

February 2017

INDIAN PHOTO ARTS

Solapur, The Blackbuck Eden by Narendra Arvind Pandit

Sandip De's Ode to the Majestic Matterhorn



HOLI OF HOPE: ARKA DUTTA DOCUMENTS
THE COLOURS OF CHANGE IN VRINDAVAN

ANUSHEEL VERMA UNCOVERS THE ROMANCE CARVED
IN STONES AND PILLARS ACROSS THE WORLD



When Stones, Cement and Steel Tell Tales of Romance by Anusheel Verma 35

Content



The Magical, Mythical Matterhorn by Sandip De 03



Editorial: Motwa, A Safe Haven for Birds 71



Holi of Hope by Arka Dutta 55

Editor in Chief:
Prasun Mazumdar

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Solapur, the Blackbuck Eden
by Narendra Arvind Pandit 17



The Magical, Mythical Matterhorn by Sandip De

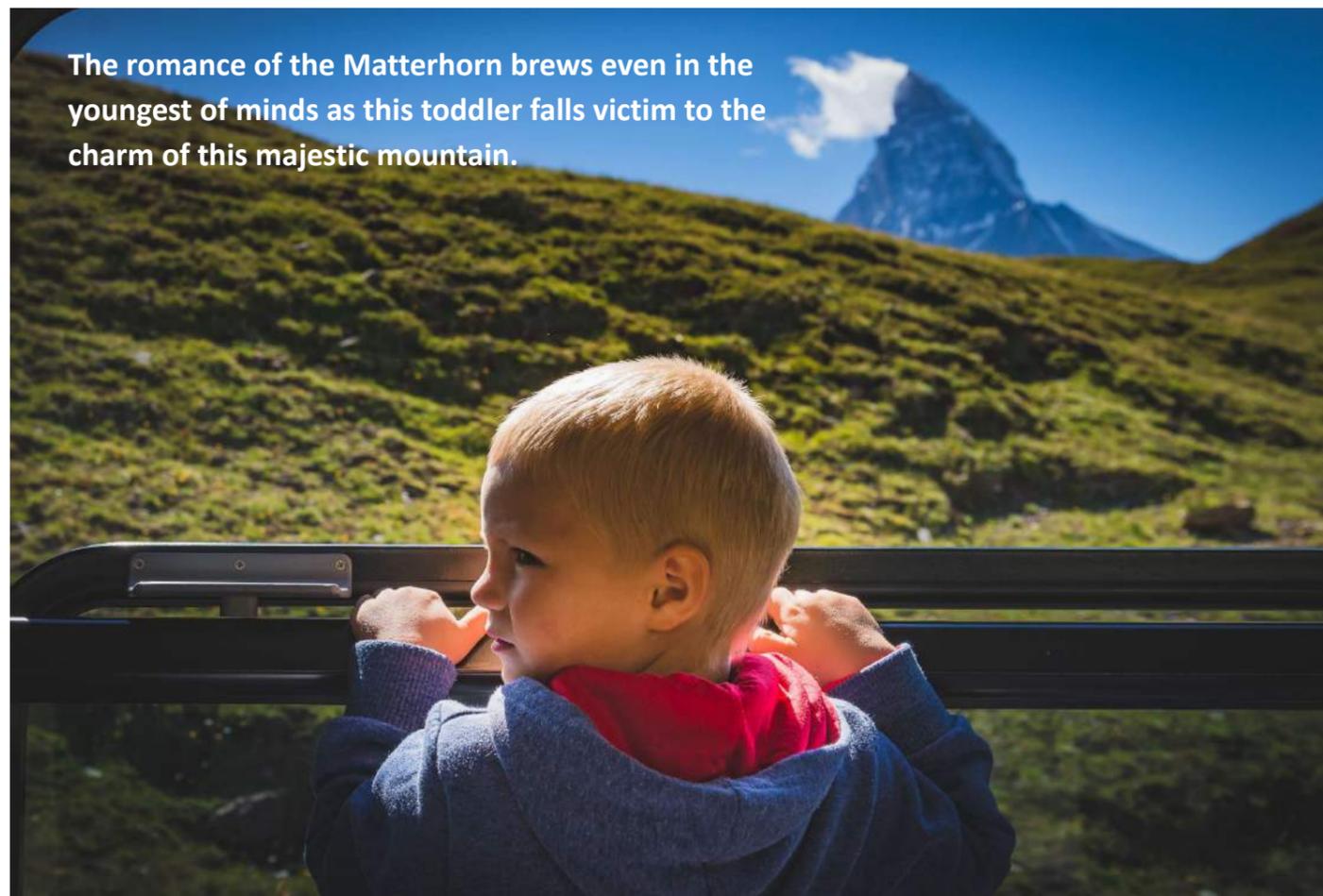
The Matterhorn, often described as “the mountain of mountains”, which dots the mantle of the Swiss Alps as in imperial insignia, is a mystical majestic mountain, standing tall at 4478 meters thereby earning the distinction of being one of the highest mountain peaks of the Swiss Alps and of the Alps in general. Staying true to the conventional portrayal of a mountain peak the Matterhorn summit resembles the pointed tip of a warrior’s spear along the border between Switzerland and Italy. The characteristic pyramidal shape was acquired as a result of natural erosion over the past million years. The sight of the Matterhorn standing in all its glory alone in the horizon reaching out for the heavens above is undoubtedly one of the most breath-taking views of the natural world on this planet. The rugged rocky surface of the peak clad in the brilliant white of the snow softly gleaming in the golden yellow of the early morning sun appears surreal to the extent of being mistaken for some master artisan’s crown jewel. Quiet interestingly something which is so grand, so majestic in its appearance, something which has drawn travellers from all over the world to its doorstep, something which has been admired by millions across the globe was one of the last summits of the Alps to be scaled. In the July of 1865 a seven member team led by British climber Edward Whymper embarked upon the journey to scale the summit of the Matterhorn. Their efforts yielded success on the 14th of July, a date which will be forever etched on the rocky terrain of the Matterhorn. The team’s success however came at a massive price as only three members of the team survived



the descent and were able to make it back to the base camp. Among the survivors was Edward Whymper who will always be remembered as the first person to step foot on the summit of the Matterhorn. The geology of the mountain is as fascination as the aesthetics. One of the most fascinating aspects of its geology is the fact that its upper portion is actually a part of Africa thrust bodily upward during the shifts in the tectonic plates of the ancient world. The formation of the Matterhorn and the whole Alpine range commenced with the break-up of the Pangaea continent some 200 million years ago leading to the formation of Laurasia (containing Europe) and Gondwana (containing Africa). However to be more precise the Matterhorn is a perfect example of a mountain formed due to glacial erosion. The Matterhorn is possibly the most prominent example of a glacial horn in Europe, and one of the most important examples of this type of landform in the world. Glaciers can be best described as large masses of ice that continue with

their descent along the slopes of a mountain range under the effect of earth's gravitational force. Glaciers are formed the surface of the earth by snow that has been compacted over many years and then becomes recrystallized. Glaciated land on the surface of the earth can be classified into to broad categories; one being continental glaciation, where a fairly large part of a continent is covered in glacial ice and the other one is known as alpine glaciation, where the glacier is found in mountainous regions around the globe. It was this alpine glaciation which resulted in the formation of the Matterhorn. The process of glacial erosion was primarily responsible for the characteristic pyramidal shape of the Matterhorn. During its initial years the Matterhorn peak resembled the top of a rounded hill. Being located at an altitude which is above the snowline the flanks of the Matterhorn including its peak was perpetually covered in a thick blanket of snow. In the warm climate of the summer month's part of this ice melts and seeps into the bedrock, as winter approaches this molten ice seeping into the bedrock freezes again. This continuous process of freezing and thawing of ice which has been going on for hundreds of years led to the fracturing of the bedrock, thereby leading to the formation of a cirque. For further understanding a cirque can be defined as basically a valley which has been formed at the base of a mountain.

The town of Zermatt lies at the foothill of the Matterhorn. The history of this sleepy little town is deeply intertwined with the history of its colossus neighbour standing tall at close to 5000 meters. The town of Zermatt is primarily a mountain resort popular among



The romance of the Matterhorn brews even in the youngest of minds as this toddler falls victim to the charm of this majestic mountain.



Gornegrat offers a detailed panoramic view of the surrounding along with a closer look into the stars and constellations above from the observatory located at its summit.

tourists for its skiing, rock climbing and hiking attractions. The town of Zermatt is situated at an altitude of 1620 meters at the upper end of the Matterhorn. The mainstay of Zermatt's local economy is tourism, however until the mid-19th century Zermatt was predominantly an agricultural community. The town of Zermatt then a small agricultural village was thrown into the spotlight almost overnight with the first successful ascent to the peak of the Matterhorn by Edward Whymper and his team. The tragic accident in which Edward Whymper lost four of his team members during their descent led to the authorities putting into place a number of safety and security measures which in turn led to the overall development of Zermatt. Soon Zermatt became the starting point for several hikes and trails along the slopes of the mountains. The present day's Zermatt is a picturesque town overlooked by the majestic Matterhorn towering above the town in the horizon. The streets of Zermatt are flooded with mountaineers, skiers, adventure enthusiasts from all over the world during the peak seasons. Zermatt can be credited with being the most eco-friendly mountain resort in the world. The residents of Zermatt are ever so respectful towards the mighty mountain in their backyard and as a token of their respect the entire town has been turned into a combustion-engine car-free zone in a bid to prevent air pollution which can obscure the town's view of the majestic Matterhorn. Except for some emergency service providing vehicles almost all the other vehicles are locally manufactured electric vehicles which also make the minimum of noise, thereby bringing noise

The Gornergrat rack railway holds the distinction of being the highest open air railway network in Europe and is responsible for connecting Gornergrat with the town of Zermatt.



pollution down to a minimum as well. Throughout the year Zermatt serves as the hotbed for all kinds of mountaineering activities and skiing. The town of Zermatt holds an important place in the annals of the Matterhorn's history. Edward Whymper the man credited with scaling the Matterhorn summit for the first time chose Zermatt as his base when he was hired by a London publisher to make sketches of the Matterhorn. During his stay in the town of Zermatt, Edward Whymper was seduced by the majesty of the Matterhorn. After several failed attempts in the years of 1861, 1862 and 1863, Edward Whymper finally realised his long cherished dream of setting foot on the summit of the mountain which had engrossed his imagination for such

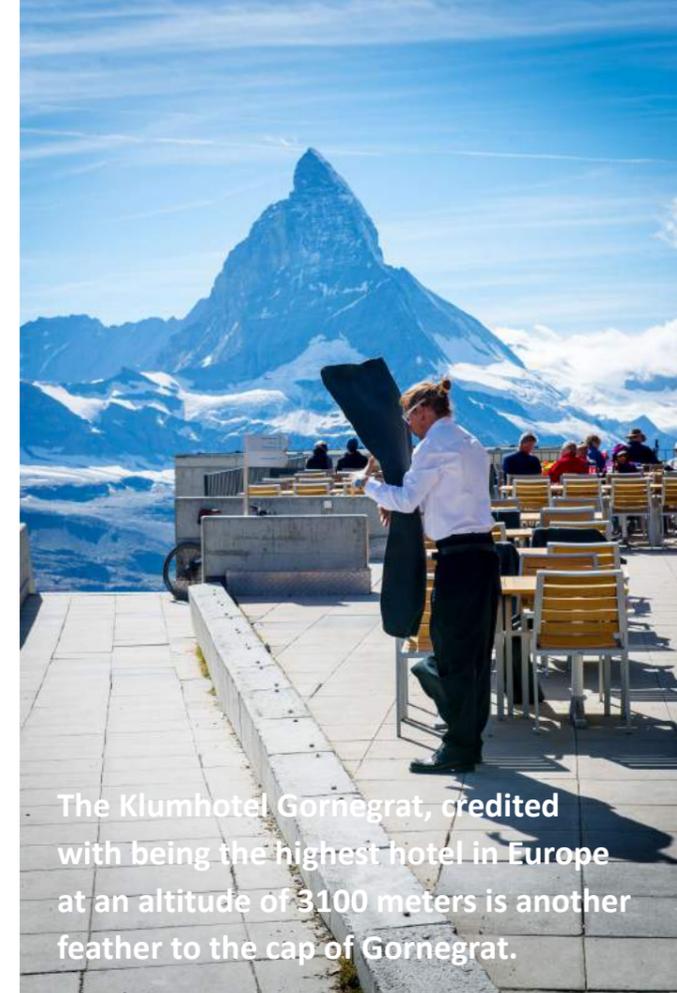
a long time. The first successful ascent by Edward Whymper was a watershed moment in the history of Zermatt and changed the face of mountaineering all over the world. Whymper published a book chronicling his first ascent, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, which got published in 1871, was a worldwide bestseller and became an inspiration for many successful mountaineers in the following years. Tourism in the region of Zermatt got a huge boost as tourists started visiting the region and hired guides in an attempt to scale the Matterhorn. The effects of this trickled on to other mountainous rural parts of Switzerland as well, which contributed in a huge way in boosting the economy of Switzerland in general. The transformation of Zermatt from a rather inconsequential agricultural village to one of the tourism hotbeds equipped with some of the most modern infrastructure and facilities in the country is a testimony to that. In fact this particular model of overall development of an area via tourism was such a success that mountain towns and resorts all over the world adopted this particular method. The stunning landscape surrounding the Matterhorn will be incomplete without the mention of the Gornergrat. The Gornergrat is a rocky ridge rising up to an altitude of 3135 meters of the Pennine Alps, overlooking the Gorner Glacier to the south-east of Zermatt. The Gornergrat rack railway (GGB), which holds the distinction of being the highest open-air railway in Europe, is responsible for connecting Gornergrat with the town of Zermatt. The GGB started its operations in the August of 1898 and was credited with being the first electric rack railway in



The first sight of the Matterhorn from the railway network leading up to Zermatt evokes a wide spectrum of emotions among its visitors.

