

READER'S SECTION | PHOTO FEATURE | PHOTO ESSAY

INDIAN

DOCUMENTARIES | EDITORIALS | TRAVELOGUE

PHOTO ARTS

Vol 1, Issue 4 | October 2015



A SPECIAL FEATURE ON A BIKE TRIP ACROSS SOME OF THE HIGHEST ROADS IN THE WORLD



ALSO FEATURING THE BEST ONLINE ENTRIES BY OUR READERS IN THE READER'S SECTION

INDIAN PHOTO ARTS

At Indian Photo Arts we are on the constant look out for new talents and committed towards providing them with a bigger platform to showcase their work. If you feel your work deserves a special mention or your photographs tell an interesting story which you would like the world to know about, then send us your work at indianphotoarts@gmail.com or at submission.ipa@gmail.com. For further details please feel free to call us at- 9163412000/916341300.

Dear readers,

It gives us great pleasure to inform all of you that the response that we received for our previous print issues has been overwhelming to say the least. The support and the encouragement that we have received from our well-wishers, our associates and most importantly from all our readers have played a huge role in providing us with that much needed boost and confidence for our future efforts. Keeping in mind the flaws which were there in our previous issues as pointed out by our critiques which include our readers and those who are intricately associated with this magazine we present to you our first ever e- issue with the hope that we have been able to put up a better show this time and have succeeded in putting forth a near flawless effort.

Ever since we began toying with idea of delivering an art and photography magazines to the millions of art and photography enthusiasts, we were determined to provide to all such enthusiasts a platform to showcase their skills. Today we say this with a lot of pride that we have stayed true to our vision and our commitment. The articles, paintings, photography features published in this magazine bear testimony to that. Except one or two, the features published in this issue and also in the previous one are the works of supremely talented individuals who in no way are associated professionally with the field of art or photography. In other words it would be safe to say that not just the Reader's section but the entire magazine belongs to our readers who have the opportunity to showcase their works on a much bigger scale.

Like the previous issues in this issue too we have focused on the different genres of photography. Some of the features focus more on the aesthetic aspect of photography while some are more along the lines of photojournalism, while some focus on the rather humble events taking place all around us on a day to day basis. The Reader's section like our previous issue comprises of the selected top entries made by the members of our facebook group going by the name of Indian Photo Arts. Our facebook group is an extremely interactive platform which helps us to reach out to our readers, answer their queries and even welcome any kind of constructive criticism which we believe plays a huge role in the growth and development of an organisation like ours.

We know we are just starting out, but that has never prevented us from dreaming big. We have bigger plans for our readers and our members in the future. One such plan is about organising regular photography-workshops for our readers, members and all the photography enthusiasts out there. Initially we will be conducting such workshops on different themes and genres of photography on a monthly basis but eventually we will be conducting these events on a bi-weekly or even weekly basis. In addition to these workshops we will also be conducting regular photo-walks which are more suitable for outdoor photography. We believe such events will provide us with the beautiful opportunity of meeting our readers and members and help them develop their skills. Such events like the workshops will also provide the participants with the opportunity of getting his/her work published in the magazine as we will be closely monitoring their efforts and the ones which will stand out among the others will be automatically selected for publication in the subsequent issues of the magazine. For the art lovers we will be conducting regular competitions for participants belonging to various age groups and needless to say this being a print media there will always be this scope of getting your work published.

Despite being only a few issues old we are taking big strides towards a brighter future and none of this would have been possible without your constant support and encouragement. We would be looking forward to your support and involvement with this magazine in the days to come. We sincerely hope all our readers are going to appreciate our effort this time and provide us with valuable feedbacks which will help us to learn, evolve and mature. We thank all of you again for your support and contributions; we hope you are going to enjoy flipping through each and every page of this issue as we take this opportunity to promise to all of you an even better effort in three months' time.

-Editorial Board, Indian Photo Arts.



66

African Safari: A Photo Album from the African Savannah by Sajeesh Shanmughan.



36

Chinese New Year, when Lions Prowled the Streets of Kolkata, an insight into the Chinese New Year celebrations by Jayati Saha.



04

Bangalore, in the Light and Shade of the Past and the Future, the contrasting spectacle of the city through the lens of Amith Nag.



20

A Parable from the Golden Mountains, a journey across some of the highest roads in the world by Rahul Bera.



52

Son Beel, the Fish Bowl of India, Dibyendu Das documents the uniqueness of two of the most important seasonal wetlands of Assam.

Content



92

Reader's Section: Featuring the best entries from our readers.



78

Chau Dance, a masked tale of decline by Suswan Mondal.



This old man selling traditional household goods in a crowded Bangalore Market is a reminiscent of the humble origins of the city.

Bangalore, in the Light and Shade of the Past and the Future

by Amith Nag

Today's Bangalore, officially known as Bengaluru, seen by many as the Silicon Valley of India is a far cry from the barren stretch of land housing the lone mud fort built by the feudal lord Kempe Gowda in the year 1537. The Bangalore which we see today among its many distinctions holds the one of being Information Technology Hub of modern India, attracting students and software engineers and technicians from all over the country. One can easily draw the conclusion without facing too much flak that this city happens to be the epicentre of higher studies in the country. The city boasts of some of the leading educational institutes in the country belonging to different fields of academics. This claim can be backed by the presence of some of the most reputed educational institutes in the country, such as the Indian Institute of Management, the leading institute in neuroscience in the form of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), the prestigious Indian Statistical Institute among many others. Today's Bangalore is home to more than 1500 IT firms, with several more in what are known as IT enabled services. Quiet understandably Bangalore has slowly built up the reputation of being the new Mumbai for the educated young generation from across the country seeking an opportunity. During the mid-1980s, the US-based Texas Instruments set up shop in Bangalore, comprising the first offshore establishment in the city thereby laying down the platform for the IT boom which was to follow soon enough. The city made rapid progress towards modernisation with the IT boom, which was gathering pace with every passing day since the mid 1990's. The city started drawing huge numbers of software engineers and students holding computer science or computer engineering degrees from all over the country. Migration fuelled almost half of Bangalore's

phenomenal population growth of 4.1 million in 1991 to almost 5.7 million by 2001; a staggering increase of more than 30 percent. People especially in their youths from different parts started pouring in to Bangalore, there was one thing common among all of them, they all spoke the digital language. The city started changing its way of life to cater to the diverse needs of the smart young professionals hailing from different corners of India. In other words Bangalore smartened up, to make the smart Indian youth population feel very much at home. And that trend which saw its emergence in the late 1990's or the early part of the 2000, has kept itself very much alive even today. Today's Bangalore can be easily thought of as a land where almost everyone is well versed in the digital language. But whatever happened to the other Bangalore? The one which is yet to be lit up by the arc lights that the outsourcing world shines upon the city. Or is it that this Bangalore never really felt the need to hog the limelight and bathe itself in the soft golden gleams of the air conditioned shopping malls or crowd its skyline with never ending high rises showing off all the modern architectural and engineering marvels and reaching out for the stratosphere? Does the Bangalore living in the crowded markets or the seedy avenues and by-lanes lack the ambition, is it too lazy to reach out for the sky or there is much more to what meets the naked eyes? Bangalore is fairly unique among the big cities in India for its very special history. For a long time Bangalore developed, grew, prospered, as two very different cities. The two cities had their very own governance, infrastructure and administration as a result of which the two cities grew at two very different paces.

One half or one part of the city was under the direct administration of the British where they had set up their own cantonment.

The other part of the city was under the rule of Maharajas of Mysore. The western part of the city which was under the rule of the Maharajas was home to some of the suburbs and housed the forts and palaces of the Mysore Maharajas. This curious case of two different cities emerging side by side under different governance and administration continued for a long period of time. It was only after independence in the year 1949 the two different parts of Bangalore were united under the same municipality and from an administrative point of view Bangalore became one for the first time. Needless to say by that time two independent and contrasting methods of governance had left their distinct marks on the two parts of the city. Throughout the 19th century, the Cantonment gradually expanded and acquired a distinct cultural and political

salience as it was governed directly by the British and was known as the Civil and Military Station of Bangalore. Cantonment had a large military presence and a cosmopolitan civilian population that came from outside the princely state of Mysore, and from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala including the British and Anglo-Indian army officers. The other part of Bangalore known as Bangalore Pete was under the direct rule of the Maharajas and was mostly inhabited by the Kannada speaking people also known as the Kannadigas.

Over the years while the geographic division was brought to an end in the year 1949 by bringing the two parts of Bangalore under the same municipality, the economic gulf has only widened. Many believe this gulf has widened at a much faster pace ever since Bangalore earned the



The erstwhile Bangalore Central Jail has now been cleared and renovated into Freedom Park - home to jogging tracks and meetings. The old cells have now been converted into museums.

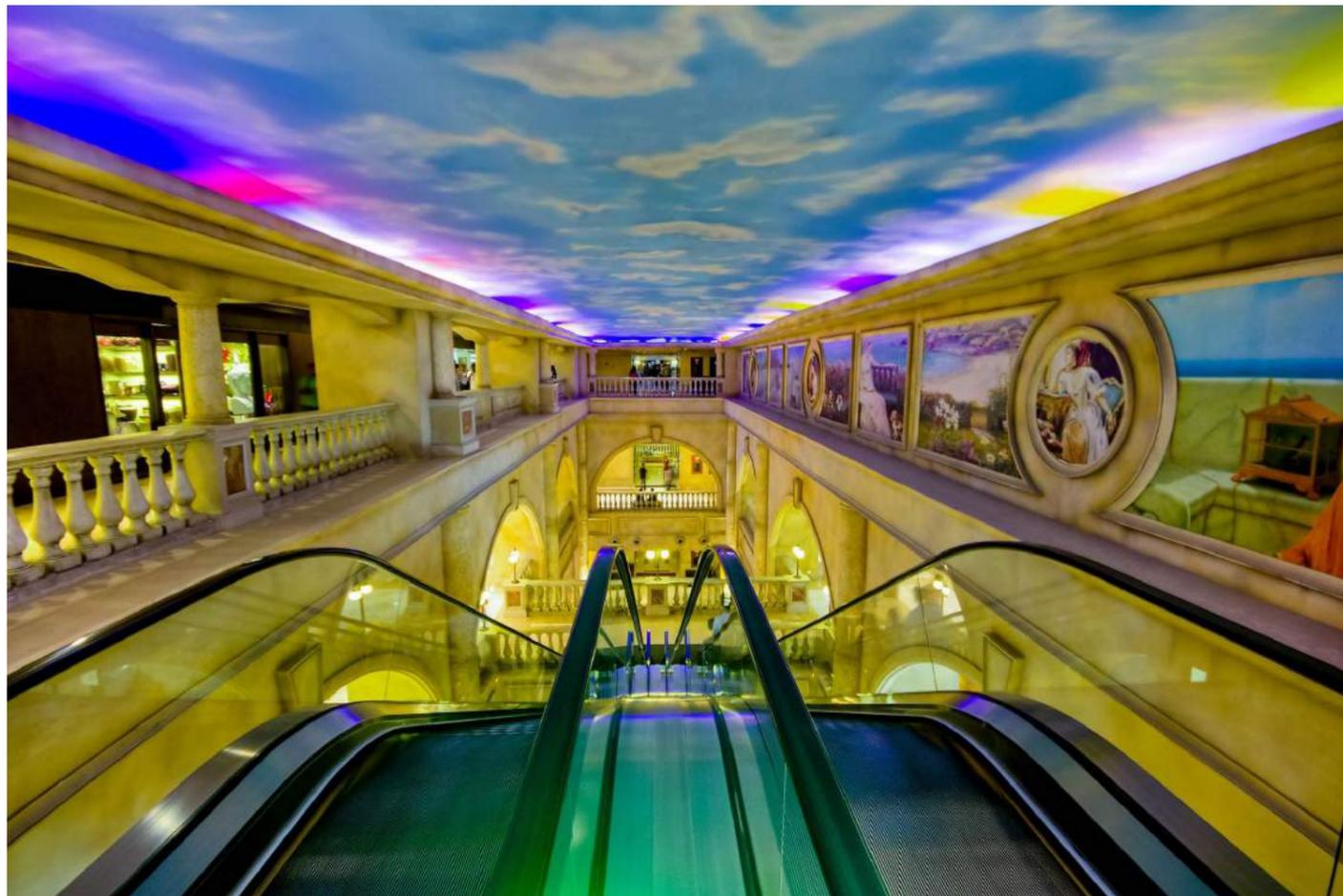
reputation of being the "Silicon Valley" of India. While the glass fronted high rises housing different IT giants and other MNC's reach out for the sky and in an attempt to assert their domination in the stock market are growing taller and taller by the year, the Bangalore ground reality remains dotted with dingy slums, dhobi ghats using the same old traditional ways of washing and dry cleaning, crowded market places upholding age old crafts and craftsmanship which has been transferred from one generation to the next and is being replicated in the exact same manner as a hundred years back. This economic gulf which widened with time has given rise to some of the most amazing and contrasting spectacles which play out on a daily basis throughout the length and breadth of the city. The stark contrast between the modern and the traditional, the ultra-modern and the age old, the digital ways and the age old traditional ways together give rise to a city which is bound to elicit a response of disbelief almost around each bend.

