INDIA
PERSPECTIVES

Volume 34 | Issue 06 | 2020

WALKING THE NEW ROAD

Celebrating Indian culture and traditions

POTPOURRI

Potpourri
Events of the season
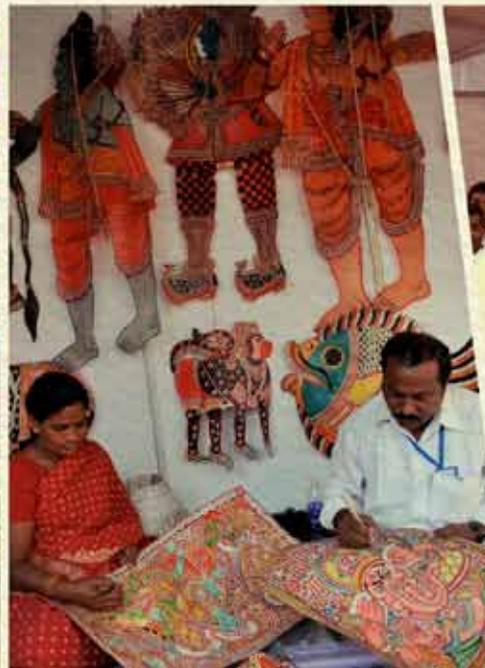
The great egret is one of the several avian species spotted in Mangalajodi

8–10 JANUARY, 2021

NATIONAL CHILIKA FESTIVAL

Mangalajodi, the largest brackish water lake in Asia, welcomes as many as 10 lakh winged visitors of almost 200 varied species. From such local migrating species as spot-billed pelican, Oriental darter and black-headed ibis to long-distance migratory birds like ferruginous pochard, Eurasian curlew, Asian dowitcher and the near-threatened river tern - the lake turns into a haven for ornithologists, naturalists and photographers alike.

WHERE: Chilika, Odisha

9–10 JANUARY, 2021

CAMEL FESTIVAL

One of the liveliest events hosted in Bikaner, it features a host of exciting activities like camel rides, cultural and folk performances, heritage walks and firework display. Visitors can also enjoy an array of competitions ranging from camel dance and camel decoration to tug of war and villager wrestling, and even a turban tying contest for foreigners. Do not forget to witness the ceremonial procession that starts from the historic Junagarh Fort and ends at Dr Karni Singh Stadium, the venue, on the first day.

WHERE: Bikaner, Rajasthan

14–15 JANUARY, 2021

PONGAL

Also called Makara Sankranthi, it marks the first day of the Tamil month of Thai. In this harvest festival, families prepare *pongal* (a dish of rice and milk) in beautifully coloured earthen pots, where grains from the year's harvest are used. In Tamil Nadu, the festivities span four days - on the first day, homes are painted afresh followed by the preparation of *pongal* on the second. On the third day (Mattu Pongal), farm animals are worshipped. It concludes with Kannum Pongal (fourth day) when families meet with relatives.

WHERE: Tamil Nadu

1–15 FEBRUARY, 2021

SURAJKUND INTERNATIONAL CRAFTS MELA

Claimed to be one of the largest crafts fairs in the world, the annual Surajkund International Crafts Mela showcases crafts and traditions from India and abroad. It sees participation from as many as 20 countries and all Indian states. This mela (fair) is a meeting ground for talented artists, painters, weavers, sculptors and craftsmen from across the country who exhibit their creations for visitors who come from the world over to admire and purchase them.

WHERE: Faridabad, Haryana

A light art installation during at the 2017 edition of the festival

6–14 FEBRUARY, 2021

KALA GHODA ARTS FESTIVAL

Touted to be one of the country's largest multi-cultural festivals, it is held in the heritage Kala Ghoda area of south Mumbai. From film screenings, dance recitals, musical performances and theatre productions to heritage walks, literary sessions, stand up comedy sets, open air exhibitions and art installations - this festival attracts both domestic and international visitors and offers them an immersive experience of India's cultural heritage. This year, the festival will be held virtually.

For more information, visit: kalaghodaassociation.com.

19–28 FEBRUARY, 2021

JAIPUR LITERATURE FESTIVAL

One of the biggest and most-awaited events in India's literary calendar, the Jaipur Literature Festival brings together scholars, academicians, artistes, best-selling authors and speakers under one roof. The festival features engaging discussions, musical events, author meet-and-greet sessions and book stalls among other attractions. Some of the notable speakers this year include author and politician Shashi Tharoor, renowned theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli and Indian diplomat Navtej Sarna. This year, the event is expected to be held virtually.

For updates, please visit: jaipurliteraturefestival.org.

Renowned economist and Nobel Prize winner Abhijit Banerjee was one of the speakers at JLF 2020

INDIA
PERSPECTIVES

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FOREWORD

India celebrated its 72nd Republic Day with the unfurling of the National Flag and the signature grand parade at New Delhi's iconic Rajpath. This year's celebrations were made more special with a series of 'firsts'. From featuring India's first women fighter pilot and troops deployed in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to a spectacular flypast of Rafale fighter jets and a tableau from the country's newly-formed Union Territory, Ladakh.

In this edition of *India Perspectives*, we delve into India's historical relationship with Bangladesh, as the neighbouring country gets ready to celebrate its 50th Independence Day on March 26, 2021. During a virtual meeting held in December 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladesh counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, reiterated their commitment to pursue the vision of deeper engagement and other avenues of strengthening border security and facilitating multi-modal connectivity between the two nations. This year also marks 50 years of India's victory in the 1971 war against Pakistan, being celebrated as year-long 'Golden Victory' commemorative event.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India has taken the centre stage in global diplomacy, a fact supported by the success of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) that has been hailed by the PM as India's "gift to the world" in the fight against climate change. This treaty-based organisation that aims to mitigate the deleterious reliance on fossil fuel has moved towards universalisation by inviting membership from all member states of the UN. We delve deeper into the increasing relevance of ISA, especially how in the wake of the pandemic, the organisation has set up ISA CARES, an initiative dedicated to the deployment of solar energy in the healthcare sector.

We also look at PM Modi's reiteration of the country's firm belief in regional peace, security and prosperity at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of State summit. In his speech at the conclave, PM Modi stressed on the need for a reformed multilateralism to cater to a world recuperating from the global pandemic.