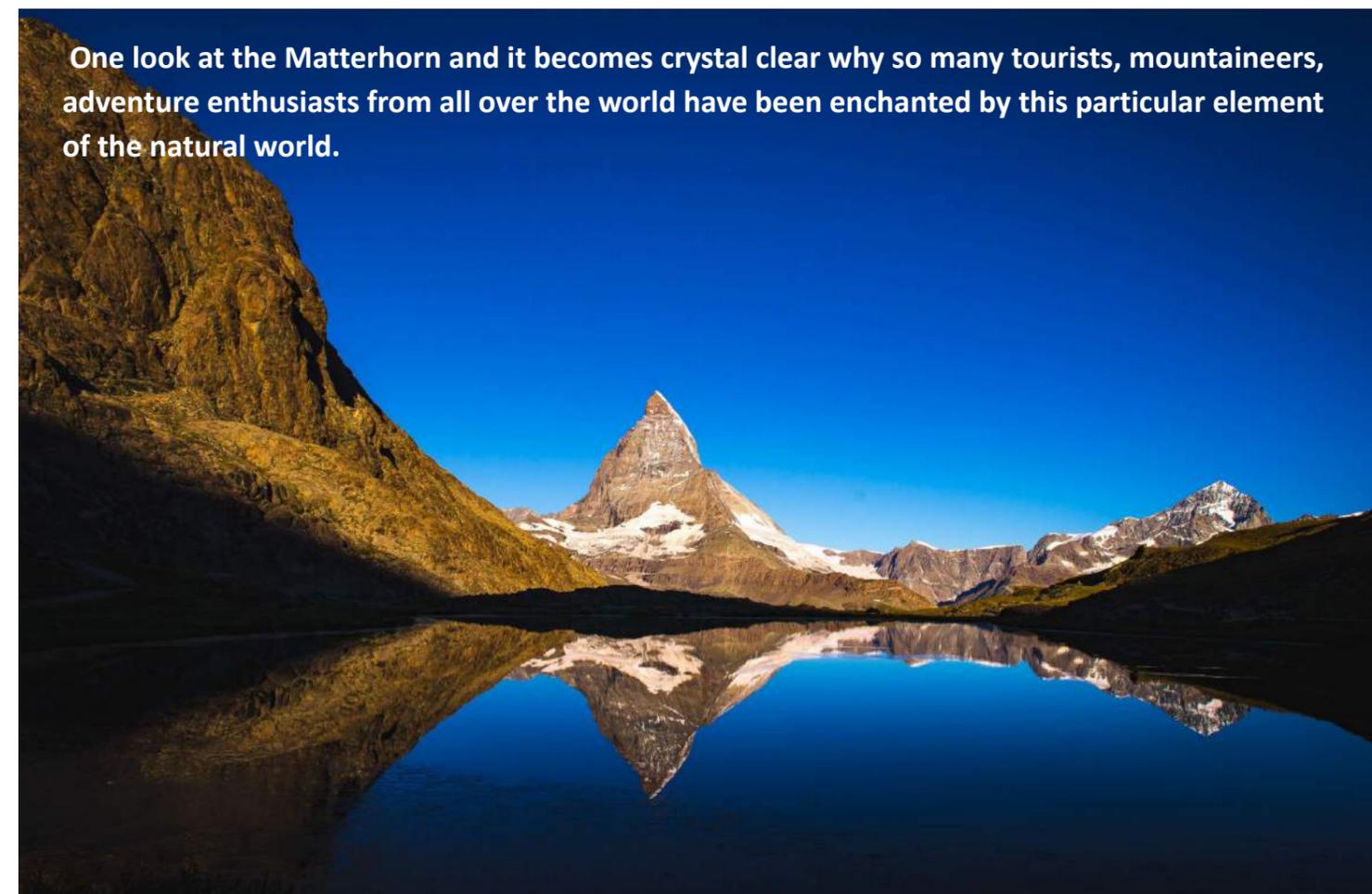
Switzerland and only the second in the world. Today the operational procedures of this railway is one of the most modern and eco-friendly in the world equipped with a regenerative braking system that generates electricity on the descent in a bid to save valuable energy. These days the GGB is involved in bringing passengers from Zermatt station to the summit of the Gornergat, roughly a 30-40 minutes ride which involves a vertical climb of 1469 meters. The train journey explores the pristine beauty of this region as it weaves its way through the beautiful valleys, tunnels, mountain lakes and rocky ravines, cutting through the heart of forests of larch and Swiss stone pine. Adding one more feather to the already illustrious cap of Gornergat is the Kulmhotel Gornergat. Located at the summit station at 3100

meters the Kulmhotel boasts of being Europe's highest hotel. Among other attractions provided by the hotel the astronomical observatory deserves a special mention. The panoramic view of the region from the summit of the Gornergat is the main attraction which draws tourists from all over. The unobstructed view of the Matterhorn in all its glory has always been the main talking point among travellers visiting the Gornergat however that is not all that Gornergat has to offer. The panoramic view from the Gornergat is a real feast for the eyes serving a delicious buffet of a total of 29 mountains which stand above 4000 meters, Gorner Glacier which happens to be the second largest glacier in the Alps and the Monte Rosa massif with Switzerland's highest peak the Dufourspitze at 4,634 meters. In all fairness there can never be any



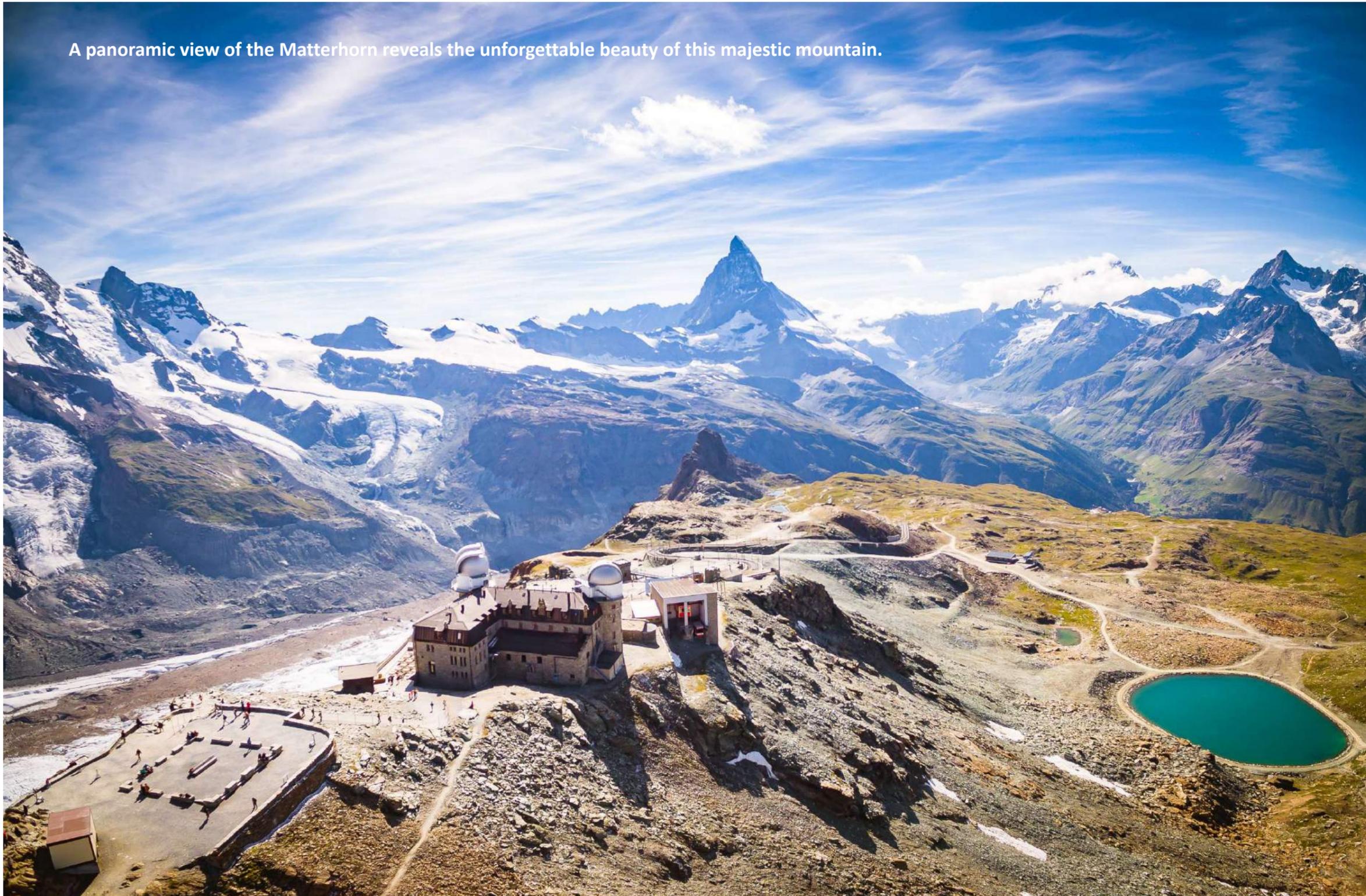
The Kulmhotel Gornergat, credited with being the highest hotel in Europe at an altitude of 3100 meters is another feather to the cap of Gornergat.

comparison between the different elements of nature. Each of them is beautiful in their own rights. The Matterhorn is just another powerful reminder to how incredibly beautiful nature in its most unadulterated form can be. The imposing structure formed over hundreds of years through processes the scales of which we can only presume at the best, today draws thousands of admirers from all over the world. Like any other element of nature the Matterhorn in its full glory evokes a mood, an atmosphere of innocence, madness, virtue, loveliness, altruism, greed and romance and possibly holds the potential to harness the best in each and every one of us. It is almost impossible to concisely define what it makes one feel, evoking a sense of gratification.

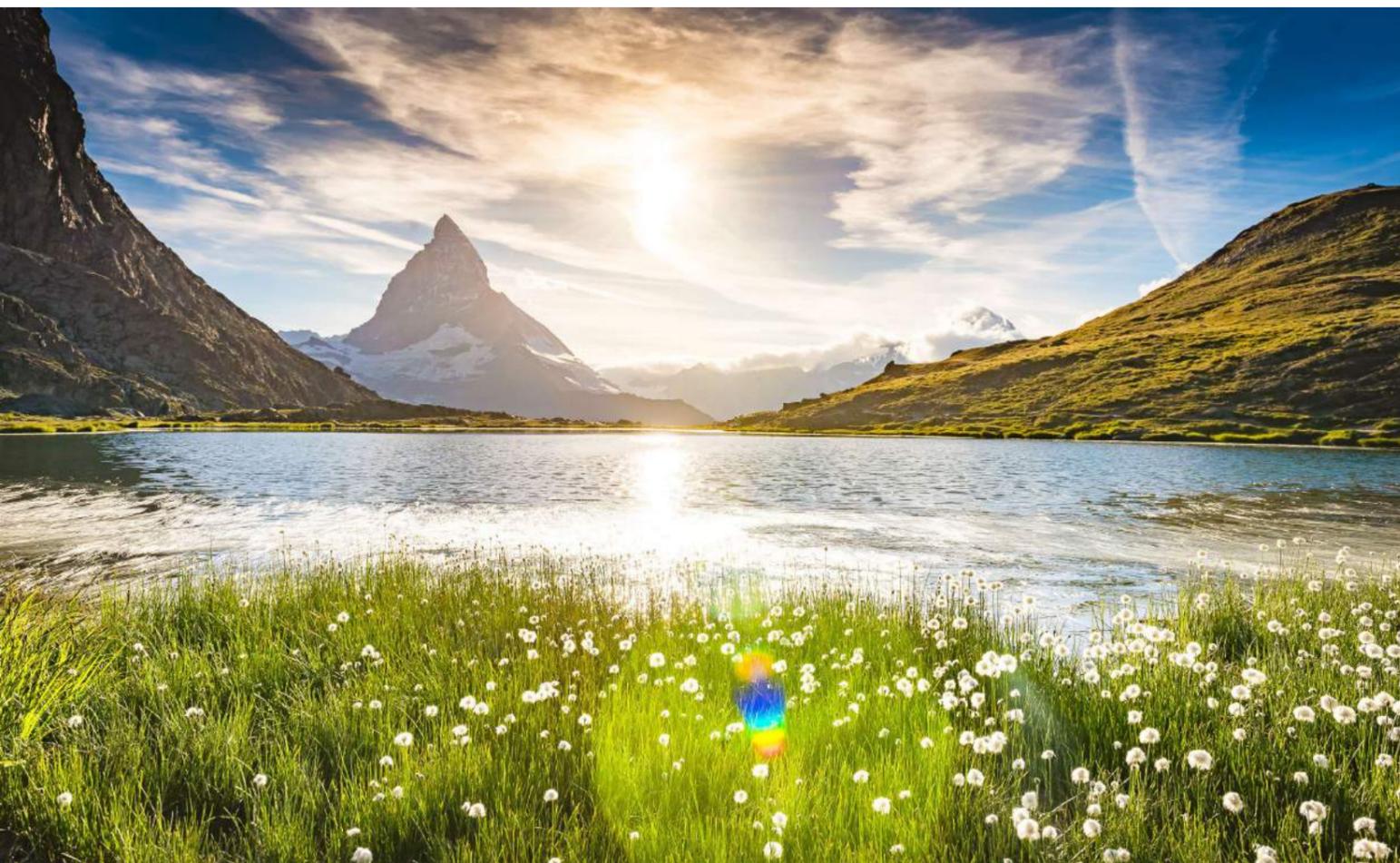


One look at the Matterhorn and it becomes crystal clear why so many tourists, mountaineers, adventure enthusiasts from all over the world have been enchanted by this particular element of the natural world.

A panoramic view of the Matterhorn reveals the unforgettable beauty of this majestic mountain.



This great mountain is a gift of nature to all of us. The onus lies with us to show our reverence to this incredibly beautiful landscape. This majestic mountain has enthralled us, lured us into its realms, evoked a sense of disbelief among us for decades and will continue to do so for centuries to come. It is nearly impossible to not feel overwhelmed in the presence of this magnificent structure carved out by the forces of nature over thousands of years, resembling the dedication and skills of a famed artisan. The iconic sight Matterhorn with its spear like summit reaching for the heavens above can be truly called The Mountain of Mountains.



Surrounded by beautiful valleys, lakes with clear blue waters the Matterhorn weaves a beautiful tapestry of colours.



About the Author:

Born and brought up in Kolkata, India, Dr. Sandip De is a scientist by profession and currently based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Dr. Sandip De is well known internationally for his photography and videography works. Besides winning several photography awards

from time to time, his works have been published in international media and journals like National Geographic. In India he became widely known for his aerial video of Kolkata. Sandip's photographic interests are myriad. From interesting faces to obscure architecture, or a detailed macro to aerial photography, he captures what captures his imagination. You can find more of his work on his website and social media pages.