The Dhobi Ghat in Malleswaram, in a way encompasses the true essence of the city. While the whole concept of Dhobi Ghat can be attributed to the old heritage and tradition of the city, the fact that it is the first modernised Dhobi Ghat in the entire state equipped with washing machines, hydro extractors, driers, boilers, calendar ironing machines etc indicates the city is taking rapid steps towards modernisation while holding on to its old traditions. On the other hand the Orion Mall at Brigade Gateway Enclave reflects everything that is young and modern about the city. With a total area of 1.1 million square feet the Orion Mall stands to be the largest shopping mall in Bangalore. With its swanky uber cool appearance the Orion Mall draws the young techies of



A Dhobi Ghat in Bangalore, yet another fast dying tradition of Bangalore. An everyday scene from one of the last few Dhobi Ghats where clothes are still washed in the traditional ways.

Bangalore in huge numbers and is seen as a perfect hang out to get rid of the week's stress among the young professionals. The same can be said about the Mantri Square Mall. Situated in the Malleswaram locality the Mantri Square has fast developed into a popular outlet for the Bangaloreans. It is only fair that a modern city like Bangalore played host to a modern day sporting event like the Flugtag. Participants taking part in this event attempt to fly their very own home made high powered planes. This particular sporting event, which happens to be the brainchild of the food and beverage giants, Red Bull, has travelled the length and breadth of globe-Sao Paulo, Sydney, California and even Kuwait before arriving in India for the first time in Bangalore. During this event the participants attempt to push their home made high powered airplanes from a 22 feet high platform into the sea or a water body. The team having the longest flights (measured in feet) wins the accolades.



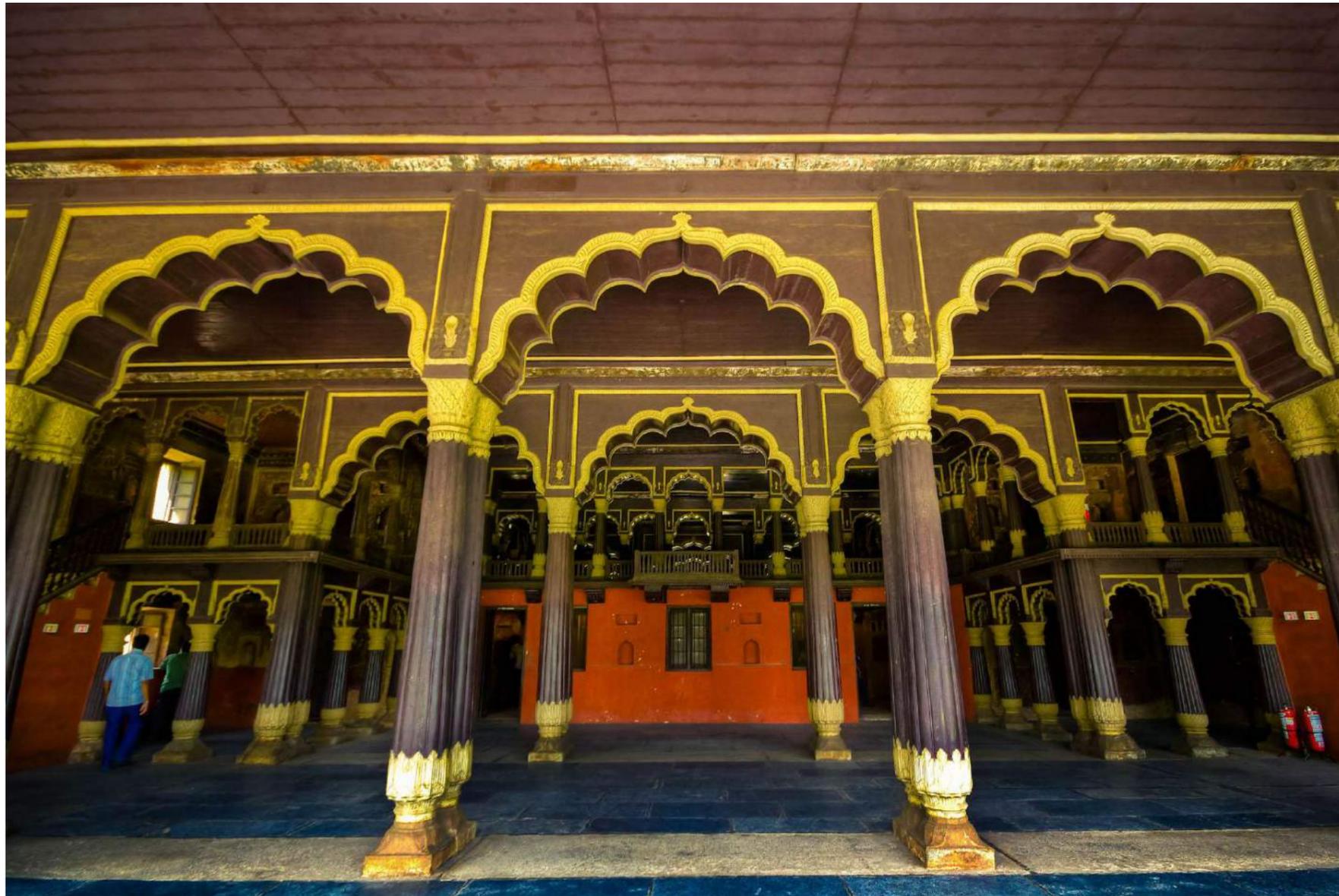
The Forum shopping mall at UB City Bangalore, one of many such outlets which highlights the facelift the city has undergone over the past decade and essentially reflects the changing ways of life of the city's occupants.



Bangalore is home to modern games like India's first Flugtag. The participants attempt to push their home made airplanes from a 22 feet high platform into a water body.

It would be wrong on somebody's part to assume that almost all of Bangalore's fascinations are centred on everything that is new, young or modern, looks flashy and swanky. The city is proud of its heritage and is extremely protective about it. The one place which immediately comes to mind in this context is the Bangalore Central Jail. The erstwhile Bangalore Central Jail has now been cleared and renovated into Freedom Park - home to jogging tracks and meetings. The old cells have now been converted into museums. Another aspect of the city's rich past history and heritage which has been carefully preserved and still attracts the average Bangaloreans among tourists from all over the nation is Tipu Sultan's summer palace. Made entirely out of teak, the magnificent structure stands adorned with pillars, arches and balconies. It is believed that Tipu Sultan used to conduct his durbar (court) and addressed his subjects from the eastern and western balconies of the upper floor. This brilliant piece of architectural marvel was finished in the year 1791. Briefly used by the British Government as their Secretariat after the death of Tipu Sultan, the place is entirely managed by the government these days. Among other notable heritage structures of the city is the vintage St. Xavier's church. Given the pronounced British presence in Bangalore during the British regime the presence of churches in Bangalore and its outskirts is not surprising. Like these old buildings which the modern Bangalore has inherited as its proud heritage, there are some particular professions and practices which have changed hands over the decades, possibly centuries staying almost unaltered since the day of their humble beginnings. One such profession is the cycle repairing shops, a fast dying profession in the heart of the city which is fast breaking into all

the spheres of modern day technologies and infrastructure. Some of these run down old cycle repair shops and gas light shops can be still found in some of the narrow alleys of Bangalore, where they stand proud, reflecting the existing contrast that makes this city so interestingly beautiful. Some of the families have been running such outlets for generations. While Bangalore appreciates and thrives in everything that the computer and the modern day technology are able to do, the city still values the importance of the human touch. This is the reason why thousands of Bangaloreans step out of their homes even on lazy Sunday afternoon for the annual Chitra Sante, an art fair that is a highlight of the Bangalore winter. Chitra Santhe was thought of over a decade ago as a medium for bringing artists and art lovers from across the country on a single platform. Every year for over the past 11 years Kumara Krupa Road comes alive on Sunday mornings with artists and craftsmen belonging to different age groups and demographics from across the country showcasing their talents in the forms of displays such as paintings, porcelain, sculptures and other objects related to art. One can also get on-the-spot portrait sketches done by these talented individuals. More than 1,300 artists from 19 states around the country took part in the last edition of this art mela. This event provides all of these artists with the perfect platform to showcase their work at a much bigger scale and also to sell it directly to the art enthusiasts without the intervention of middlemen. Any attempt at understanding or describing this wonderful city would be incomplete without a mention of the Krishna Rajendra Market, popularly known as the K.R Market. Also known as City Market, this is the largest wholesale market dealing with commodities in Bangalore.



The entrance to Tipu Sultan's summer palace in Bangalore, where the ruler used to conduct his daily durbars.

Old family professions such as this cycle repair and gas-light shop can be still found in some of the narrow run down alleys of Bangalore. Outlets such as this one are a fast dying genre in modern Bangalore.





KR Market - an aerial view of the commotion and confusion at the flower bazaar in the Bangalore City market

Established in 1928, located in the Kalasipalya area, adjacent to Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace, K.R Market is considered home to the largest flower market in Asia. The market's earliest red and white brick building structure still stands, but just behind it is the newer and much larger market complex. This is the main fruit and vegetable market, but it is not confined to these buildings, and spills out onto the sidewalks and neighbouring streets and lanes. A walk through the market can be an intense experience: vendors haggle loudly with their customers, and the earthy and pungent smell of vegetables, flowers and spices and the riot of brilliant colours is an exhilarating feast for the senses. The hawkers and vendors of the K.R Market are mostly immigrants from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, particularly from Salem and Dharmapuri districts. Vandi Mode is a small slum situated in between Avenue Road and the newly constructed City Market complex. This slum is mainly inhabited by Tamil migrants from Salem and Dharmapuri districts in Tamil Nadu who came to Bangalore in the 1920s in search of a

more promising livelihood than what their native lands offered to them. Most of these people along with their families are still living in makeshift temporary houses built of tin sheet, tarpaulin sheds and other cheap materials like mud and coconut leaves. Approximately forty families had migrated during the initial period and now the number of families living in this slum has almost doubled to seventy-five. An average house in this slum may house up to 3-4 families totalling to 12-18 members. The population of Vandi Mode is approximated to 600. The residents work as mainly as coolies on a daily wage, there are street vendors, carpenters, auto rickshaw drivers, road side food stall owners, shopkeepers, hotel assistants, electricians, bulk cart owners, book binders and people belonging to various other small time professions. These hardworking people living on such meagre wages are the ones working silently in the background and they are the ones who keep the wheels of the city rolling.

The world around us is changing at a fast pace, the changes are taking place at a rate which was unimaginable to all of us a decade ago, a rate which remains unfathomable to most of us, in the light of such technological and infrastructural advancement it becomes hard to predict what bounty of treasures the future has in store for us. It might be what seems indispensable today might become redundant in a few years' time. These changes are going to touch our lives and most definitely in a positive manner, these changes are going to shape the society and most certainly our cities and Bangalore cannot be an exception to this trend. There might come a point in time when old ways of the city will have to make way for the new, for the safer, the more efficient and the more convenient. Today's Bangalore is vastly different from the Bangalore some fifty years ago.



With its rich Anglo history, Bangalore is home to numerous churches, including the vintage St. Xavier's church.

Every year in January, a free-for-all art mela called 'ChitraSante' is organized to bring artists from all over the nation under a single roof. Budding and seasoned artists arrive from all over the country to exhibit and sell their paintings.

Mantri mall is one of India's biggest shopping malls located in the heart of Bangalore.

A scene from the KR Market in Bangalore. This market place is home to many shops selling traditional and holy items, along with flowers, fruits and vegetables. This particular shop sells devotional items exclusively.





One of the numerous posh eateries which have sprung up all over the city.

Fifty years from now on there will be little or maybe no resemblance between the Bangalore of today and the future version of the city. Some of the old traditions and cultures or practices will perish, only finding a place in old reports or file photographs or newspaper cuttings. However as long as they are still prevalent the city will embrace these old ways with a motherly embrace, for many more years to come, possibly decades, even if they appear out of sorts when faced with the swanky outlets and massive skylines and most certainly the city will not do so to keep the contrast alive, not for the sake of an interesting diaspora, but to cherish those humble old days, which paved the path for today's glittering present, which laid down the foundation for tomorrow's promising future. The future most definitely seems to be heading in the right direction, but the ground work was laid down many years ago, it is easy to overlook those contributions amongst all the glitterati of the modern world, but there cannot be any denying the fact that the narrow by-lanes and alleys, the crowded market places, the over-populated humble localities, the dingy slums with their dwellers are the true unsung heroes of the city who all have contributed in a significant yet silent manner and earned epithets such as "City of the Future" for their favourite city, which in return in spite of all of its more glamorous subjects extends a loving hand towards them.



A Panoramic view of the world Trade Centre and Brigade gateway enclave in Bangalore, which clearly demonstrates how far the city has come from its very modest beginnings.



