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# PHOTO ARTS

July 2017

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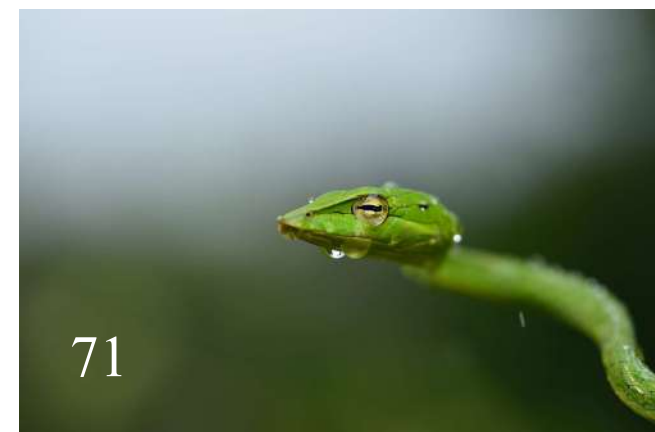
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# Reader's section

featuring the best entries from our facebook group Indian Photo ARTS



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# The Colours, Smiles and Confetti in the streets of Lausanne

photographs by Sandip De  
text by Rahul Bera



The world famous brands of ever so accurate and legendary Swiss watches are probably reflective of the discipline, punctuality and work ethics which govern the daily life of this nation as a whole. The country is blessed with one of the most stable economies in the world and boasts of being a safe haven for investors. In fact the economy of Switzerland ranked first in the world in the 2015 Global Innovation Index. The economy of Switzerland is not solely dependent on one particular sector, instead the different sectors in the form of industry, banking, agriculture, tourism, manufacturing together have contributed in strengthening the Swiss economy over the years. Even after such marvellous achievements the Swiss people cannot be classified as a work crazy, success oriented, end result obsessed race. Interestingly much of this success can be attributed to the perfect synergy which exists between the personal and professional life of an average Swiss individual ranging from a banker to the owner of a small scale business organisation. The country's phenomenal journey of becoming one of the prominent global economies today can serve as a model of what a happy and satisfied work force can achieve. Despite being thoroughly professional and competent in their respective work places the Swiss are no strangers to long public holidays, relaxing weekends, music concerts, theatrical ventures and countless ingenious ways of celebrations or

relaxations. Quiet understandably it doesn't come as much of a surprise when the industrial area of Zurich or the streets of Basel, the city centres of Lausanne or Bern seamlessly dawn the festive hat and effortlessly slip into a carnival mode to play host to their respective annual carnivals, in a way reiterating the perfect harmony between work and leisure which exists in this country. The Swiss carnival is known as "Fasnacht" in Germany and "Carnaval" in French. Throughout the year Switzerland witnesses almost 200 carnivals and though traditionally most of them are celebrated from Thursday to Wednesday, some of them are celebrated anywhere between end of January and May. Traditionally these celebrations have been scheduled in such a manner that they do not overlap with each other thereby paving the way for anyone to be a part of as many celebrations as they wish. The celebrations during these carnivals vary according to the history, heritage or culture or even the politics of that particular region. Some of these celebrations are a satirical take on the politics of that region which applies to the residents of that region only. For instance in Basel, which also organizes the biggest carnival in the whole of Switzerland, every year a particular theme is chosen which usually, highlights the political discourse of the city and the adjacent regions. Leaflets are given out to the crowds on the current topics written in the local dialect of Schweizerdeutsch. While some of these



**Keeping up with the fervent pace of the celebrations all around can be a tough ask, a smoke break can prove handy in these situations.**



**You are never too old to have fun, this gentleman with a colourfully made up face seems to be an ardent patron of that idea.**



The carnival is a joyous occasion for kids and adults alike. The revelry creates an atmosphere of joy and happiness with the confetti showers being a particular favourite among the kids.







Some of the face paintings at display during the carnival can be as elaborate as the one sported by this participant and deserve special mention as brilliant works of art.

celebrations can be political in nature, some have religious connotations associated with them. The carnival celebrations are usually linked to mainly the catholic regions, however even the protestant regions of Switzerland do have their own form of celebrations as well. The carnival of Lausanne organised in 2016 was the 32nd edition of this colourful spectacle. The carnival of Lausanne is certainly not as glitzy an affair compared to the ones in Basel or Bern, but Lausanne carnival stands out in its own rights. Traditionally the Lausanne carnival has been organised in the first week of May every year. Since its inception the festivities have only grew in magnitude and reached its pinnacle

with the 2016 edition which witnessed more than 50,000 people taking part in the celebrations. The city of Lausanne turns into a palate of colours during the carnival. The streets, the alleys, the rooftops explode with colours. The elaborate masks and headgears are a common sight, the colourful parades along the streets are a melee of colours, the relentless confetti showers heap upon anything and anyone out in the open, the dancers and the performers add to the festive spirit and above everything else the spirit of celebration looms large in the stratosphere of Lausanne. Every year for three to four days in the first week of May, Lausanne experiences all of these during its carnival. The carnival of Lausanne has traditionally featured the guggenmusik concerts. In general the event tries to combine the Swiss guggenmusik approach with the Samba dance routine inspired by the Brazilian form of carnival. Apart from these thousands of participants dress themselves up in elaborate costumes and cover themselves in attractive masks and take part in the parades. At times these costumes are themed on a particular topic or issue. Costumes and masks commonly represent famous people including politicians, or even comic characters or animals. More traditional masks recall Napoleonic soldiers. During all these years face painting too has become a popular



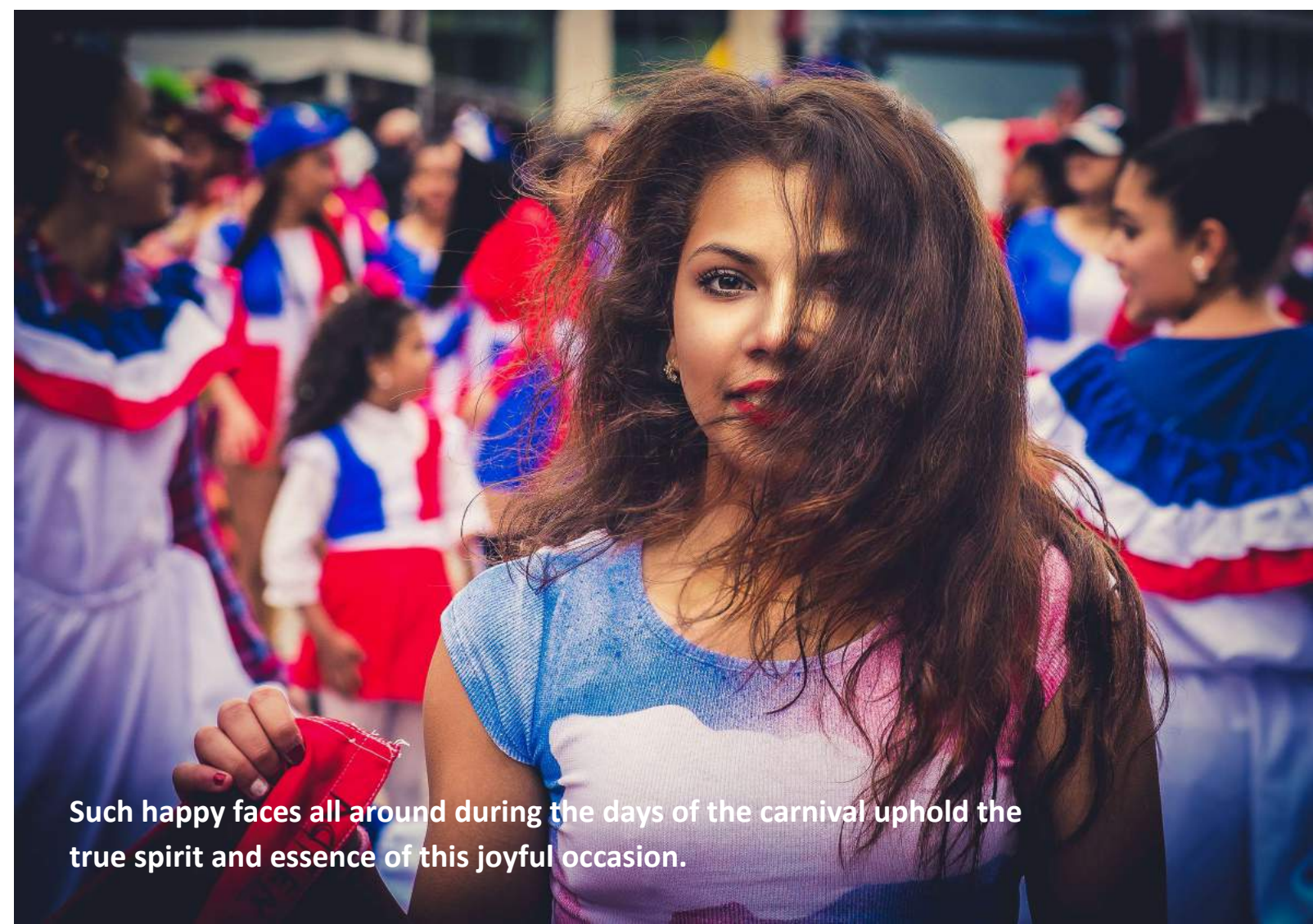
trend among the participants. All of this is accompanied by huge amount of confetti which has become an integral part of Lausanne carnival. According to some local historians, the practice of throwing confetti owes its origin to the city of Basel which later spread to the rest of the world. While there is no proof for this theory, the amount of confetti used during Lausanne carnival and other carnivals across Switzerland certainly makes a strong case for this hypothesis. For any innocent by stander, too engrossed in everything happening around them, there is the ever-present threat of being attacked from behind by a confetti-throwing mask clad participants. Needless to mention all this

Another participant all dressed up for the occasion, the amount of effort which goes into preparing themselves for the occasion is a testimony to how important the carnival is to the citizens of Lausanne.



adds to the festive spirit and such acts of “confetti violence” are usually overlooked, in fact even in some cases welcome by the victims. The confetti wars might be a probable explanation behind some of the Trans Swiss Rail trains cluttered with confetti at particular times of the year. The events throughout the day are accompanied by myriad activities and more fun filled gatherings throughout the evenings and the nights as well. Music concerts, food festivals, cultural events are all too familiar parts of the carnival. While purists may say Basel carnival is probably the most traditional one in Switzerland, there can be no denying the fact that the Lausanne carnival is fast becoming the most fascinating and the liveliest one to take place across the country. The Lausanne carnival since its inception has slowly but steadily carved a special niche in the hearts of people coming to take part in it from all over the world. For four to five days around the first weekend

Vibrant attires and elaborate costumes coupled with bright smiles across faces are the most common sights around Lausanne carnival.



Such happy faces all around during the days of the carnival uphold the true spirit and essence of this joyful occasion.



An enthusiastic participant dressed along the lines of a Brazilian Samba dancer in the streets of Lausanne during the carnival.







The Lausanne carnival is an explosion of colours marked by colourful costumes and elaborate head gears decorating hundreds of participants.



of every May the city of Lausanne adorns itself in myriad hues reflecting the mood of its citizens. Kids, youths, elderly people all become a part of these celebrations. For the citizens of Lausanne this is the time to revel in these celebrations putting their fears, sorrows, and anxieties aside until the streets are cleared of confetti. This is the time when the citizens of Lausanne rise above their day to day petty affairs and embrace the life around them. True to its essence, the carnival of Lausanne serves as a reminder to each and every one who is a part of it that every once in a life it is important to take a step back and enjoy the way life unfolds at its own definitive pace in front of our eyes. From a historical perspective the carnival of Lausanne and other carnivals across Switzerland owe their origin to the pagan celebrations in ancient Greece and Italy centred around winter and spring solstices and spring and fall equinox even long before the emergence of Christianity. Even after the pagan people embraced Christianity they refused to give up these wild celebrations, as a result of which while remaining under the folds of Christianity these festivals and celebrations continued to thrive and paved the path for carnivals almost all over Europe and in other Catholic societies as well. In ancient Europe for most of tribes winter was a period of limited resources, hardships, a time during which the merciless winter spirits reigned supreme. For these people carnivals were



a form of ritual which can also be looked upon as a rite of passage from darkness to light, from winter to summer, from long cold days of hardships and starvation to a season of plenty, a season of clear blue skies marking a new beginning. In other words carnivals were a celebration of the departure of long harsh winters and the beginning of spring, which was looked upon as a joyous occasion, one which certainly called for massive celebrations. The carnivals or the celebrations were also occasions when people would have their last hearty meal before the fresh produces of spring would become available to them. The end of winter also meant dwindling food stocks and rations as most of it had been used up during the winter months. Typically there would be a shortage of food and people were limited to the minimum necessary food supply until spring blessed them with a fresh bounty. The remaining stocks of lard, butter and meat which were left over from the winter would soon start to rot and decay due to the rising spring temperature. To prevent their stored food from going to waste the people used to organise a huge feast in which they would consume all the remaining food and have their last hearty meal before the fresh produces of spring would become available to them. Typically these feasts used to coincide with the celebrations or the then form of carnivals quietly adding to the grandeur of the occasion and making the whole occasion all the more significant. The carnival of Lausanne brings unbridled joy to the residents of this city. The young kids eagerly wait all throughout the year for their favourite carnival to arrive and turn their city into a fairy

tale like “candyland”. For the others the carnival is a well-deserved break from their respective daily routines and schedules and a time for them to indulge in oodles of fun and fun filled activities. The sense of harmony, the spirit of celebration, of coming together and the celebration of brotherhood, friendships, and kinships are the few things which remain with everyone long after the streets have been cleared off confetti. The carnival visits the city of Lausanne once a year and sweeps the city off all negative feeling, pessimisms and during its brief period of stay fills the air of Lausanne with a renewed sense of vigour and energy. For some the carnival is a great healer, while for others the same carnival is the harbinger of fun and for the kids the carnival is nothing less than the proverbial Santa Claus spreading gifts of joy all over their city. The display of myriad colours during the Lausanne carnival, the colourful spectacles and frames all around the streets of Lausanne, the richness of colours in the costumes, the masks somehow serve as a pleasant reminder to the festival of Holi. The two festivals even though separated by thousands of miles and different from each other in so many regards are probably tied together by the single common thread of joy and happiness, which is probably the one connecting dot among all festivals across the globe.