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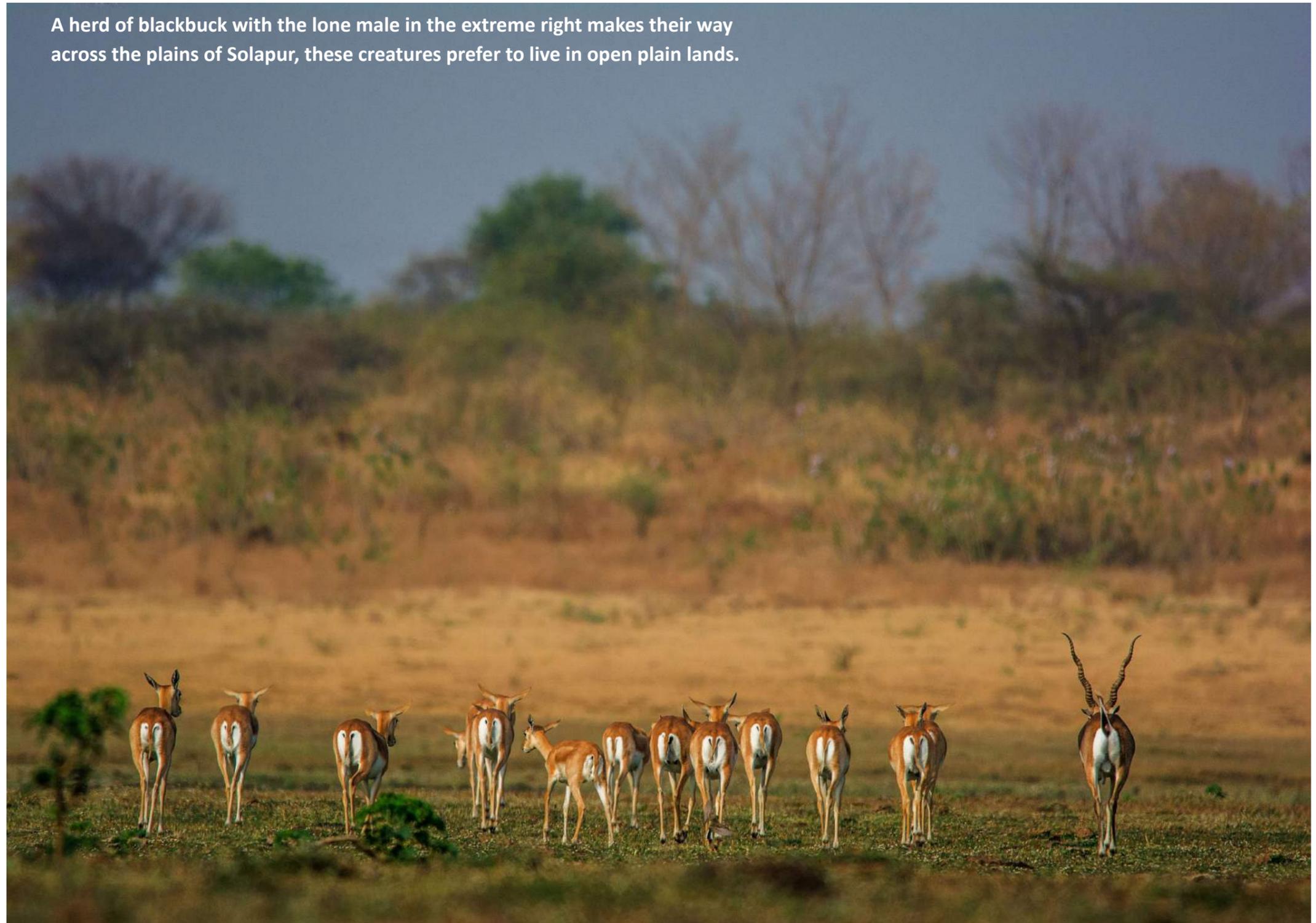
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Solapur, the Blackbuck Eden
by Narendra Arvind Pandit

The semi-arid plains of Solapur in the state of Maharashtra are one of the few places in India which can still be considered a safe haven for the native antelope blackbucks. The total population of blackbuck in Solapur district is reported to be around 3300 individuals. Solapur has one of the largest populations of blackbuck within its distribution range in Maharashtra. The blackbuck is staging a steady and encouraging comeback in many areas of Solapur particularly after the World Bank launched its Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) scheme of habitat restoration which has been successful in its aim. Apart from this initiative by the World Bank several other schemes aiming at habitat restoration, afforestation, creating a general awareness among the local human settlements, efforts to rein in illegal poaching activities have all played a significant role in providing effective and much needed protection to the blackbuck population along with several other wild species.

Formerly widespread across the length and breadth of the country their numbers have dwindled at an alarming rate over the years due to illegal hunting and massive loss of habitat, while the species has gone extinct in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh. The grassy slopes of Solapur which can be primarily identified as scrublands present these antelopes with their favoured habitat. Solapur frequently experiences severe droughts. As a consequence of which there is extreme scarcity of forage during the summer months. To counter the scarcity of food the blackbucks usually break off from their respective herds and disperse over large



A herd of blackbuck with the lone male in the extreme right makes their way across the plains of Solapur, these creatures prefer to live in open plain lands.

areas in search of food. With the onset of monsoon in the month of June-July these small groups congregate into large herds when the resources are plentiful all around. They usually prefer open woodlands or semi desert regions but can be equally at home in areas with subtropical to thorn or tropical dry deciduous forest. Being extremely fast runners the open grasslands or woodlands provide them with the opportunity to make a quick dash when faced with some form of danger or crisis, which is often not possible in a dense ecosystem. Since these animals do not prefer the cold climate the relatively warm climate of Solapur throughout the year is ideally suited for them. Presently the grasslands in Hiraj and Hipparga in Solapur boast of a significant population of blackbuck.

A full grown adult male blackbuck can be easily recognised by the corkscrew like horns and their characteristic blackish coat with a white underbelly.



Behaviourally blackbuck can be classified as a diurnal species, which means they tend to be at their active best during the daytime. However their activities slow down as the day progresses and the temperatures rise. This is a pretty common behaviour which can be noticed in many other species inhabiting scrublands or places with little or no natural overhead cover. They do so in order to not overheat themselves as the temperature rises throughout the day. When it comes to their physical appearance a blackbuck can be best described as a medium sized antelope with a slender build which is similar to the build of a gazelle. The blackbuck is one of the very few antelopes in the world which exhibits a pronounced sexual dimorphism, where the males and the females of the same species are readily distinguishable from their physical appearances. One of the most conspicuous characters of blackbuck is the striking colour change of its male during the period of development from fawn to the adult stage. An adult blackbuck male is much darker in colour, typically sporting either a dark brownish or black coloured coat. They can be easily identified by the long rimmed horn which they possess; these horns often bear a

A male juvenile blackbuck is busy grazing, as it grows older the fawn coloured coat will assume a much darker brownish or blackish tan.



Blackbucks are skittish by nature and keep a close watch on their surroundings and make a run for it at the first sign of danger.

striking resemblance to a corkscrew. Usually the size of a male blackbuck's horn ranges between 20-24 inches, V shaped, spirally twisted with pronounced ridges almost all the way to the tip. The males are heavier than the females, weighing between 34-45 kilograms whereas the females weigh somewhere between 30-39 kilograms. A male blackbuck stand at around 74-88 cm at the shoulder, the females are almost comparable in height with the males and are only a few centimetres shorter in height than the males. Females and young are yellowish-fawn on their back and head, and are generally hornless. The underparts and insides of the legs in both males and female blackbucks are white in colour.

Except for dry summer months when there is a severe shortage of food and other resources, the blackbucks prefer to live in herds. The social organization of blackbucks and their herd structures can be classified into several groups depending on the composition of the herd. The most common one being a mixed herd, where males and females of different age groups can be found together. In case of a harem herd, there is a single dominant male and the rest of the herd members are females belonging to different age groups. Apart from these two categories the bachelor herds comprising exclusively of male members and similarly all-female herds can also be noticed. It is not very uncommon to come across a lone wandering male, these males often challenge the dominant males to stake a claim on their territories and claim the mating rights. The varied composition of different herds also ensures the diverse relationship which can be observed when it comes to inter-herd relationships. The most fascinating aspects of these behaviours can be noticed during the mating season when the males try to woo the females.

Every year as the mating season approaches, the dominant males who are in their primes get busy marking their territories to ward off any intruding male. As a part of this territory marking exercise the male defecates and urinates several times at one or more previously designated dung pile inside his territory. While defecating or urinating the males sit on the ground and rub their secretions against the blades of grass in the region, so that the ground vegetation or anything lying on the ground picks up their smell. This is done with the agenda of sending out a warning signal to intruding or wandering males and a welcome sign for interested females. During the mating season the males indulge in lekking, a phenomenon which is noticed frequently among avian species however mammals or even insects are no strangers to this event. During the mating season the males adopt the strategy of lekking in which they aggregate at one place with the sole agenda of enticing the females for mating. The male also guards his territory from other intruding males. The place which witnesses such a huge gathering of males trying to win over the females is known as lek. Needless to say when the hormones are running high and there is so much of energy in the air the lek turns out to be a very dynamic place. As more and more males gather, newer territories are formed, some older ones get divided between two or three males and stronger males replace weaker ones. Things almost get out of hands once the females make their appearances. The females are extremely careful and picky when it comes to choosing their partners.

The female carefully examines each and every male in the lek, and also takes a serious note of which male is trying its hardest to win her over. However amidst all this chaos and confusion there is a definite pattern which emerges on careful observation, a method to all this madness. While so much is going on around them, nobody loses their mind; everybody goes about their business in a confident manner. Typically the males chose to display their prowess or their desirability to females and neighbouring males by lifting their heads up in the air in an attempt to sniff the air and making peculiar grunting calls. This is a display of their machismo which the males hope will win over the females and intimidate other males. When this fails to work some males take it one step further to chase away a non-relenting intruding male out of his territory. When the intruder wishes to stand his ground he challenges the resident male. These challenges often end up in brutal fights but they pan out in a very dignified manner at the beginning. As part of this elaborate ritual of challenging your opponent, the two males engaged in this conflict walk parallel to each other in a rhythmic fashion. This is not for nothing though; during this walk they keep a close eye on each other carefully gauging their opponent's strengths and weaknesses. These walks sometimes lead to aggressive fights if both the parties feel confident of their own abilities and refuse to relent. This results in a full blown physical conflict where the males head-butt each other, jostle with each other and they lock their antlers at full force. With their horns locked together they try to push each other away with great force. Usually these fights

don't end up being fatal since the rivals know when to pull out of the fight but permanent skull damages or broken horns are common outcomes.

Amidst all these activities the females visiting the lek on the lookout for a prospective mate, do their bit to keep themselves busy as well. When it comes to standing their grounds the females don't seem to lag far behind than their male counterparts. In case of a stronger and one of the more desirable male fancying a particular female, the other females won't just give up without a fight. Some other female will try to shove off the particular female who has drawn the attention of the male. So like the males the females also do compete for the most desirable male around. Then there are the young males at the lek, which can be viewed more as trouble makers. They are too young to challenge the dominant males and they know it far too well, so these young males are more of an opportunist. They tend to try their lucks with a female which is still undecided when it comes to picking up her mate. Needless to say the dominant males would have nothing of this nuisance created by these youngsters and waste no time in chasing them away. However the presence of these youngsters further enhances the colourful dynamics already panning out at the lek. Regardless of how amusing this might seem to any casual bystander this blackbuck ritual which unfolds during every mating season on these semi-arid plains of Solapur has a much bigger purpose, a way of ensuring the survival of this species. Lekking provides the females with the option of choosing the stronger males, which in turn ensures

the best of genes for her offspring, the key to a stronger and healthier future for her fawns. The males compete with one another to claim the mating rights, which again is a way of ensuring only the strongest and the fittest get to mate with the females, which underlines for the millionth time the ancient rule by which all the species in nature are guided by-the survival of the fittest. The showdowns at the lek continue for a few weeks, after which some sort of normalcy returns to these grasslands. Once lekking gets over males and females break away in their respective herds and some remain solitary. Those females which chose their mates would give birth to the next generation of blackbuck in the next four to five months, which would coincide with the next monsoon when resources will be aplenty and the young ones will be able to grow up in an environment of abundance, which ensures the first few weeks or months of their lives will be much less of a struggle. The females become sexually mature at the age of eight months. However they don't show any interest in mating before they are two years old. After a gestation period of six months the female usually gives birth to a single calf. The new born calves are usually light yellow in colour; males sometimes display a small patch of black on their head and back. Similar to other antelope calves the blackbuck new-born can stand on its legs and walk within moments of its birth.

Like so many other species on this planet the blackbuck too is faced with a series of problems which threaten their very existence. These animals face a serious threat from local

human settlements, not only in the state of Maharashtra but elsewhere in India too even though they are classified as Schedule I animals by dint of which they are offered the highest protection by the Wildlife Protection Act. Blackbucks are illegally hunted for their meat and skin. In fact in some parts of the country blackbuck meat is sold at a cheaper rate than goat meat. Their horns are used in Ayurveda and to cure skin problems. These animals face threats from human beings even in protected enclosures as well, for instance there have been reports of the local nomadic community of Pardhi hunting blackbucks using snare traps or country made guns within the protected confines of the Great Indian Bustard Foundation in Pune. There are strict penalties in place for anyone who violates the law by killing a schedule I animal like the blackbuck, but somehow that fails to deter the offenders which also stems from a lack of understanding of the natural world and its resources and the importance of preserving them. Apart from poaching the biggest threat faced by the blackbucks these days is the loss of their habitat. These animals are fast losing their habitats to steady human encroachment. Over the past few decades the loss in habitat has resulted in a steady decline in the blackbuck population. The same can be said about blackbuck populations in Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh as well as Gujarat. This steady decline in blackbuck population prompted the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to place

These juvenile males will soon wander off in search of their own territories where someday they will be able to form their own herds.



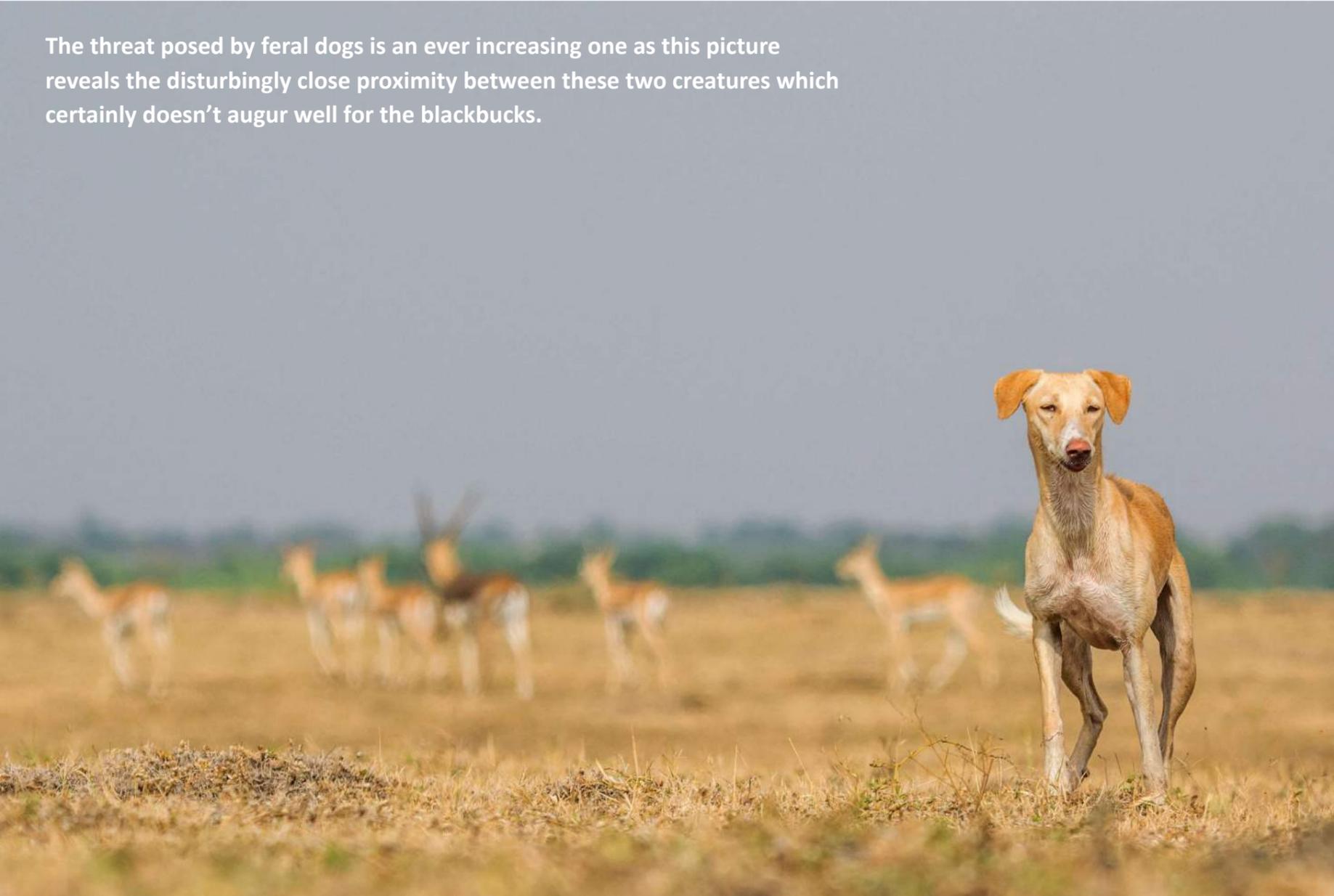
Loss of habitat by encroaching human settlements is the biggest threat which puts the survival of this species at risk. Human settlements are clearly visible in the vicinity as this herd of blackbuck makes its way across their habitat.