We further showcase one of the Government's flagship programmes, the ambitious Jal Jeevan Mission, which aims to provide Functional Household Tap Connection to every rural household in the country by 2024. Also in focus is another recent achievement, the completion of the Atal Tunnel, the world's longest high-altitude tunnel in the Himalayas. We analyse the strategic importance of this engineering marvel connecting the picturesque town of Manali to the Lahaul-Spiti Valley, in the border state of Himachal Pradesh.

In a living example of how India inspires people across the world, know more about the indigenous Zapotec community of Mexico that is propagating khadi, the symbol of Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle. Mark Brown, the man behind the movement in this North American country, recounts his experiments with the Mahatma's philosophies of self-reliance. And in the persona section, we pay tribute to the legendary actor Soumitra Chatterjee, whose sudden demise has left an indelible void in the fabric of Indian cinema, specially in the sphere of Bengali films and theatre.

Anurag Srivastava

Anurag Srivastava
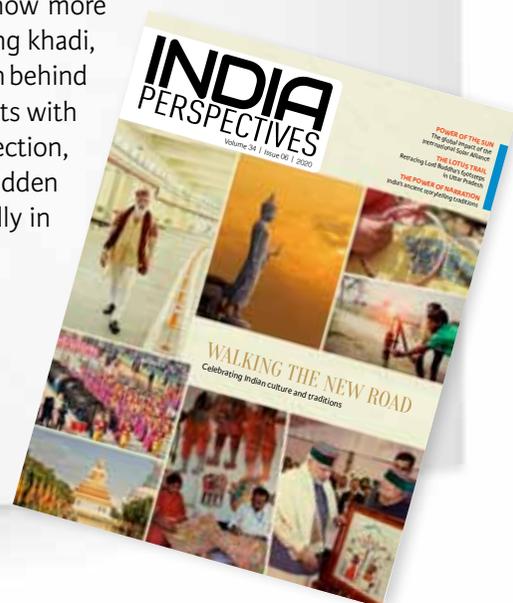
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) greets Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina before their bilateral talk at Hyderabad House, on October 5, 2019, in New Delhi

TALE OF TWO
friendly neighbours

The virtual summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina on December 17, 2020, marked the Victory Day, which commemorates the war of 1971. During the meeting, the two leaders reiterated their commitment to pursue the vision of deeper engagement

BY **PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY**

Every year, Bangladesh and India celebrate December 16 as "*Bijoy Dibosh*" or Victory Day to commemorate the end of the War in 1971. On this day, Pakistan's Army surrendered in Bangladesh to the joint command of the Indian Army and the '*Mukti Bahini*'. This historic and momentous surrender brought to a close the valiant struggle for liberation that finally led to the emergence of Bangladesh. Bangladesh's determined march towards independence was a geo-political event of immense significance in South Asia. Bangladesh is celebrating this year as the golden jubilee year of its independence. This year also marks the 50 years of India's victory against Pakistan in the 1971 war which is being celebrated as year-long '*Swarnim Vijay Varsh*'. Both India and Bangladesh have worked out an elaborate plan with a series of events

Indian and Bangladesh army officers during a ceremony that marks "Bijoy Dibosh", at the Eastern Command headquarter of Fort William in Kolkata on December 16, 2020

" NOTING THAT BANGLADESH AND INDIA WERE PRONE TO FREQUENT NATURAL DISASTERS, THE TWO PRIME MINISTERS DIRECTED OFFICIALS ON BOTH SIDES TO EXPEDITIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE MOU IN THE AREA OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT COOPERATION

Joint Statement
on India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit

PARTNERSHIP

Top: Bandhan Express, a train connecting Kolkata (India), and Khulna (Bangladesh), was virtually flagged off by Indian PM Narendra Modi and his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina along with West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee from Kolkata railway station on November 9, 2017; **Below:** Indian officials flag off the Goodwill rail rake consignment from Siliguri, West Bengal, India, on March 17, 2016, towards Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation storage depot in Parbatipur

The Shilaidaha Kuthibari in Kushtia, Bangladesh, where Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore occasionally spent time and wrote many poems

and activities to jointly commemorate the landmark victory that gave birth to Bangladesh.

The upward trajectory in Bangladesh–India bilateral ties in the recent years owes much to the commitment of the leadership in both countries to pursue the vision of deeper engagement and open new vistas of cooperation. When Bangladesh's PM Sheikh Hasina and Indian PM Narendra Modi had their Summit meeting on December 17, 2020, in the virtual mode, it was a reiteration of this policy of building strong neighbourly ties "based on shared bonds of history, culture, language and other unique commonalities that characterise the partnership. They emphasised that

relations between Bangladesh and India are based on fraternal ties and reflective of an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust and understanding that transcends a strategic partnership."

Under the "Neighbourhood First Policy", India has assiduously pursued productive ties with Bangladesh. India-Bangladesh bilateral ties have reached a stage where the template of multifarious sectors of cooperation has made impressive progress. The Joint Consultative Commission that held its 6th meeting in September 2020 has been guiding the implementation of this process.

During the recent Summit, the two PMs inaugurated the 5th railway connectivity between Haldibari in West

Bilateral documents were signed by respective representatives during the summit:

Framework of Understanding (FOU) on Cooperation in Hydrocarbon Sector

Protocol on Trans-boundary Elephant Conservation

MOU regarding Indian Grant Assistance for Implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) through Local Bodies and other Public Sector Institutions

MOU on Supply of Equipment and Improvement of Garbage / Solid Waste Disposal Ground at Lamchori Area for Barishal City Corporation

Terms of Reference of India-Bangladesh CEOs Forum

MOU between Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Memorial Museum, Dhaka, Bangladesh and the National Museum, New Delhi, India

MoU on Cooperation in the field of Agriculture

Bangladesh is India's largest development partner with the latter having committed around USD 10 billion in Lines of Credits and Grants to Bangladesh

Bengal and Chilahati in Bangladesh. Railway connectivity between two countries was completely sundered by Pakistan following the war of 1965 between India and Pakistan. Partial railway connectivity was restored after Bangladesh became independent in 1971 but the process has gained momentum only in recent years with increased demand of cargo and passenger movements between both countries. There is a rising demand from the business community for reducing the cost of transportation and travel, as trade and tourism gradually regain their pre-COVID volume and numbers. India receives the largest number of foreign tourists from Bangladesh. As a result, both countries are now working on other trans-border railway connectivity nodes that will ease the congestion at the existing border points and facilitate hassle-free cross-border movement of goods and passengers in considerably much lesser time.