The parades are endless, the costumes are vibrant, the smiles are refreshing and above everything else the positive energy all around is infectious.





## About the Photographer

**B**orn and brought up in Kolkata, India, Dr. Sandip De is a scientist by profession and currently based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Sandip 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.

facebook: [www.facebook.com/sandipdephotography](https://www.facebook.com/sandipdephotography)

Website: [www.sandipde.com](http://www.sandipde.com)

instagram: [@sandipde\\_photography](https://www.instagram.com/sandipde_photography)



# Those who Rule Solapur's Skyline

by Narendra Arvind Pandit

**B**lessed with superior aerial abilities, sharp and powerful talons coupled with a hook like beak which together infuse terror in the hearts of their preys, unmatched predatory instincts and above all excellent eyesight, the raptors are the true rulers of the sky, in a league of their own. These birds are better equipped in most departments when compared to their other winged relatives. Since time immemorial these big, powerful birds have enthralled us and have etched their places in our mythologies, folk-tales, literature, and art as a symbol of strength, grace and valour. Our romance with these powerful predators is not a newfound one. These birds have repeatedly found mentions in the hieroglyphs in ancient Egypt, they have time and again found their places as key elements in our mythologies and legends, their pictorial depictions have dotted the walls of ancient caves dating back to the Stone Age, our ancestors were as much in the awe of these powerful predators as we are. The image of a huge bird of prey, an eagle or a falcon with its wings spread out, was and still is a symbol of courage among men of war. The magnificent sight of an eagle or a falcon gracefully gliding along the slopes of a mountain, or over sandy dunes or ice capped mountains can be an advert for everything that is strong, courageous and beautiful on this planet. The term “raptor” is generally used to denote a group of modern day predatory birds which are equipped with hook like beaks for tearing through the flesh of its prey, strong and piercing talons for grabbing and holding on to its victim. Hawks, eagles, vultures, kites, ospreys, falcons, and owls are all among the birds sometimes considered raptors, or birds of prey. While the phrase “birds of prey” may have a wider implication, from an ornithological stand point the phrase refers to birds that have very good eyesight for finding food, strong feet for holding food, and a strong curved beak for tearing flesh. In spite of these generic common features shared by most members belonging to the “birds of prey” family or the classification raptors, the members of these individual families can be quite







different from the others. The raptors or birds of prey are widespread across the globe. There are more than 500 species of raptors found throughout the world. Their excellent adaptation skills have made them the undisputed rulers of the sky from frozen tundra and scorching deserts to dense forests and bustling cities, making them the key apex predators in every environment.

Solapur in Maharashtra is possibly best known to any birding enthusiast for the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary. These critically endangered birds are clinging on to their last remaining safe haven in the grasslands of Solapur. While the grasslands are home to this exotic bird species the sky of Solapur on a daily basis handles a heavy traffic of powerful winged predators, the raptors who like elsewhere in the world are the undisputed rulers of this sky. The semi-arid grasslands of Solapur provide these raptors with the ideal hunting opportunities. Almost all of these birds are blessed with excellent vision and can spot their prey from a great distance while circling up above in the sky. The unobstructed view of these arid plains devoid of any dense vegetation for most parts provides these birds with the opportunity of picking up the slightest of movements on the grounds. Some of the commonly found birds of prey in Solapur are Greater Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Pallid Harrier, Brahminy Kite, Black-winged Kite, Shikra, Indian Eagle Owl, Short-eared Owl among others. While the others are primarily diurnal in nature, the owls prefer to go about their business in the cover of the dark of night. Their nocturnal way of life is based on one of their better assets, their incredible vision. The Indian Eagle Owls, a species of large horned owl prefer hilly and rocky scrub forests as their homes and the grasslands of Solapur interspersed with small rocky mounds or hills provide them with their preferred real estate.

The Peregrine Falcon is best known for reaching speeds well over 300 km/hr during their characteristic stoop or dive in pursuit of its prey, earning it the reputation of being the fastest member of the animal kingdom. The silhouette of this winged hunter piercing through the overhead sky is an ominous sign for the lesser ground dwellers in the arid plains of Solapur.





**The Short -eared Owl gets its name from the small tufts of feather on its head which resemble mammalian ears. These tufts of feather are so small often they are not visible.**



A habitat shot of the Short-eared Owl. These birds prefer to nest on the grounds which are concealed by low vegetation. The moderate grass cover on the plains of Solapur provides these owls with the perfect cover for their nests.





The Indian Eagle Owl finds itself perfectly at home in the rocky terrain of Solapur. Tragically this bird over centuries have found itself at the receiving end of many a superstitious believes in which it has been portrayed as an incarnation of the devil. Executed by humans for over centuries now, this species is now battling for its survival.

They are easily recognisable by the signature tufts on their heads and the splashes of brown and grey all over their plumage. Their diet mainly comprises of rodents, however any unfortunate smaller birds including partridges, doves, Indian rollers even smaller owl species such as the spotted owlet may fall prey to these skilled predators on any unfortunate day or rather night. Unfortunately their appearance instead of finding too many admirers has evoked a sense of fear among people and even in this age finds itself at the centre of many superstitious believes and practices. Like many other large owls they are considered birds of ill omen and their deep haunting calls are widely recognised as a precursor to death. These superstitions have led to a widespread execution of these birds threatening their numbers in the wild. Famous ornithologist Salim Ali referred to two such rituals executing these birds worth mentioning. In one the bird is captured, starved and beaten with the hope it would start speaking like a human and transform into a soothsayer, while the other involves possessing a lucky bone of these birds which is supposed to bring the owner good fortune. Quite understandably these false beliefs coupled with a demand in illegal pet market and poaching have significantly reduced their numbers in the wild. The other winged predator belonging to the owl family in these grasslands is the Short-eared Owl. Their curious nomenclature

can be attributed to the short tufts of feather on their heads which resemble a mammal's ears. These tufts are so small that in some cases they go undetected. Compared to the Indian Eagle Owl this species is smaller in appearance and can be described as a medium sized bird measuring 35-45 centimetre in length. One of the most widespread owl species the Short-eared Owl finds itself equally at home in the arid plains of Solapur as it does in some of the colder climates of Europe or North America. They prefer to nest on open grounds concealed by light vegetation, usually tallish grasses. They prefer to line their nests with weeds, grass or feathers. The female usually lays a clutch of 4-7 eggs which after a period of 4-5 weeks of incubation hatches. Although it is mostly active during night this species is not strictly nocturnal, it remains fairly active during day or early dawn. Like other owl species rodents feature at the very top of their menu. Smaller mammals such as moles, bats, ground squirrels, even smaller birds at times feature in their menu as well. Due to its widespread habitat their population faces no immediate threat, although declining numbers in different parts don't augur well for the future of these birds. The kites as well are among frequent fliers in the skies of Solapur. The ones most commonly found are the Brahminy Kite and Black-winged Kite. Kites are medium sized birds of prey. Although while in flight they resemble falcons their



The Greater Spotted Eagle is one of the largest raptors to soar in the sky of Solapur during the winter months. Like most eagles they are blessed with excellent eyesight and are superlative fliers.



The female Montagu’s Harrier is remarkably different from the male. Slightly larger in appearance than the male the female has a darkish brown plumage with white upper tail rumps, visibly different from the pale grey plumage with black wingtips as can be seen in the males.



A juvenile Indian Eagle Owl. The tufts of feathers on their heads are not as pronounced as the adults.





Kestrels like most raptors are excellent hunters. Typically they hover above the ground before making the final attempt. They mainly feed on small mammals and rodents however they are known to prey upon smaller birds like a grey necked bunting here which has fallen victim to this male kestrel.



**The Common Kestrel is a widespread species of raptor belonging to the falcon family. The species exhibits pronounced sexual dimorphism, the males (as the one seen here) possess fewer black spots and streaks and display a blue grey cap and similar plumage on their tails while the females display a brown tail with black bars and are devoid of the blue grey cap on their heads.**

tail structure is distinctly different from those of falcons. The Brahminy Kite is a medium sized bird and is distinctive and contrastingly coloured, with chestnut plumage except for the white head and breast and black wing tips. They primarily feed on fish and prefer to live and nest communally close to some water body. However they are no stranger to hunting down smaller mammals and rodents or even small birds. These birds have been known to team up to mob larger birds of preys to rob them off their hunts and share the spoils of their teamwork. Its winged cousin the Black-winged Kite is comparatively smaller in dimensions and has a preference for open grasslands. It can be readily recognized by the long wings with black shoulder patches and a predominantly grey or white plumage and black eye stripe. A persistent pursuit is followed by a noisy courtship which ultimately leads to mating between the pair. The female puts in considerable effort to build the nest and incubate a clutch of 3-4 eggs. The male takes part in incubation too, but once the eggs hatch most of the male's efforts are concentrated on foraging for food. Insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, lizards, small rodent even small snakes make up their menu. It displays dual traits of a harrier and a kestrel during its flight for a hunt. The harriers to frequent the skies of Solapur are the Montagu's Harrier and the Pallid Harrier. Harriers are medium-sized raptors and usually prefer to fly low or hover while hunting over open country, often marshes or grasslands. Their unique facial disk helps them hear prey much better which consists of small mammals and rodent. These birds can



**The White-eyed Buzzard easily recognisable by the distinct white iris of its eyes is a medium sized buzzard which soars in the sky of Solapur. A widely distributed species the White-eyed Buzzard is equally at home in the plains of Solapur as well as along the slopes of Himalayas in the north up to an elevation of 1000 meters or more.**



also hover for brief periods as they hunt. Both the Montagu's Harrier and Pallid Harrier exhibit sexual dimorphism. The Pallid Harrier is a winter migrant to the grasslands of Solapur. It breeds in the southern parts of eastern Europe and central Asia and during winters to escape the cold migrates to India and other parts of south east Asia. Adults measure 40–48 cm long with a wingspan of 95–120 cm. Males weigh approximately 315 g while the females are slightly larger and weigh around 445 g. The male is whitish grey above and white below, with narrow black wingtips. The female is dullish in appearance compared to the male and is primarily greyish brown in colour with white upper coverts. The Montagu's Harrier on the other hand named after British naturalist George Montagu exhibits particularly apparent sexual dimorphism. The adult males display overall pale grey plumage with contrasting black wing tips, while the females are dark brownish in appearance. Like Pallid Harriers these birds are also migrants in nature. Birds from Eurasia spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa, while those from the eastern part of the range migrate to the Indian subcontinent. For breeding the Montagu's harrier requires a large open area, with sufficiently tall ground vegetation which will provide them cover from any approaching threat. They prefer to perch on small trees, rocks, mounds to scan their surroundings for any lurking threat. The open grasslands of Solapur provide them with the ideal hunting grounds with minimal obstructions.