the blackbuck in the Near Threatened category in the year 2003. Most of their pre-existing habitat has either been converted into agricultural land or has been engulfed by the rapid and aggressive expansion of our urban settlements. Needless to say this results in rising conflicts between humans and these antelopes. Their once grazing lands have been converted into agricultural lands which resulted in a scarcity of natural food for these animals. In order to find other means of survival in many parts of our country these animals have developed a liking for agricultural crops which quite understandably antagonises the farmers. Hence in an effort to protect their crops and their livelihoods the farmers have resorted to means of keeping these animals at bay by setting up electric fences along the perimeters of their fields or even gunning them down. Over the years many blackbuck deaths due to electrocution have been reported from various parts of the country. Also encroaching human population brings with itself another set of dangers for these animals. Human population brings with itself a sizeable population

of feral dogs. In the wild the blackbuck faces threats from their natural predators mainly the wolves; however the presence of feral dogs in close vicinity further compounds their problems. The dogs may not be as efficient a predator as a wolf, but they surely pose a serious threat to these animals, particularly the young ones or the old and the injured. Although poaching is not that rampant in the plains of Solapur, still it is no stranger to the other threats plaguing the lives of these antelopes. Considering the magnitude of these threats which can potentially eradicate this species from the face of our planet, it goes without saying the concerned authorities, wildlife enthusiasts and conservationists have their hands full. On the brighter side, over the past few years several measures have been implemented or are being implemented countrywide to ensure the survival of this species. Designated wildlife sanctuaries have been set up all over the country to provide safe havens to these animals. The most prominent ones are the Blackbuck National Park in Velavadar, Gujarat; the Ranebennur Blackbuck Sanctuary in Haveri district, Karnataka; the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary in Maharashtra and the Jayamangali Blackbuck Reserve in the Tumkur district of Karnataka. Apart from setting up sanctuaries a huge part of this effort involves educating human beings especially those

The threat posed by feral dogs is an ever increasing one as this picture reveals the disturbingly close proximity between these two creatures which certainly doesn't augur well for the blackbucks.

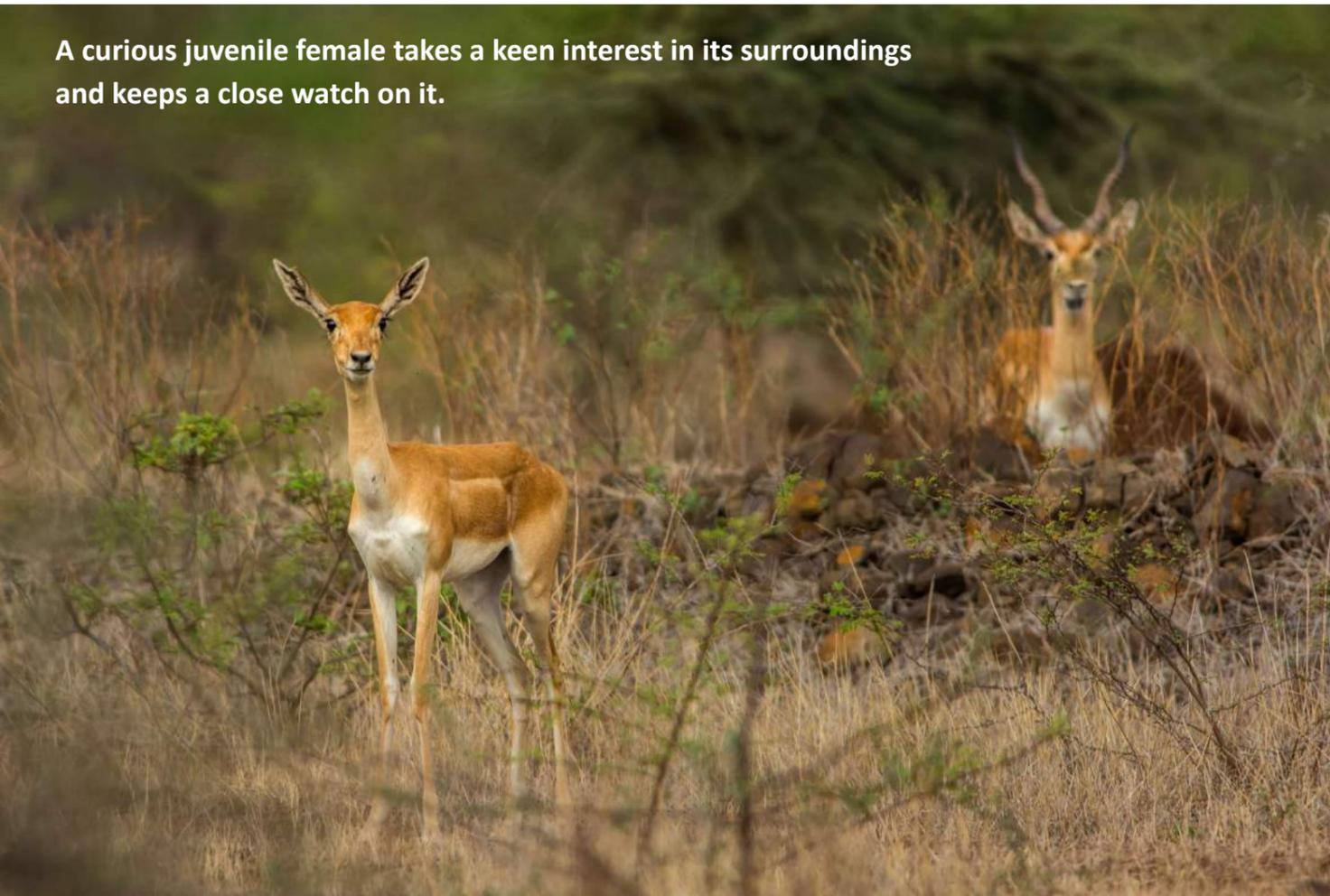


The Indian Wolf shares the same habitat with the blackbucks and features high in the list of the natural enemies of the blackbucks.

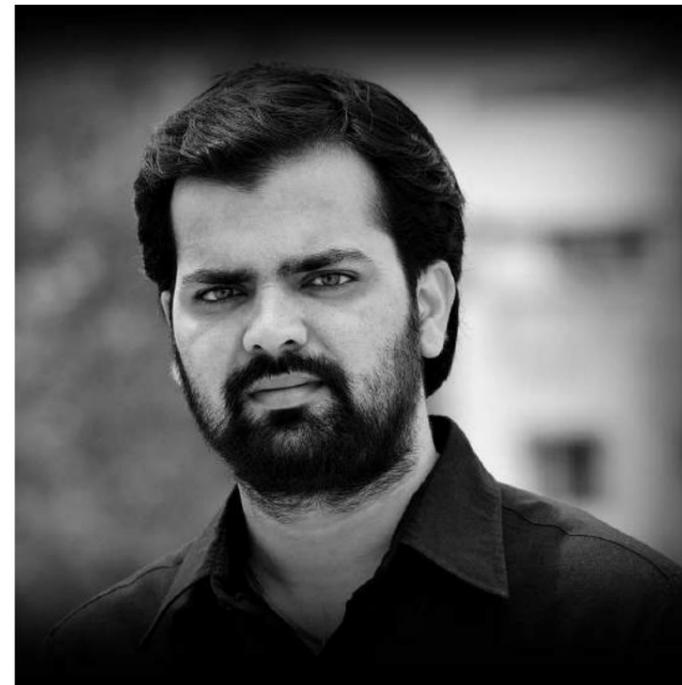


living in close proximity to these creatures about the importance of conserving this beautiful antelope. This is being done all over the country and has yielded success on many occasions. In many cases illegal poaching was prevented by the intervention of local villagers, in some cases people living in these villages who share the same landscape with these animals have tipped off the concerned authorities about the presence of poachers in these parts. Poachers mostly use illegally modified 0.22 airguns (converted into firearms) or other firearms such as 315 bore rifles and 12 bore shotguns. Strict actions have been suggested against illegal selling of these firearms along with the suggestion of controlling the sale of these products. Farmers who feel their crops are under threat from blackbucks have been counselled on a regular basis with the view of dissuading them from resorting to violent means in order to protect their animals. They are being encouraged to use normal fencing for their crops instead of using electric ones. Efforts are also being made to provide the tribal people with alternate modes of livelihood so that they don't resort to hunting in order to earn their bread. Sterilisation of stray dogs are being done on a regular basis in order to keep their population under check, otherwise the ever growing stray dog population can pose some serious threats to blackbucks.

A curious juvenile female takes a keen interest in its surroundings and keeps a close watch on it.



If all these measures are implemented in a proper manner and with a little cooperation from our side, these animals will be staring at a relatively certain future which they richly deserve. It will indeed be an extremely sad day for the animal kingdom and also for every living being on this planet if we become responsible for another beautiful creature falling prey to our greed and insensitivity. Our hands are already stained with the bloods of many beautiful creatures lost forever, we can ill afford to lose yet another one. The onus lies with us to ensure a safe future for these magnificent animals, and it certainly is not a daunting task if only we let nature follow its own course instead of tampering with it.



About the Author

Inspite of his busy schedule it is his love for the wildlife and the natural world that draws Narendra Arvind Pandit to the wilderness time and again. An avid birdwatcher and wildlife enthusiast Mr. Pandit has made countless journeys to the grasslands of Solapur which incidentally happens to be his hometown as well. During these travels he has been a witness to many secrets of nature unravelling in front of his eyes.



**When Stones, Cement and
Steel Tell Tales of Romance**

by Anusheel Verma



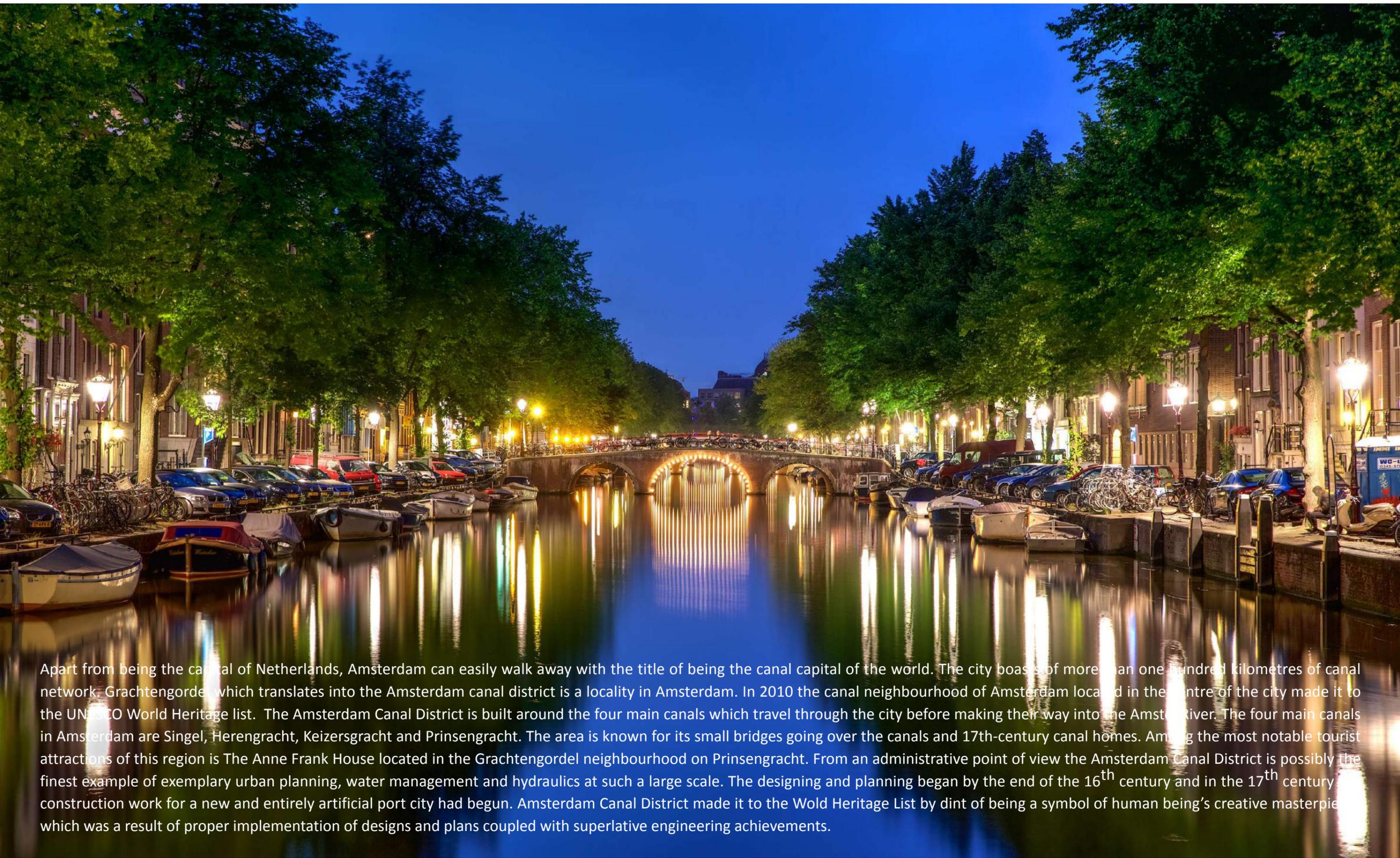
Montmartre is a relatively large hill standing at 130 meters in Paris's 18th arrondissement. Though being a part of the same city Montmartre is a world apart from the rest of Paris. The hill top of Montmartre is dominated by the sight of the iconic Basilica of Sacre-Coeur, a Roman Catholic Church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in Paris. This iconic monument was designed by Paul Abadie and it took almost 40 years for the construction work starting from 1875 to be completed. In stark contrast to this iconic church at the top of the Montmartre, at the bottom of the hill lies the ever so bustling Boulevard de Clichy, the streets of which are lined with bars, kebab shops and for someone seeking a bit more adventure in this quaint hillock, arrays of sex shops and peep shows.