A Parable From The Golden Mountains

by Rahul Bera

A road trip, anywhere in the world promises everything but certainty. In a sense a road trip is not for those who prefer a scheduled arrival and a departure, a road trip titillates the senses of those who seek to deliberately disrupt everything controlled and scheduled in their lives. It is almost never a smooth sailing affair, things more often than not spiral out of control, plans change at the very last minute something which gradually becomes the norm, resources dwindle at an alarming rate, with every bend on the road the distrust for the map grows bigger and stronger, but in the end all these disasters, road bumps, last minute cancellations, detours and other catastrophes team up and conspire to lead us along the most scenic roads which would have never featured in our meticulous planning and researches before hitting the road. Despite all the precautions we may take it only needs an otherwise insignificant keel on the road to flatten the tyres and leave you with no other choice but spend the night with the local villagers, or an unforeseen landslide blocking the only route thereby forcing you to accept the neighbouring crevice along the mountain slope as your home for the next few days. Anyone who has been on a road trip would vouch for the fact that never did they complete a trip where everything panned out the way they had envisioned them, in the same breath they would agree they were glad it didn't, because the uncertainties, the unpredictability of a road trip is like a treasure chest, containing the true essence, the soul of such a trip only to unravel it to those who seek it braving the countless hurdles that lie along the way.

Each road trip no matter how well thought out, presents to the enthusiasts a fresh set of challenges which are mostly determined by the nature of the trip and most importantly the



View of the golden yellow mountain ranges of Spiti Valley during a sunset in Kaza.

place. If the place in question happens to be the mountains of Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir, needless to say the challenges get amplified. The greater the challenges appear the lure to experience this beautiful world swirled by some of the highest motor able roads on this planet grows bigger. So when the opportunity presented itself to me to be a part of a road trip across the mountains of Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh it didn't require much brainstorming on my part to answer in the affirmative. The route across the mountains of Himachal Pradesh cutting through the Spiti Valley before entering Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir where it attains massive proportions in terms of altitude has been a major attraction to passionate bikers and hard-core drivers from all over the world. Now common sense would implore us on every single occasion to take a four lane highway

for a smoother and perhaps more enjoyable ride instead of criss-crossing some of the highest passes in the world on dirt roads where mangled carcasses of vehicles lie deep down in the gorges and are as frequent as the diners along a busy highway. But it is not the lure of death which draws hordes of road trip enthusiasts or bikers every year to these deadly trails, it is the invitation to explore this beautiful land braving these odds which sees so many people from all over the world embarking on this difficult journey, it is the promise of something truly magnificent lying at the end of the road, and those who have been a part of such a journey would agree the journey always keeps its end of the deal. Our journey started from the much celebrated hill station of Manali in Himachal Pradesh which was teeming with tourists mostly from Delhi over the weekend which had coincided with a couple of government holidays in the country.



A herd of Pashmina goats rests along a rare grassy slope in the Spiti Valley.

Over the next two days the road took us deep into the heart of Spiti Valley when we reached the town of Kaza, the sub divisional headquarters of Spiti Valley in the Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh in the western Himalayas. The road from Manali had plenty to offer in terms of scenic beauty, beautiful retreats hidden away in the lush green slopes of the mountains, fast flowing mountainous streams offering a rich bounty of trout and a smooth ride. All of that started changing rapidly as the road assumed a dusty colour leaving behind the familiar black and grey of the pitch. It seemed in order to be in accordance with the changing nature of the road, the scenery all around us assumed a similar nature. While the part of the Himalayas which nests Manali wraps the sleepy town in a blanket of green, the Himalayas which nestles the valley of Spiti in its lap sheds off its coat of green and assumes a golden yellow colour almost devoid of the lush green vegetation found all around Manali. This is primarily due to the harsh climate which Spiti Valley experiences, permitting only scattered tufts of hardy grasses and shrubs to grow, even below 4,000 metres. The changing road conditions reminded us this wasn't going to be a straightforward affair after all, the curves were becoming sharper, the road was full of potholes and dusty, we had to be ever so careful of any approaching vehicle from the opposite direction. However the changing scenic beauty all around us gave us nothing to complain about, it will not be an exaggeration to term the mountains in these parts as made of gold, especially when they gleam in the soft late afternoon sun. It was a beautiful canvas of golden yellow all around us embroidered with the turquoise threads of gently flowing streams through the valley. Little did we know at that

point of time there was so much more to Spiti Valley than just the incredibly beautiful sights all around us. Weary from a three hour long ride through these treacherous terrains on the way to our next stop Keylong the administrative centre of the Lahaul and Spiti district we stopped which seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. We were standing in the heart of a valley separated on the two sides by a narrow stream of water. I was told this was our lunch break. I couldn't make much out of it, as it seemed nearly improbable to me that someone was going to fix our lunch in the heart of a barren lifeless valley like this one. I headed in the direction where everyone else was headed and soon came across a small hut like structure, made of stones cemented together with a tarpaulin cover serving the purpose of a roof. I was greeted by the smiling face of an elderly Tibetan lady, who despite being busy serving food to the other bikers and travellers greeted everyone with that lovely smile. A humble meal of rice and rajma daal was served to us, during the course of which I came to know the story of this elderly lady running this place from a local person. She runs this small joint along with her husband during the tourist season during which travellers like us stop by for a meal or some much needed rest. But she is better known among the locals and frequent travellers through this region as the "Didi" or the elder sister of the "Saviour café". I tried looking for signs displaying the name "Saviour Café" in vein when the man told me it is something which the locals call her affectionately, for the sixty odd lives of trekkers, mountaineers who got injured or trapped in the snow while attempting a daring expedition during the harsh winter months, which this couple has saved over the years. They stay put in this desolated land braving the freezing temperature and the hostile environment just in



This elderly Tibetan lady who along with her husband runs this small joint in a remote corner of Spiti Valley. Over the years among the locals this place has earned the reputation of being "The Savior Cafe" for the 60 odd lives of mountaineers who got trapped in snow or injured saved by this couple during the severe winter months, when they stay put braving the hostile environment just in case somebody needs their help.

case somebody needs their assistance. I had never heard of anything more heart touching than the story of this elderly couple in one of the most remote corner of the world, a place which doesn't exist in any map, but a place made richer than most by the presence of two of the most unselfish human beings I have ever known. I realised the road had opened its treasure chest for me. Among other notable experiences while making our the one of the one where we had to snake our way through big herds of Pashmina goats locally known as Changthangi shepherded by the Gaddi people stands out for me. The Gaddis are not nomadic people but during the summer months they keep

moving on to higher pastures for days at a stretch with their huge flocks. During our journey we encountered several such flocks. The Changthangi or Pashmina goat is a breed of goat which are raised for their much coveted cashmere wool which is known as Pashmina once woven into shawls and other woollen garments. Before leading us into Keylong the road took us to the Bara-lacha Pass also known as Bara-lacha La. Situated at an altitude of 4,890 meters this was one of the highest passes that we encountered during the course of our journey. The pass is situated in the Zaskar range and connects the Lahaul district of Himachal Pradesh with Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir.

Just a few kilometres away from the Bara-lacha Pass towards Manali is the Bhaga river, a tributary of the Chandrabhaga river, which originates from the Surya Taal Lake. This pass is the point of commencement for several treks which include the famous Suraj Tal trek and Chandra Tal trek. During the winter months the pass becomes inaccessible due to the heavy snowfall closing down all the roads. Even during the summer months which are considered to be the best time of the year to visit these places, we had to be wary of the melting snow from the ice capped mountain peaks in the background. The melting snow gives rise to fast flowing streams of water which floods the roads leading up to the Bara-lacha Pass making it all the more difficult to negotiate those sharp bends and turns. Hence it is always advisable to start early and cross the Bara-lacha Pass before the snow starts melting. Once we had crossed Bara-lacha pass we were looking forward to reaching Keylong and rest our weary minds and bodies. We were on course for reaching Keylong within the expected time. However the road ahead had very different ideas. Around one bend we discovered the road ahead for almost 500 meters or more was under knee deep water. The road like in the other parts of Spiti Valley was a dirt road and by being flooded with water it made our job of negotiating this stretch ahead doubly difficult. The source of water was the melting snow from the ice capped mountain peaks something which we didn't take into account. It was once again a reminder of the uncertainties of a road trip. An hour later we finally managed to overcome the inundated corridor with help and able assistance from the local drivers. Needless to say this unforeseen delay nipped in the bud any hope of making it to Keylong before sunset. From Keylong our next destination was Sarchu.



The humble appearance of this Tibetan shack in one remote corner of the Spiti Valley might fail to attract customers elsewhere; however such insignificant outlets keep the wheels rolling in this barren and harsh landscape which can be unforgiving at times. Usually the bikers passing through stop by for some much needed rest and a taste of delightful Tibetan cuisine.

Sarchu lies along the Leh-Manali highway on the border between Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. It in fact is the gateway to Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir. This land portrays the true picture of a cold desert. I remember the night at Sarchu being extremely cold and windy threatening to blow the tents away. But the tents at the camping grounds at Sarchu which offer the only accommodation are made of some of the toughest material and seemed to be able to withstand almost anything. Over the years these white tents lined up next to one another in the deserted land of Sarchu has become one of the most recognizable images from the biking trips across this region. The next morning we left Sarchu behind and now we were firmly inside Ladakh. The road wended up and down along the slopes of the mountains, taking us through a couple of passes the most notable one being the Lachung La. Situated at an altitude of 5079 meters Lachung La happens to be the second highest pass on the Leh-Manali highway. The pass is situated between the settlements of Sarchu (towards Manali) and Pang (towards Leh). While crossing the Lachung La the condition of the road doesn't pose much of a threat, although the high altitude can be something of a challenge to deal



One of the bikes stands against the backdrop of turquoise waters of Tso Moriri.



It is hard to think of any other place which can boast of such a contrast in the landscape in a single frame. Such lush green grassy banks close to Tso Moriri lie right next to the barren mountains in the background.

A road sign at one of the crossroads on the outskirts of the city of Leh. These road signs are typical of this region and have become synonymous with the roads in these mountains.



Small outposts like this one near Chang La are maintained by the Indian Army, which the tourists, bikers, travellers can avail for rest and refreshment free of cost. In fact the army jawans invite the travellers passing through such outposts to come inside and share a cup of coffee with them.



with if someone is not acclimatised properly. The symptoms of high altitude sickness may range from headache, nausea, fatigue to peripheral edema even insomnia. Leaving Lachung La behind we made our way towards lake Tso Moriri. Located in the Ladakhi part of the Changthang plateau at an altitude of 4522 meters Tso Moriri is the largest among the high altitude lakes in India. The lake is fed by springs and snow-melt from neighbouring mountains. Largely based on the ecological diversity of the lake which include thirty four species of avifauna some of which gather round the lake during the nesting season in huge numbers, particularly the Bar headed Geese and various other species of mammals the most notable being the Tibetan Wild Ass or Kiang, Tso Moriri was notified in November 2002 under the list of Ramsar Wetland sites under the Ramsar Convention and is actually known as Tso Moriri Wetland Conservation Reserve. Apart from all these unique facts and figures there is one more reason for remembering Tso Moriri, the turquoise colour of its water. The still turquoise water of the lake flanked by the typical golden mountain slopes of Ladakh on one side and lush green plain land on the other appear as a riot of colours to the eyes and make this arduous journey worthwhile for this one one glance at this most surreal spectacle. It is hard to think of any other place on this planet which boasts of such a stark contrast in the landscape. Having spent the night at a camp site a few kilometres from the shore of Tso Moriri we started out early next morning for Leh. It was a 220 kilometres long journey which didn't really spring any surprises on us, apart from a couple of flat tyres and some mechanical snags in some of the bikes. On reaching Leh we realised we have been on the move for the past 10-12 days at a stretch and our weary bodies were crying out aloud for a good night's sleep and a whole day's rest.

Leh played the perfect host and provided us with everything which we were looking for to energize ourselves. Leh welcomes thousands of tourists from all over the world every year during the summer months. Although there is much to do and see in Leh and places surrounding it, for us Leh was an extended pit stop. Also it provided us with the opportunity to get our bikes and cars back in near perfect condition, something which was at the top of our priority list, because we were yet to face our biggest challenge on this trip.

With our bodies and minds well rested we set out for the famed Pangong Lake or Pangong Tso. In no time we had left the city of Leh far behind us and making our way through the villages of Karu and Shakti. Once we had left the village of Shakti a few kilometres behind the real ascent for Chang La began. Chang La at an altitude of 5360 meters is considered to be the second highest motor-able road in the world. For most part the ascent is steep and during the initial climb the condition of the road is not a huge matter of concern however the final few kilometres of the climb more than makes up for it. The condition of the road deteriorates rapidly and the steepness of the climb increases making the affair of reaching the summit of Chang La all the more challenging and memorable. Chang La almost throughout the year receives moderate to heavy snowfall. As we were painstakingly making our way through the last few bends en route to Chang La it started snowing. We knew Chang La receives snowfall throughout the year, but getting caught in the middle of it was a very different scenario for all of us. The drop in the temperature along with the reduced visibility presented in front of us such a scenario which can at best be called a whim of nature, something no amount of preparation can deal with. But we knew waiting for the weather to get any better would mean freezing ourselves to death and by this time we knew all too well nature doesn't play by any rules. Left with no other choice we decided to carry on and to our surprise reached Chang La top safely. It was still snowing heavily but now it was our turn to enjoy this fancy of nature. It was remarkable what had seemed such a predicament barely thirty minutes ago turning into a source of unbridled joy for all of us, especially for those experiencing snowfall for the first time in their lives. As the weather improved over the next few minutes we continued our journey towards Pangong Tso.