Multi-modal Connectivity is another priority sector for both countries. Riverine routes for trans-border transportation have been expanded periodically. There are 54

The Chittagong sea port, situated on the bank of the Karnafuli river, is one of the two main ports in Bangladesh. Most of the export and import of the country are carried out via this port. This year, for the first time since 1965, India sent a vessel from Kolkata to Chittagong port through sea route

trans-boundary rivers and these, wherever navigable, provide riverine connectivity under the Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit Treaty (PIWTT). Transhipment of goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong port, together with Sonamura-Daudkani additional riverine route will facilitate trade between both countries. A section of the River Ganges (Padma in Bangladesh) forms a part of the riverine boundary between both countries.

The river tends to meander, entering Bangladesh and then re-entering India through the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. This creates challenges for fishermen and passenger traffic on the river because they have to cross the international boundary. India has agreed to consider Bangladesh's proposal of "innocent passage" which will enable boats to enter India and re-enter Bangladesh while using the riverine passage without undergoing formal procedures for crossing international borders.

The BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) awaits finalisation of procedures. This will help vehicular movement between both countries seamless. Another road connectivity

Director General of BSF, Rakesh Asthana (centre) attends the 50th BSF–BGB Border Conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh

India–Bangladesh bilateral ties have reached a stage where the template of multifarious sectors of cooperation has made impressive progress

Construction underway on the Indo-Bangla bridge that will connect Tripura's Sabroom town with Bangladesh's Ramgarh. Once complete, this bridge will enable Tripura to access Bangladesh's Chittagong port as a 'port of call', further strengthening the strategic ties between the two nations

project is planned between Hilli (West Bengal) and Mahendraganj (Meghalaya) via Bangladesh. Bangladesh has sought its participation in the India-Myanmar-Thailand tri-lateral Highway, which will provide connectivity between India and ASEAN countries.

Bangladesh and India share a long land border of around 4,097 km. There are several sectors along the border where rivers form the international boundary. Since rivers in the deltaic region tend to change course, the challenge of delineating fixed borders is discussed in the Joint Boundary Conference. After the Land Border Agreement (LBA) of 2014, follow-up on implementation measures and preparation of maps along riverine boundaries are underway. To prevent cross-border illegal activities, India had erected a fence in certain sectors of the land border. Owing to cross-border illegal activities, there have been clashes between India's Border Security

Multi-modal Connectivity is another priority sector for both countries. Riverine routes for trans-border transportation have been expanded periodically

Top: Bangladesh's soldiers march along the Rajpath during the full dress rehearsal for India's Republic Day Parade (January 26) in New Delhi as captured on January 23, 2021

Below: Bangladesh's soldiers participate in a rehearsal for India's Republic Day parade in New Delhi; photographed on January 20, 2021

Bangladesh and India share a long land border of around 4,097 km. There are several sectors along the border where rivers form the international boundary

The Museum of Independence in Dhaka, Bangladesh, depicts the country's struggle for independence. It is said to be Bangladesh's first and only underground museum

Force (BSF) personnel and people who indulge in illegal border crossings for smuggling. The fence has helped lower cross-border illegal activities and both countries have agreed to facilitate completion of the fencing along the shared border in Tripura in India. The Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) has enable the border guards of both sides to interdict and reduce human trafficking and the smuggling of weapons, narcotics and fake currency. Facilitating legitimate movement of people via land ports along the common border is being streamlined.

As both countries grapple with the pandemic, the healthcare sector has risen in the priority list for bilateral cooperation. In this sector, there is immense scope for cooperation, particularly in medical education, manufacture of medical equipment and the pharmaceuticals. Facilitation for Bangladesh nationals coming to India for medical treatment has been in place for quite some time. PM Modi had assured PM Hasina that Bangladesh will be among the priority countries to receive the vaccines produced in India. Under the #VaccineMaitri

initiative, Government of India gifted two million doses of the Made in India Covid-19 vaccines to Bangladesh in January 2021. This was followed by the supply of the first consignment of five million doses of Covishield vaccines from India under a commercial procurement arrangement.

India-Bangladesh educational and cultural exchanges have had a long and rich history. The shared culture between both countries will be amply demonstrated during the year-long celebration of golden jubilee year of Bangladesh's independence and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who is

regarded as the "Father of the Nation". Joint celebration also includes launching of commemorative stamps to honour Bangabandhu and Mahatma Gandhi by India and Bangladesh, respectively. A digital exhibition on the life of these two leaders is currently being screened in New Delhi and later will travel across the world.

Bangladesh is India's largest development partner, with India having committed around USD 10 billion in Lines of Credits and Grants to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is also India's largest trading partner in South Asia with total trade volume of around USD 10 billion. Both sides are resolved

Both Bangladeshi and Indian war veterans share an eternal bond of camaraderie. A delegation of 28 Indian war veterans and 4 serving officers in Dhaka during a five-day visit on December 14, 2016

Transhipment of goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong port, together with Sonamura–Daudkani additional riverine route will facilitate trade between both countries

to remove non-tariff barriers and other impediments to facilitate trade. Bangladesh is an important market for essential food commodities exported from India. On the other hand, the textile sector is crucial for Bangladesh as ready-made garments (RMGs) constitute more than 80 per cent of its exports. Both countries are working out the Bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which is adding further momentum to bilateral trade.

The energy sector has also emerged as a key area of bilateral cooperation. Bangladesh's energy shortage was being met with electricity from India. Two power plants are being built by private Indian companies for exporting electricity to Bangladesh. The pipeline, for delivering petroleum products and lubricants from India to Bangladesh is under implementation. Taking into account mutual interest to move towards cleaner fuels, both countries are now engaging in giving greater focus to efficient and renewable energy sources along with sub-regional coordination and cooperation with Bhutan and Nepal on clean energy.

Left: Two million made-in-India Covid-19 vaccine doses sent as a grant to Bangladesh by India, being offloaded on January 21, 2021

Below: India despatched five million doses of Covid-19 vaccine to Bangladesh on January 25, 2021, as commercial supply

Indian Minister of Railways and Commerce Piyush Goyal (centre) and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina witness the exchange of G2B MoU between Adani Port & SEZ (second from left), and Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority during the India-Bangladesh Business Forum meeting on October 4, 2019, in New Delhi, India

The influx of around 1.1 million refugees into Bangladesh, forcibly expelled from Myanmar's Rakhine State, has remained a matter of mutual concern and India has expressed deep appreciation for Bangladesh's generosity in hosting these refugees. India has extended humanitarian assistance for the refugees. Bangladesh and India have agreed to cooperate in the speedy repatriation and safe rehabilitation of the refugees. At the international level, both countries have also acted in concert on a host of issues like UNSC reforms, Climate Change, Sustainable Development Goals (SDs) and protecting rights of migrants.