**The Montagu's Harrier is a migratory bird of prey and is a winter migrant to the plains of Solapur. The species exhibits sexual dimorphism and the males appear distinctly different from the females. A male Montagu's Harrier can be readily identified by the distinct pale grey plumage all over it.**

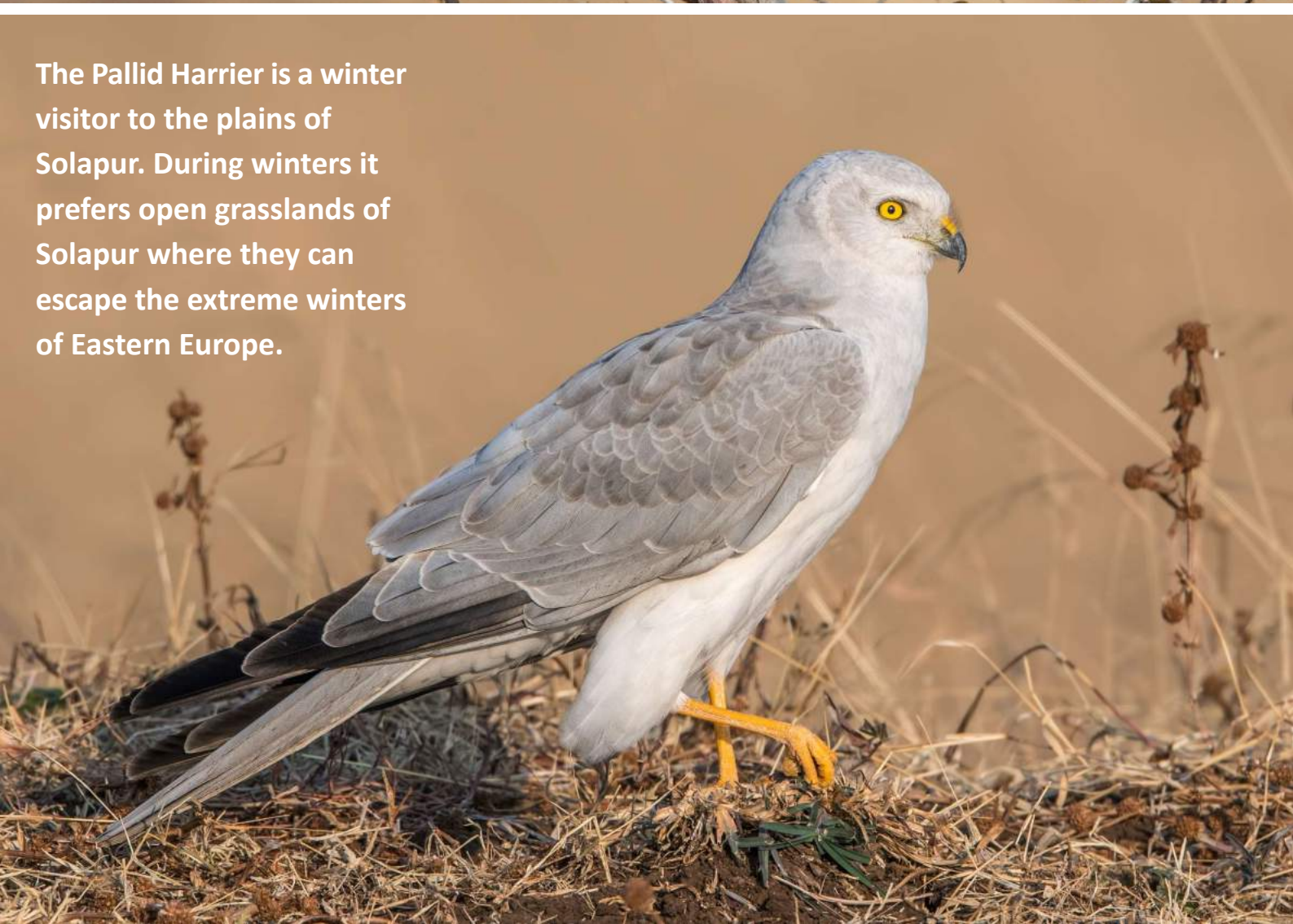
Soaring higher than probably any other birds in the sky of Solapur, in their inimitable graceful manner are the eagles of Solapur. The skies of Solapur are no strangers to the mighty Greater Spotted Eagle and the Short-toed Snake Eagle. The eagles are the largest of all raptors and in general are huge birds with massive wingspans. The Greater Spotted Eagle measures 70 cm in length with an average wingspan of 160-180 cm. They typically weigh in the region of 1.6-2.5 kg although occasionally a very large female may weigh in excess of 3 kg. This bird is a winter visitor to the grasslands of Solapur, where they spend the winter months to escape the harsh extreme winters of Europe and Eurasia. However this magnificent species is on the brink of extinction primarily due to poaching and excessive habitat loss. The Short toed Snake Eagle is smaller in comparison to its northern relative. It is a fairly widespread species extending from the Mediterranean basin, into Russia and the Middle East, and parts of Asia, mainly in the Indian Subcontinent and also further east in some Indonesian islands. They can be easily identified by their predominantly white underside, the upper parts being greyish brown. The chin, throat and upper breast are a pale, earthy brown. As the name suggests they have developed a particular liking for snakes and have been known to regularly prey upon snakes. Apart from snakes, lizards, small mammals also feature in their menu. The Short toed Snake Eagle is probably the most accomplished flier in its genus and spends more time airborne than any other member of its family.







Black winged Kites like most raptors are excellent hunters. Their diet mainly consists of insects such as grasshoppers and crickets however their superior hunting skills allow them to prey on small mammals such as this rodent.



The Pallid Harrier is a winter visitor to the plains of Solapur. During winters it prefers open grasslands of Solapur where they can escape the extreme winters of Eastern Europe.



A juvenile Black-winged Kite displays brownish plumage on its head and underside. As they mature these brownish spots disappear only to be replaced by their trademark white plumage.





Brahminy Kites are a widespread species of raptors found all over south-east Asia and are particularly known for their affinity towards fish.

While on a hunt it prefers to soar over hill slopes and hilltops at an altitude of 500 m or more. While it is true their population is not under any immediate threat in the middle and far eastern part of its habitat, in Europe however their population is on a steady decline mainly due to the rapid loss of its natural habitat.

These winged predators have graced the skyline of Solapur for many decades now. A topography suitable for their flight, an abundance of prey, the perfect climate for some to escape the harsh extreme northern winters, lack of threats from humans, all these factors together have contributed in making Solapur a favourite destination among the raptors. The wide variety of birds of preys which can be found in Solapur is truly amazing and speaks volumes of the ideal and preferable conditions available for these excellent hunters. However like in so many other parts of the world even here the birds are not completely safe. Loss of habitat at a rapid rate still remains a huge problem lurking in the horizon, rapid urbanization is also forcing many of these birds to move to different grounds or look for newer habitats. Urbanisation brings with itself a whole lot of other by products which can adversely affect the well-being of these birds. The noise, the pollution, the bright street lights are some of the factors which can often disrupt the way of life of these birds and many other birds for that matter. It is not uncommon for raptors or other birds to abandon their nests in the wake of trouble or disruption, which the city life along with its off shoots definitely causes. In the wake of all of this the birds have stayed strong and resilient and are still gracing the skies of Solapur and its adjoining regions. The birds have been doing their bits and will certainly keep on battling against all odds, it is about time we too take up some of the onus to ensure these amazing creatures keep soaring high up in the clouds for many more centuries to come.



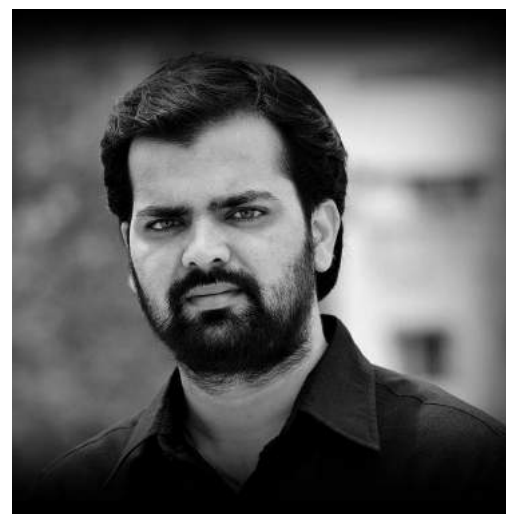
**The female kestrel appears markedly different from their male counterparts without the male's signature blue grey cap on its head.**



A Short-toed Snake Eagle scans the plains of Solapur for an easy unsuspecting prey. Although these eagles will feed on small mammals they have a particular affinity towards snakes and specialises in hunting them.



## About the Photographer



**N**arendra Arvind Pandit's busy schedule could never come in the way of his love for wildlife and the natural world. Being a resident of Solapur and an avid wildlife enthusiast the natural world and its treasures in and around Solapur are well known to Mr. Pandit. He has

made countless trips to the wilderness of Solapur to document some of the fascinating creatures which inhabit these plains through his photographs. Apart from being a wonderful cameraman, which is evident from his works, Narendra Arvind Pandit is considerably knowledgeable about the animals which he documents which is one of the main reasons why he has been able to produce such brilliant bodies of work time and again. An avid traveller his journeys are not just restricted to the grasslands of Solapur, he is a frequent traveller to other parts of India as well and has had a first-hand experience of witnessing some of the best kept secrets of the natural world unravelling in front of his eyes.





# Discovering Bisket

by Aptratim Saha



The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal is a land which is all too familiar with festivities and religious celebrations. Some of these festivals are hundreds of years old, dating back to the time of the different dynasties and kingdoms which used to rule this ancient land. While some of these practices, rituals, celebrations have been lost in time, some have lived on through the generations, kingdoms have fallen around them to be replaced by new regimes, old traditions have made way to newer ways of life but these festivities have stood the test of time and is still very much prevalent in different parts of the country. Like elsewhere in the world festivals in Nepal are primarily occasions to express religious devotion and reaffirm social ties. Almost all such events take place in accordance with the lunar calendar. Every year the streets and alleys in the city of Bhaktapur come to life to witness one such celebration. Bhaktapur plays host to the momentous occasion of Bisket Jatra in the month of April every year which for many centuries has found a special place in the hearts of Nepalese people.

The ancient Newar city of Bhaktapur may have lost the patronage which it used to enjoy during the great Malla Kingdom when it used to be the capital of Nepal until the second half of the 15th century, but the city still remains a very significant one to most Nepalese people. Bhaktapur



The chariot and the procession along with it form the most integral part of this festival.

which literally translates to the “place of devotees” is located in the Kathmandu valley barely 8 miles from the capital city of Kathmandu. Historically Bhaktapur has been home to the Newars, who are considered to be the original inhabitants of Kathmandu valley and the chief architects behind shaping the heritage and culture of this region. Even till this day many Nepalese refer to Bhaktapur by its old name of Bhadgaon (pronounced bud-gown) or the Newari name Khwopa, which means City of Devotees. Bhaktapur has not one but three major squares full of towering temples which uphold some of the finest architectural works in the whole of Nepal. Essentially Bhaktapur is a city which has strong religious overtones associated with it, with its skyline dominated by the magnificent temples which are an all too familiar site throughout the city, the name Bhaktapur and its literal translation-the place of devotees, suit the ancient city perfectly. Bhaktapur was located on the ancient trade route between India and Tibet. As a result of which the city since time immemorial has been a witness to the confluence of different cultures and ways of life. That probably has played a significant role in making Bhaktapur a hotbed of traditional art and architecture, culture, music, historical monuments, weaving industries, craft work and its temples which are awe inspiring. Bhaktapur has always boasted of



being one of the best-preserved ancient cities in Nepal. In fact for its traditional culture, temples, wood, metal and stone artwork Bhaktapur was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Tragically, the severe earthquake in 2015 unleashed its full wrath on Bhaktapur, in the aftermath of which entire streets of traditional houses were lost to this natural disaster. The iconic temples were not as hard hit with only a few of them destroyed, however the traditional buildings around the city were not so fortunate. A large number of such buildings were destroyed in this disastrous event and those which survived the horrific ordeal have since been declared uninhabitable and are now being torn down. Although the city has picked itself up and strived every day since then to leave these horrific memories far behind, the temples, the houses, the streets, the alleys of the city still bear the scars of the disaster. These scars are still fresh and serve as a grim reminder to that fateful event. However, even a disaster of such epic proportions couldn't break the spirit of this ancient city and its people. The city even after having endured such a nightmare came to life in all its glory and upheld its true spirit during the following Bisket Jatra. Bisket Jatra is one of the most important annual festivals celebrated in the city of Bhaktapur. The festival begins four days prior to the Nepalese new year according to the Bikram Sambat calendar and continues for four days after it. The little



The enthusiasm surrounding this festival can be felt in every nook and corner of the city.

more than a week long celebrations see thousands of people belonging to all age groups flooding the streets of the city to be a part of this grand festival. The famous festival, which is observed for eight nights and nine days, as per historical records has its origins rooted in the ancient Lichchhavi era (c. 450-c. 750). Some people believe this festival was started by Jagajyoti Mallya a Mallya dynasty king who ruled Bhaktapur from 1613 to 1637.

Legend has it that this celebration is the “festival after the death of the serpent.” Prominently observed at the advent of spring, it is a festival of human emotions that are symbolically depicted through the multiple aspects of the festival. The central point of folklore, as it goes, is about the slaughtering of a pair of snakes by a handsome young man bestowed with tantric powers. It is said that the two serpents came out of the nostrils of a beautiful princess when she sneezed at midnight. In the twinkling of an eye, they transformed into huge serpents.



The chariot carrying the statue of God Bhairava the patron deity of Bhaktapur makes its way through the streets of the city.