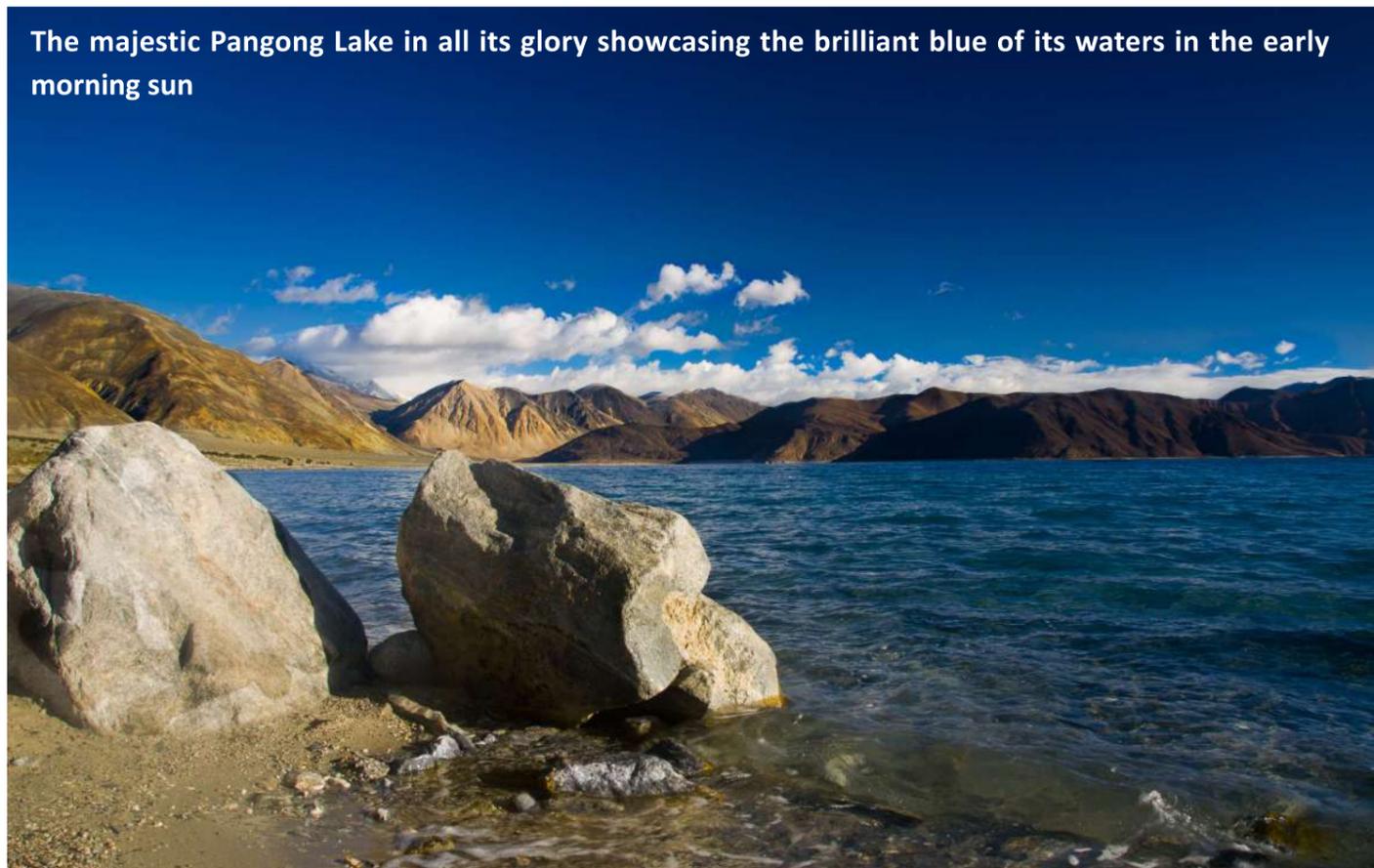
Chang La at an altitude of 5360 meters receives moderate to heavy snowfall as can be seen here, throughout the year requiring great efforts from the personnel of the Border Road Organisation (BRO) to keep this route open for vehicles.

On our way we came across a grassy bank which we soon found out was home to an extended family of Himalayan Marmots. These beaver like animals can be found all over these mountains. These marmots were particularly tolerant towards our presence; in fact their curiosity drove them towards us, giving us a fantastic opportunity to get a good look into the lives of these mountain dwellers. We cleaved our way through the mountains until the entire world seemed to dip into the brilliant blue of the Pangong Tso. This was our first real glimpse of the world famous lake. In Tibetan language Pangong Tso means long narrow enchanted lake. There could not have been a description more befitting than this one. Approximately 60% of the length of the lake lies in Tibet. The long narrow stretch of blue enchants, intoxicates and rejuvenates the senses of those who stare at it. Having witnessed Pangong Tso in its full glory early next morning, it was time for us to bid adieu to this marvel of

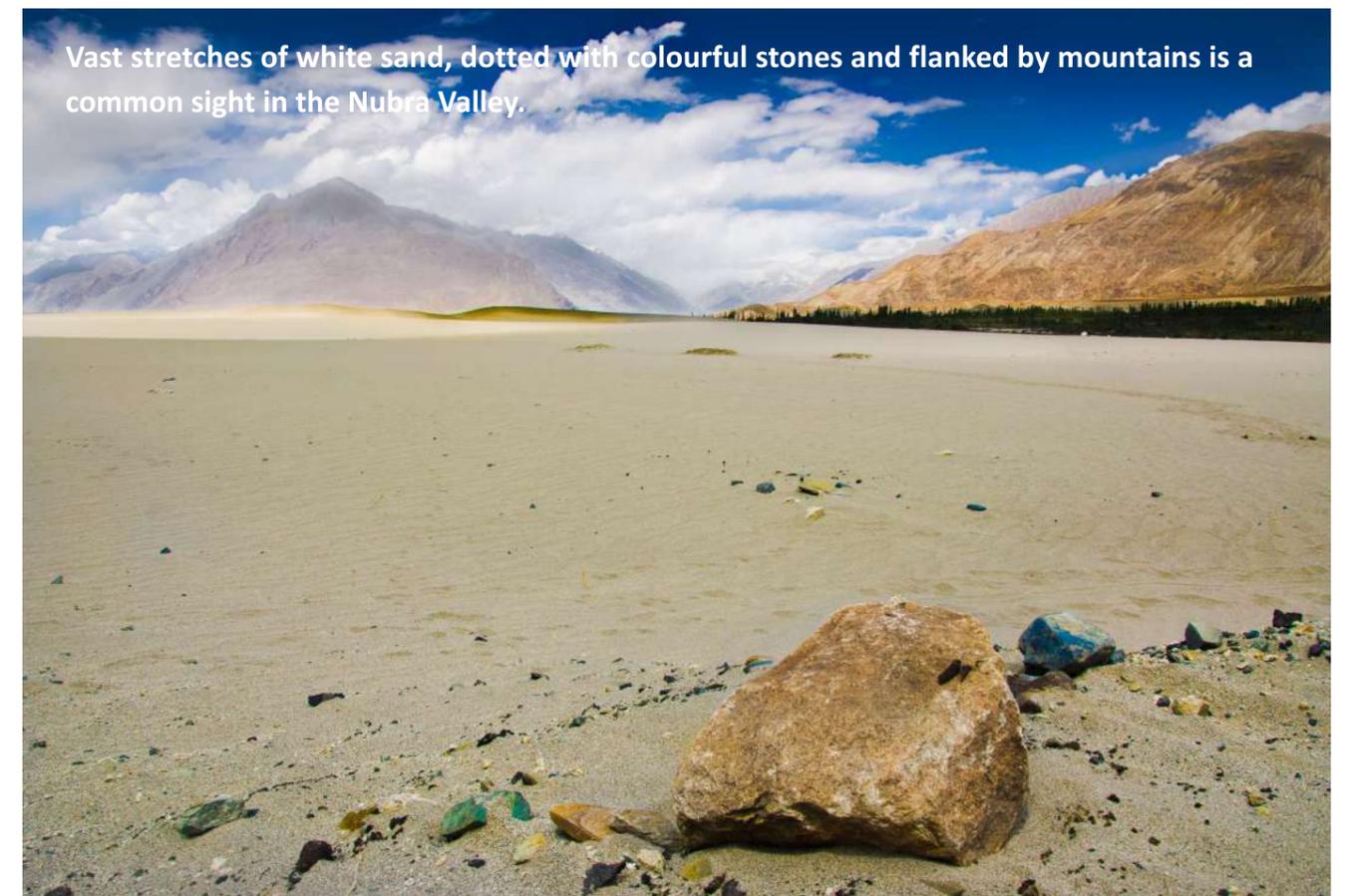


A Himalayan Marmot curiously approaches the tourists who had gathered around this grassy bank which happens to be the ideal location for spotting these animals.

nature. We were heading back to Leh which would mark the end of our journey. Our journey would lead us back to Leh through the magical whites of the sand dunes of the Nubra Valley and Khardung La, arguably the highest motor-able road in the world. Having spent the night at Nubra valley we embarked on the last leg of our journey the next morning when we headed out for Leh via Khardung La. As we approached Khardung La top the conditions seemed very similar to the ones we encountered on our way to Chang La earlier. Although on this occasion despite the overcast condition it didn't snow much to our relief. That relief was a fairly short lived one as the route seemed to get narrower around every bend. Khardung La being the gateway to the Siachen Glacier which is home to a contingent of Indian Army, this route is frequently used by heavy commercial vehicles carrying supplies,



The majestic Pangong Lake in all its glory showcasing the brilliant blue of its waters in the early morning sun



Vast stretches of white sand, dotted with colourful stones and flanked by mountains is a common sight in the Nubra Valley.



The long and arduous journey reached its pinnacle at the Khardungla Top, a road which is bound to challenge the strongest of minds. Overcoming all the odds which were stacked heavily against us, we finally made our way to the Khardungla Top on a cold gloomy morning.

which makes the job of negotiating the turns all the more difficult. Overcoming all the odds which were stacked up heavily against us we finally made it to Khardung La top. The journey through some of the highest roads in the world exceeded all my expectations. It was a gloomy morning at Khardung La top; maybe not the true reflection of the emotions I was going through, giving me enough reasons to be back at Khardung La on a bright sunny morning which would resonate my feelings in a more apt manner.

All good things eventually come to an end. My travel across the mountains of Himachal and Ladakh came to an end as we reached Leh. Even until this day I cannot tell whether it was a good idea to go on a road trip on some of the most dangerous roads in the world. Maybe it wasn't, but I wanted to see these places by becoming a part of them. I wanted to explore the passion I feel, dig into the heart of it, embrace it, even the dangers of it; I needed the quiet that followed at the end of this trip, the quiet which played out the smiling face of the Tibetan lady from the "Saviour Café", the struggle of the hardworking Gaddi people shepherding their herds of Changthangi, the brilliant blue of Pangong Tso, the turquoise of Tso Moriri, the curious marmot family, the ram shackled tents in the middle of barren mountains serving hot dishes. As these scenes played out in front of my eyes I realised the journey never ends, it stays with you, it guides you, it plays out over and over again in the quietest nooks, in the busiest streets, and the mind never gets off the road.



Chinese New Year, when Lions prowled the streets of Kolkata

by Jayati Saha

Tangra is a small suburb in the eastern part of Kolkata that traditionally housed a large number of tanneries owned by people of Hakka Chinese origin. Chinese people, principally ethnic Hakka from the provinces of Guangdong, Jiangxi and Fujian, have lived in Kolkata for at least 230 years, dating back to the time when the city was the capital of the British Empire in India. Once inhabited by almost 20,000 ethnic Chinese, the population has dwindled down to barely 2,000 at present. The earliest record of immigration from China can be traced back to 1820. According to a police census carried out in the year 1837 there were approximately 367 Chinese people living in the city of Kolkata.