However this in no way is an accurate portrayal of Montmartre, such a description does not bring to life some of the most fascinating episodes in the annals of Montmartre. Montmartre once used to be the rendezvous point for artists, writers, bohemians from all over Paris. Usually the flamboyant cafes or bars of Montmartre used to host these almost daily events. Needless to say some of the greatest works in French literature, art, drama among others were direct consequences of these confluences. The birthplace of the iconic Moulin Rouge, Montmartre in those days inspired and brought the best out of the likes of Picasso, Zola and Renoir, who lived and worked there. The Montmartre of today is a popular tourist destination, attracting thousands of people all over the world to its fun filled streets dotted with world renowned restaurants and lively music venues. While Montmartre has retained some of its old world charms much of it had to make way for the new. The bohemian way of life in the Montmartre has sadly now been reduced to a myth yet the idea of a world full of possibilities, a world where a masterpiece in the field of art and culture can emerge from the most unassuming of the sources, a sense of belief flows through the veins of Montmartre, thereby setting it apart from the rest of the metropolitan of Paris.

Perched on top of a granite cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean lies the Minack Theatre at Porthcurno, barely 4 miles from Land's End in Cornwall, England. The Minack is possibly the world's most famous open air theatre. The origin of this iconic theatre is synonymous with the story of sheer grit and determination of one Rowena Cade. Rowena Cade was born as the daughter of a mill owner in 1893 in a village near Derby. From a very early age she harboured the love for stages and plays and eventually at the tender age of eight made her stage debut in a local production. Little did she know at that point of time much bigger things were lying in store for her. After the First World War, she moved to Cornwall and built a house overlooking the sea near Porthcurno. It was here



she got involved with a local theatre group and she took part in an open air production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1929. Rowena decided to build a bigger and grander stage for their next production *The Tempest*. With this view in mind she set out on building a permanent open air theatre in the cliff beneath the house. She herself overlooked the construction, took part in it, and even took valuable construction lessons from her gardeners. It was this humble beginning which carefully nurtured the seeds of a bigger dream; in due course of time the foundation stone of today's magnificent Minack Theatre was laid. The theatre witnessed the horrors of the Second World War and suffered like everyone else. But a determined Rowena Cade set about renovating the theatre. She worked on the Minack every winter until she was well into her eighties. When Rowena Cade breathed her last in 1983 she had left behind a legacy transcending the walls of the theatre into and well beyond the Atlantic. In an ode to its creator the Minack houses an exhibition on Rowena Cade's life and her works along with numerous stage performances. The season runs each year from the month of May to September and entertains approximately 80,000 audience every year and more than 100,000 pay an entrance fee to look around the site.



Apart from being the capital of Netherlands, Amsterdam can easily walk away with the title of being the canal capital of the world. The city boasts of more than one hundred kilometres of canal network. Grachtengordel which translates into the Amsterdam canal district is a locality in Amsterdam. In 2010 the canal neighbourhood of Amsterdam located in the centre of the city made it to the UNESCO World Heritage list. The Amsterdam Canal District is built around the four main canals which travel through the city before making their way into the Amstel River. The four main canals in Amsterdam are Singel, Herengracht, Keizersgracht and Prinsengracht. The area is known for its small bridges going over the canals and 17th-century canal homes. Among the most notable tourist attractions of this region is The Anne Frank House located in the Grachtengordel neighbourhood on Prinsengracht. From an administrative point of view the Amsterdam Canal District is possibly the finest example of exemplary urban planning, water management and hydraulics at such a large scale. The designing and planning began by the end of the 16th century and in the 17th century construction work for a new and entirely artificial port city had begun. Amsterdam Canal District made it to the World Heritage List by dint of being a symbol of human being's creative masterpiece which was a result of proper implementation of designs and plans coupled with superlative engineering achievements.



One can only begin to imagine what kind of reaction the Colosseum of Rome would have evoked in its full glory when the rays of the setting sun filtering through used to bathe its amphitheatre sands in brilliant hues of golden and orange. Those were the glory days of this iconic structure which has been a silent witness to many epic gladiatorial conquests. With over two thirds of it destroyed over time due to a combination of natural disasters such as earthquakes and other weather conditions along with senseless acts of vandalism, the Colosseum may have lost a part of its sheen but it still remains one of the iconic and widely recognised monuments of the world. The Colosseum was commissioned in A.D 70-72 by Emperor Vespasian. The final phases of construction of the Colosseum were completed under the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Made of stone and concrete the Colosseum was the largest amphitheatre in the Roman Empire. When packed to its capacity the Colosseum could house up to 50,000 spectators. Since the gates of Colosseum were opened to the people of Rome the Colosseum was in active use for as long as four centuries, during which it used to be the largest venue for some of the most epic gladiatorial combats and other forms of public entertainments.

However with the gradual decline of the Roman Empire along with the refining tastes of entertainment which prompted people to develop distaste for the kind of bloodshed involved in gladiatorial combats, the Colosseum lost its charm among the people of Rome. By the 6th century A.D. Restoration efforts began in the 1990's and are still going on as the Colosseum continues to be one of the most visited places in the whole of Italy and possibly the world. On one hand the Colosseum serves as a grim reminder to all the bloodshed, the countless loss of lives etched firmly in its annals, on the other hand every stone, every pillar, every arc, every rock of the Colosseum represents the unprecedented heights of glory achieved by the Roman architects and builders.

The pier in the Dutch resort town of Scheveningen was opened on 17 September 1959. The present structure was designed by Dutch architects Hugh Maaskant and Dick Apon from Rotterdam after the town lost its first pier during the Second World War. The total length of the pier is 382 meters and consists of two separate levels- a closed lower deck section and an open air upper deck and four terminal sections known as islands. Every year the pier attracts thousands of tourists from all over the country and also from abroad. The pier offers a glimpse into the way of life in the town of Scheveningen with its light, broad sidewalks, relaxed beach atmosphere and the iconic Ferris wheel.



This is Europe's first Ferris wheel constructed over the sea and was opened on the 19th of August 2016. Over 40 meters high and equipped with 36 closed gondolas an average 20 minutes ride on the Ferris wheel offers a panoramic view of the Dutch coast, the sea and the city's skyline. Since its opening the Ferris wheel has added further sheen to the already glistening portfolio of the pier. Despite all its beauty the history of the pier has not always been a glorious one. After its opening in 1959 the pier witnessed a phase of decay until it was purchased by a private company in 1991 who invested millions of Euros in renovating it. The renovated pier boasting of a restaurant and a casino was struck by tragedy once again when a fire in 2011 marked the beginning of the second phase of its decay until it was declared bankrupt in the year 2013 and was shut down by the government following safety concerns. The pier got another new lease of life in 2014 when it was bought by the project developer Kondor Wessels Groep. Since then there has been no looking back for this iconic structure along the Dutch coast. The new pier is a far cry from its early days, equipped with the most modern facilities and infrastructure the pier is any visitor's delight and looks all set for greeting travellers from all over for many more years to come.

A museum of distinction, the Louvre has earned the glorious reputation of being the world's largest museum apart from being a historic monument. Located on the bank of Seine River the museum is housed in the Louvre Palace which was built by Philip II in the late 12th century. The palace of Louvre served as the royal residence for the kings of France until 1682 when Louis XIV decided to move his court to Versailles. The idea of using the Louvre as a public museum originated in the 18th century and in 1793 the revolutionary government opened the doors of the transformed Louvre palace to the general public and the first episode in the history of Louvre museum was penned.



Over the years the Louvre museum has earned the status of being the second most visited museum in the world with a footfall of more than 9 million visitors placing it next only to China's Palace Museum. The present day Louvre can be readily identified by the iconic metal and glass pyramid gracing the main courtyard of the palace. This glass and metallic pyramid serves as the main entrance to the museum and has become one of the most iconic structures of the modern world. The construction of this structure was commissioned by the French President François Mitterrand in 1984 and the responsibility of designing it was entrusted to the famous Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei. The museum which opened in 1793 with a not so enviable collection of 537 paintings presently houses a staggering collection of more than 380,000 objects and showcases 35,000 works of arts in eight different curatorial departments with more than 652,000 square feet dedicated for display. Among its collections the one which has garnered the most number of views over the years is probably Leonardo Da Vinci's famous creation Mona Lisa during the renaissance period. With a combined staff of more than 2000 the Louvre easily happens to be one of the busiest museums in the world. The Louvre is primarily owned by the French government although a significant dip in government funding prompted the Louvre authorities to generate funds on their own for their upcoming projects. The government though still pays for the operational costs of the museums in the form of salaries, maintenance and safety while any further infrastructural or other form of expansion falls under the jurisdiction of the Louvre authority. The Louvre museum of today stands proud as one of the magnificent and iconic pillars of our architectural excellence showcasing a perfect synergy between traditional and modern form of architecture and continues to draw thousands of people every day to its realms to take them on a thrilling odyssey to lands lost in time.

The Erasmus Bridge is the second largest bridge in the whole of Netherlands and is the extremely vital connecting link between the northern and southern part of Rotterdam. The 802 meters long and 139 meters tall bridge was opened for public use in 1996 by Queen Beatrix. The most easily recognisable feature of this bridge is the lone 139 meter high asymmetrical pale blue pylon resting on a horizontal base, a structure which has a curious similarity with the neck of a swan, thereby earning the bridge its nickname "The Swan". The Swan is considered as the brainchild of renowned Dutch architect Ben Van Berkel. Since its opening the Erasmus Bridge of Rotterdam has been instrumental in facilitating the flow of traffic in between the northern and southern parts of Rotterdam and bringing down traffic congestion. The bascule bridge of the Erasmus Bridge is the biggest and heaviest in the whole of Western Europe. Built at an expense of nearly 163 million Euros the journey of this iconic structure has not always been smooth. Soon after it was opened to public in 1996 it was noticed the bridge had a tendency to sway sideways when faced with strong gusts of winds. Architects took a note of this problem and to prevent such inconvenient swinging dampers were installed in the bridge subsequently. It has also been the venue for some of the most popular events worldwide such as The Red Bull Air Races of 2005, the Marathon of Rotterdam and most notably it was the starting point of the 2010 Tour de France. Since its opening in 1996 the bridge has been in service for a little more than two decades now, but within this short period of time this magnificent structure has become synonymous with the city of Rotterdam, something the city and its people can be proud of and hold very close to their hearts.





Zaanse Schans which can be better identified as the “windmill neighbourhood of the Netherlands” is a region near Zaandijk in the Netherlands. The area is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Netherlands with reportedly 1.6 million visitors in 2014. The quaint neighbourhood has nothing much to offer except for a collection of well-preserved historic windmills and houses. The entire area is a recreation of the Dutch way of life in the 18th and the 19th centuries. The traditional houses, windmills, workshops, warehouse all contributing in their own ways to bring to life a bit of history from days gone by. In the bygone era the surrounding Zaan region was a place of industrial importance to the Dutch people. The windmills in this area were vital to the production of linseed oil, paint, snuff, mustard, paper and other products which were commodities of paramount importance to the Dutch economy. Presently the Zaanse Schans has been converted into an open air museum. The majority of the windmills are open to the visitors from April to October. The souvenir shops in this region and the cheese factory are firm favourites among the visitors. Most of the windmills from the previous eras failed to stand the test of time, some have been put out of use and replaced by more modern and more effective technology but some of them have been carefully preserved and these old timers still stand tall and proud, retaining their old world charm unapologetically and offering many tales from the past to them who come their way.



About the Author

Anusheel Verma defines himself as a tireless seeker of knowledge and occasional purveyor of wisdom on technology and coincidentally, a software architect. His initial inquisitiveness towards photography grew out of a fascination with the intricate mechanical device. It all started as an interesting experiment turning unseen scientific principles into art. He always visualized a photograph to be like a jigsaw puzzle game, where one has to discover the various pieces that fit together to create something visually unique and mesmerizing. He started exploring blogs and magazines on exposure, composition and different elements of photography and at the same time kept on shooting with his cameras to further enhance his skills. He considers himself fortunate since his work takes him to different countries and provides him with an opportunity to be a part of some unbelievable places and locations. He has attended some interesting photo walks in USA, UK, Europe and India. Over the years he has been researching on various styles of photography and has attempted a little on Street, Astro, Wildlife, Macro although Landscapes and Cityscapes still remain to be his favourite genres of photography.

In his words-“photography is taking me on a journey and I hope to capture those moments with my perspective.”

"You don't take a photograph, you make it." - Ansel Adams



Holi of Hope

by Arka Dutta

The city of Vrindavan on the banks of the river Yamuna, barely 11 kilometres from Mathura in the state of Uttar Pradesh is a place with an ancient past and one which has prominently featured in Hindu mythologies and Holy Scriptures, earning it the reputation of being one of the holiest Hindu pilgrimage in modern India. It is a widespread belief among the Hindus that Vrindavan is the birthplace of Lord Krishna, who was born in a nearby forest. The Bhagavat Purana a Holy Scripture of the Hindus refers to the cow herding community in the village of Gokul in Vrindavan where Krishna was raised by his foster parents Nanda Maharaj and Yashoda. According to the same scripture Vrindavan witnessed the early childhood days of a young Krishna's life and time with his brother Balaram and other playmates and many legendary folklores associated with it. It is also believed that some of the enchanting tales of romance between Lord Krishna and Radha played out on the soils of Vrindavan. This legacy which Vrindavan has carried with it since time immemorial has left a profound impact in the minds of Hindu pilgrims, devotees as well as tourists from all over the country and the globe and results in a constant influx of visitors round the year. The Radha Krishna legend is at the focal point of this huge interest among all of Vrindavan's visitors. Understandably almost the entire economy of today's Vrindavan has been shaped by these religious tales and folklores. Most of the land in Vrindavan is owned by temple trusts and a rough estimate puts the number of temples and ashrams in Vrindavan at 5,000 which hold the key to the city's revenue generation. Some of these temples

are more than a few centuries old and with all the legends associated with them further add to the rich heritage of the city. It seems plausible that a city with such a rich past will draw people from all over the world, however over the years the city for some reason has attracted a huge population of Hindu widows to its realms, earning it the title of "the city of widows". This story is a look into the lives of the widows of Vrindavan against the backdrop of one of the iconic Hindu festival of Holi during which incidentally the whole city of Vrindavan is probably at its exuberant best.