Every male who married the princess of the city in those mythical times was sadly found dead the following morning. After a number of grooms lost their lives, one clever young man decided to stay awake the entire night. No sooner than the princess had fallen asleep a pair of snakes slithered out of her nostrils and assumed huge proportion. The young man was ever so prepared for such developments and acting quickly, he disposed of the monstrous creatures with the help of his sword and broke the curse which was plaguing the city and the princess. Since then the citizens of Bhaktapur has been celebrating Bisket Jatra to mark the triumph of good over evil through



the ritual crash of the iconic chariots symbolising the consummation of marriage.

Bisket Jatra is celebrated differently in various parts of the city based on the respective traditional rituals and ways of celebrations. A huge chariot carrying the statue of God Bhairava, the patron deity of Bhaktapur forms the most essential component of these celebrations. Hundreds of workers assiduously assemble the chariot near the Nyatapole temple in the city prior to a month of Bisket Jatra. The festival starts with the procession of the chariot of Bhairav from a place called Taumadhi. Local people and citizens of Bhaktapur take turns



Sacrifices made on this auspicious occasion form an integral part of the celebrations and pave a way for the opportunists to make some quick buck.



The festival opens its door to people from all age group, everybody forms an essential part of these celebrations.



in pulling the chariot through the streets of the city. The locals believe that as God Bhairava embarks upon this journey, the other deities too descend upon the city from their divine seats, making this an incredibly holy and pious occasion. To commemorate such a momentous occasion all the temples of Bhaktapur are opened to the public and visitors throughout the festival. As the festivities come to an end, the deities return again to their respective divine seats. The excitement and fervour surrounding the journey of God Bhairava in this huge chariot reaches its pinnacle at Bhaktapur Durbar square where the chariot is pulled by hundreds of people to the Khalna Tole. The most spectacular event on Bhaktapur Durbar square is a huge tug-of-war which takes place between the residents of the upper and lower half of the town. Each team tries to pull the chariot towards their part of the town however eventually irrespective of the result the chariot heads toward the village of Khalna Tole. In keeping with the traditions and rituals of the festival on the fourth day of the festival a huge ceremonial wooden pole approximately 25 meters tall locally known as “Yosing Dyo” or “Yohsi” (male genital) is erected on top of a stone base known as “Yoni”(female genital). This ceremonial pole stays up until the following day when residents of the lower and upper halves of the city again engage in a tug of war, in a quest to bring down the pole towards their respective sides of the city. As the 25 meter tall ceremonial pole crashes into the ground it signifies the beginning of the New Year. The festivities continue for four more days into the New Year. The themes of these celebrations vary a little in different parts, as can be seen in the villages of Timi and Bode. In the village of Timi the villagers engage in a procession carrying the images of the Gods or carry them in small homemade chariots. During this procession the villagers smear themselves with red powder or “sindoor”, thereby naming the procession as “Sindoor Jatra”. These processions are accompanied by the music of “dhime” a typical traditional Newari drum. The village of Bode witnesses a different ritual at play. In Bode this festival is accompanied by a tongue piercing ceremony, with one chosen villager spending the entire day with an iron spike pierced through his tongue. The festivities all over Bhaktapur are





**The Sindoor Jatra is one of the highlights of this whole ceremony.**

accompanied by many traditional events and rituals and conclude after several days of spiritual enhancement and merry making which spills over to strengthen the existing bonds between the citizens, even forge new bonds and relations. Bisket Jatra is an extremely significant festival in the lives of these people. Known to all, Bisket is an important occasion that brings families, friends and relatives close together to further strengthen the existing feelings of kinship. Bisket like many other festivals in Nepal is associated with deep-rooted religious faiths and traditions, but also produces the far reaching and widespread positive effects of creating an environment of peace and communal harmony among people and inspire them to celebrate in a spirit of communal harmony. Being a part of these festivities or even being a mere witness to these celebrations can be an unforgettable experience, one which is bound to stay in the pages of our memories. Bisket Jatra in all its glory is a true celebration of human spirit, the spirit which celebrates the triumph of good over evil, the spirit which makes us compassionate, empathetic, in other words which makes us humans.





The revelry which goes on throughout the duration of the festival encapsulates the true essence and spirit of this momentous occasion.








## About the Photographer

**A**pratim Saha is a commercial photographer specializing in people photography, portraiture, lifestyle & editorial clients. Besides commercial works, he takes a keen interest in any other subject which stimulates his visual or emotional sensibilities. He is blessed with more than thirty years of experience in the field of photography from analogue to digital. He has been a national Geographic Stock photographer for the past 12 years and also a Getty Image member since the last 10 years. He holds the distinction of being the brand ambassador for Datacolor, the leader of colour technology, for India since the last 3 years and a mentor and brand ambassador for Tamron Lenses too from this year. His work has been featured in reputed global publications on many occasions which include the National Geographic, Italy's most prestigious magazine 'The Postinternazionale' and 'We Photo' which published his work on Maha Kumbh Mela. His work "Making of a Devi" was exhibited at Camden Centre in London in 2016. He has been involved with Chiiz magazine for almost a year now in the capacity of a consultant. Asian Photography covered some of his work in one of their editions along with an interview and featured it in their "Pro Photographer" section. 121clicks.com a prestigious online magazine too has published one of his interviews. He is a featured photographer of Life Force Magazine which has published several of his works. In spite of his busy schedule he regularly conducts several photography tours across India and elsewhere and is involved in mentoring budding talents. He takes time out of his schedule to judge various photography competitions all over the world and encourages the works of upcoming young talents.



A green snake with yellow markings is coiled on a dark, textured branch. The background is a dense, misty forest with soft, out-of-focus light filtering through the trees, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is mysterious and serene.

A natural sanctuary to over 300 globally threatened species, a place where life explodes along the slopes and crevices of mountains older than the mighty Himalayas, a place which has made it to the coveted UNESCO world heritage site list for its amazing bio-diversity, a place which despite zoologists' and naturalists' best efforts, till this day, carefully preserves countless closely guarded secrets of the natural world which make it possibly one of the most enigmatic wildernesses in the natural world, the Western Ghats in a nutshell, is all of these above. The mountain range of Western Ghats also known as Sahyadri runs parallel to the western coast of India for approximately 1600 kilometres ranging from the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra till Kanyakumari the southern tip of India. The laps of these mountains are home to hundreds of species of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds and thousands of species of flowering and non-flowering plants. However the true fact remains, these numbers along with other facts and figures can at the best provide a partial account of what these mountains truly are. These numbers and other statistics fail to give an account of the soul of these mountains which lies camouflaged in the forest floors, on other occasions remains nestled in the thick overhead canopies, or at times lurk in the shadowy undergrowth. The hundreds of species of micro and macro organisms, the thousands of plant species together form the soul of these forests and each of them plays an extremely crucial role in finishing the jig saw puzzle the Western Ghats is.

# Where Life Explodes in the Mist

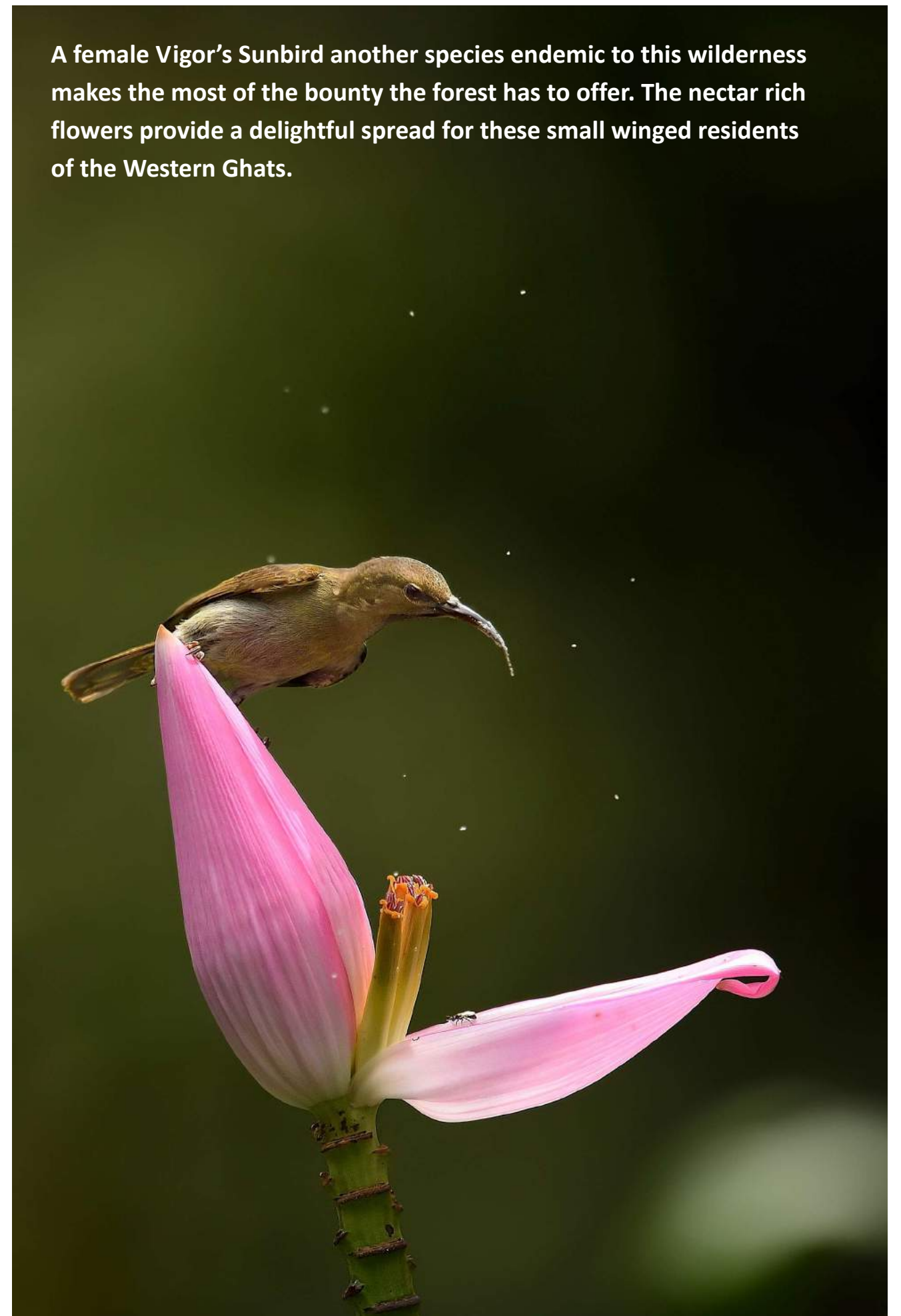
by Arvind Ramamurthy



The varied and complex levels at which life pans out every day along the slopes of these mountains is a wonder in itself. The forest floors, the mountain slopes, the overhead canopies are the canvasses where the epic struggle between the predator and prey, the unending quest of the fittest to survive unfold on a daily basis. These struggles, these rivalries to stake their own claims to the elements of the forests, the ingenious methods adopted by every creature to safeguard their futures, all together form the beating heart and soul of this mighty and mysterious wilderness. The rich diversity in the flora and fauna of the Western Ghats is a direct consequence of the diverse ecosystems dotting these landscapes. This diversity ranges from tropical wet evergreen forests to montane grasslands, making this wilderness home to a large assemblage of animal and plant species. Quite understandably the climate of this region plays a crucial role in contributing to this diverse ecosystem. The climate in this region varies largely with the elevation of the mountains and the distance from the equator. The lower reaches of these mountains typically experience humid and tropical climates and are generally home to wet evergreen rain forests. The forest covers assume different nature as the mountain slopes reach an altitude of 1,500 meters or above. Typically elevations of 1,500 meters and above in the north and 2,000 meters and above in the south experience a more

temperate climate and as a result an ecosystem which is markedly different from the tropical rainforest ecosystem found at lower elevations. In fact the mountains themselves play a crucial role in shaping the climate of this region, which is of paramount significance not just to the forest dwellers but also to the millions of human beings who call these mountains their home. During the monsoon the Western Ghats stands tall in the way of the moisture laden trade winds sweeping in from the Arabian Sea. Having met with a formidable opponent in the form of these mountains the moisture laden winds are forced to rise up, during which they condense to form heavy rain bearing clouds and eventually deposit copious amount of rain along the slopes of these mountains. Rainfall in this region averages 300 to 400 centimetres with localised extremes touching 900 centimetres. The eastern regions of the Western Ghats which lie in the rain shadow, receive far less rainfall of about 100 centimetres resulting in an average rainfall of 250 centimetres across the entire regions. In a way this entire cycle of rains shaping the climate of this region which in turn shapes the bio-diversity of this wilderness are intertwined and to a huge extent determined by the lofty and crucial presence of the Western Ghats. Spread over an area of approximately 160,000 square kilometres the wilderness of Western Ghats alone accounts for almost 30% of India's bio diversity. With

**A female Vigor's Sunbird another species endemic to this wilderness makes the most of the bounty the forest has to offer. The nectar rich flowers provide a delightful spread for these small winged residents of the Western Ghats.**