Most of the standing structures have been built, over many years, by the industrious Hakka Chinese, upon marshy and reclaimed low lying land. Over the past several decades, it has served as the location of Kolkata's Chinatown. The Hakka Chinese specialized in the manufacture of leather and turned it into one of the major industries of West Bengal, providing employment to tens of thousands of local inhabitants. They were the principal suppliers of lard and were considered as the most skilled shoemakers in the country. In addition to these the Chinese people excelled in the craft of carpentry. One report from the year 1849 suggests that Cantonese carpenters used to run their trades in the Bow Bazaar area of Kolkata. Bow Bazaar is still noted for carpentry but it is nearly impossible to find any Chinese craftsmen running their trade these days. There was a huge demand of leather goods in the colonial India. In addition to the huge volume of exports to the developing and developed countries, finished leather was supplied to all the major shoe and leather goods manufacturers

all over the country. Apart from these professions the Chinese people in Kolkata were into the business of running licensed opium dens. After independence the government of India declared all these dens illegal, and carrying out opium trade in India was declared illegal. One of the main reasons for the growing Chinese population in Kolkata during the British rule was a large number of Chinese immigration which continued unabated through the turn of the century and during World War I partly due to the political upheavals in China during the First and Second Opium Wars, First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Rebellion. Around the time of the First World War, the first Chinese-owned tanneries sprang up in the Tangra region of Kolkata. Kolkata Chinatown is changing rapidly. The population is no longer renewed by waves of migration and many traditional professions such as dentistry, laundry and tannery are no longer the preserve of the Chinese. The West Bengal government, under the direction from the Supreme Court of India, recently moved all tanneries to Bantala, another suburb in the east of Kolkata. The once prosperous Calcutta Chinese community is now clearly in decline. However, a boom in Tangra's unique Indian-Chinese food is attracting a lot of attention these days and the cuisine will probably live on in Kolkata and in the global Indian diaspora although it is not strictly restricted to Kolkata anymore. The success of Hakka styled Chinese cuisine across the length and breadth of the country prompted many Chinese families to migrate to other Indian cities which have only been expedited by the dwindling economy of the Tangra suburb. Even then Tangra has been and probably always remain an integral part of the culture of the Chinese community in India and a reminder of the city's long standing association with the hard working people from the neighboring land.



Mary with her daughter Adora, busy shopping for the New Year.

Chinese people have celebrated their New Year as a spring festival for thousands of years. For centuries Chinese New Year has been widely recognized as the biggest festival among the Chinese people all over the world. Quite understandably the few remaining Chinese settlement in Kolkata feels no differently. Since Chinese culture has a very long history, there is a very traditional way of celebrating the New Year. They have also developed their own calendar system called the Lunar Calendar, which is traditionally based on the position of the moon in the sky and the lunar cycle of full moon and dark moon. The Chinese New Year appears ever changeable from day to day every year, because it is based on this calendar. Currently the city with the only Chinatown of India, Kolkata witnesses a number of colourful events around the Chinese New Year. The Chinatown in Tangra dresses up and the

celebration continues well into the first month. Michael Liu (Chinese name Liu Kuo Wen), Mary Liu (Chinese name Liu Wei Ni) and their 2 sons, Dylan Liu (Chinese name Tet Chiang), Marcus Liu (Ka Chiang) and their daughter Adora Liu (Chinese name Xin Ye), have made the Chinatown in Tangra, their home for the previous four generations. Michael and his family, like all other Chinese families in this Chinatown, have been celebrating Chinese New Year every year. Legend has it Gautam Buddha asked all the animals to gather around him on the Chinese New Year. Twelve creatures appeared and Buddha named a year after each one of them. The Chinese people believe that people born in each animal's year will possess some of the characteristics of that animal's personality. It is generally believed by the Chinese people that a person born in the year of the sheep possesses an amicable personality and is blessed with artistic talents.



Mary preparing offering for God and ancestors, during the morning worship.



Mary and Michael welcome the New Year at the auspicious time as announced by astrologer Mr. Lee.



Michael burning the symbolic money for his ancestors' after life.

A few days before the Chinese New Year, Michael and Mary take great amount of pain in thoroughly clean their entire household. This is a particularly significant practice among the Chinese people which signifies removing the old and bracing themselves up for providing the new and the future with a fresh and clean start. A couple of days prior to the New Year, a temporary market is set up for selling flowers, candles, fireworks, incense sticks, decorations, food, and small arts. All these items play a big role in the decoration of the Chinese households, the streets and the alleys, as ingredients for the authentic Chinese cuisine. After the cleaning, people will decorate the house to welcome the New Year. Most of the decorations are red in color. The most popular New Year decorations are upside down fu, dui lian, lanterns, yearly paint, papercutting, door gods, etc. Red lanterns hang at the doors and

red couplets are pasted on doors. The couplets are usually on popular themes of good fortune, wealth, longevity and above everything else happiness. The Red Lanterns hanging at the doorstep serve as a reminder to the old ways of the Chinese civilization dating a few hundred years back or possibly more. These lanterns started out as an extremely practical means of lighting the entrance way leading up to a Chinese household. These lanterns in ancient China soon proved themselves to be an improvement to the open flame way of lighting. The roundish or oval shade apart from protecting the flame inside from getting extinguished in windy weather also acts as a diffuser, thereby providing a more diffused soft artistic light. The early signs made it quite obvious that one day these lantern shades one day would become the object of artistic

expressions, as it stands today all over the world. In ancient China the emperors had the best lamp shade artisans working for them, and usually artisans all over China would copy the best designs which were made available to the Chinese people. The Chinese people were quick to realize that these lanterns were extremely capable of being used as a portable source of light or a flashlight. Once indispensable the Chinese lanterns no longer serve any practical need, but are still considered an important element of decoration during the New Year festivities by the Chinese people. Nowadays these lanterns continue to be a means of artistic expression and play a vital role in connecting the dots which trace back to the early days of the ancestors of the present day Chinese settlement all over the world.

On the morning of the New Year Eve, Michael and Mary prepare the altar before the pictures of their ancestors for the morning worship. Then they light candles, burn the incense sticks and offer gifts and fruits to the ancestors. They also thank the God for the previous year that has gone by and the ancestors who have passed on. As the Chinese believe in life after death, Michael burns symbolic money before his ancestors for a good life after death. They also pray to the departed relatives, who they still consider as part of the family. It is a custom among the Chinese people on the occasion of the Chinese New Year, to present the family members and relatives with gifts. This is considered to be a time for giving. When presenting a gift during the Chinese New Year close attention is paid to the colour of the packet or the paper in which the gifts are wrapped. The rules are simple; avoid white, as it is associated with funerals; and black or blue, as they both are synonymous with death.

The best choices are red, yellow and gold as they all symbolize wealth and prosperity. Michael and Mary carefully wrap the gifts for their family members and relatives and Michael starts preparing for the grand family reunion feast. It's usually a lavish dinner prepared at home. A typical reunion dinner menu usually consists of Chinese dishes such as the dumpling, spring rolls, and different varieties of fish among others. The families usually make different types of dumplings each having a significance of their own. Dumplings generally consist of minced meat and finely-chopped vegetables wrapped in a thin and elastic dough skin. Popular fillings are minced pork, diced shrimp, fish, ground chicken, beef, and vegetables. They can be cooked by boiling, steaming, frying or baking. There is a belief among Chinese people that different fillings in the dumplings have different significances. Some put a white thread inside a dumpling, and the one who eats that dumpling is supposed to possess longevity. Sometimes a copper coin is put in a dumpling, and the one who eats it is supposed to stumble upon a huge fortune waiting for him or her. Also the Chinese believe dumplings should be arranged in lines instead of circles, because circles of dumplings are supposed to mean one's life will go round in a loop, never reaching anywhere thereby preventing the person from achieving his or her goals in life. The consumption of fish also happens to be a very important aspect of this family reunion dinner. How a fish is eaten matters a lot. The fish should be the last dish left with some left over, as this has auspicious homophonic for there being surpluses every year. The family follows certain rules even while serving the fish on the dinner table. For instance the head of the fish should face the elders of the family or some distinguished guest; this is a way of conveying



Colourful balloons in huge numbers are let off as a part of the celebration.



Hundreds of people take part in the Dragon procession.



Children belonging to different age groups take part in the community celebration at the central market place.

their respect to the elder members or their distinguished guests. Also the diners should wait for the elders or the guests towards whom the head of the fish is faced to eat first before they start eating. However more often than not these customs and traditions are followed in a light hearted friendly manner often followed by a friendly family banter, all adding to the festive mood of the occasion.

After the dinner, Michael and Mary set up and decorate the altar with fresh flowers, incense sticks, candles, food items comprising of fruits, nuts and cakes (in multiples of five), to welcome the God in the household. With dinner and other customs over Michael, Mary and their children go out to the central market place for the festive and jovial parade. Dragons and lions would line the streets and dance about while fireworks filled the night sky with their multitudes of color and

thunderous drums of sound scared away the evil spirits. In ancient China fireworks were used to drive away the evil spirits, that custom is still very much alive although the purpose of it is nothing more than creating a brilliant spectacle against the backdrop of the night sky, which all add to the grandeur of the festivities.

An auspicious time for ushering in the New Year is announced by Mr. Lee, the astrologer and Michael and Mary and their children rush back home to pray and welcome God and the New Year. Thereafter, the Chinese Community visits relatives and friends and stay up all throughout the night. The children, unmarried people and the elderly people in the family receive a red envelope containing "lucky money". These envelopes called "hongbao" in Mandarin and "lai see" in Cantonese.

Actually, the significance of red packets is the red paper, not the money inside. Wrapping money in red packets is hoped to bring more happiness and blessing to the receivers. Hence, it is impolite to open a red packet in front of the person who gives you. Chinese people seem to be fascinated by the color red. The origin of this fascination can be traced back to a Chinese mythological episode. According to tales and legends, there was a mythical beast named the "Year". On the night of New Year's Eve, the "Year" a beastly creature came out of its hiding to torment people by harming them, killed their livestock and their pets and eventually setting out on a violent spree of mindless destruction of their properties, farmlands, crops thereby leaving behind a trail of ruins and shambles the next morning. However there was one thing the mighty and the bloodthirsty "Year" was afraid of. People found out that the "Year" was afraid of the color red, since red signifies the colour of fire. Therefore, on the New Year's Eve night, people in ancient China used to dress up in red, lit bamboo stalks hoping that the bright flames and the crackling noise of the bamboo as it burned would scare off the "Year". That custom is still very much prevalent among the modern Chinese people. The once prevalent fear of the mighty beast doesn't torment the Chinese people anymore; instead this tradition provides them with a colourful and jovial way of welcoming the New Year. Modern fireworks have replaced the bamboo shoots, the crackling noise of the burning bamboo shoots cannot be heard anymore, instead it is the loud crackling of the fireworks in all their glory, lighting up the night sky in different patterns of red and yellow and other bright colours which mark the beginning of the Chinese New Year.

On the first day of the New Year, the whole of China town goes into a slumber, people too tired from previous night's celebrations either rest or sleep in the comforts of their homes. Everything stays shut and the entire region comes to a standstill. They neither clean nor sweep nor do they engage themselves in any household chores. They eat vegetarian food throughout this day. The lights are kept on as a symbol of a bright and promising beginning to the New Year. The second day of the New Year is marked by the traditional Lion dance ceremony. The lions (who are people dressed up in Lion costumes in teams of two) are invited by the business communities to their individual establishments. In ancient China it was believed that the lion is an auspicious animal, which brings good luck and fortune along with it and a creature which signifies courage, stability and superiority. The teams usually consisting of two people each dressed in brightly coloured and brilliantly decorated lion costumes visit the business establishments. The performers mimic the movements and the mannerisms of a lion during their performance. There are various styles of lions and lion dances, though the biggest distinction is the Northern and the Southern. The Northern lion dance was used for entertaining the Imperial Court; the lions showed more of a lion's flowing mane, the appearance similar to a Pekinese dog. The Southern dance form is more symbolic as mentioned above and is performed during the Chinese New Year celebrations. The Lion Dance is accompanied by the music of beating of drums, cymbals, and gongs. Instruments synchronize to the lion dance movements and actions. They are given a red envelope, which contains money. The lions enter the premises, bow before the altar and leave. It is considered as a good omen for ushering in the New Year and for the



The teams of Lion dancers visit Michael's factory to bow before the altar and collect the red envelope.

prosperity of their businesses and their families as well. More celebrations follow and these celebrations continue deep into the sixth or the seventh day of the New Year. In China the New Year marks the longest public holiday. However the main festivities take place during the first couple of days, which give us a glimpse of a culture which is so ancient, so detailed and colourful and always promises to come up with something full of surprises.

The dwindling population coupled with the lack of opportunities do not augur well for the future of the last remaining Chinese people in the Chinatown of Kolkata. The gradual decrease in the population clearly reflects a trend where these Chinese people no longer consider Tangra Chinatown to be a land of opportunities unlike their ancestors in the past. Under such circumstances no one can predict with absolute certainty for how many more years the city will continue to witness these truly wonderful festivities dotted with the vibrancy of the red color, lit up by the beautiful traditional Chinese lanterns, night sky crowded with colourful balloons while the lions roam freely on the streets of the city ushering in a new dawn of happiness and prosperity. With the future uncertain we can only hope to hear the chorus of Gong Xi FaCai (Mandarin for wishing someone to be prosperous in the coming year) echoing across the streets, lanes and alleys of Chinatown while we marvel at the wonderful sight.