As Vrindavan bustles with energy on even an average day in the calendar with its thousands of temples, devotees, tourists, among the celebrations of Radha Krishna's legendary romance the sight of Hindu widows in their traditional whites and incredibly subdued presence stands out in stark contrast to the surroundings. It is true gone are the days of widows jumping in to the pyres of their recently deceased husbands to sacrifice themselves with the lives of their husbands, however in many parts of India it is still not an easy experience being a widow as a closer look at the forlorn figures clad in whites reveals. The congregation of widows in Vrindavan from all over the country particularly from Bengal and Bihar is indeed a unique occurrence. Some reports suggest the number of widows living in Vrindavan at present is somewhere between 6,000 to 7,000 although the actual figure could be a lot higher. For centuries Hindu widows have faced ostracism from the society, in fact in many sections of the society there is a strong belief

that widows are inauspicious and should not be a part of the family. These age old misogynistic sentiments lead to the widows being subjected to differential and often brutal treatment and in most cases being evicted from their own families. Once they are thrown out of their families, neglected by their own sons and daughters the widows have little options, most of them have no other choice but endure the life of hardships that stares them in their faces, most of them resort to begging for meagre alms in the streets of the cities having lost the physical abilities at their old ages to be able to perform any kind of work. Over the years a significant number of ostracised widows have started taking refuge in Vrindavan. This is mainly due to the holy reputation of the city. Having lost their everything and having led a life of subjugation all throughout the allure of living in a holy city, in God's very own realm is too strong a temptation for these elderly women most of whom probably had never been allowed to step out of their homes until being thrown out. Also the idea of being able to spend the rest of their lives in the company of people who have suffered the same fate as theirs provides them with a certain sense of comfort. As a result of which the widows once thrown out of their families or ostracised from the society and their villages take on the arduous journey of making their way to Vrindavan with the hope of clinging on to the last straw which in this case is religion. The entire city of Vrindavan is like a sanctuary for these elderly women. The destitute women of Vrindavan who come to Vrindavan from different parts are entirely dependent on the state. Their shelter, ration, pension

even healthcare is looked after by the state. The pilgrims extend a helping hand and provide these women with cash as alms and other products of daily use such as blanket, woollen garment and food items among others. The overwhelming display of these women's dependence on charity is indeed disturbing and one can't help but wonder is this really a sustainable model for these women. However it is the Bhajan Ashrams spread all over the city which forms the core of these women's life in Vrindavan. A Bhajan Ashram is a place where these women gather round, sing Bhajans or holy songs praising or depicting stories from Lord Krishna's life and in return earn some cash for their daily needs. The Bhajan singing sessions also serve the dual purpose of a social get together for these women during which they exchange their stories, share the chronicles of their plights. These Ashrams operate as independent entities and are not under any government jurisdiction. However recently the government has implemented some schemes for the widows at these Bhajan Ashrams. The women go to the Bhajan Ashrams in shifts of 6-10a.m, 10-3p.m and 3-7p.m. For each shift of four hours the widows are paid a meagre sum of rupees 3 and 100 gm of uncooked lentils and rice. Needless to say this meagre allocation does little to improve the situation of the widows in the city or in the state in general. It must be mentioned most of these widows reaching the Bhajan Ashrams are from the states of West Bengal and Bihar and no significant collaborative action by the governments Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal has been implemented thus far. As a direct consequence of this the Uttar Pradesh

government is overburdened with the responsibilities to look after the widows converging in Vrindavan from other parts of India as well. The widow pension granted by the Uttar Pradesh government is Rs.1, 800 a year, or Rs.150 a month. Although on records it seems that this meagre amount is serving its purpose, in reality it is not. The shelter homes built by the government have only provided limited relief to them. The widows living in these shelters may have a roof over their heads but their financial struggles and the struggles to be accepted as a part of the society is far from over. In case of most of them despite their old ages and health related problems they are forced to beg on the streets for food and money, eking out the last few days of their existence in a rather undignified manner.

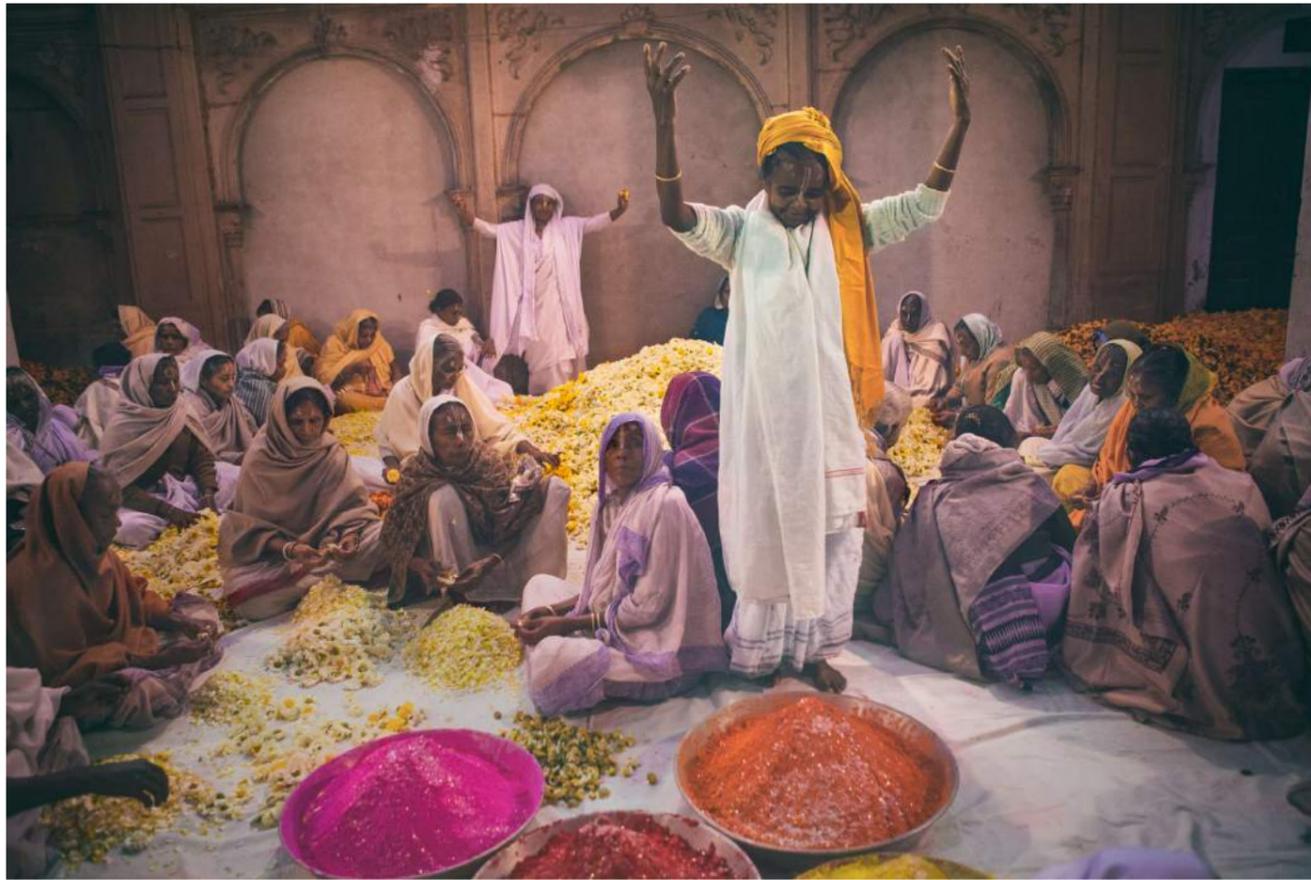
In the midst of such grim surrounding and overwhelmingly challenging odds it is easy to lose hope. And maybe that was the situation a few years or maybe a decade ago. But over the years things have started to change, slowly yet steadily. The winds of change are being felt in the narrow by lanes of Vrindavan, maybe the change is not obvious for most part of the year but every now and then the odd flash in the pan reiterates this belief. The plights of these women have made headlines in all leading newspapers and news channels across the globe. The shockingly unfair, unequal treatment meted out to these women throughout their entire lives have attracted significant responses from self-help groups, NGO's, charitable organisations, human rights activists from all over the world. These organisations are working to improve



the situations of these widows. With a view of making these women self-sufficient and empowering them they are entrusted with jobs like stitching and knitting. They are provided with monthly salaries on regular basis for their services. Some of these groups have invested a lot of their time and resources at setting up better health care facilities for these women. In the face of all these the one most significant and symbolic and in accordance with the theme the most vibrant

change was observed during the festival of Holi, which also happens to be the biggest festival in the city of Vrindavan. Over the years the widows in India have been discouraged and in most cases even forcefully prevented from taking part in any social gathering, festival or ritual. It is widely believed that the participation of widows in any social gathering or festival would bring bad luck to the others; sadly this mind set is still very much prevalent among all sections

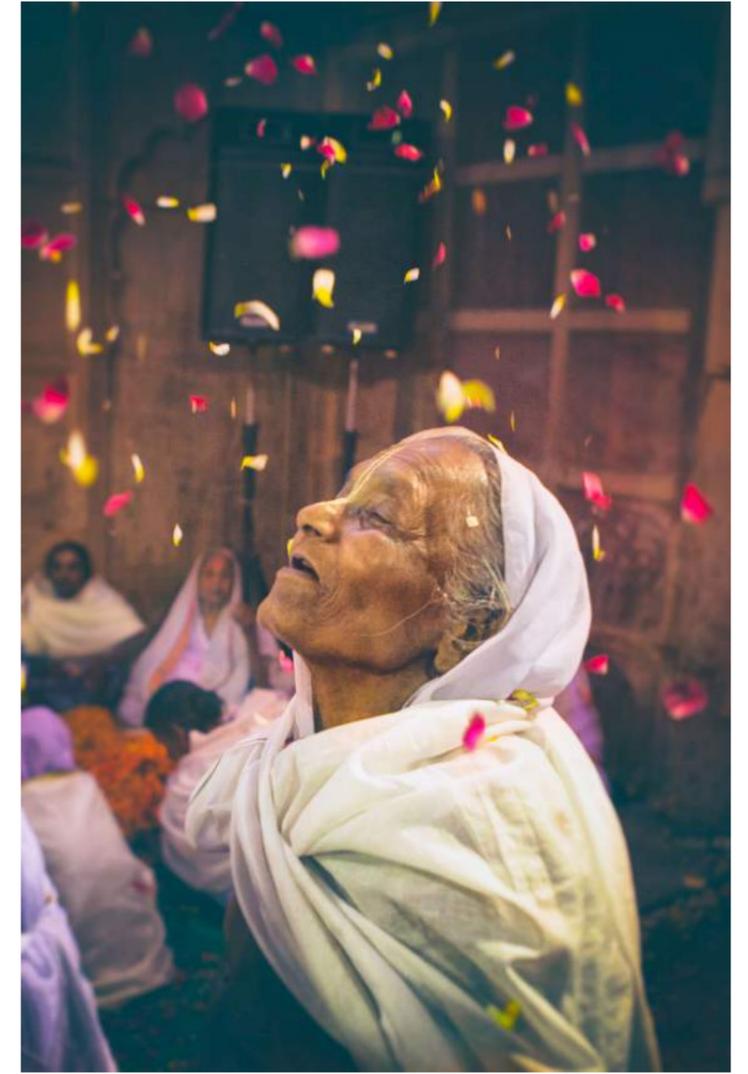
of the society. Against a backdrop like this the huge gatherings of widows during the festival of Holi smearing each other with the brightest of colours, is truly an amazing and ground breaking occurrence. This phenomenon struck at the very heart of the social order the foundation of which reeks of gender inequality. It may be argued such symbolic gestures don't really bring about significant and tangible changes to the lives of these women. But when looked from a

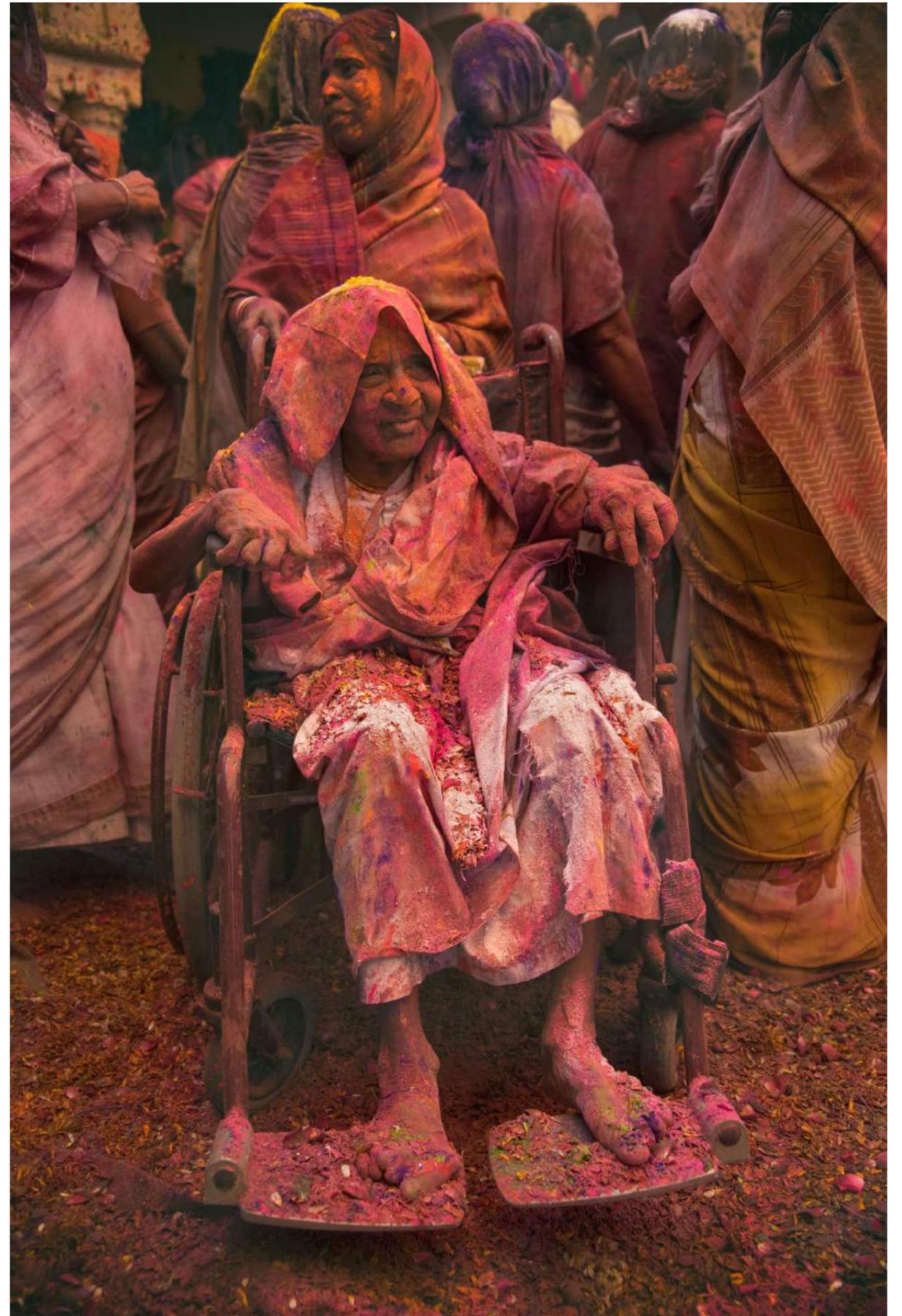


societal perspective this incredible paradigm shift in the way of perceiving widows is an incredibly significant milestone. Sulabh International, an organisation headed by the famous reformist cum sociologist Doctor Bindeshwar Pathak, has played a crucial role in ushering this significant change. In an effort to mark the departure of age old useless tradition and gender discrimination and bring the widows into the mainstream of our society, Sulabh started organising Holi for them about three years ago at the widows' ashram and in the year 2016 it was organised at the famous Gopinath temple to give it a kind of social acceptance and provide a much bigger and louder platform for everyone to witness the change that was playing out. The organisers who termed this event as a “riot of colours” had organised 1200 kilograms of gulal (coloured

powder) and 1500 kilograms of rose and merry gold petals. The celebrations saw another archaic tradition being shattered as young Sanskrit scholars and Pundits also formed a part of these celebrations signifying the further assimilation and acceptance of these widows in the mainstream society. The celebrations generated a widespread interest as the Indian as well as the global media flocked the streets and alleys of Vrindavan and particularly the premises of the Gopinath temple to report this event which broke old taboos and paved the path for a more balanced beginning. Some of the widows who took part in these celebrations echoed the sentiments of the ushering change. According to many of them people belonging to the younger generations find little or no difficulty in accepting them as a part of their own society and have been the frontrunners in