Bangladesh and India have gradually and carefully built a framework of integrated cooperation to achieve greater synergy in all sectors. For India, Bangladesh has

emerged as a steadfast pillar in her "Act East Policy" which envisages greater connectivity and engagement with the ASEAN countries and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. In the post-COVID era, the continuing trend in international power alignments, Bangladesh and India are building an enduring relationship, which will strengthen South Asian connectivity and cooperation for the greater goal of economic development and prosperity for the peoples of the region.

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty is a former Indian ambassador and permanent secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. He is currently a visiting fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, a leading Indian think tank in New Delhi, and a regular media commentator.

INDIA AT
the SCO

India has been constantly involved in promoting socio-economic cooperation and regional stability among members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Recently, the country was part of two crucial meetings of SCO. Nivedita Kapoor analyses the importance of India's involvement and the country's stand

The 20th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit hosted virtually by Russia on November 10, 2020, and the 19th SCO Heads of Government Meeting hosted virtually by India on November 30, 2020, highlighted several issues of interest to the grouping. From the SCO's progress on forging stronger socio-economic relations between member nations to the organisation's role in countering terrorism and maintaining security and stability in Asia, India has been focussing on these areas since its inclusion in the regional body as a full-member in 2017.

On November 30, Vice-President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, chaired the meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government that is tasked with discussing and promoting economic and trade cooperation within SCO.

Vice President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, chairs the 19th session of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government on November 30, 2020

The Vice-President, in his address, called for a reformed multilateralism that would equitably represent all stakeholders. This was the first meeting of the SCO hosted by India since it became its member.

Speaking at the SCO Council of Heads of State summit hosted by Russia on November 10, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated the country's commitment to peace and security, while outlining a vision for the role of the organisation for a post-COVID world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCO

The organisation's multilateral setting has gained further importance, as a reordering of the international world order is underway, with Asia as the focus of the ongoing churn in the global system. This year, the meetings had to be shifted to the digital platform. While bilateral issues are not discussed at SCO, it presents an opportunity to offer a nuanced understanding of India's ideas and stand on different issues to an international audience.

INDIA'S VISION

Following the spirit and Charter of the SCO, as PM Modi noted, India has focussed on providing a broader roadmap that would benefit all member states, laying stress on economic cooperation, curbing terrorism and maintaining regional stability.

In the sphere of extending cooperation between member nations, PM Modi called for promoting a "combination of economic multilateralism and national capacity

A screenshot of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) and the leaders of SCO member states during a video-conference meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO

"
TO FURTHER DEEPEN CONNECTIVITY NETWORK [AMONG THE SCO MEMBERS], IT IS NECESSARY TO RESPECT EACH OTHER'S SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY. WE HOPE TO GET SUPPORT OF THE SCO MEMBERS IN ATTAINING A REFORMED MULTILATERALISM.

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

PARTNERSHIP

On November 30, 2020, Vice-President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, chaired the meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government

Agreements that reflect India's commitment to the cause. The policy of reformed multilateralism was stressed upon by the Prime Minister as India begins its stint as a non-permanent member of United Nations Security Council in 2021.

building" to help SCO members deal with the pandemic induced recession in the global economy. He also vowed to mobilise India's resources as the largest vaccine producing country.

With reference to regional security, India emphasised its commitment to work against terrorism, illegal arms smuggling, and drugs and money laundering. India also called for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity while furthering the idea of connectivity. In this context, special mention was made of the International North South Transport Corridor, Chabahar Port and Ashgabat

Indian Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar (fifth from right) at the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation that was held in Moscow, Russia, on September 10, 2020

THE DECLARATIONS

The declarations issued by the summit and the meeting included several topics of socio-economic cooperation that were of utmost relevance to India. The most important being the regional connectivity projects and the promotion of technology-driven digital measures to accelerate sustainable economic cooperation among SCO members.

The result of India's efforts alongside other SCO states was

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India supported celebration of 2021 as "SCO Culture Year". As part of this, India will organise the first SCO exhibition on shared Buddhist heritage among member-states. In addition, translation of 10 Indian literary works into Russian and Chinese as well as participation of member states in a yoga programme have already been completed.

PM Modi (left) shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on June 24, 2016

reflected in the Moscow Declaration, which decided to move forward the organisational agenda on several key issues beneficial to all the participants. Member states called for a multipolar world order and identified areas for further strengthening of cooperation. These include trade, production, transport, energy, finance, investment, agriculture, customs, telecommunications, information technology, innovation and other spheres in order to promote innovative, green and sustainable development. A special note was made of the establishment of the SCO Consortium of Economic Analysis Centres, whose first meeting was organised by India in August 2020.

The economic and investment potential of SCO member states was also noted, as was emphasised by PM Modi. This potential can be enhanced through joint projects to promote sustainable development in areas like finance, investment, industry, transport, energy, agriculture etc. On

two issues – information security and Belt and Road Initiative – India did not put its name alongside other SCO states in the Declaration; in line with its pre-stated position.

The participation in the SCO meetings is yet another example of India's commitment to the path of diplomacy as it has steadily risen to become an important player at the regional and international level at a time of changing global order. This has also meant taking a long-term approach to foreign policy, including maintaining regular contacts with other key powers to promote national interests while managing bilateral differences through talks in a peaceful manner to promote stability and growth.

Nivedita Kapoor *is a Fellow Researcher with the Strategic Studies Program at Observer Research Foundation. She tracks Eurasian strategic affairs. She has recently authored a paper on the potential of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to advance India's Connect Central Asia policy.*

POWER OF THE
sunshine alliance

The International Solar Alliance, led by India, is playing a major role in promoting the use of solar energy, globally. Former Indian Ambassador Anil Wadhwa analyses the group's impact

Climate change is recognised as the greatest challenge of our time. As the global community seeks measures to urgently counteract and reverse its proven catastrophic impacts, India has led with the initiative of the International Solar Alliance (ISA), initially targeting 122 countries lying between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, which are endowed with plentiful sunshine ideally suited to generate clean solar energy on a massive scale. This is intended to mitigate the deleterious reliance on fossil fuels and also contribute

India, largely lying between the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer, is endowed with plentiful sunshine which can be used to generate solar power for myriad uses in even some of the nation's remotest places. Here, a woman adjusts a solar cooker in Gongma, Ladakh

to Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG-7), which aims to "ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" by 2030.