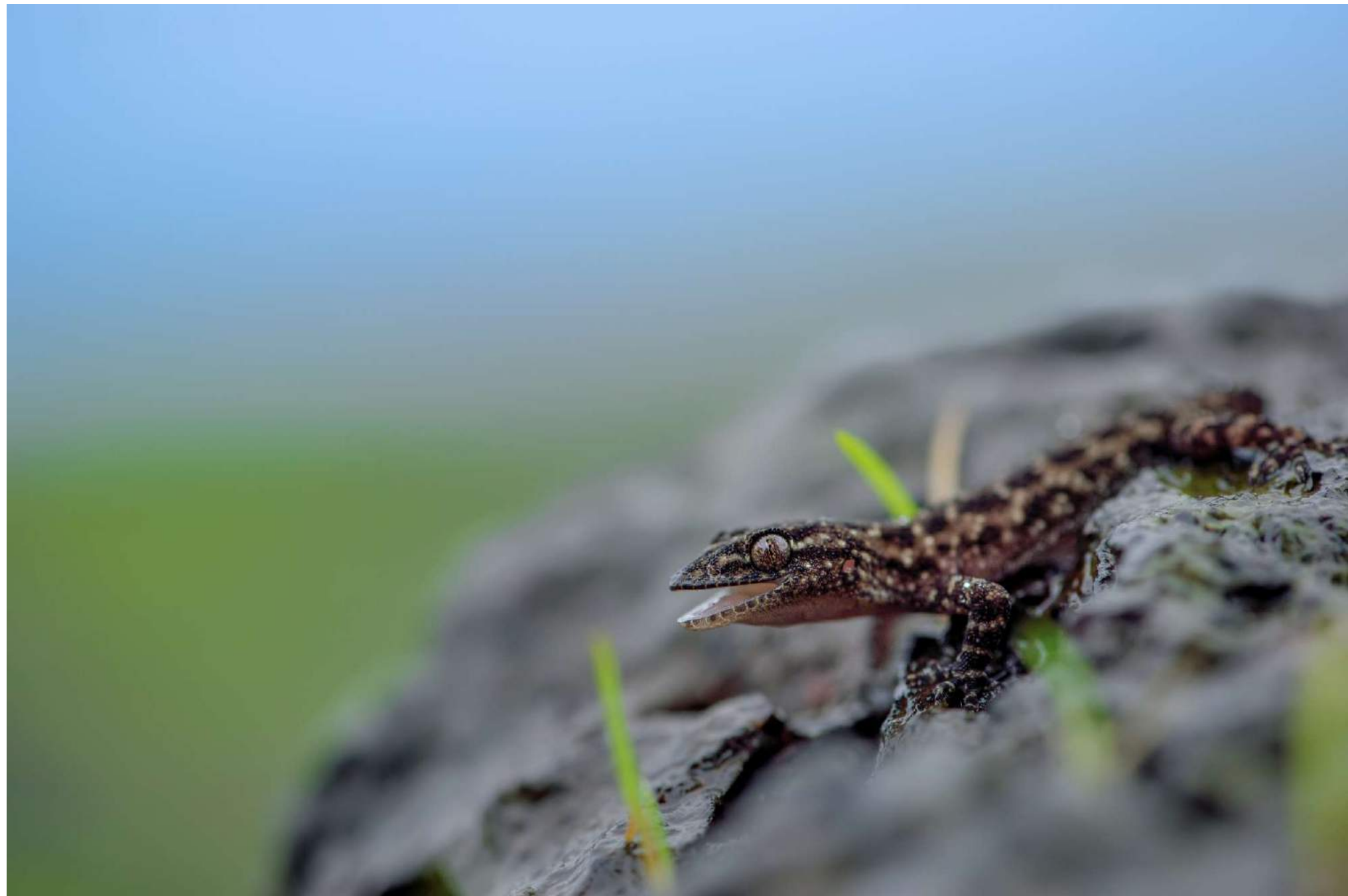




**An up close encounter with the famed Malabar Gliding Frog.**



**The widely distributed Hemidactylus brookii more commonly known as Brooke's gecko named after British naturalist James Brooke founds itself very much at home in the moist monsoon dominated climate of Western Ghats.**



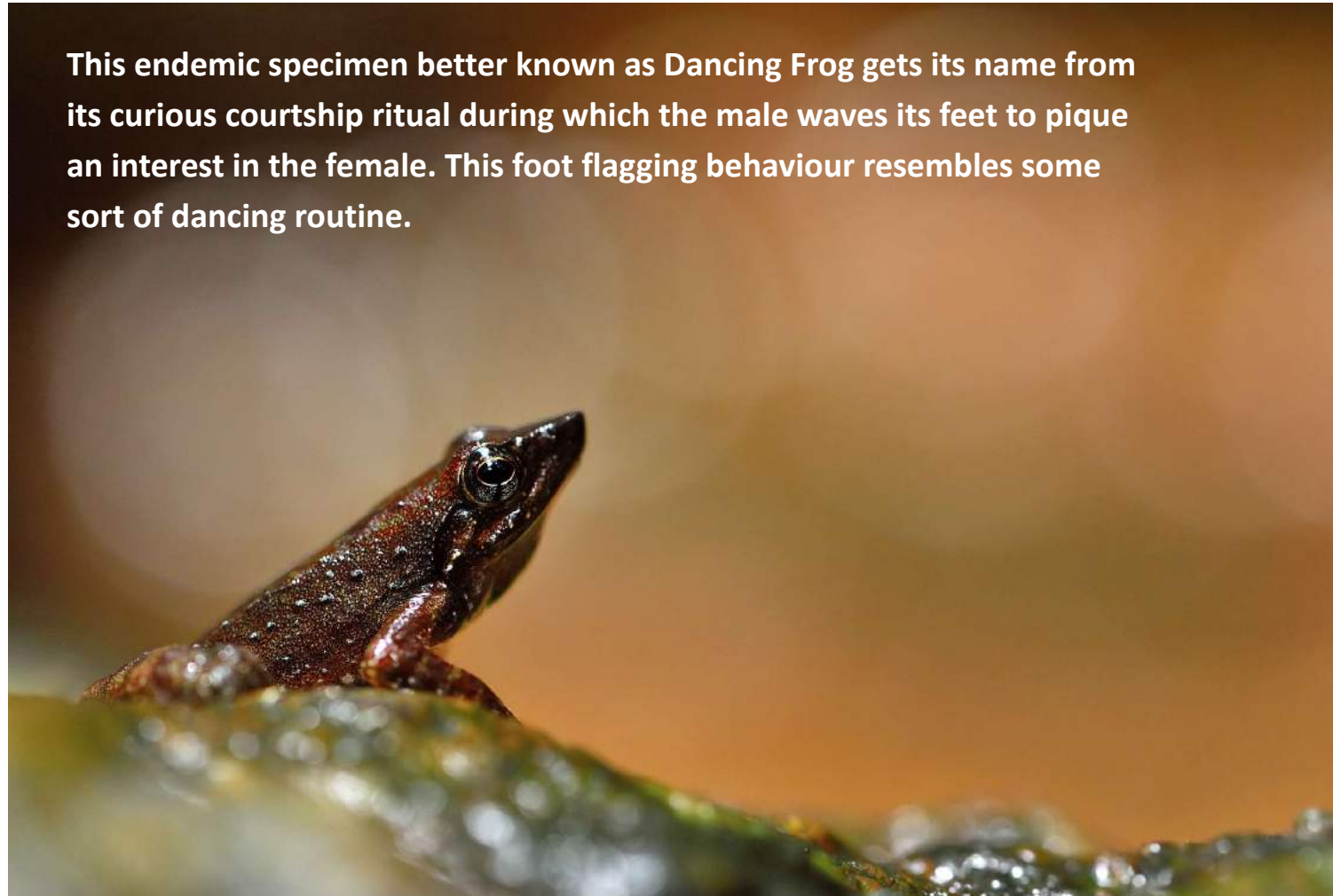


approximately 140 mammal species, 260 reptile species, more than 500 bird species and close to 200 amphibian species the forests of Western Ghats tower above any other wilderness in the country when it comes to natural diversity. These are the species which have been discovered and presently known to science, there can be absolutely no doubt the forests of Western Ghats hide countless more gems of the animal kingdom in its realms, which are yet to be discovered by science. Many of these species are endemic to these mountains and can be found nowhere else in the world. The huge covers of wet evergreen forests are particularly well suited for a plethora of amphibious creatures along with reptiles and their mammalian and feathered neighbours. This is an ode to the secret lives of the reptiles and amphibians of Western Ghats. They come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, some are as tiny as the thumbnail, some come equipped with the brilliant art of camouflaging themselves, some are armed with venom glands while some rely on a hasty retreat for survival. The lives of these creatures shrouded in mysteries are still an enigma to most of us. This is a humble attempt to shed some light on some of the aspects of these remarkable existence this remarnable wilderness of the Ghats. The wet forest floors, the ever flowing streams of waters, the lakes and other water bodies spread across the forest floor,

**Another endemic nocturnal arboreal frog species to find its place in the list is the Wayanad Bush Frog. The night air filled with their calls bears a testimony to their nocturnal nature, as can be seen in case of this particular individual engaged in a calling frenzy.**



**This endemic specimen better known as Dancing Frog gets its name from its curious courtship ritual during which the male waves its feet to pique an interest in the female. This foot flagging behaviour resembles some sort of dancing routine.**



the dense moist undergrowth all facilitate the booming amphibian population. The forests of Western Ghats boast of 93 endemic frog species, a clear testimony to this being an amphibian stronghold not just in India but all over the natural world. The most widely recognised one being the Malabar gliding frog or the flying frog known for its ability to cover a remarkable distance of up to 1 foot or more as it almost glides through the air during its jump. It can be anybody's guess where the actual number of different frog species stands in these forests and what percentage of it is known to science. Every now and then the forest floors spring new surprises to zoologists and naturalists like they did in the early part of 2017, when scientists discovered as many as 7 new miniature night frog species, which are small enough to fit perfectly on the top of a coin or a thumbnail. The reptiles too have made this wilderness their own over the years. A mind boggling 260 species of them is evidence to this claim. The endemic Malabar pit viper has been an exclusive resident of these forests for time immemorial now. The king of all venomous snakes, the mighty King cobra too has developed a particular liking for the forests of Western Ghats although it can be found in other parts of India and in some of the other South East Asian countries. The saw scaled viper, the Russell's viper, the green vine snake, the bamboo pit viper, the



The Malabar Gliding Frog is a species endemic to these mountains is a tree frog species and spends most of its lifetime in the trees. Its unique ability to perform gliding jumps of up to 10 meters or even more by stretching the webbings between its toes during a leap led to its curious nomenclature.



Indian cobra are some of the other commonly found snake species among many others in the forests of Western Ghats. This safe haven for hundreds of species of animals has been subject to keen human interest over the years. Among other things the mountain slopes, river beds and valleys of Western Ghats are rich sources for various minerals and mineral ores namely iron, manganese, bauxite and others. Over the years several mining companies and industries have set up their bases in and around this region, and despite the best efforts by the concerned authorities illegal mines and mining sites have flourished all over the region. These forests are no stranger to human exploitation. In fact the exploitation of the natural resources of the Western Ghats began as early as the British rule in India. As the British government introduced railways in this region, the forests witnessed a large scale felling of trees to make way for the railway tracks and for the dire need of timber for the fast developing infrastructure. However over time our greed got the better of us and somewhere down the

line the margin between greed and need became blurred. In the quest to make more profit within the shortest time possible each and every industry dependent on these forests ranging from the mining industry, the timber industry, the fishing industry and others are subjecting the forests and their natural resources to a lot of pressure. In the face of such overzealousness the forests hardly get any time to replenish the previous losses. The consequences are far reaching and severe, the rapid losses in the forest cover leading to the loss of habitat of hundreds of species and their subsequent dwindling population or even extinction in some cases, the increasing animal human conflict, the major upset caused in the delicate eco-system of this region as a whole are some of the noteworthy ones. Apart from all this the increase in human settlements in and around the forests of Western Ghats has also taken its toll on the forests. The rise in human settlements has led to the over exploitation of forest resources through activities such as livestock grazing, firewood collection for fuel. In the period between 1920 to 1990 an estimated 40% of the natural vegetation in this region was depleted. Unauthorised large scale fishing has also contributed significantly to the perils which plague the well-being of this wilderness. Most of these activities go unmonitored and occur well within the



protected boundaries of the animal reserves located in the Western Ghats. The fishermen in order to reap maximum benefits from their efforts use traditional methods such as use of poison or electrocution of fishes. Such methods have a trickling effect and fatally affect other creatures which are part of the same eco-system even though the fishermen show little or no interest in them. Such large scale hunting of fishes has also led to some of the exotic species going extinct or struggling for existence. The increases in human settlements along the fringes of these forests coupled with increasing human activities have resulted in an increase in the number of vehicles plying through this region and unfortunately have triggered a disturbingly increasing trend of incidents of roadkill. Over the last two decades or so there has been a steady increase in traffic plying through the routes cutting through the forests. As a direct consequence incidents of animals getting run over by traffic or traffic coming in the way of a passing herd of elephants or gaur are becoming more and more common these days. The presence of a significantly large number of traffic also does hamper the natural movements of the animals from one part of the forest to the other which is never a good thing for large mammals living in herds where they are dependent on significant resources on a daily basis. The silver lining in the midst of such bleak backdrop is the intent shown by the concerned authorities to



**The majesty of a Malabar pit viper endemic to the Western Ghats is something no naturalist can ever get tired of. The famed pits on display here right in front of their eyes are crucial to the hunting abilities of these serpents. These heat sensitive pits enable these snakes to produce a thermal image of their surroundings allowing them to pinpoint their warm blooded preys even in complete darkness by sensing their body heat which particularly during nights is higher than the surroundings.**



**Indirana chiravasi** or commonly known as Amboli leaping frog is one among the many species endemic to the Western Ghats. This frog species was discovered as recently as in 2014, a testimony to the fact that the Western Ghats still remains a treasure trove of natural wonders which it has carefully preserved over centuries.



