungs. Environmentalists have raised multiple concerns and sounded off the alarm call on multiple occasions and warned the concerned authorities over the grave consequences of such pollution. Yet there seems to be no reprieve for the environment and the citizens suffering from the toxic smog each year during the winter months. Caught in the loop of the respective state governments of Haryana, Punjab and Delhi blaming one another and no clear blueprint laying down the alternative for stubble burning being made available to the farmers, this age old practice which contributes heavily to environmental pollution is showing no signs of slowing down. While the practice of stubble burning is not restricted to the northern states of the country and is practiced freely elsewhere in the country, the vast agricultural fields of Punjab and Haryana are significant contributors to this form of air pollution. Efforts have been made by the governments, ranging from banning the practice, promises of reward for those taking up alternate means to putting the perpetrators in jail. Yet the ground reality has stayed much the same. Many farmers are forced to resort to stubble burning in order to prepare their land for the next harvest due to the lack







of suitable alternatives, while others have gone back to their old ways once they realized they were being denied of the reward money in spite of abstaining from the practice for a whole season. Stubble

burning, particularly during the winter months when the heavy winter air isn't breezy enough to dissipate the thick plumes arising out of thousands of acres of land, has created a massive public health crisis

- its fumes polluting swathes of northern India and endangering the health of hundreds of millions of people. While stubble burning garners much of the attention during the winter months,

there are other human induced activities which contribute significantly towards air pollution throughout the year. The unorganised sector in India employs tens of millions of people and often they live and work in conditions which are far from ideal. Overworked, underpaid and often left at the mercy of their employers, these workers lead a life rife with abuse. One such industry is the numerous brick kilns which are scattered all over the country in the outskirts of the cities and towns. The pollution norms which these kilns adhere to are as farcical as the sincerity with which the owners uphold the basic human rights of the workers. Still largely reliant on outdated methods of production these factories emit serious volumes of toxic gas and smoke into the atmosphere. The concerned authorities and enforcers often choose to turn a blind eye to these unchecked and unregulated emissions and have been found wanting in the matter of providing greener and more environment friendly modes of production. A combination of apathy on part of the regulators, a lack of awareness and willingness to migrate towards greener means of production and the desirable technology not being made available to all at affordable rates together play a significant role in such means of pollution going on unchecked. This photo series brings to the fore some such scenes of pollution which contribute in a huge manner towards the deteriorating health of our planet.

















## Pradiptamoy PAUL

Pradiptamoy Paul recalls being fascinated by the art of photography ever since he was a child. During his childhood he would often draw pictures from the various photographs around him. It is only until recently he has started taking photographs and he loves to photograph people, various moments on the streets and documenting stories. He is particularly drawn to the genre of black and white photography. He carefully observes the works of acclaimed photographers and tries to learn from their ways. He realises in order to master the nuances of photography one has to be patient and be a keen observer of the surroundings. He feels he is still in the process of learning and is constantly trying to improve his skills with the vision of becoming a great visual storyteller in the future.





A photograph of two men in tiger costumes. They are wearing a thick, white, shaggy fur mane around their heads. The man on the right is wearing a white and orange striped headband and has his mouth wide open in a roar. His face is painted with orange, black, and white tiger stripes, with green and yellow accents around his eyes. The man on the left is wearing a black headband and has his mouth open, showing white fangs. His face is painted with black, white, and blue tiger stripes. The background is dark and out of focus.

# *Colours of Muharram*

by Vikrant MAHOBE

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a photo album highlighting the unique performances during the celebration of Muharram in a small town in India.







**T**he religious festival of Muharram is of utmost importance to Muslims all over the world.

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and is of tremendous religious significance to pious Muslims. The history of Muharram and the significance of it is closely intertwined with the historic battle of Karbala. Hussain Ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad laid down his life in the Battle of Karbala which took place in the year 680. Hussein's death could be seen as a watershed moment in the history of Islam. The day of his martyrdom is known as Ashura – the tenth day of Muharram and a day which is a day of mourning for Muslims across the globe. Hussain's martyrdom flagged off a number of Shia movements in the 7th century and inspired his followers to stand in unison against injustice and oppression which was meted out to the Muslims for centuries. To mark this historic occasion and celebrate the martyrdom of their Imam, millions of Muslims embark upon this arduous journey on foot to the holy city of Karbala. Walking in long columns some of them cover the imposing distance of nearly 72 km from Najaf to Karbala.

This day, which is remembered as the occasion of ultimate sacrifice made by Hussain Ibn Ali is celebrated across India by millions of Muslims. Since the occasion marks the beginning of a new Islamic year there is understandably a palpable sense of joy and hope in the heart and mind of

everyone. To honour the ultimate sacrifice made by Hussain people mourn by putting on black clothes, observing abstinence, fasting and then they break their fast on the day of Ashura, the 10th day. Believers hold sad processions, and chant “Ya Hussain”, “Ya Ali” while wailing loudly a symbolic gesture of their grief over the death of Hussain. Thousands of Shia Muslims across the world and in parts of India take part in these processions and often indulge in the practice of self-flagellation using sharp knives, blades or other sharp objects attached to chains. Sunni Muslims pay their tribute to the heroic deeds of Hussain by taking part in prayers, religious commemorations and by observing a fast from sunrise till sunset. This photo album however highlights an entirely different aspect of Muharram celebrations. In a quiet corner of Chhattisgarh a bunch of performers dressed up in tiger and lion costumes complimented by elaborate face and body paintings and took to the streets on the occasion of the festivities of Muharram. The performers with their moves and gestures trying to imitate the fierce predators of the forests certainly added another dimension to the rituals and festivities surrounding Muharram.



