AN IDEA

This innovative idea, mooted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the "sunshine states" or "*Surya Putras*" (sons on the Sun) was jointly launched by him and former French President Francois Hollande at the UN Climate Change Conference, COP -21, in Paris in November, 2015, as a major initiative for the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. It has since evolved into a treaty-based intergovernmental organisation headquartered in Gurugram, India, with 87 signatories to the Framework Agreement and 67 States Parties. After the successful launch and growing global appeal of the ISA, it has now moved towards universalisation by throwing open its membership to all member states of the UN.

THE JOURNEY

The evolution of the ISA from concept to operationalisation was realised in record time, driven by the urgent need for action. The Framework Agreement, which was negotiated with wide participation of interested countries, was opened for signature in Marrakesh, Morocco, in November,

Left: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) and former French President Francois Hollande during the inauguration of the interim secretariat of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and foundation stone laying ceremony of ISA Headquarters in Gurugram, India, in January 2016

Right: PM Modi (right) and French President Emmanuel Macron at the opening of a solar power plant in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, on March 12, 2018

India has gifted 193 solar panels to the UN worth USD 1 million, which were installed on the roof of the UN headquarters in 2019

ISA's objectives

Guided by the Framework Agreement of the ISA, the interests and objectives as outlined in the web-site of the ISA are as follows:

To collectively address key common challenges to scale up solar energy applications in line with their needs

To mobilise investments of more than USD 1,000 billion by 2030

To take coordinated action through programmes and activities launched on a voluntary basis, aimed at better harmonisation and aggregation of demand, risk and resources, for promoting solar finance, solar technologies, innovation, R&D, capacity building, etc.

Reduce the cost of finance to increase investments in solar energy in member countries by promoting innovative financial mechanisms and mobilising finance from institutions

Scale up applications of solar technologies in member countries

Facilitate collaborative R&D activities in solar energy technologies among member countries

Promote a common cyber platform for networking, cooperation and exchange of ideas among member countries

2016. The founding Summit Conference of the ISA was held in New Delhi in March 2018 with the participation of President Emmanuel Macron of France and 22 other heads of nations, where PM Modi presented 10 action points for the ISA. These included the availability of affordable solar technology across the world through concessional financing, encouraging innovation, enhancing photovoltaic cell-generated electricity and drawing up standards and regulations in support of the initiative. The first General Assembly of the ISA was held in New Delhi in October 2018, and was inaugurated by PM Modi and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

In his address to the Assembly, the UN Secretary General welcomed the ISA initiative as being "exactly the need of the hour" and representing the future of the global energy scenario, while applauding the ambitious goals of mobilising USD 1 trillion and the deployment of 1,000 GW of solar energy by 2030. The Framework Agreement of the ISA is registered with the UN as an international treaty and the organisation has established declarations of cooperation with several multilateral institutions including IRENA, World Bank, ADB, UNEP and UNDP. The ISA, however, does not intend to duplicate the efforts that other existing bodies are engaged in, but seeks to establish networks to "develop synergies with them and supplement their efforts in a sustainable and focussed manner",

Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) with Secretary General of United Nations Antonio Guterres during the inauguration of the India-ISA Partnership Renewable Energy Investors Meet & Expo at Vigyan Bhavan on October 2, 2018, in New Delhi

according to the ISA website.

The ISA is actively enabling and accelerating the collective response of deployment and use of solar energy, which, according to estimates, is contributing more than 2.8 per cent of global electricity today. If the ISA's aim of generating at least 1,000 GW by 2030 is successful, solar power will become the most important source of energy for electricity production in large parts of the world. According to RK Singh, Minister of State (Independent Charge) of the Ministry of Power, Minister of State (Independent Charge) of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy and Minister of State in the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India, "a robust pipeline of more than USD 5 billion has been developed for solar energy application to meet lighting, irrigation, drinking water and productive energy requirements of the ISA member countries, which have so far been deprived of modern energy services".

THE IMPACT

The ISA is working towards its goals by partnering governments and organisations to create impactful projects around the world. To cite a few examples, ISA is working with WRI (World Resources Institute) to develop a roadmap for mobilisation of solar energy applications in transportation and cooling. In wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, ISA has responded by setting up ISA CARES, an initiative

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) welcomes Australia's Governor General Peter Cosgrove (left) and his wife Lynne Cosgrove to the founding conference of the ISA in New Delhi on March 11, 2018. Australia signed the ISA's Framework Agreement on July 18, 2017

The evolution of the ISA from concept to operationalisation was realised in record time, driven by the urgent need for action

The ISA is working towards its goals by partnering governments and organisations to create impactful projects around the world

dedicated to the deployment of solar energy in the healthcare sector. This initiative aims to solarise one primary healthcare centre in each district of target member countries. ISA has also undertaken a Demand Aggregation Initiative for 47 million solar home systems and 250 million LED lamps in ISA member countries, which was launched in August 2020. The ISA is committed to making the costs of solar power more affordable for remote and inaccessible communities. In partnership with the World Bank, it has launched the Global Solar Atlas, which displays annual average solar power potential at any location in the world and, thus, identifies potential sites for solar power generation. In June 2019, the Commonwealth of Nations and the ISA signed an MoU to expand solar power in the Commonwealth member countries.

As the ISA works with developing countries to find cost-effective and efficacious means of switching to low-carbon growth, India has led by example, pledging to generate 100 GW of solar energy in its target of 175 GW of power from renewable energy sources, to instal rooftop solar

The generation of solar power has helped people in some of India's coldest areas. Here's a glimpse of a home in Ladakh's Yarat village, which is largely dependent on solar energy

projects of 40 GW by March 2022, and reduce its emission intensity by 33-35 per cent, and to generate 40 per cent of its electricity from renewable energy by 2030. India has established 42 solar parks all over the country and solar power capacity in India has grown tenfold in the past five years, according to some estimates. A key threshold was crossed in 2018 with solar power becoming cheaper than coal for electricity generation. This has been a great impetus to meet and cross the targets for solar power generation set by the government.

India also plans a World Solar Bank, which will pool resources to the tune of USD 10 billion from across the globe and use them to fund solar projects in ISA member countries. This will help projects in India, and across the world, in areas like creation of advanced storage applications, manufacture of solar photovoltaic cells for batteries and other solar products.