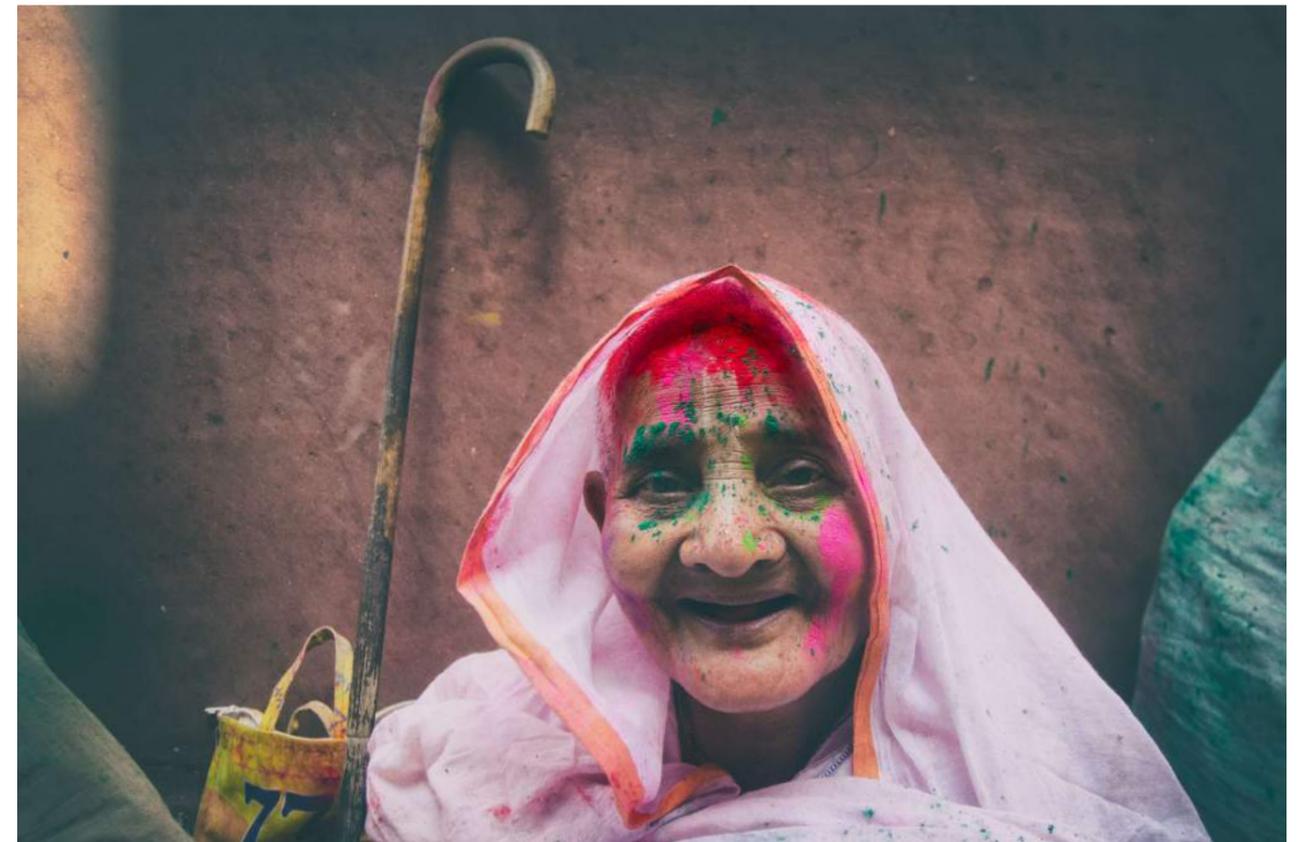
embracing this change. As the Gopinath temple opened its door to the widows on the day of Holi thousands of these women took over the courtyard of the temple and smeared each other in bright colours. As the colours of Holi descended and painted the white saarees in myriad hues of red, yellow, green, orange it symbolized the fall of those age old superstitious beliefs which barred the widows from wearing colours, among many others. For them it was a joy long denied. Under the showers of flower petals and among the songs of Lord Krishna, hundreds of widows danced, splashed coloured powders (gulal) and played with water pistols (pichkari) filled with coloured water.







There can be no denying that we are far from achieving a society free of biases, prejudices, superstition, misogyny and countless other evils plaguing us. In this bleak landscape of the white of the widow, Holi — a festival of colours, revelry and a licence for fun is a much-needed act. Measures like these however sidestep the more serious concern of why widowhood should be a scourge at all. A society that offers women access to property, paid employment, education and sexual autonomy would create independent women, who would know how to live their life with dignity and joy whether they are single, married or widowed. Festive celebrations relieve the tedium of everyday, this attempt to infuse colour and joy into the barren lives of the widows of Vrindavan is surely welcome, but this should not lull us into accepting the harshness of a society that pushes these women into the ashrams of Vrindavan in the first place. We need to remind ourselves of the need to challenge the inequalities and injustices, which create the sorry plight of the widows of Vrindavan whose grief is temporarily alleviated by the welcome colours of Holi. We wait for the day when men and women can freely choose the colours of their lives. As the women returned to their respective shelters their white sarees dyed in the colours of the celebrations bore testimonies to the changing times, this Holi will not go down in the annals of Vrindavan as just another one, it will be forever remembered as the Holi of hope.







About the Author:

Born in 1983 and brought up in the city of Kolkata, India Arka Dutta apart from being a mechanical engineer by profession is an independent photographer keen on taking up photographic projects mostly concerning social issues, people and environment. He believes photography can be an important medium to make a statement, form opinion and to bring about a change and he tries to achieve the same through visual storytelling. At present he is dedicating his time and efforts working on the effects of climate change in the Ganges delta and on a particular untouchable community in central India.

For more of his work visit www.arkadutta.com.

Motwa: A Safe Haven for Birds

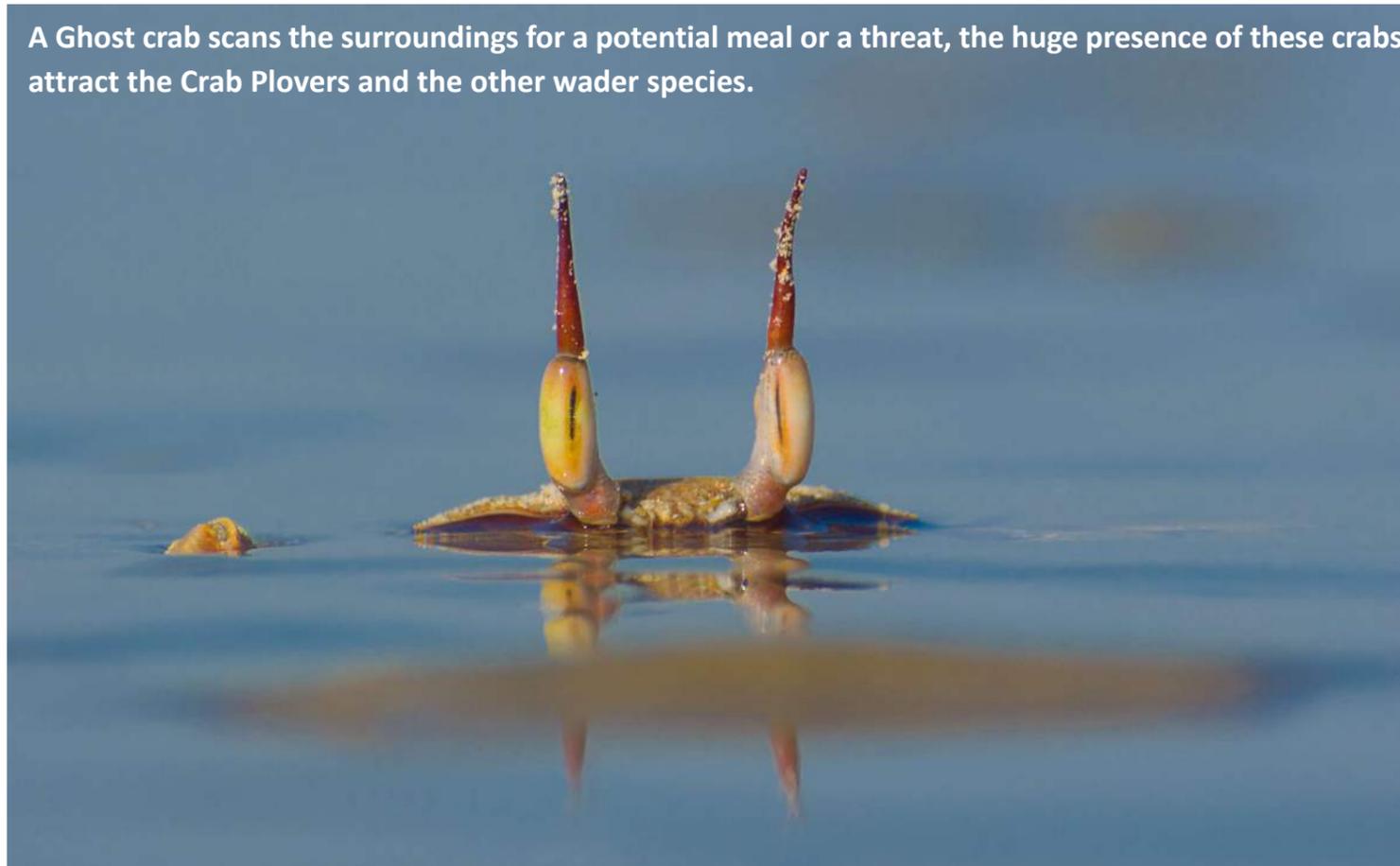
by Rahul Bera



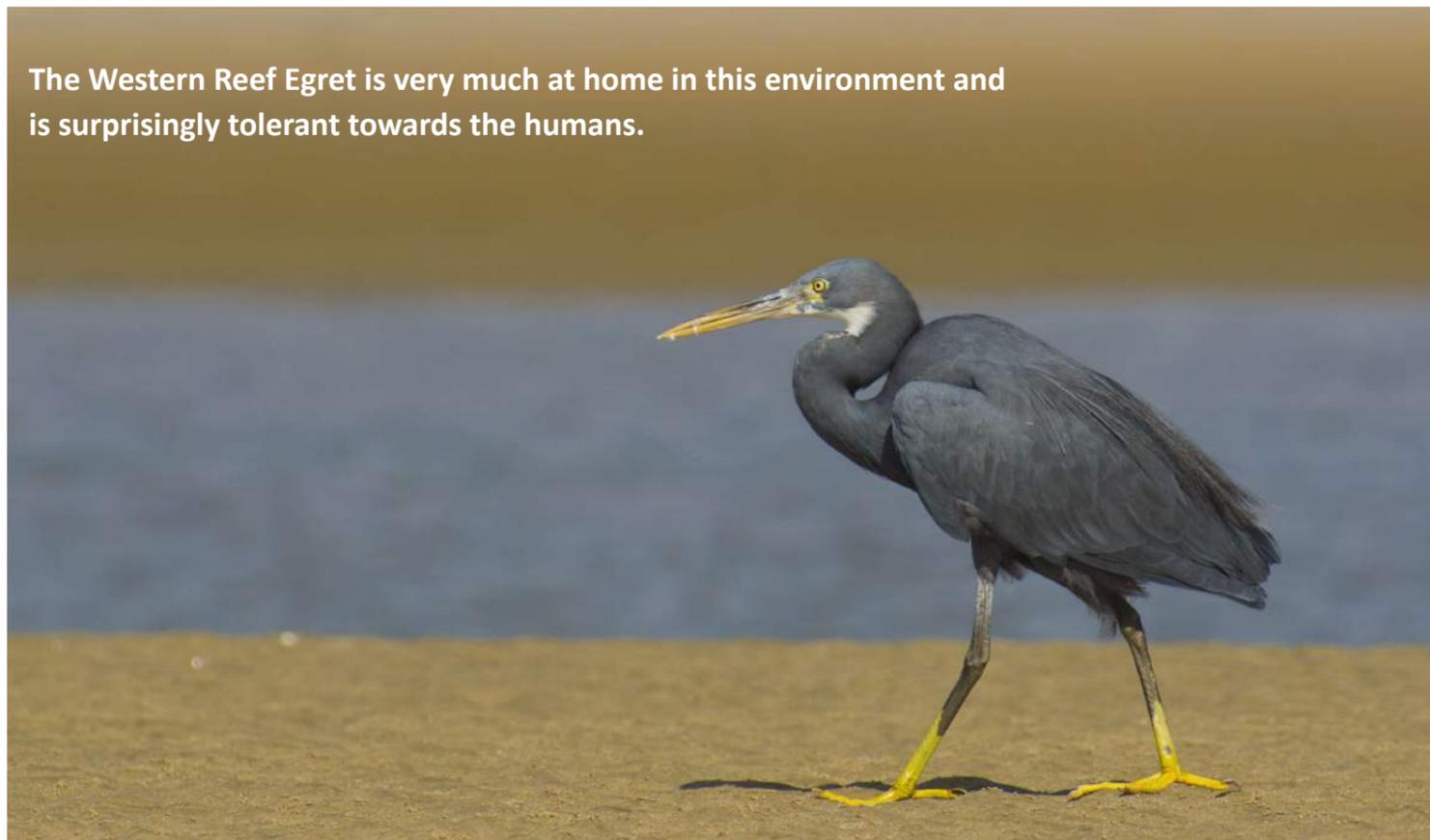
Over the years the state of the Gujarat has earned the reputation of being one of the most prominent birding hotspot in India. There are quite a few well known birding destinations across the length and breadth of the state. Most of them are very well known among birdwatchers and are frequently visited. Even though the state of Gujarat boasts of a rich and diversified bird population still it is always a pleasure and a great source of encouragement to find a new birding haven. Approximately 11-12kms from the coastal town of Mandavi which even in today's age has stuck to the age old tradition of building small ships with wood carved out entirely by hand, is the beach of Motwa along the Gulf of Kutch which is home to a small community of fishermen living along the beach and a huge variety of bird species. Motwa is a secluded place nestled carefully in one arm of the Gulf of Kutch with huge stretches of sandy beach which are flat with very little or almost no vegetation along the beach. People belonging to the small fishing community which has also made Motwa their home live in their very modest huts along the shore. However being a very small community comprising of hardly 200-300 individuals their presence is barely noticeable, which needless to say has contributed in a big way towards the thriving population of the birds.