हजरत बाबा सैयद अटलशाह रहमतुल्ला अलह





## Vikrant MAHOBE

Vikrant Mahobe is a professional photographer from Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh. He is always on the look out to capture the various moments involving people all around him. He is passionate about exploring different cultures and places and documenting them through his photographs. In the course of such documentation he always tries to infuse some kind of aesthetic value to his photographs through the myriad colours and emotions which he encounters during the course of his explorations.

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*Photograph by Saurabh Sirohiya*

**Editor's note:** This photograph deserves a special mention for bringing to the fore a slice of rural Bengal in the build up to the Durga Puja. The expanse of Kash flower, the retreating monsoon clouds together signal Bengal's biggest festival is right around the corner.





*Photograph by Harsh Shah*

**Editor's note:** A stunning frame and a masterful piece of composition which successfully documents the habitat of the green vine snake. The misty backdrop further enhances the brilliant colouration of the snake and the passing biker adds that extra dash of drama to this composition.



*Photograph by Soumayan Biswas*

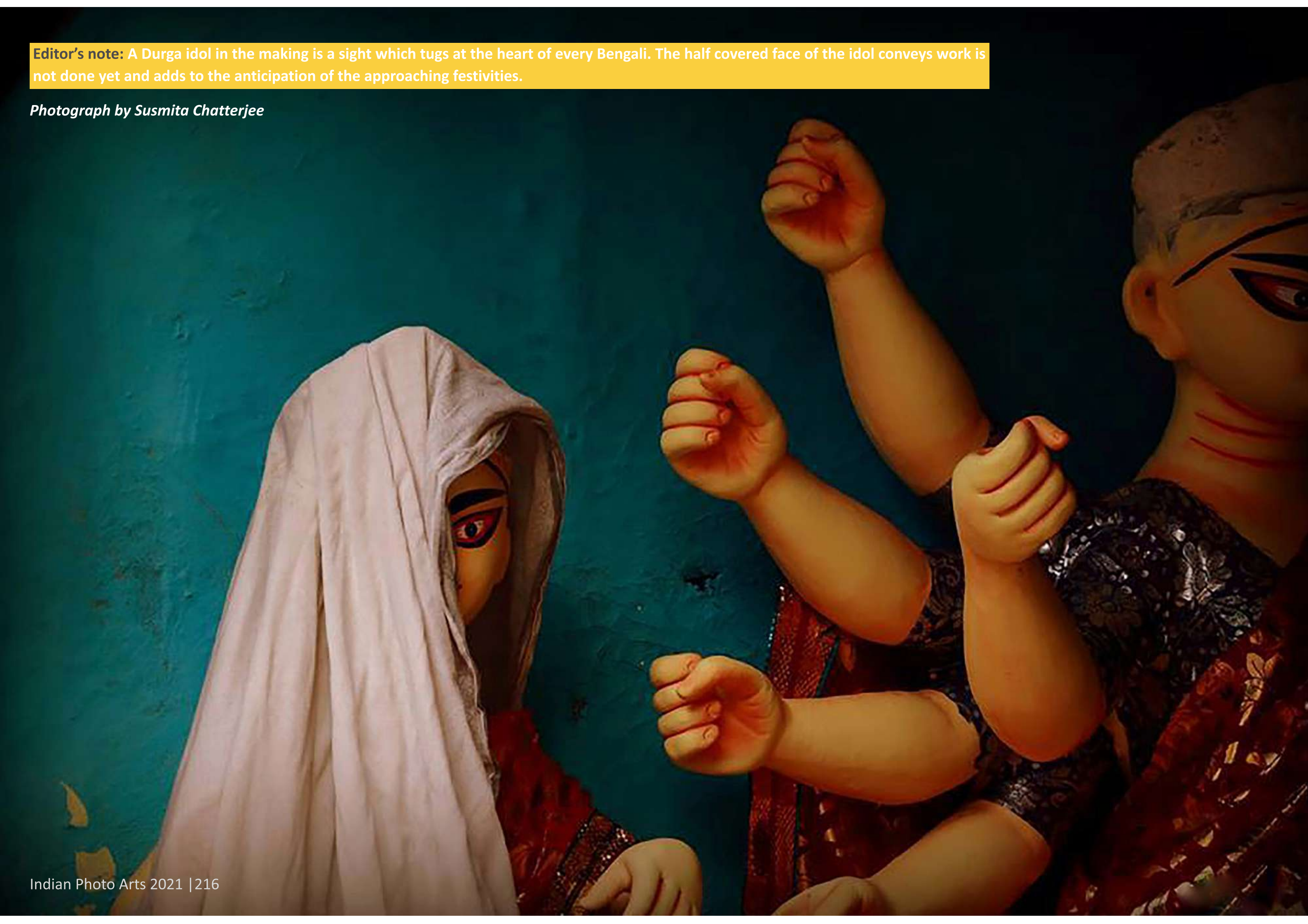
**Editor's note:** This beautifully composed wide angle frame captures the drama played out by the riving clouds in the sky above while capturing the expression on the woman's face. A wonderful documentation providing a glimpse into a tea estate.





**Editor's note:** A Durga idol in the making is a sight which tugs at the heart of every Bengali. The half covered face of the idol conveys work is not done yet and adds to the anticipation of the approaching festivities.

*Photograph by Susmita Chatterjee*







*Photograph by Goutam Maiti*

**Editor's note:** All the elements of the iconic Kolkata Maidan ranging from the iconic building - 42 in the background, the early morning fitness enthusiasts to the winter mist that engulfs the surroundings have been accounted for in this beautiful composition.