At the third ISA General Assembly held virtually on October 14, 2020, and attended by ministers from 34 member states, India and France were re-elected as president and co-president of the ISA, respectively, for a further term of two years. India will strive to work with other member states of ISA to realise the vision of PM Modi, reiterated in his Independence Day address in August 2020, of having "One Sun, one world, one grid" (OSOWOG) with a trans-national electricity grid supplying solar power across the globe.

Anil Wadhwa is a former Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs and has served as the Indian Ambassador to Poland, Oman, Thailand and Italy.
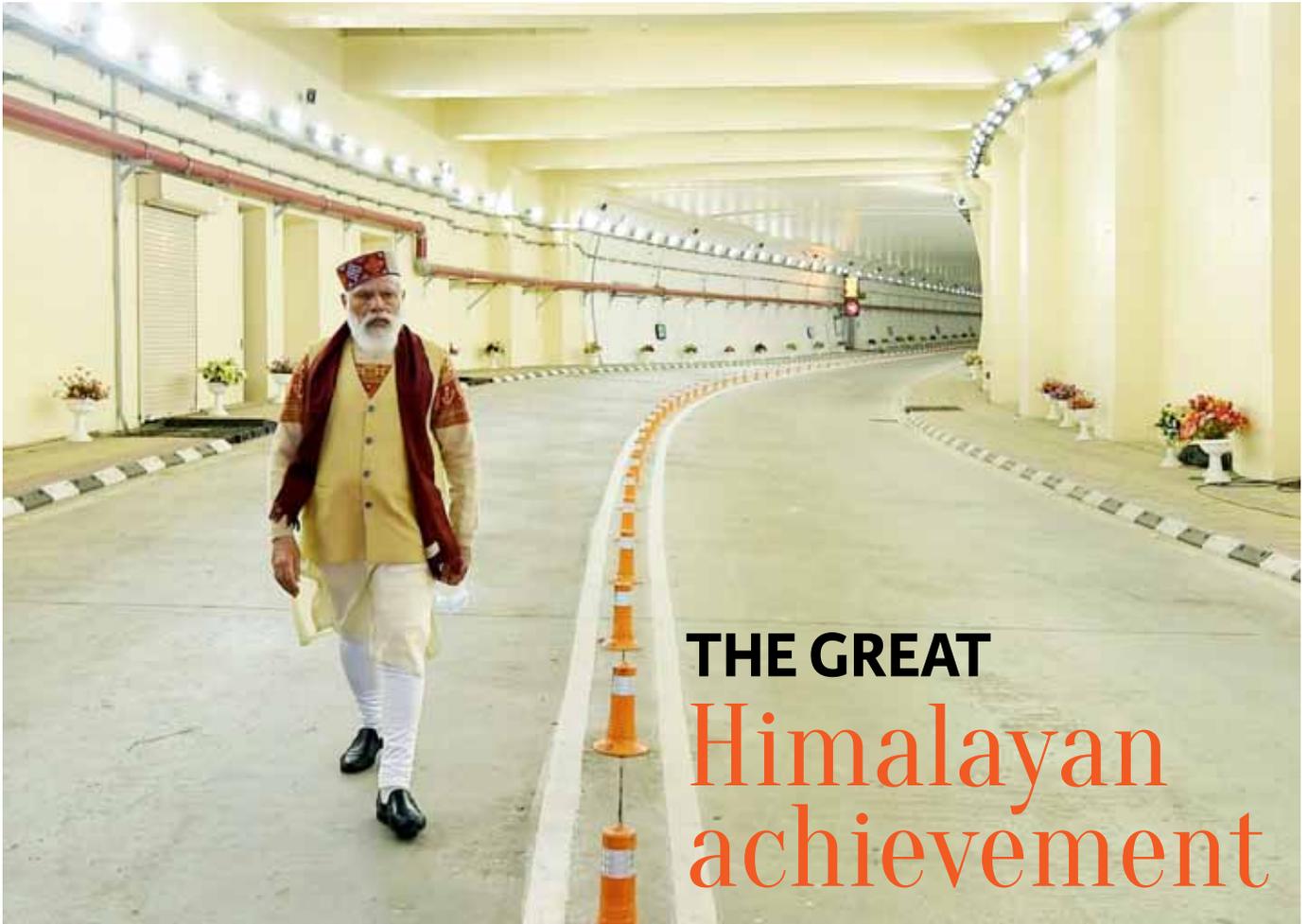
THE GREAT
Himalayan achievement

The world's longest high-altitude tunnel in the Himalayas, the Atal Tunnel, is an engineering marvel and was unveiled recently by PM Narendra Modi. We delve into the tunnel's strategic importance

BY SAMEER PATIL

On October 3, 2020, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi inaugurated the world's highest altitude road tunnel – the Atal Tunnel – at Rohtang pass in Himachal Pradesh, which will provide all-weather connectivity from the hill town of Manali to the Lahaul-Spiti Valley. The tunnel, an engineering marvel, is an important piece of India's border infrastructure in the Himalayas. It is a step closer to the goal of all-weather connectivity to Leh, capital of the Union Territory of Ladakh, and other forward areas, and is extremely significant for the country's defence.

ASTOUNDING FIGURES
The 9.02-km-long tunnel is located at an altitude of 3,000 m in the eastern

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes a walk inside the Atal Tunnel on the day of its inauguration (October 3, 2020)

Pir Panjal range of the Himalayas, on the Leh-Manali highway. It provides connectivity till Darcha, north of Keylong, in the picturesque Lahaul region. Before the tunnel became operational, the area was isolated for almost six months since the Rohtang pass is covered with snow between November and May. Every year, authorities had to painstakingly clear the snow to locate the road and restart traffic. With all-weather connectivity, the tunnel also shortens the 472-km distance between Manali and Leh by 46 km, drastically reducing the time taken to cross the Rohtang pass from over two hours to 15 minutes.

The project was executed by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) of the Ministry of Defence. Apart from BRO personnel, the Atal Tunnel project team comprised specialists from around the world, including Austria, Croatia, Turkey, Hungary and the Philippines.

Top: Construction team members work inside the Atal Tunnel near Solang in Himachal Pradesh. This photograph was taken on September 1, 2020; **Left:** The north portal of the Atal Tunnel, captured on September 1, 2020

"THE ATAL TUNNEL WILL GIVE NEW STRENGTH TO INDIA'S BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE. IT IS AN EXAMPLE OF WORLD-CLASS BORDER CONNECTIVITY. THERE HAVE BEEN DEMANDS TO IMPROVE BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE BUT, FOR A LONG TIME, SUCH PROJECTS EITHER COULDN'T GET OUT OF THE PLANNING STAGE OR GOT STUCK MIDWAY."