About the author



A 100m long string of firecrackers is set on fire on the street to ward off the evil spirits.



A renowned transaction lawyer who gave up her lucrative career for her first love, photography, Jayati Saha is a freelance photographer, with an extremely sensitive eye that has captured moments glistening with human emotions. Her forte is seeing the unseen and the unnoticed.

Based out of Kolkata, India, she is peripatetic and her journeys have taken her to the India not known or seen by many. Her work has been widely appreciated and have been exhibited in India and abroad, used as tutorial material and form part of private collections. She is also a contributor at the Getty Images Inc., USA.

Exhibitions

India Angles - Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Kolkata, India

Namaste India, 2011 - Bucharest, Romania

Colors and People- Calcutta Information Centre, Kolkata, India

Publication

Life Force Magazine - Gujjars of Devmali , a photo-story on life of people in Devmali, a village in Ajmer, Rajasthan, where not a single residential house is made of concrete, although the villagers are prosperous and not poverty stricken.

Life Force Magazine - Temple Holi, a photo-story on the celebration of Holi at Govind Dev Ji Temple in Jaipur.

Photojournal - Labour of Faith, a story of 4 incredible persons who, through their immense faith, ignore their unavoidable daily labour while observing Ramadan, without a drop of water.

Son Beel, the Fish Bowl of India

by Dibyendu Das



The state of Assam in the northeast of India has many a natural gems on offer, some are well known throughout the length and breadth of the country while the others often fail to hog the same limelight which some of their more celebrated counterparts in the state have grown quiet used to. The seasonal wetlands of Chatla and Sonbil are two such hidden gems in the eastern part of Assam. Pitched against some of the other major natural attractions in the state the wetlands of Chatla and Sonbil will certainly not fall short in any aspect. The history of the people inhabiting these regions, the natural beauty, the crucial roles they play in sustaining the eco-systems, the bounty of resources they have on offer are no less fascinating. These unique places along with their unique history have their own stories to tell, stories which are no less significant and worth listening to. The seasonal wetland of Chatla is about 10 km from the district head quarter Silchar of the Cachar district in the state of Assam. The village of Chatla is roughly a 20 minutes' drive away from the town of Silchar. Chatla is a seasonal floodplain wetland which retains water for approximately six months and remains dry during winter except in low lying areas where the local communities cultivate wetland rice, locally known as 'Borua' or 'Boro' rice. For almost six months of the year starting from the month of April/May to August/September Chatla remains under the water. During the monsoon season small streams such as Jalangachhara, Baluchhara and Salgonga overflow with water and flood the low lying wetlands of Chatla. As monsoon recedes the excess water drains out through river Ghagra, which is a major tributary of Barak, one of the significant rivers of Assam. Chatla is connected with the river Barak. During the rainy season as the small streams feeding water into Chatla

overflows the entire region assumes the appearance of a huge lake. The topography of Chatla is dotted by a group of tiny hills scattered throughout this region. Due to their moderate to low elevations the hills are known as "Tila" in the local language which means small mound or a small hill. What they lack in altitude, the interesting names of the hills more than make up for it. Some of the hills with peculiar names are Bairagi Tila, Harin Tila, Baghmara Tila, Varshangan Tila, Mahadev Tilla, Sannasi Tilla among others. The hills are sparsely populated; on an average hardly 5-6 families can be found living around each hill or tila. Due to their low elevations most of these hills remain submerged under the overflowing waters during the rainy season. But how do you cope with a neighborhood which remains flooded for half the year every year. The answer lies in the abundance of small boats or dinghies which can be found in this region. Almost every household in Chatla possesses one of these vessels. During the rainy season as the water level rises the small boats become the lifeline of this region, the only mode of transport and commute. It is almost impossible to find someone, men and women alike in Chatla who doesn't have sufficient knowledge regarding navigation of a boat in the flooded plains of Chatla. It is considered as a way of life, a skill which has sustained this community leading an amphibious life for hundreds of years. Hence it becomes absolutely imperative for the survival of these people to master this skill and there can be no exceptions, even children are expected to handle a boat in the waters of Chatla with ease. Majority of the inhabitants of Chatla belong to the Kaibartya community. People belonging to the Kaibartya community historically have been known to be excellent fishermen and capable oarsmen. In fact the word Kaibartya



Local people have been using such traditional techniques for catching fish in the wetlands of Chatla. These techniques have passed on from one generation to the next and have stayed almost unaltered through the course of time.

means occupation through water, mainly boating and fishing. However in the present day situation the Kaibarta people are actively engaged in cultivation and also in various government services. Despite all of that Chatla being a seasonal wetland the main livelihood of these people still remains fishery particularly during the monsoon months. During the winter months when the water dries up and fish are in short supply majority of these people turn to agriculture and animal husbandry. Boro rice is the main agricultural crop which is grown by the people in this region during the winter months. This is mainly due to the environmental factors which shape this region, the winter months are the only time of the year to grow anything on these soils, and also the topography of this region is particularly well suited for Boro rice cultivation. Apart from rice cultivation animal husbandry

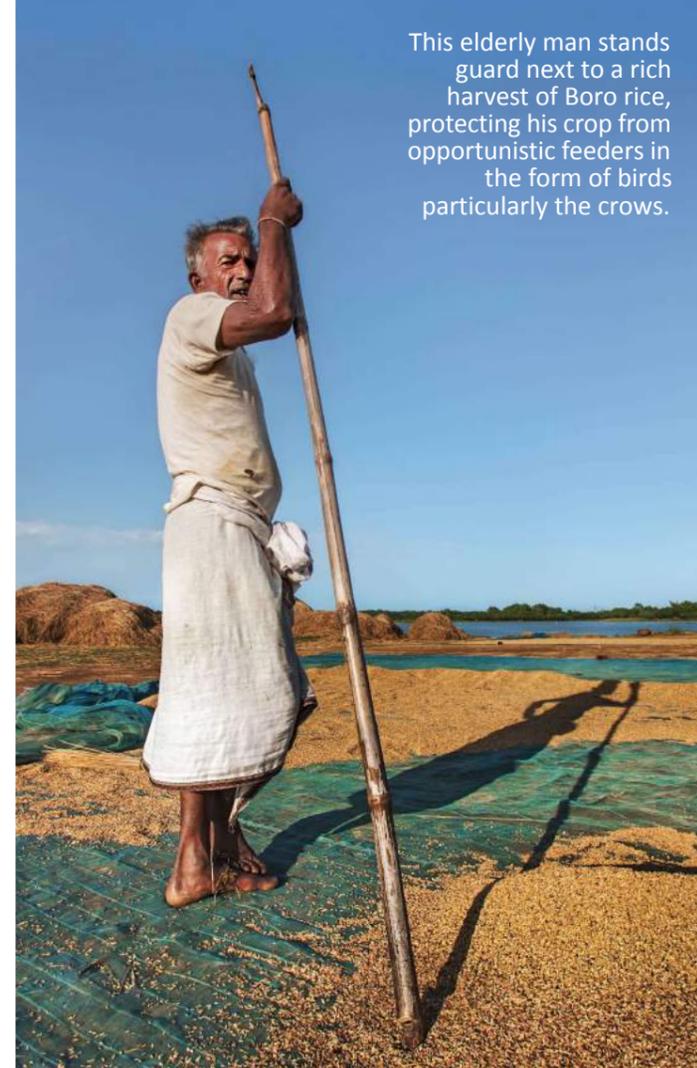
provides an alternate occupation to these people. They rear animals like duck, chicken, goat, cow and buffalo. During winter some of the male members of the community venture out to other towns and cities in the state in search of temporary jobs as daily laborers, or drivers, or rickshaw pullers. Female members of this community have been known to possess a detailed knowledge about the medicinal values of the plants locally found in this area. With the nearest healthcare being quite far away and virtually inaccessible during the rainy season, the women of the community particularly the elders are first and often the only help available in case of a medical emergency. There is not too much to write about the infrastructural developments which have taken place in this region, precisely because there hasn't been much. Although the massive



The end of monsoon is marked by the receding water level and emergence of low lying paddy fields in Chatla and Son Beel which provide excellent conditions for the cultivation of Boro rice.

potential this region holds is palpable at one glance at the vast stretches of waters during the monsoon and the lush green paddy fields during the winter months. In Assam, rice is the staple crop consumed by people belonging to all strata of the society and fish is the most preferred low cost food protein particularly by the rural people. Thus, rice-fish farming has a huge potential in improving the status of food security, health and socio-economic structure of the fishermen and farmer community thereby shaping the economy of the region in a positive manner. Chatla provides the perfect platform for concurrent rice-fish culture i.e. cultivation of rice simultaneously with culture of fish in the same plot of land. While the flooded plains for six months of the year promises a bounty of fish, the Boro rice cultivated here is ideally suited for these conditions and with the implementation of proper technique

and knowledge the production can go up manifolds. Since Boro rice cultivation is mainly practiced in the low lying areas of wetlands where the soil remains saturated with water and nutrients throughout the year mainly due to entry of nutrient rich runoff water from the surrounding inundated and upland areas, these flooded rice fields are already so rich in nutrients and minerals they require minimum or almost no external input of nutrients for rice production which drastically reduces the cost of production and leads to better yields. If properly educated the community of fishermen and farmers in this region can make subtle changes to their day to day business which in the long run will play a crucial role in adding up to reap rich benefits for these people and positively affect an entire community, which these hardworking people who tackle the odds with meagre resources most



This elderly man stands guard next to a rich harvest of Boro rice, protecting his crop from opportunistic feeders in the form of birds particularly the crows.



Winters in Son Beel promise a rich harvest of Boro rice when fields turn golden.



The wetlands of Chatla in all their beauty and grandeur.

certainly deserve.

Although still not so popular among tourists, people particularly photography enthusiasts have started visiting this place. During the rainy season one can hire the many small dinghies available and venture deep into the wetlands of Chatla within 2-3 hours. It might be possible such practices will lead to an influx of tourists in the years to come which along with it are bound to bring upon some much needed infrastructural development in this region. The natural beauty of the place is unparalleled, during the winter months early in the morning and late in the evening the horizon gets painted in myriad hues of orange, yellow, purple and pink. The colorful canvass in the sky is ably complimented by the lush green paddy fields and the slopes of the hills all around. It is only fitting that a place blessed with such surreal beauty is home to some of the nicest people who seem to be perfectly at home in this beautiful setting.

Not far away from the wetlands of Chatla lies the ox bow lake of Son Beel the largest freshwater lake in the state of Assam. Almost five times in dimensions than its closest relative Chatla, Son Beel is situated in the southern part of Assam. Although the lake itself is situated in the Karimganj it acts as a connecting corridor between the districts of Karimganj and Hailakandi. Similar to the wetlands of Chatla this beel (lake) on the whole is used as a farm land for rice cultivation during the winter season when the water recedes. With the advent of monsoon heavy downpour floods the winter farm land and turns it into a gigantic lake. This cycle of farmland and lake alternates itself after every six months of the year. The shallow depth of the lake leads to the overflow of waters as monsoon gains impetus and the excess water channels through the Gagra and Kushira rivers and eventually flows

into Bangladesh. Since the lake is a connecting corridor between the districts of Karimganj and Hailakandi, the lake experiences a fair share of water traffic during the rainy season. More than fifty country boats ply on the waters of Son Beel on a daily basis. Approximately 300 families are directly engaged and are dependent on the revenues from these commutes for six months of the year. The craft of boat making which is an area of expertise for the rural artisans provide almost similar number of families with a source of livelihood. However the biggest bounty which Son Beel offers is in the form of its traditional fishing grounds. Son Beel is home to at least 70 different species of fish, including katla, mrigel, kalbosh, puti, moka and chela baiya. Snails, which are found aplenty particularly along the shores of the lake, are considered a delicacy. Picking them from the lake is a part of the daily routine of the women that live here. More than 35,000 families are directly involved in the business of traditional fishing in the waters of Son Beel. Another 500 families are involved in providing the necessary accessories such as fishing nets, fishing rods and specialized boats and are actively involved in the fish marketing network. During the rainy season Son Beel offers a rich bounty of countless species of fish, coming in all kinds of shapes and sizes. A particular item known as the Bhujia fish which is a mixture of different species of small fish usually served as a light snack is an overwhelming favorite among the local people and across the state as well. The adjoining Kalibari Fish Market and the Fakua Railway Station Markets in Kaliganj and many others are entirely dependent on the supply of fish from Son Beel and the areas surrounding these markets have prospered mainly due to fishing trade. Son Beel supplies its fish to other parts of the state as well. Many everyday markets and traders



It is never too early to learn the ways of water, even kids are expected to be able to negotiate these waters, a vital skill which they pick up by observing the elders and often accompanying them on their fishing expeditions.



Monsoon evening descends upon the waters of Son Beel as the clouds promise another heavy downpour.