Being a coastal region Motwa is the ideal place to find different species of gulls, some of the most notable ones are the Pallas's Gull, Black Headed Gull, Slender Billed Gull and the Heuglin's Gull. The huge numbers in which

A Ghost crab scans the surroundings for a potential meal or a threat, the huge presence of these crabs attract the Crab Plovers and the other wader species.



The Western Reef Egret is very much at home in this environment and is surprisingly tolerant towards the humans.



these gulls are found here will be a sheer delight to any birdwatcher.

The abundance of marine food, the leftovers from the fishermen's day's catch, the quiet backwaters combined together assures a healthy and constant supply of food for these birds. Apart from the gulls Motwa boasts of a healthy population of wader birds in the form of the Crab Plovers, the Greater Thick Knee, and the Bar Tailed Godwits. The waders can be typically found along the quieter backwaters of Motwa, where the relatively calm and still water allows them the opportunity to zero in on their prey with that surgical precision. With the breaking of dawn the waders are the last one to make their appearance. The exact reason for their late appearance can be hard to tell but maybe it has something to do with the backwaters still being inundated with the sea water from the previous high tide at dawn, as the water recede these birds start appearing.

The presence of huge colonies of marine crab species like the Ghost Crab and the Fiddler Crab attract Crab Plovers to the Motwa beach. The Crab Plovers have a call which is very similar to that of a Bar Tailed Godwit. The one trait which sets it apart from other waders is the Crab Plovers nest in burrows along the sandy banks of beaches where they lay their eggs and use the warmth of the ground for incubating their eggs.

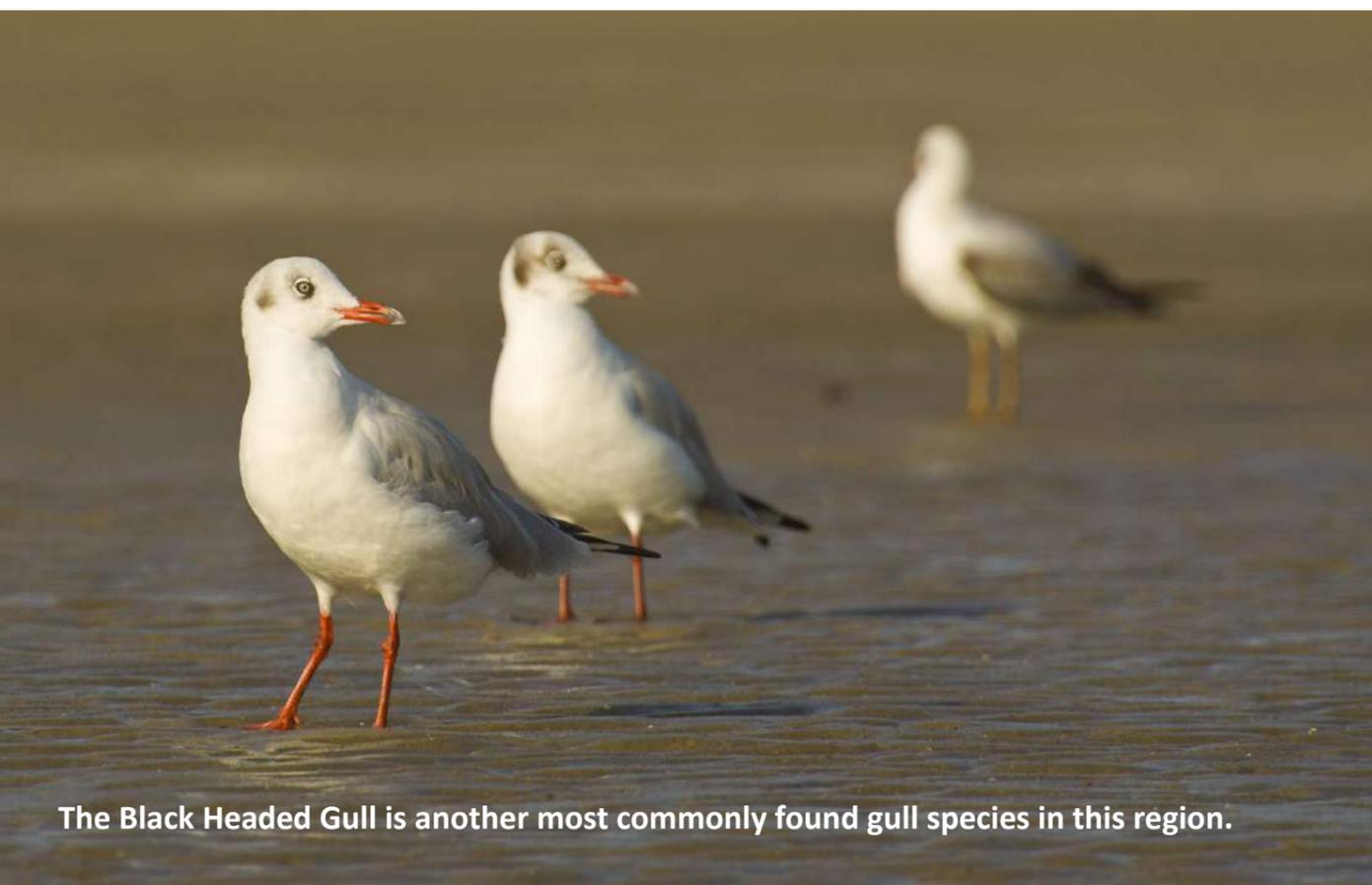
A Slender Billed Gull along with Black Headed Gulls flying in a formation.



The Crab Plovers spend most part of the early morning scanning the beach for the Ghost Crabs and the Fiddler Crabs.



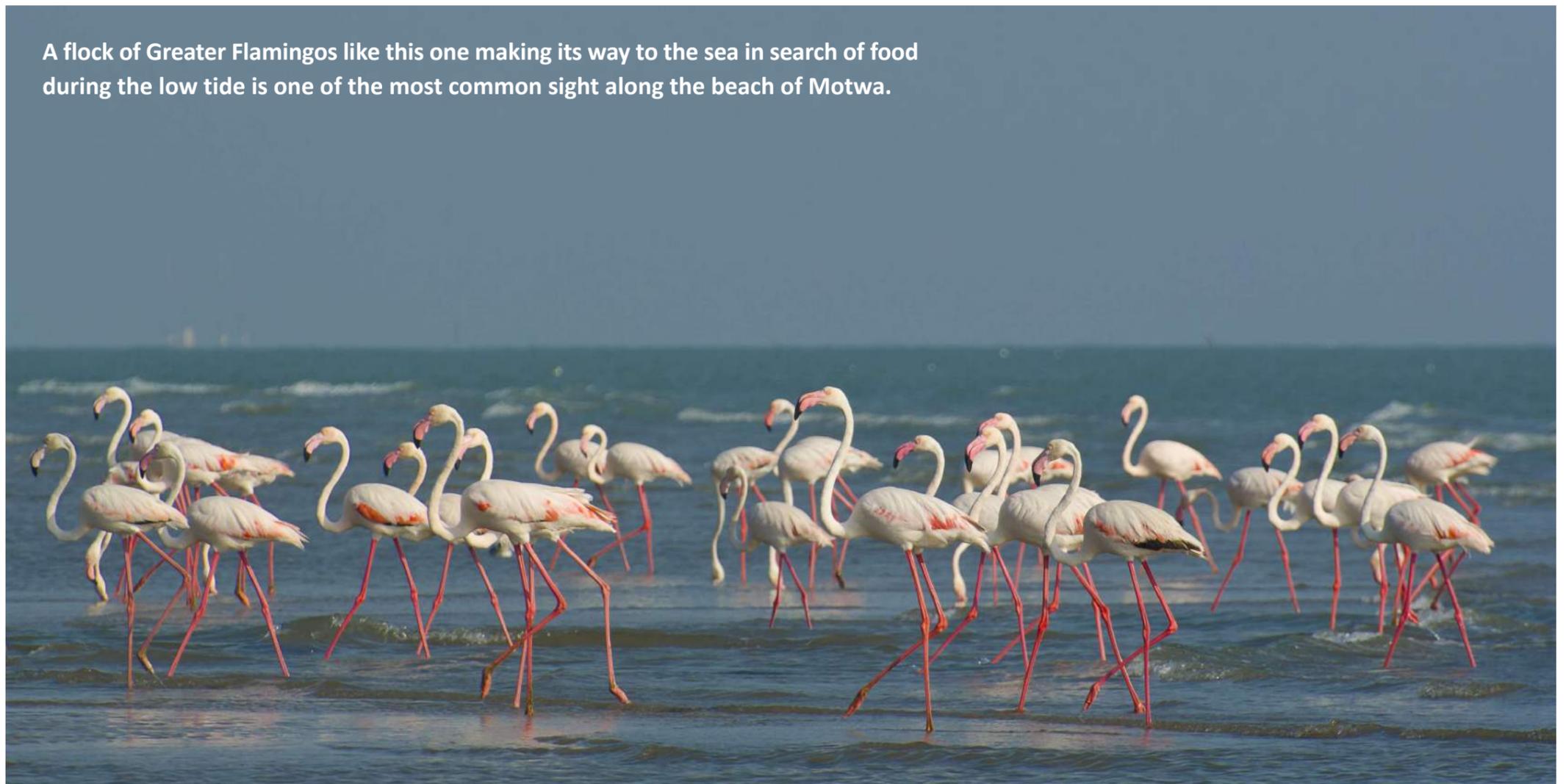
The Black Headed Gull is another most commonly found gull species in this region.



Early morning happens to be the best time to see these birds in fairly big colonies consisting up to 10 individuals including the juveniles, carefully scanning the beaches and wading into the sea for their favourite meal of a crab. The game of cat and mouse between these waders and the Ghost crab or the Fiddler crab species is worth watching. With every passing day both the predator as well as the prey are learning and devising new techniques to outrun and outwit the other one turning the calm and quiet sands of Motwa into a fiery battleground. The ever so adaptable egrets have also made Motwa their home. The Western Reef Egret and the Great Egret are the most commonly found egrets along the Motwa beach. The Egrets show tremendous amount of patience when it comes to carefully and meticulously scanning the surrounding for a potential meal. But these same birds spring into action and display unbelievable agility when they hunt down their prey. Not picky at all, the egrets eat almost everything that Motwa and the Arabian Sea have to offer. Along with the egrets the herons are also at home along the coast, the most notable one being the Grey Heron. However it is the presence of huge number of Greater Flamingos along with the Lesser Flamingos which makes Motwa a special birding destination. Flamingos are widespread all over the state of Gujarat but along the Motwa coastline they can be found in huge numbers. Typically these birds can be seen in flocks or colonies where an individual flock consists up to a hundred or even more individuals.



Another beautiful Gull species the Heuglin's Gull is very much at home in this environment and can be found in huge numbers.



A flock of Greater Flamingos like this one making its way to the sea in search of food during the low tide is one of the most common sight along the beach of Motwa.

They spend most of their time wading into the Arabian Sea where they forage in knee deep water but as the water level begins to rise they keep on inching closer towards the shore.

Unlike some other coastal regions the sea along the coast of Motwa is pretty calm, which allows the Flamingos to forage into knee deep or sometimes even deeper waters. These birds spend most part of their day burying their bills or sometimes their entire head to suck up both mud or sand and food mixed in them. There is a filter like structure in their beak which separates the food from the muddy water before the liquid is expelled out. Their menu is typically made up of tiny fish, fish larvae, planktons and shrimps. The huge presence of these birds provides the birding enthusiast with enough opportunities to study the behaviour of this species from a close range. Apart from the huge population the proximity of the flocks of Flamingos towards the beach means one can study these birds from a close range without causing any disturbance to them. Other than these resident species Motwa is also the ideal place to find some of the Tern species in the form of the Caspian Tern and the River Tern. They spend a few months along the coastline of Motwa before continuing with their annual migration. The best time for finding these Terns would be from October to December or even late January. With the departure of winter the mercury starts rising at an alarming rate which doesn't make for the best conditions for these Terns.

The contributing factors:

The beach of Motwa is virtually unknown to the tourists and as of now there is no plan on the part of the concerned authorities to turn it into a port for carrying out maritime trade affairs. These two factors have contributed immensely towards the thriving population of these bird species, especially the Great Flamingos. The Flamingos can be found all over the state of Gujarat but they can be found in such huge numbers at a very few places. Other than these factors the abundance of food and the absence of no real enemies play a big role too. Apart from the huge supply of food from the sea and the beach the birds also benefit a lot from the leftovers from the day's catch by the fishermen. The fishermen usually venture out to the beach during the high tides to set sail for fishing in the sea. Once they are back from their job they use the late morning sun and the afternoon sun to dry some of the fish from their day's catch. This in a way means for most part of the day there is very little human presence on the beach or along the coastline. This allows the birds to get on with their lives in a quiet and confident manner.

Also the fact that Motwa is located along the fringes of the Gulf of Kutch means there is no real pressure from the ever-growing human population, which in turn means there are very little human activities in terms of fishing or the maritime industrial activities going on in this part.

As a result of which the bird species which have made Motwa their home do not face any stiff competition for food from their human counterparts. One might argue that the Greater Flamingo is a species which is not endemic to this part and can be found in healthy numbers in various other parts of India as well as the world. But the sheer number in which these beautiful birds are found in Motwa makes this place so special. Since no surveys or census was never conducted in these parts hence going by what the local people told me and what my eyes witnessed the number can be anything between eight hundred to a thousand along the stretch of this beach.



A Greater Flamingo lands along the coast with a fishing boat in the background. Such small fishing boats pose no threat to these birds who ignore their presence and go about their daily business.



The fish hung in the afternoon sun for drying by the fishermen from their early morning's catch provide an easy meal to the opportunist hunters.

A Pallas's Gull soaks up the afternoon sun, these birds need to dry their wings after every fishing expedition over the waters of Motwa.



What the future has in store:

Motwa is one such success story which did not require the assistance from any external factor to turn into a birding hotspot. It has pretty much developed on its own. It is one of those few remaining places where the human population and the animals still exist in harmony. In today's world of rapid and aggressive this age urbanization it is absolutely imperative to strike the right balance so that urbanization doesn't engulf everything that stands in its way. We need to ensure such expansion of our cities or the urban world doesn't take place at the expense of the natural habitat of any wild species. In today's world we cannot afford to lose a few more species of wild animals due to the destruction of their natural habitat. The coastline of Motwa is one such natural preserve which has been a self-sustaining model for human beings as well as countless bird species for all these years. The coastline of Motwa didn't require anyone's assistance to become the birding hotspot that it is today and will continue to remain one only if we allow nature to follow its own course. It is extremely heartening to see that for the time being the future does not look bleak for this place unlike most other places across the globe. One can only hope it is going to stay like this for many more years to come. A narrow and otherwise insignificant coastline along the Gulf of Kutch happens to be the centre stage for some of the most fascinating dramas unfolding every day, which only goes on to show that the natural world chooses to hide its bounty in some of the most unlikely of places, it is up to us to discover such hidden treasure troves and above all do our very best to preserve them.



Greater Flamingos taking off along the coast to join the other flock members as dusk approaches, the flock will again return to these shores with the onset of dawn.