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

Atal Tunnel at a glance

Length: 9.02 km connecting Manali to the Lahaul-Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh.

Features: Horseshoe-shaped 10.5 m wide single tube, double-lane tunnel with two portals (north and south); overhead clearance of 5.5 m.

Altitude: South portal – 3,060 m; north portal, located near village Teling, Sissu – 3,071 m.

Capacity: 3,000 vehicles per day, with a permissible speed of 80 km/hour

Construction contractor: Strabag-Afcons, a joint venture between Afcons Infrastructure, India, and Strabag, Austria.

Safety: Telephone connections at every 150 m, fire hydrant mechanisms at every 60 m, auto incident detection system with CCTV cameras at every 250 m, air quality monitoring at every kilometre, evacuation lighting/exit signs and broadcasting system throughout.

THE CHALLENGES

The tunnel is named after former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee since his administration had cleared the project in 2000. The Atal Bihari Vajpayee government had taken the decision to construct the tunnel in June, 2000, and the foundation stone for the access road to the south portal of the tunnel was laid in May, 2002.

However, the project progressed slower than expected as the engineers encountered several roadblocks. The dual challenges of high altitude and the extreme climatic conditions, particularly in the colder months, were formidable. Heavy snowfall and blizzards during winter made the north portal of the tunnel inaccessible, which considerably disrupted the pace of the project. Engineers could only work on the excavation of the tunnel from the south portal.

Even more daunting was the unstable geological condition of the Himalayas and the associated seismic activity, which triggers landslides and avalanches. The approach to the tunnel had more than 46 avalanche sites. To overcome this, engineers used the New Austrian Tunnelling Method for construction – an advanced technology, appropriate for tunnelling in the Himalayas. After seven years of excavation, a breakthrough from both ends was achieved in October 2017. The construction includes an emergency escape tunnel built into the main tunnel as well as 18 avalanche-protection structures. The tunnel was scheduled to be completed by May 2020, but the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown pushed back the completion till September.

A SAFER BORDER

The Atal Tunnel is a significant part

The view en-route to the snow-covered Rohtang pass of Pir Panjal Himalayan mountain range on Leh-Manali highway

The beautiful Key Monastery in the Spiti Valley

of India's broader push for border infrastructure in the last few years. It encompasses all connectivity options, including roads, railways and airfields. The demonstration effect of this project's determination and engineering will be positively felt on other ambitious infrastructure plans for India's defence and development. This strategically-important tunnel will ensure faster transportation of rations, weapons and other logistics all year round to the troops stationed in Ladakh. It will also help in faster deployment of personnel.

HELPING THE LOCALS

The new road offers locals a new chance for livelihood and health, by bringing them closer to bigger markets and medical facilities. The residents of the Lahaul and Spiti Valley remain cut off from the rest of the country in winters for nearly six months due to heavy snowfall. The tunnel will also boost tourism opportunities for the Lahaul valley and Ladakh. The Himachal Pradesh government already has plans for new tourist attractions such as vista-dome electric buses and cafes on either ends of the tunnel. There are plans to host a winter sports festival in the Lahaul-Spiti valley. The tunnel itself will be a tourist attraction, as could be guessed seeing the hordes of tourists who thronged the site to experience this engineering feat within days of its inauguration.

Sameer Patil *is a fellow of International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House (a foreign policy think-tank). He was the former assistant director at the National Security Council Secretariat in Prime Minister's Office, New Delhi, where he handled regional security desks.*

Children drinking water from a hand pump in India

AS SUCCESS
flows

The ambitious Jal Jeevan Mission is transforming the lives of people by providing potable water to every rural family in the country

BY MANOJ KUMAR SAHOO

Announced by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in his Independence Day address to the nation on August 15, 2019, Jal Jeevan Mission is a mission-mode programme under implementation to provide Functional Household Tap Connection (FHTC) to every rural household of the country by 2024, well ahead of the timelines fixed under UN SDG-6. The mission is a means to improve the quality of lives and enhance the 'ease of living' of

about 1 billion people living in the country's villages.

Having successfully delivered assured facilities and expanded access to rural housing, clean cooking gas, household toilets, bank accounts for financial inclusion, basic healthcare, etc, the Government of India has now made providing safe drinking water to every household in the villages one of its top priorities.

The country was declared 'Open Defecation Free' (ODF) on October 2, 2019, on the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Nation. Under Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), about 110 million toilets were constructed in India's villages during the last five years through community involvement, thereby freeing about 600 million people from defecating in the open. The success of SBM is remarkable in expansion of public services anywhere in the world.

UTILITY IS THE MOTTO

The focus of this ambitious programme is improving water supply service delivery to every home in rural areas, rather than mere infrastructure creation. Thus,

“DURING THE LAST ONE AND HALF YEARS, FROM THE START OF JAL JEEVAN MISSION, MORE THAN 2 CRORE 60 LAKH FAMILIES HAVE BEEN PROVIDED PIPED DRINKING WATER CONNECTION TO THEIR HOMES”

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India
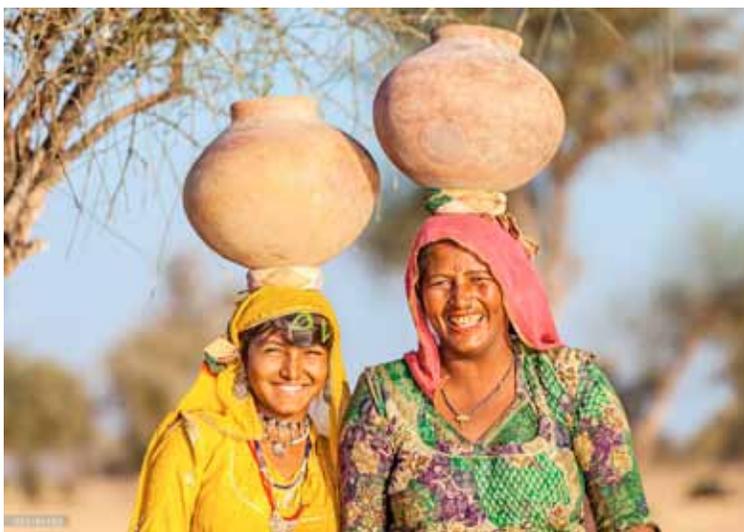
Left: Women carrying pots of water on their heads in a village in Rajasthan; **Right:** A young boy drinks fresh water near the Thar desert in Rajasthan