Small boats like these are the only modes of communication during the monsoon season when Son Beel brims with overflowing rain water.

throughout the state depend on the supply of fish from Son Beel for carrying out their businesses. The fishermen use their traditional methods for reeling in the fish. Traditionally, fish are caught using cane barriers. These barriers allow the smaller fish to slip through, thereby ensuring the future of the species. Nowadays fishermen prefer mosquito nets over fishing nets because mosquito nets are much cheaper and easy to get hold of from the neighboring tea estate although in the long run this practice is bound to be proven counter-productive since this fine web of plastic traps almost everything including the small fish, fish eggs and other aquatic life thereby threatening the balance and the future of the aquatic species.

Apart from the rich bounty which Son Beel offers to the human settlement, the wetland also happens to be a bio-diversity hotspot. More than

150 species of birds have been recorded, although the actual diversity must be much more. The water body being a wetland eco-system attracts thousands of waterfowl. Other than the local species of avifauna Son Beel is the winter home to many species of migratory birds such as the Bar Headed Goose, the Red Crested Pochard, the Lesser Whistling Teal and others. At least 27 species of exotic birds including the Short-eared Owl and the Osprey have made Son Beel their home.

Son Beel is slowly but steadily developing the reputation of an eco-tourism destination. Being a short 20 minutes' drive from the district head quarter Hailakandi the place is fast becoming a favored weekend destination. There are a few places in Son Beel to visit, one of them is Kakdwip. Kakdwip is a small island which remains



Women in Chatla and Son Beel use such indigenous methods to prepare par boiled rice particularly during the winter months.

completely submerged during the rainy season. The Hizol trees on this little island like land can be seen as they are standing on the water stretching their necks over the water. It is one of the most breathtaking views of that place. There is another beautiful place in Sonebeel known as Devodwar (Door of God) which is mainly a bazaar which offers breathtaking views of the sun setting over Son Beel. The tiny sandy beach of Anandapur has also garnered the reputation of being a picturesque location, particularly among photography enthusiasts. Visiting Son Beel and these adjoining locations during the rainy season is bound to be a memorable experience. A boat ride in the waters of Son Beel along with the local people provides an insight into their lives and how they go about their daily business sometimes using indigenous methods. For birding enthusiasts winter is the ideal time to visit Son Beel to witness the conglomeration of hundreds of bird species both local and distant migrants from faraway lands.



Traditionally women in these regions have been practising the technique of winnowing for separating rice from the chaff.



Fishing nets like this one are the most commonly used gear by the fishing community in these regions.

The Saraspur tea estate in Son Beel is fast developing into a weekend getaway for tourists from neighbouring parts of the state for its picturesque and tranquil setting .



However the lake which could be called the lifeline for thousands of people finds itself in a perilous situation under the present circumstances. With the ever increasing human population along the water body the threat of rampant encroachment and pollution loo large and is assuming massive proportion with every passing day. In an attempt to preserve the bio-diversity and the unique eco-system of this water body, the ox bow lake was granted the status of a national wetland by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest in 2008. This was seen as a step taken in the right direction after prominent ecologists and conservationists have been crusading relentlessly for the preservation of this fragile eco-system for decades. The ever increasing human population along the shores of the lake and in the surrounding areas is multiplying the threats of pollution and encroachment. The pollution from human waste and garbage over the years coupled with the unabated destruction of greenery through illegal felling of trees mainly for firewood all around the lake have significantly reduced the appeal of Son Beel among migratory bird species for whom this ox bow lake used to be their favorite winter retreat. Encroachment has increased over the past few years, resulting in a loss of a total area of 2,087 hectares along the fringes of the forests. The numbers of bar-headed goose, adjutant stork, lesser whistling teal, crested pochard and other winged migrants who used to flock around this lake in huge numbers have dwindled significantly. The dwindling numbers of avian migrants is leaving a negative impact on this already fragile eco-system, a problem which is showing no signs of sorting itself out. Conservationists in the wake of such a situation are pinning their hopes on achieving the Ramsar Site status for Son Beel, which will firmly put in place certain rules and regulations, which

implemented properly can go a long way in securing the future of this threatened eco-system. It is not only in the interest of the avifauna Son Beel needs preservation. A few hundred thousand people are directly dependent on this vast stretch of water body, even for needs as basic as drinking water. This incredibly complicated and unique eco-system with all its components from the most humble plankton species to the more appealing winged visitors operates in a manner which requires the perfect harmony. If we let this eco-system degrade we will be putting the existence of thousands of individuals at risk. The waters of Son Beel have served the inhabitants of this region and have served them well, there can be no debating the fact that the huge human settlement will always be dependent on the natural resources the lake has to offer and that dependence cannot be frowned upon, however it is absolutely imperative on our part to use up the natural resources in a sustained manner, which will allow nature to cope with our needs and regenerate so that it can serve us and other species dependent on these waters forever. On a brighter note the concerned authorities are already putting in place appropriate restoration measures for improving the health of this fragile natural wonder. Attempts are being made at restoring the greenery all around the lake; steps are being taken to treat the human settlement runoff which includes sewage before discharging into the beel, illegal encroachments and settlements around the beel periphery are being gradually eliminated, efforts are being put in to educate the locals on the importance of preserving this wetland at the same time eco-tourism and conservation activities are being encouraged. All these measures are important and crucial to the survival of this wetland eco-system and also for the future of the human beings living in this area.



A typically beautiful evening marks the end of another day in Son Beel where life from an early age revolves around these vast stretches of water. While enough damage has already been done, there is still enough reason to feel hopeful about the future although an immense amount of work needs to be done in order to rejuvenate Son Beel



An African Safari

A photo album by Sajeesh Sanmughan

Although my passion for photograph dates quite a few years back it wasn't until 2013, I started going out with my camera with the intention of taking some high quality shots which would help me take my skills as a photographer a couple of notches higher. At the very beginning I was mainly interested in landscape and cityscape photography (Dubai, where I currently live being the place for finding some amazing cityscapes I was mainly concentrating on that). And then, one of my colleague who had been to the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya showed me some of his photos, which bowled me over. From that very moment onwards Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya easily made its way into my bucket list of places to visit. As a result of which I started taking a keen interest in the works of renowned wildlife and nature photographers all over the world and started educating myself regarding the nuances and of course the technicalities of wildlife/nature photography.

Another one among the big fives of Africa, the Wild Buffalo is a massive creature and a sworn enemy of the lions, the bad blood between these two species dates back to the early stages of evolution. (Facing page - bottom picture)

The king of the Savannah was out in full glory with his queen by his side. The pair was a mating couple and would stay together for the next three to four days over. Apart from the mating season pride males usually prefer to be by themselves and don't indulge in socialising too much. The beautiful couple basking in the glory of the afternoon sun after a brief spell of rain presented a beautiful frame for me.



The queen of the Savannah seamlessly slips into the role of a doting and affectionate mother from being a fierce hunter.



The fastest land animal on this planet, the Cheetah combines speed with athletic grace while sprinting across the Savannah, its every move bearing a testimony to the fact that it was built for speed.





The giants of the Savannah, the Elephants live in herds comprising of females and calves, where every female is related to the others in some way, while the bulls or the male elephants lead a solitary life only to venture close to a herd of females during the mating season.



It was around 3.30 p.m when we spotted two Cheetahs resting in the shade of a fallen tree trunk in an attempt to beat the heat of the scorching afternoon sun. The Cheetahs were presumably males since male Cheetahs are known for forming a coalition of up to 4 or even 5 individuals, usually brothers by birth. We waited for a long time with the anticipation of some action but the Cheetahs were in a leisurely mood and were determined to extend their siesta for as long as they possibly could. Just when I had given up all hopes of catching them in action one of them made an attempt to climb up the dead tree against which they were resting but suddenly decided against it. It was when the Cheetah was climbing down the trunk of the tree I took this shot.



It was around 5:30 in the evening, the sun was about to set, the Savannah was painted in an ethereal golden yellow hue which was further accentuated by the tall golden grasses. Amidst this wonderful setting stood the imposing frame of a Giraffe, Savannah's tallest resident. I had watched a Giraffe on many occasions until then, on the television set, in the zoo, but out there in the open Savannah it looked like a prehistoric creature. What fascinated me the most was the ease with which such a huge creature with such a peculiar and elaborate body structure gracefully made its way through the golden grassland of the Savannah.

This particular shot was taken during the middle of the day during one of our safaris. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have stumbled upon this incredible phenomenon. Every year during the annual migration thousands of wildebeests embark upon a journey of hundreds of miles in search of greener pastures. This was one such herd making an attempt to cross the river. It was something none of us had hoped to witness on the very first day. It took place at around 12 in the afternoon and like I have already mentioned how fortunate I was since I didn't get to see any more crossing during the rest of the safari.







Chhau Dance, a Masked Tale of Decline

by Suswan Mondal

The concept of Chhau dance has always been synonymous with the district of Purulia in West Bengal and dates a few hundred years back into history. Over the years the district has earned the distinct reputation of producing some of the finest Chhau dancers. In a way the vibrant Chhau dance masks and attires seem like a carefree splash of bright colours on a canvas which predominantly portrayed rugged and barren landscapes which are so typical of Purulia. The popular notion says the practice of Chhau dance evolved simultaneously in three different Indian states, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal. There are three recognized schools or styles of Chhau. These are the Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj varieties belonging to the three different states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa respectively and named after the district or the village in which they are performed. Though the origin of Chhau dance cannot be traced back with absolute certainty, the gross believe among historians is the word 'Chhau' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Chhaya', which means shadow or image. In Oriya 'Chhauka' means the ability to make a sudden and unexpected attack. Chhau dance perhaps originated from the martial dance PhariKhandaKhela (playing with the sword and the shield). According to another school of thought the dance form owes its origin to the efforts of the tribal warriors living in the military barracks, to appease and influence the Sun God. This theory gains further impetus from the meaning of the word 'Chhauni' which means military barracks. Some authors or historians have provided in their manuscripts another interesting explanation to the origin of this dance form, particularly in the Purulia district of West Bengal. According to them, the secret to understanding the origin of this dance form lies in the outcries of the performers or the

drummers during the performance, something which should not be overlooked. Particularly in the Purulia form of Chhau dance, the singer drummer often rushes to the new characters that are waiting to take centre stage by shouting "cho... cho...cho..." with excitement, before they enter into the arena. By doing this he infuses the same enthusiasm in the dancer. During the course of the performance also such excitement and outburst of joy are expressed by the singers and other members of orchestra. Such outcries of excitement and enthusiasm bear a striking resemblance to the utterances made by the hunters in this region who assemble at a particular hill top during the annual hunting expeditions on the full moon day in the month of May. While chasing the game they let out cries of "cho... cho...cho..." (Which can be looked as a broader pronunciation of the word Chhau), in order to confuse the frightened animal and rob it of the possible escape routes or invoke the spirit of the animal with the view of suppressing it with minimum of effort. Going by these anecdotes some claim Chhau dance owes its origin to the practice of hunting, the earliest occupation of the native tribal belonging to this land, which could be thought of as the most arduous areas to penetrate, where the tribal people had no other option but to live off the land. However historians unanimously have accepted that Chhau dance, on a broader scale originally was a form of martial art, which was mainly performed by the tribal warriors in the tribal belts of these three Indian states. Like other forms of martial arts found all over the world, the main purpose of this particular dance form was to keep the warriors fit, agile and battle ready. The winds of change over the years have touched these tribal areas too, what was once thought of as a hostile terrain covered by thick blankets of forests, infested by wild animals in huge numbers



Moments like these are common during a Chhau performance which normally includes a face-off between the good and the evil.



A Chhau dancer takes the centre stage dressed as a king ready to challenge his evil opponent.

has given way to human settlements, although still considered among some of the lesser developed areas of the state, the Chhau villages of Purulia today are a far cry from what they were during the inception of this dance form. However Chhau dance has survived the winds of change. Although the entire purpose of the dance form today has taken a whole new meaning, with the days of hunting or warfare far behind these people, Chhau dance of today is viewed more as an art form aimed at the enjoyment of people than as a means to keep the warriors fit or as a simulation to an actual hunting expedition.