Small crevices along the foothills of the mountains or an unsuspecting rock lying along a stream in the Western Ghats carefully hides small gems of the natural world like this Purple Crab for whom these are essential refuges from its predators.



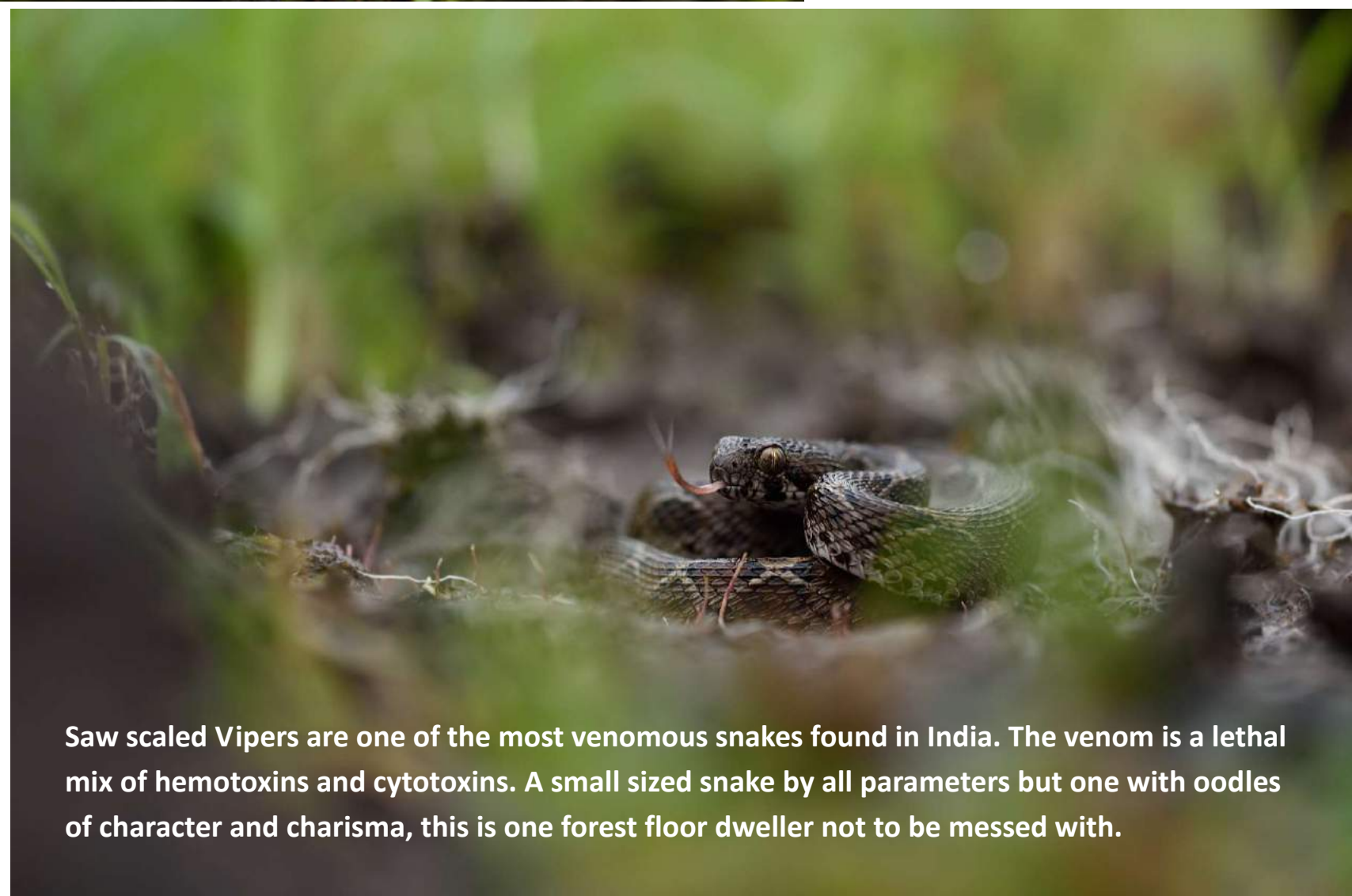
tackle these issues, although one may argue they were at least 40 years too late in waking up to these problems. Over the years some significant steps were taken by the authorities to safeguard the future of these forests, and one such significant step was the formation of the Gadgil panel in 2010. The government to address these issues and to promote conservation setup the Gadgil panel in 2010. The panel is officially recognised as the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), although it is popularly known as the Gadgil panel after Professor Madhav Gadgil, the chairman of this panel. Based on their researches and findings the panel submitted their report in 2011 in which they recommended that the whole of Western Ghats should be divided into 4 zones. It was recommended that the responsibility of denoting 4 separate zones in the Western Ghats should lie with the Western Ghats Ecology Authority which would also incorporate inputs from the local authorities and local communities. Although the recommendations made by the Gadgil Panel which included the setting up of a national level authority, the Western Ghats Ecology Authority was criticised for being too environment friendly and not in sync with the ground realities, the report was considered by UNESCO which added the 39 serial sites of the Western Ghats to the World Heritage List. In the wake of these criticisms faced by the Gadgil Panel, the Kasturirangan committee was constituted to examine the WGEEP report. The Kasturirangan committee suggested certain modifications to the Gadgil Panel report. This panel among other changes suggested instead of the total area of Western Ghats, only 37% (i.e. 60,000 sq. km.) of the total area be brought under ecologically sensitive area (ESA) and suggested a complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA. The panel also strongly advised against any thermal power set up in the region and hydropower projects to be undertaken only after a detailed study of its impacts on the environment.



**A Montane Trinket gracefully makes its way through the rain drenched forest floor. Montane Trinkets are non-venomous constrictor snakes known for their fierce temperament. Primarily diurnal in nature these snakes can be often seen during the daytime on the lookout for a potential meal.**



**A tragic loss of yet another animal's life as a keelback lies dead after being run over by a vehicle in Amboli. Incidents like this are becoming far too common as the number of vehicles plying on the roads through these forests keeps on increasing every year.**

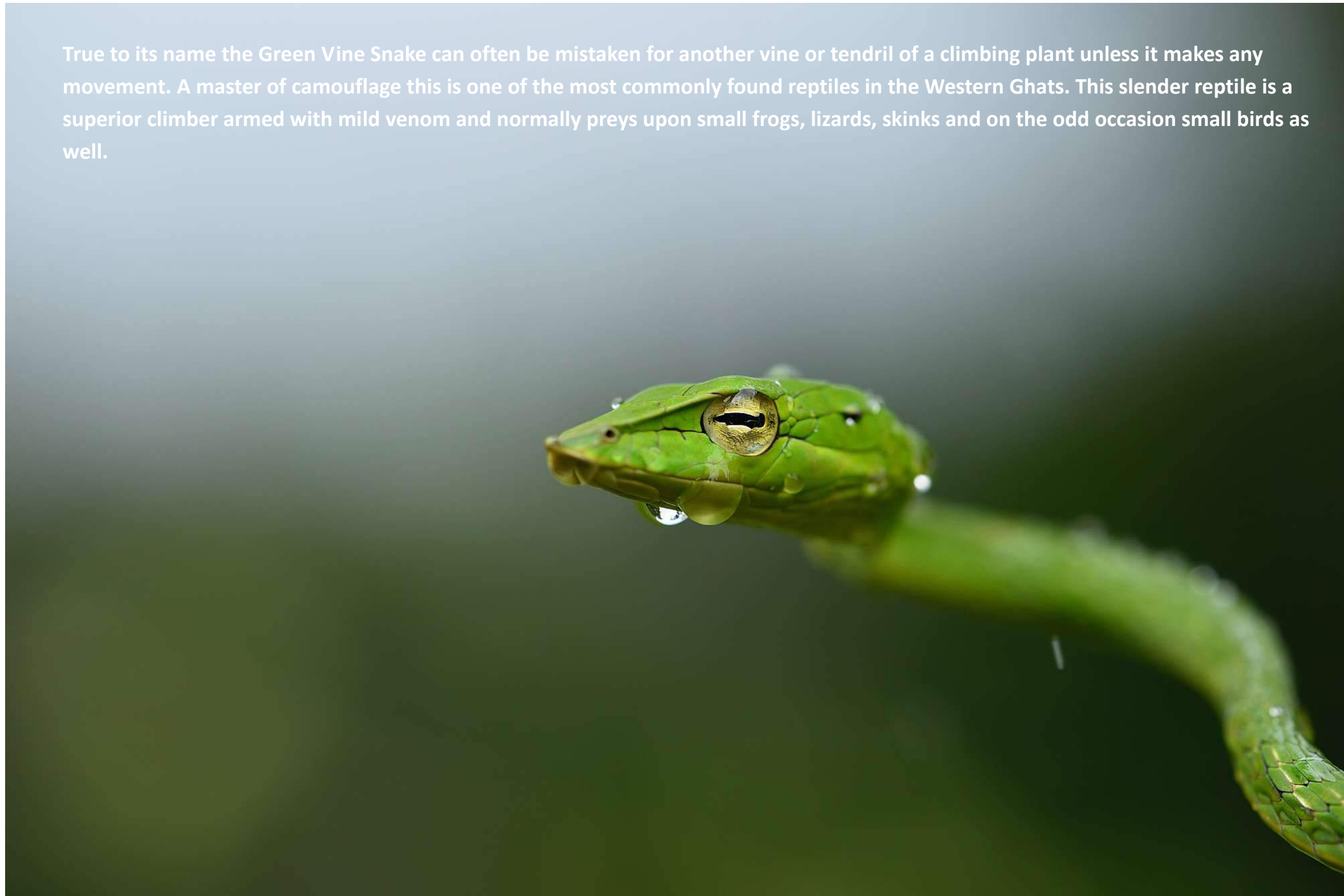


**Saw scaled Vipers are one of the most venomous snakes found in India. The venom is a lethal mix of hemotoxins and cytotoxins. A small sized snake by all parameters but one with oodles of character and charisma, this is one forest floor dweller not to be messed with.**



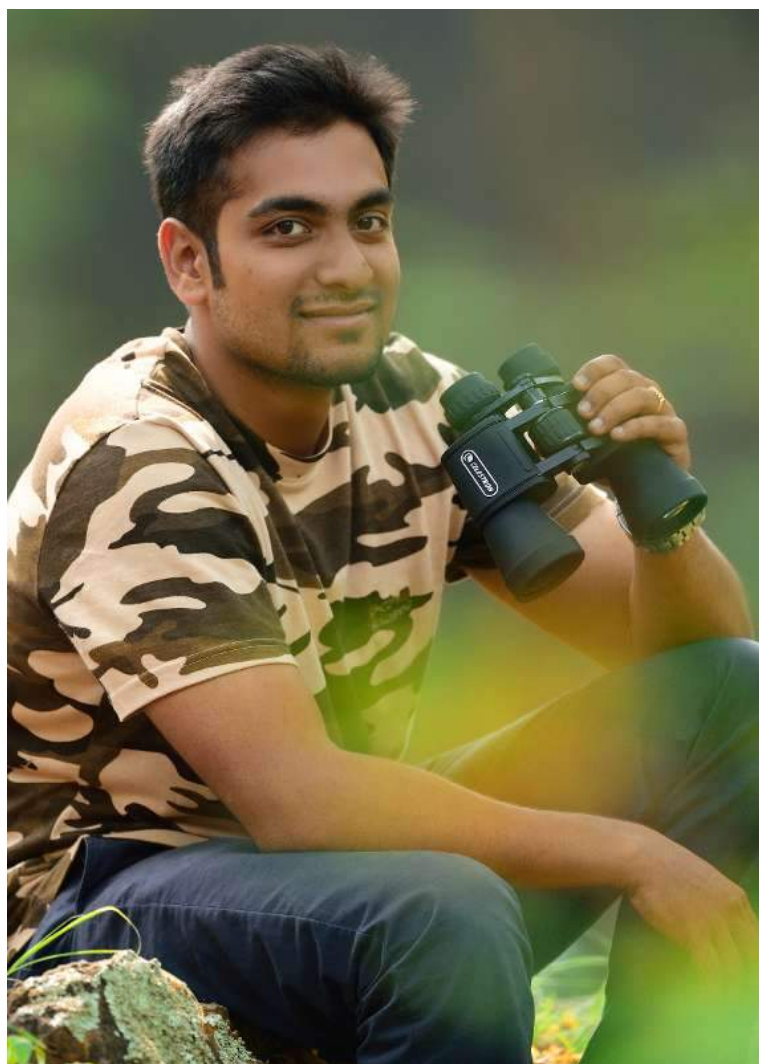
Apart from such major steps taken by the authorities there are plenty of independent bodies or organisations which are working tirelessly to safeguard the future of this magnificent wilderness. Their efforts may not make the headlines on a regular basis, but they are of tremendous significance as well. Initiatives such as sensitising the local communities, in order to create a sense of awareness so that they are more respectful towards the forest and sensitive in dealing with the dwellers of these forests and natural resources, encouraging the local people to bring about small changes in their daily lives which will have a positive impact on the environment can go a long way in creating an environment of mutual respect between the humans and the forest and its creatures living around them and eventually ensure a safe and harmonious future for the forests of Western Ghats. There can be no argument regarding the need for power or minerals or other natural resources which the Ghats have to offer. However the need of the hour is to devise a sustainable model of using up these resources, one which will allow nature to recuperate and regenerate. The forests of Western Ghats are home to hundreds of creatures ranging from the tiniest of frog to the imposing elephant, these animals have shared a wonderful relationship with these forests, as a matter of fact their fates are thoroughly intertwined. If we can only