The brilliantly coloured masks of the Chhau dance form of Purulia, possibly precedes the reputation of the dance form itself. As an outsider, one may never witness this brilliant spectacle, but a sight of those masks is always enough for that person to attribute it to Chhau dance. In a way these masks are symbolic to the entire elaborate ritual of Chhau dance. Charida, a small quaint village in the foothills of Ajodhya is home for some wonderful artists making Chau mask. The village of Charida is completely dedicated to the task of mask making, and this profession has passed on from one generation to the next in many families for hundreds of years. Presently around 250 artisans of Charida village are involved in this craft the most celebrated one being Dwijen Sutradhar better known as Sadhu Sutradhar who has an entire team of artisans working for him. It is a profession which involves every family member in some way. The principle raw material used for making these masks is the clay collected from the neighbouring river bed, which is then pounded for hours and made smooth and malleable. The smooth clay is then moulded into various shapes and forms suitable to different types of masks. Using water and wooden tools the clay is then sculpted into a human face and



One of the oldest mask makers in the village of Charida, old age has failed to slow him down, he is still burdened with the responsibility of supplying a good number of masks during the peak season.

left to dry in the sun for days. These form the moulds from which using recycled paper mache masks are made. When the mask dries up the clay mould is broken in order to free the mask. Once the mask is dry, an initial layer of primer paint is applied, which is usually followed by more layers of paints adding to the details of the mask resulting in the finished product. Each mask resembles a particular character from the ancient epics, the Puranas, the Gods and Goddesses from the mythologies. The Gods and Goddesses are usually depicted as having sharper facial features with a fair complexion, whereas the indigenous people are usually depicted as large and course with an abundance of facial hair. In a similar manner the masks depicting the Aryan invaders who invaded these lands centuries ago,

are painted with light colours and have sharper features, whereas the masks depicting indigenous people are painted in darker shades and conscious effort is put in to make those masks less appealing to the eyes even giving it a monstrous appearance. This is largely a reflection of the conflict that existed between the Aryan invaders and the indigenous epics. Since the Chhau dance rituals in fact are re-enactments of different episodes from the Indian epics or mythologies there is a stark contrast in the masks' appearances in their depiction of the good and the evil. However it is of some interest to notice that those characters, rather masks representatives of the indigenous people are usually portrayed in the performances as the indomitable warriors, insurmountable in battles, who can be subjugated only by the supreme prowess of lord Shiva or the Goddess Durga. Although the Chhau dance performances are a typically male dominated arena, where the female representatives find no place whatsoever to showcase their skills or

A little kid carefully examines the Chhau masks hanging from the wall of a house in Charida village which excels in the craft of mask making.





Dwijen Sutradhar, the most celebrated mask maker in the village of Charida is busy bringing the mould of clay and paper to life, while his little son who has big shoes to fill in, is already showing a lot of promise.

talents, female members of the families involved in the craftsmanship of making masks and attires are entrusted with the responsibility of stitching together the attires of the performers and their ornaments, which are usually of extremely bright colours comprising of a lot of brightly coloured beads in order to create a striking spectacle. The entire process of mask making is an elaborate one and one that is evolving every year. With competition growing in every second house or family in the village artisans try their level best to outdo their previous best efforts. The end result of this healthy rivalry is clearly visible in the masks produced, which grow bigger and brighter in their appearance every year, with careful attention paid to every finer details, so that nothing appears out of place, everything is in perspective, the colours become bolder, the demons and Asuras appearing more menacing with every passing year. In other words the competition has forced the artisans to shun their once conservative ways and become bolder in their usage of resources. Young children of these families are introduced to this world of craftsmanship at a very early age. They are expected to pay attention and learn from observing the elders of the family while they are at work. It is from these early observations they are going to unlock a lot of secrets of this trade so that when the baton is passed on to them they can carry the family legacy forward.

In Purulia Chhau is performed on the Sun festival, which falls in the Chaitra month of Hindu calendar, during the month of March-April. Nowadays Chhau dance makes an important element of some major function or programme, for instance in 1995 Chhau dance was the approved theme of West Bengal's tableau during the Republic Day Parade. In the countryside performances of PuruliaChhau, there is no elevated stage and the dancers usually perform on the flat ground in an open arena, with people sitting encircling them. While performing in some show or on a wider platform, an elevated stage is used for the performance. The three different genres of Chhau dance maybe different in various aspects, but the different forms of music which accompany these different formats of Chhau dance is quite similar to one another. The underlying theme of the music is a strong percussion which is a symphony of a variety of drums of which Dhol and Dhumsaa are the most essential. Again, between Dhol and Dhumsaa, the former leads. Dhol can be easily thought of as the driving force behind a Chhau performance. It not only provides the much needed rhythms and beats to an essentially dance performance which Chhau is but lays down the foundation for the Chhau music. While Dhol provides Chhau music with a solid foundation and acts as the backbone of the performance, the nuances of Chhau dance are brought to life by other musical instruments such as the Chadchadi, a short cylindrical drum and a small hemispherical drum known as Tikraa. The music produced by these instruments compliments the Dhol by carving out the finer details on the solidly laid platform by the Dhol.

A Chhau dance performance is usually preceded by an invocation to the Hindu God Ganesh. The basic premise of most Chhau dance performance

is the triumph of good over evil as depicted in the various episodes of Hindu mythologies or Indian epics. A distinctive feature of this dance form is the acrobatic use of the body; something which when combined with the elaborate masks, headgears and the costumes can present itself as a mighty difficult proposition to deal with. Chhau dancers spend hours and years in training their bodies so that they can meet the physical demands of this highly specialized form of art. Powerful movements, intense concentration, building up of the energy level leading to a final but powerful release are the characterizing features of this dance.

In the villages the performance usually starts between 9.00 and 10.00 o'clock in the evening. As the night grows older the dance gains momentum, the air of excitement which grows with every dance move is palpable all around. During the performance the dancers make significant efforts to communicate with the audience encircling them. One of the most popular presentations of the Purulia Chhau Dance is the mythological tale of Mahisasur Mardini the incarnation of Goddess Durga who was created by other Gods to put an end to the devastation caused by the king of demons Mahisasura. Tormented by the devastation caused by the demon Mahisasur, the Gods and Goddesses seekedhelped from Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar who joined forces to create a supreme power in the form of Goddess Durga. In a fierce battle which followed Goddess Durga put an end to the woes of the Gods and Goddesses by slaying the demon king Mahisasura and brought peace back to the universe. Other popular mythological stories or episodes are also depicted in the Chhau dance performances where each performer is assigned a specific role and dresses up accordingly. In this light Chhau dance can be viewed as primarily a form of theatre in



This young men are artisans in the team of Dwijen Sutradhar. Both of them are busy fitting the elaborate headgear on the mask of Goddess Durga, one of the most popular characters of any Chhau performance.





Dhol is an extremely important component of Chhau dance. A member of the musical team plays the Dhol which provides the beats and the rhythms to the Chhau dancer performing in the background.

which dancing is the most dominant means of communication between the performers and the audience.

What the future has to offer:

In 2010 Chhau dance form found a place in UNESCO's elite list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a much needed impetus for an art form which is on the verge of decay and possibly suffering a slow death. Over the years the popularity of this dance form has eroded significantly due to a combination of various factors. During the course of last five years, the number of Purulia Chhau dance troupes has dropped from 300 to 100, due to a severe lack of funding and performance opportunities, as well as changing lifestyles in the region which was once home to this dying art. The greatest threat to a Chhau dancer's future is the harsh economic reality which he has to encounter. Considering all the arrangements which go into a Chhau dance performance it can be an expensive business for a poor farmer who is perennially entangled in the loop of debt. Each year, farmers either take a loan or sell paddy to fund Chhau performances. A dancer makes about 120 rupees per performance, but by the end of the season he finds himself in debt again, in other words Chhau dance has failed to provide a viable economic model to the performers.

Also with the integration of the native States with the Indian Union and in consequence thereof the families of the Maharajas and feudal lords in this region being deprived of their earlier resources, the popularity of Chhau dance has been declining. The dance form which once enjoyed rich patronage from the feudal lords has failed to strike the same chord with the present generation, especially the youngsters. This can be attributed to the winds of globalization and urbanization which have swept across these regions as well. With other modes of entertainment available at their doorsteps Chhau dance is falling short on entertainment quotient when faces with bigger and glamorous counterparts. For instance in the olden days the access to a television set in these villages was limited to a handful of villagers, the situation has changed drastically with time. Chhau dance form has to come up with something dramatic in order to match what a television set can offer in terms of entertainment. In the light of such developments aspects of Chhau have evolved to keep up with the times and keep the younger generation interested. The dances have become



Chhau dance is performed exclusively by male performers. Here two male performers are busy portraying some mythological female characters.

Two Chhau masks lie side by side revealing the stark contrast that exists in the depiction of the good and the evil.



A Chhau dancer meticulously examines his mask, the all important component of Chhau dance, moments before entering the arena for his performance.



down all too well with some of the older masters of the art who are of the opinion that the dance has lost some of its subtlety in adapting to a younger generation influenced by popular media. With interest among the locals dwindling at an alarming rate, Chhau dancers are now dependant on invitations or contracts to perform on special occasions in front of a more urban audience. Various attempts made on the part of the government to promote the works of Chhau artisans as exhibits and souvenirs in different melas, exhibitions, trade fairs have met with considerable success. The Chhau artisans too have changed their once orthodox stand of not investing their time and energy for anything other than an actual performance in order to promote their craft and most importantly to keep their profession alive. The miniature masks usually priced at around 200 rupees while the larger ones rated at 3000 promise a good return for their efforts and have found sizeable followers in the form of art lovers and enthusiasts from all over the state as well as the country. This certainly is a shot in the arm for this dying industry and with proper marketing and methodical implementation of further measures can go a long way in bringing this threatened genre of art back from the verge of extinction. In other attempts to popularise this art, efforts have been made by the concerned authorities to bring Chhau dance to people especially the young generation belonging to other states and communities of India. To further safe guard the interests of Chhau dancers and artisans the Sangeet Natak Academy has taken up the initiative to set up a National Dance Centre for Chhau Dance at Baripada, Orissa. All these efforts if properly co-ordinated can go a long way in preserving this dance form thereby providing a platform to these wonderful performers and artisans to display their unique skills and talents besides preserving their livelihood. Chhau dance is much more than a mere performance for these people, over the years Chhau dance has become a part of their existence, whether actively involved with it or not, if someday this dance form goes extinct, this region along with its people will be robbed of their souls. The onus lies with all of us to keep this wonderful tradition alive, to keep the indomitable passion of these wonderful people burning for many more years to come.

Reader's Section

All the photographs featured here were selected from the entries made by our readers in the Facebook group-Indian Photo Arts or at submission.ipa@gmail.com. Showcase your work by sending them to us at the above mentioned addresses.



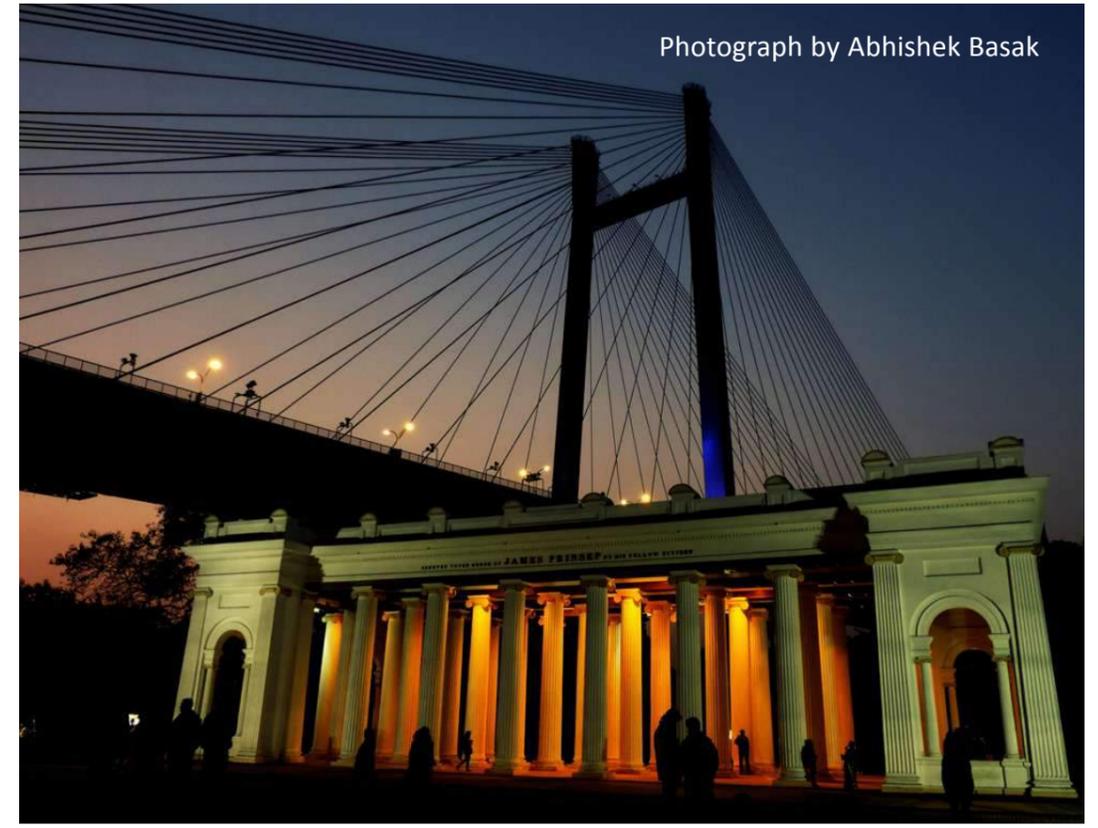
Photograph by Suman Sengupta



Photograph by Sanak Roychoudhury



Photograph by Arindam Satiar



Photograph by Abhishek Basak



Photograph by Avik Sett



Photograph by Aniket Modak



Photograph by Arindam Satiar

Photograph by Ashish George Chalapuram



Photograph by Manjima Mukherjee