True to its name the Green Vine Snake can often be mistaken for another vine or tendril of a climbing plant unless it makes any movement. A master of camouflage this is one of the most commonly found reptiles in the Western Ghats. This slender reptile is a superior climber armed with mild venom and normally preys upon small frogs, lizards, skinks and on the odd occasion small birds as well.



respect this beautiful relationship between the forest and all its dwellers which has unfolded over millions of years the forest is capable enough of taking care of the rest. The world has already lost countless species and thousands of acres of vegetation, it would be a real pity and a disaster of epic proportions to lose yet another ecological stronghold, more so since this wilderness in it its realms still preserves many a secrets and mysteries of the natural world.





## About the Photographer

**A**rvind Ramamurthy is a wildlife enthusiast and photographer residing in Bengaluru. His love for wildlife is not a newly found one. At a very early age he was introduced to the magnificent kingdom of nature and its animals through various art works and art forms. There has been no looking back for this love affair since then, one which has withstood the rigors of time and has only increased manifolds. His tryst with the camera is a rather recent affair. His main aim for picking up the camera was to explore the unparalleled beauty abundant in the natural world and to showcase it to the rest of us through his photographs. Despite his busy schedule he is no stranger to the wilderness and his photographs bear testimony to the unprecedented love for animals and the natural world which he has carefully harboured and nurtured since a very early age.

For more of his works visit: [www.arvindramamurthy.com](http://www.arvindramamurthy.com)



# Costa Rica's Canopies: a treasure trove of feathered gems.

by Supreet Sahoo



The brilliant blue of its feathers, the turquoise crest on top of its head, the red in the legs make up the little beauty that the red legged honeycreeper is. The species however exhibits pronounced sexual dimorphism and the females are remarkably different from the males appearing pale greenish with streaked underparts. The slender and slightly curved beak allows these birds to feed on nectar, which possibly led to the allusion made to honey in its taxonomy. Insects and fruits too make up a significant part of their diet.





The unique location of Costa Rica in the world map, where it is nestled in between the North and the South American continents plays a vital role in making the Costa Rican wilderness one of the prime wildlife destinations in the world. Courtesy this curious placement of the country in the world map, Costa Rica's forests are an amazing assortment of species which inhabit the two American continents. These forests are home to hundreds of species of mammals which include the rarely seen sloth, the tropical rain forests are the perfect home for a huge number of reptilian and amphibian species, giant orchids with exquisite colour patterns and of course the hundreds of species of birds which decorate the forest canopies with their brilliant colours. This is an ode to these feathered forest dwellers, whose chatters fill up the air, the vivid plumage appear as a splash of vibrant colours on the palate of the most eccentric artist. The winged jewels of Costa Rican forests come in all sizes and shapes, some are fruit eaters while some prefer to scavenge on rotting meat, some are fast fliers while others are gentle gliders, some prefer to lead a solitary existence while others are more social. It is this diverse existence of these feathered creatures which turns the forest canopies of Costa Rica into a tapestry of colours, with details more intricate than the highest order of craftsmanship known to us.

The tropical lowland forests of Costa Rica provide the ideal home to the King Vulture. This large bird is found across Central and South America. The plumage is predominantly white with black wing tips. It is the head of this bird which garners the maximum attention. The head and neck are devoid of feather but resemble a palate of colours. A varied combination of pink, purple, orange, yellow and red paints the slightly wrinkly skin on their heads and necks. However the most distinguishing feature in these birds has to be the reddish golden crest on top of its beak. Staying true to the reputation of other vultures the king vulture too primarily is a scavenger. Not at all a fussy eater, the king vulture will feed on any carrion it can dig its beak into. While its eating habits may not be so dignified, the bird has earned quite a celebrity status for itself. The king vulture finds repeated mentions in the Maya mythologies where it is portrayed as a god with the body of a human and the head of a bird. It found its mention in the stamps of quite a few countries such as El Salvador, Belize, Honduras.

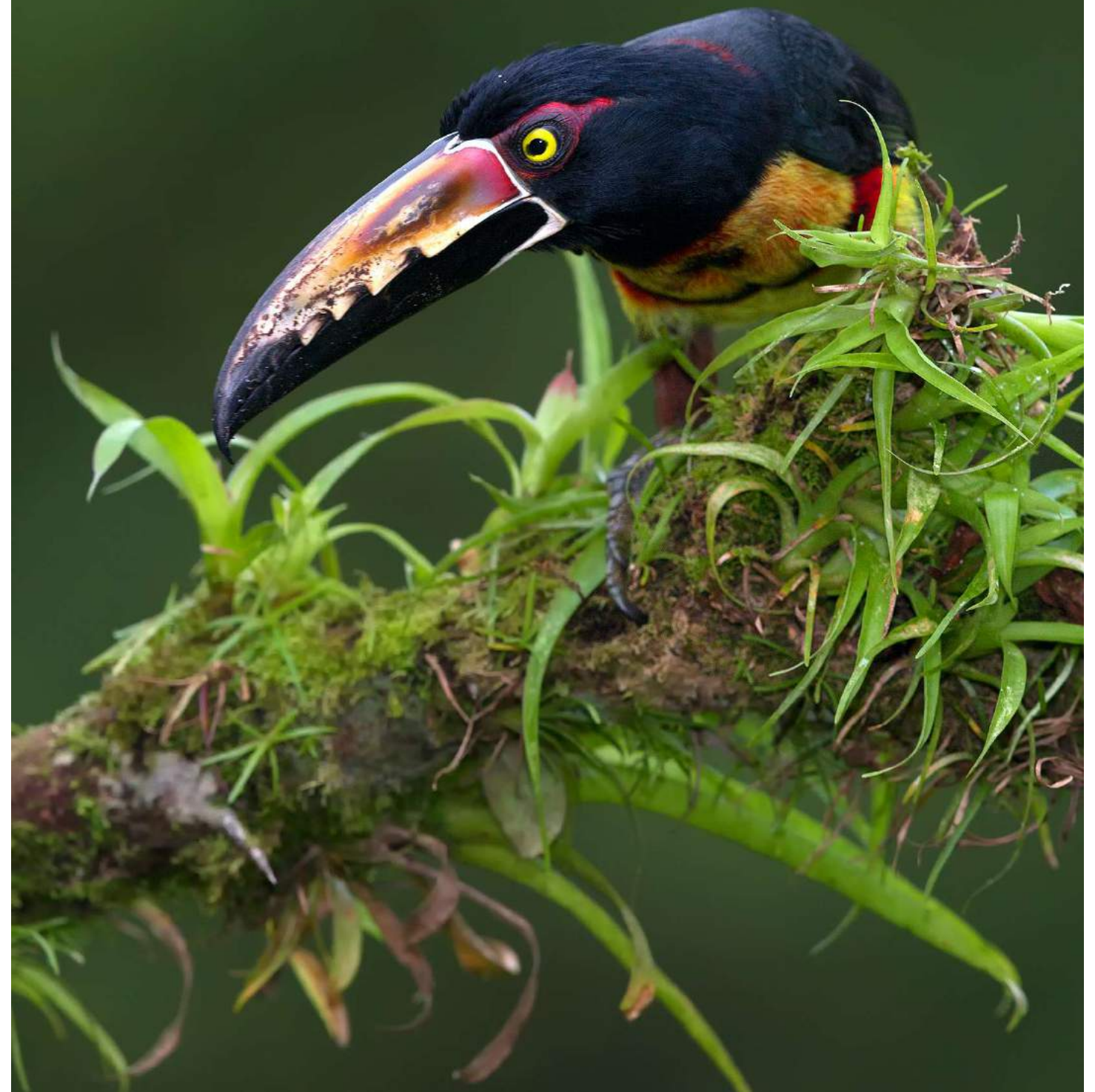


It is nearly impossible not to be amazed by hummingbirds. These tiny feathered creatures are nothing short of being one of the natural wonders of the world. Quite literally this species has a big in fact a giant heart; an average hummingbird's heart rate is more than 1200 beats per minute. Hummingbirds are best known for their flight speed, with wing beats between an astonishing 50 to 200 flaps per second. Depending on the conditions the hummingbirds can achieve a maximum forward flight speed of 30 miles per hour which easily goes up to 60 miles per hour in a dive.



There are more than 325 hummingbird species found in the world and the green violet seen here is one among them found in the tropical forests of Costa Rica. Like other hummingbirds the green violet too is an avid fan of nectar and the long, slender, slightly curved bill makes its job of sucking nectar all that easy. Like most hummingbirds the green violet too is brilliantly coloured. This fast moving speck of colours may be tiny but there is a lot to admire about these winged beauties.

The collared aracari is a toucan found commonly in the forests of Costa Rica. Like most toucans the collared aracari sports a large bill and displays bright plumage. Of all the toucans the collared aracaris are the most social. In some cases a single nest may house up to six different individuals. This highly sociable bird prefers to spend its life in lowland forests and open woodlands. These birds are resident breeders and tend to spend the whole of their life rooted at one place. Being an arboreal species fruits make up the bulk of their diet, although insects, lizards, other small mammals do feature in their diet. The smooth jet black of its back and the contrasting bright yellow of its underparts, along with that huge beak which often sports a vibrant pattern of colours is an endearing sight to any birding enthusiast.







There are few prettier scenes in the wild than a flock of scarlet macaw flowing over the wilderness displaying their brilliant red plumage with the iconic dash of yellow and blue. These largest parrots are natives of humid evergreen tropical South American forests and have a wide range of habitat extending from Mexico to Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil. Sadly one of the crown jewels of the rainforest is under considerable threat due to the rapid loss of its habitat and illegal smuggling into the pet trade. The scarlet macaw because of its astonishing beauty finds a lot of admirers, which unfortunately seals the fate of macaw chicks who are often stolen from their nests and soon find themselves tangled in the vicious network of illegal pet trade. Although these birds have until now successfully maintained a healthy population in the wild, but in the face of such twin threats it is anybody's guess for how long images such as that of this pair of scarlet macaw near the Tarcoles river area in Costa Rica will be a reality.



The Montezuma oropendola is a large tropical bird common to the tropical rainforests of Costa Rica. This chestnut coloured bird with a bi-coloured bill stands out in quite a few regards. These birds are known for the conspicuous nests they build for themselves. They normally prefer the canopies of the forest where they weave hanging nests along the branches of trees. These nests are typically made of dried vines, tendrils, and anything fibrous they can get hold of. What is even more interesting than their nesting behaviour is their social dynamics. These are colonial birds and nest together in large flocks. However each such colony is dominated by one alpha male, which enjoys the mating rights with all the other females in the colony. To ensure his dominance over the colony is well established the dominant male particularly during the breeding season engages in elaborate bowing display. The male makes a loud gurgling sound while cocking its tail and spreading its wings in an attempt to reaffirm his position at the top of the hierarchical pyramid.



As the name suggests, summer tanagers are fairly common in the tropical forests of Costa Rica particularly during the summer months. This beautiful bird is almost completely red with a short stout bill. This is yet another species which exhibits pronounced sexual dimorphism with the females being predominantly mustard yellow in appearance. Although insects are their favourites the strong stout beak helps them to crack open hard shells of fruits or other nuts. These birds truly lead a high life courtesy their particular affinity towards the prime real estates in the forest canopies.







The quetzal also known as the resplendent quetzal, considered by many as the holy grail of bird photography in Costa Rica. Primarily a resident of humid highlands the quetzal is a member of the trogon family. An extremely shy bird, the quetzal can be really difficult to find in its natural habitat and the fact that these birds prefer to lead a solitary life makes the job of finding lone individuals which often is the case even more difficult. Resplendence, elegance and much sheen, all combined into one flying pixie, the resplendent quetzal. The green wonder leaves behind a trail of glitter and aww and one cannot help but feel like experiencing a tale straight out of the fabled childhood chronicles.



One look at that oversized almost banana shaped brightly coloured greenish yellow bill with a hint of purple at its tip and it would be safe to say you are looking at a keel-billed toucan. This eccentric colouration of its bill led to this bird being known as the rainbow billed toucan as well. The bill aside, the rest of the bird is primarily black in colouration with bright yellow neck and chest. These birds with such magnificent bills prefer to spend their lives in the canopies of tropical, sub-tropical and lowland rainforests. The rainforests of Costa Rica are home to these beautiful birds. From the look of the bill it becomes evident that this toucan was built for eating a wide variety of fruits, which make up almost the entirety of its diet. The bill comes in handy while eating to dissect a fruit as per the need. Like most toucans the keel-billed toucans are social birds and are usually found in flocks of 6-15 individuals. The keel-billed toucan is undoubtedly one of the jewels of the Costa Rican rainforests.





### The Photographer Speaks

**P**hotography to me is a way to translate what I see and make of the natural world. As an 8-year-old, I was gifted my first camera by my dad which was a simple camera roll Yashica with a fixed lens. Fast forward 25 years the way I perceive the world is still the same. The planet has a lot to see and conserve which is why I decided to move away from the traditional photography practices back home in India and evolve to what I truly aspire to be. Spending time in the rainforests of South America has been the most revolutionary experience of my life so far. When you walk inside a forest knowing that everything around you is full of life it changes your perception towards life. In the last 2 years, I have tried to do what a lot of photographers have not. Unfortunately, bird photography as a process has both evolved and regressed at the same time in the last decade but through my work, I try to inspire people to preserve what they see and respect every living thing around us. My mission in the next 5 years is to cover more locations in the Amazon and South America. If you would like to be part of the mission let me know.

**"In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught." (Baba Dioum, 1968)**

Instagram -  
<https://www.instagram.com/supreet.sahoo/>

### His other ventures

"My love for the natural world and its species draws me to the wild world on the flimsiest of pretexts. Having embarked upon many such trips over the years I have been blessed with the opportunities to peep into the lives of some of the most exotic species and garner invaluable knowledge about various aspects of their lives. Being a naturalist first, nothing gives me more pleasure than sharing these experiences with others and exposing them to these amazing chronicles from the natural world. Keeping this in mind I organise photo tours not just as a photo mentor but more as a species expert that one would like to see and photograph during these trips. While organising such trips my primary concern is to make these trips cost effective so that it can cater to the need of a much larger section of photography and wildlife enthusiasts. My aim is to bridge the gap between the birders and photographers from India (and other Asian countries) while being cognizant of the expenses and other needs of Indian photographers.

Most of my trips which I undertake are concentrated in and around the forests in Central and South American locations with Costa Rica and Ecuador being two of my most favoured locations. However for some time now I have been focussed on expanding the horizons with Central Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Colombia soon to be added to my portfolio."

Click here to subscribe to my newsletter :

<https://www.supreetsahoo.com/contact>

Supreet Sahoo apart from his skills behind the camera is well known as a naturalist and a tour operator to the forests of Central and South America. His vast experience of these forests and his intricate knowledge of the species which inhabit these wildernesses prove to be instrumental in not just getting the perfect shot but also in an acute understanding of the forest and the entire eco-system.





# A City's Love Affair with a Colour

by Akash Ghosh



There is something about the city of Jodhpur in Rajasthan which stands out at the very first glance; it is the city's love affair with the colour blue. The state of Rajasthan is no stranger to colours, vibrant colours are splashed almost everywhere. The yellows and reds of the iconic turbans sported by the men, the bright oranges, yellows and greens painting the fabrics of the women's dresses and the general affinity towards anything which is bright and vibrant will not go unnoticed. Hence naturally the question arises what made Jodhpur embrace the blue hue in such a manner that the city itself has come to be known as "the blue city" over the years. The abundance of blue in the older quarters of Jodhpur, the second largest city in Rajasthan is amazing. The buildings are painted in blue, the shops are painted in blue, it seems like there is a splash of blue everywhere, and any king from the past would have given anything to bask in such an allegiance which the citizens in this part of Jodhpur owe to the colour blue. There is no one well researched theory which can decode this mysterious allegiance, however there is no dearth of explanations, some are myths while some are theories where as others are stories which have passed on from one generation to the next. One such theory suggests the old fort of Mehrangarh was situated in the now older section of Jodhpur. Rao Jodha, the founder of the city, laid the foundation stones of this fort in 1459, many believe it

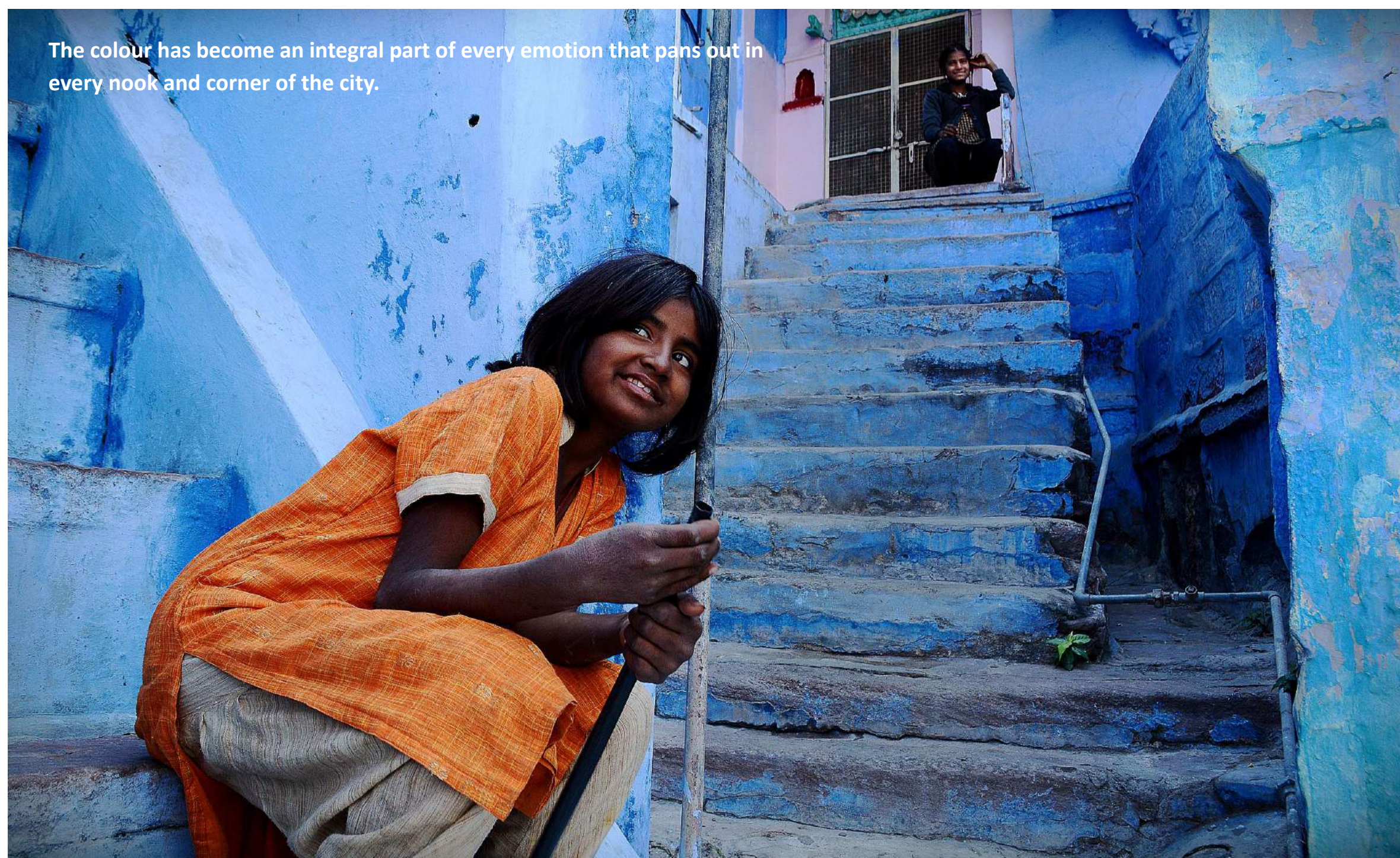
was by his orders the houses in the vicinity were painted blue and the tradition is still going on. Another theory suggests blue was the favourite colour of the Brahmins by virtue of being the worshippers of Shiva who himself wears a blue tan. As a result of which the buildings in the older part of the city which housed Brahmins and their families wore the colour blue. However there are some explanations which adopt a more pragmatic approach than dwelling in the history or folklores. One such plausible explanation suggests the blue paint was created using a mixture of limestone and copper sulphate. The surrounding regions of Jodhpur have always been rich in limestone and copper, making these ingredients easily available to the paint makers or artisans thereby making the resultant rich blue hue the cheapest option. It is also believed copper sulphate used as one key ingredient for making the paint acted as an effective insect repellent which would deter the termites from infesting most of these houses. Another explanation taking similar logical path suggests the blue colour reflects most



The city and its residents have warmly embraced other hues but their loyalty towards blue remains unquestionable.



of the heat which turned out to be nothing less than a boon in the face of the scorching desert sun which beats down remorselessly upon the walls of this house with the same rigour almost throughout the whole year. Irrespective of which one among the above explanation is true, the blue hue of Jodhpur has certainly done no harm to the city, in fact in the heart of the desert Jodhpur stands out as an ocean of blue. The blue colour has given the city a distinct identity making it instantly recognisable from the cluster of houses in blue scattered all over. Eventually there may be no way of uncovering the truth although a walk down the streets and by lanes of old Jodhpur renders the uncovering of truth hardly important purely because what stands in front of us right now is fascinating enough to grab all the attention. The colour blue is intertwined with the daily lives of Jodhpur's residents. Their day to day activities, the hardly important ones, the momentous occasions, episodes of joy and sorrow alike all pan out with the shade of blue in the background. There is a hint of blue in everything the city does, in everything the city experiences, for blue is the colour of Jodhpur.



The colour has become an integral part of every emotion that pans out in every nook and corner of the city.





Even the most inconsequential alleys in Jodhpur proudly wear the iconic blue of the city.





The blue of Jodhpur has passed on from one generation to the next since hundreds of years and the trend shows no sign of slowing down.





(Top right) The ageing scooters have been long discarded by their owners, the same however cannot be said about the colour which adorns the wall and most other walls in the city.

(Top left) Life for all in Jodhpur flows quietly against the ever present backdrop of blue.

(Right) There is an abundance of other colours too which lures tourists from all over the world to this place. The sarees were bright enough to catch her fancy.







The loyalty towards the colour blue is evident in the interiors of the houses as well.





The splashes of blue are a part of every living soul in the city.





Neighbours sharing a laugh, children making their way home from school, the blue of Jodhpur remains witness to many such every day occurrences.





## The Photographer Speaks

Photography for me is not merely restricted to being just another profession, nor does it mean manufacturing photographs. It is all about creating them. When it comes to creation, heart has a role to play. It was not the dazzle of glamour photography, nor was it the lure of money from commercial product shoots, which triggered my passion for this career. Instead, what I used to get intrigued by was "life on street"!

Mostly, I happen to pick up my subjects while rambling on squalid streets of Kolkata with my camera slung around my neck in quest of answers to questions I have long been nurturing in me. I try to capture the lives of people living in these streets of Kolkata to find out if they are really different from us, if it is only the poverty that they are neglected for, if it is the same joy they feel as we do, or if it is the same sorrow they experience as we do. I have always tried my best to make sure that my photographs are not only visual treats to human eyes; they must also render them empathetic towards my subject.

Being born and raised in a metro city like Kolkata is a privilege in itself since I get to explore people from different walks of life through my lens. Now I am a complete photographer who confidently handles professional photographic assignments catering to every single niche of commercial photography, be it product, wedding, fashion, portfolio, photojournalism or natural history. Over the years my hard work has paid off in the form of some of my notable achievements such as acceptances in more than 1000 international and national salons, with more than 150 awards in national and international salons and contests, achieving honours such as AFIP - (ASSOCIATE) OF FEDERATION OF INDIAN PHOTOGRAPHY, AFIP - (ASSOCIATE) OF FEDERATION OF INDIAN PHOTOGRAPHY, AFIP - (ASSOCIATE) OF FEDERATION OF INDIAN PHOTOGRAPHY, APSI - (ASSOCIATESHIP) OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY OF INDIA, published shots in Asian Photography, Lonely Planet, National Geographic, Indian Photo Arts, The Telegraph, EPSON Fotoflock and others,