A Rashtriya Jal Jeevan Kosh or fund has been created to enable people to contribute in finding drinking water solutions

India | Status of tap water supply in rural homes

Total number of households	Households with tap connections as on 15 Aug 2019	Households with tap connections as on date +69,846
19,10,85,542	3,23,62,838	5,95,10,427
	(16.94%)	(31.14%)

Har Ghar Jal [100 % FHTC] Status

100 % FHTC States/ UTs
Goa

100 % FHTC Districts	100 % FHTC Blocks	100 % FHTC Panchayats	100 % FHTC Villages
16	402	31,665	57,551
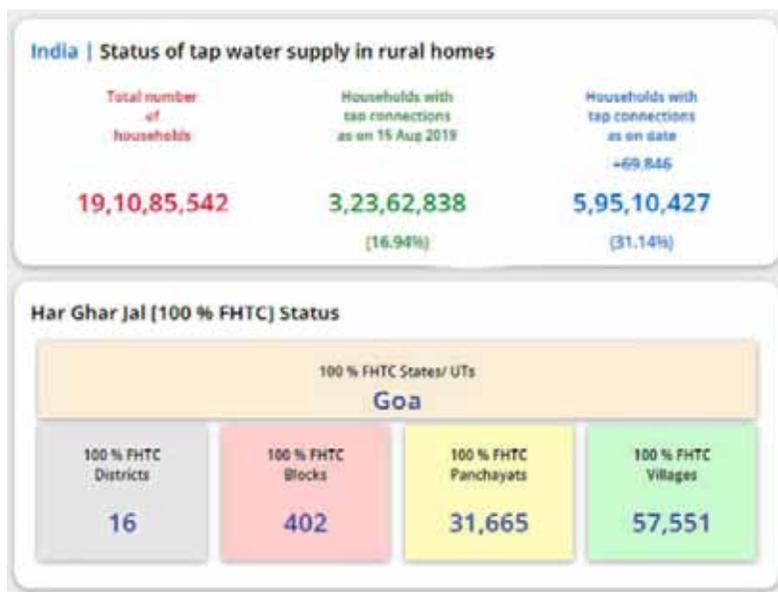
Graph source: Jal Jeevan Mission

To ensure potable water in all villages, the provincial governments are being encouraged to speed up the accreditation of the water testing laboratories and open them to the general public

there is a focus on bringing in a 'utility-mindset' in the water supply sector. The mission aims to provide potable water in adequate quantities and of prescribed quality to rural households on both regular and long-term basis. Safe access to potable water in household premises will not only improve the health of rural people by reducing spread of water-borne diseases, but it will also provide economic opportunities in rural India, especially for women by freeing up the time otherwise spent in fetching clean drinking water from long distances.

Since the objective of the mission is universal coverage, emphasis is being laid on the principles of 'equity and inclusiveness' i.e, every family in the village gets functional tap water connection in their household and 'none is left behind'. At the time of announcement of the mission in August 2019, out of 190 million rural households, only 32 million households (17 per cent) had tap water connections.

IMPLEMENTATION

The outlay for the mission for water supply infrastructure creation is USD 51 billion. In every village, water supply, grey water treatment and reuse infrastructure is being built. There is a huge demand in the water sector enterprises for planning, designing, implementation, quality check, etc. In many water–

(Clockwise from left): At the time of announcement of the Jal Jeevan Mission in August, 2019, about 32 million households had tap water connections. Here, a family fills tap water in Dehradun; an elderly woman uses tap water in her kitchen; with the success of the Jal Jeevan Mission, every village in rural India would be able to enjoy the benefits of piped water supply like urban dwellers

stressed areas, bulk water transfer, treatment plants and distribution networks are being created. In areas having geogenic contaminants in groundwater like arsenic, fluoride, iron, heavy metals, salinity, etc., cost-effective water treatment technologies are in demand. Modern control and command centres, supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) and IT systems for efficient management are being put in place. All these provide huge opportunities.

To ensure water supply and improved sanitation in India's villages, in 2020-21, rural local bodies in the country have been allocated about USD 4 billion as grants. This is likely to increase in the coming years. It's a very progressive step as these two basic services determine the quality of life in rural areas.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The soul of this decentralised, demand-driven and community-managed programme is 'community participation' starting with the planning of the water supply scheme to regular operation and maintenance for assured service delivery. Every village is being taken up as a unit so that each becomes water secure. Village Action Plan (VAP) is prepared for each village for strengthening of local drinking water sources; in-village water supply infrastructure to provide tap water connections; grey water treatment and reuse; and regular

Forging partnerships

- For building the capacity and training officials of the public health engineering sector, the mission is partnering with premier institutions of the country. They will be on-boarded as 'Key Resource Centre (KRCs)' to impart training to these officials. Training of functionaries of rural local bodies has been taken up. This will help in the development of 'responsible and responsive leadership' at the grassroot level.

- For day-to-day planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting of the progress, a modern online 'JJM – Integrated Information Management Systems (IIMS)' has also been put in place. To enable the public to see the progress on real time, a dashboard has been created. The link: https://ejalshakti.gov.in/jjmreport/JJMIndia.aspx

- To ensure that public health engineering departments/ agencies and local rural bodies function like a public utility, 'sensor-based IoT solutions' are being deployed to measure and monitor water supply in each village in terms of quantity, quality and regularity.

- The mission is also bringing in innovations and new technologies through its online platform and encourages innovators, technology developers and R&D institutions to develop and provide solutions to address various challenges in the sector.

operation and maintenance of water supply system so that every family gets assured supply of potable water on regular and long-term basis.

It is expected that village communities will be able to identify issues and challenges, and also address those issues by dovetailing resources made available by the government for various activities. Alongside, planning for drinking water, requirements of livestock population are also being considered. Looking at livestock's significance in turning the wheels of rural economy, provision of constructing cattle troughs in villages has been made. The VAP is prepared by either the local self-government, or Gram Panchayat, and/or its sub-committee i.e, Village Water & Sanitation Committee with the help from government agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working as implementation support agencies.

DRINKING WATER IN FOCUS

The mission gives topmost priority to potability of drinking water, which has a huge impact on water-borne diseases and health. For this, the state governments are being encouraged to speed up the accreditation of the water testing laboratories and open them to the general public so as to enable them to test water samples at

Identifying the significance of livestock in changing the wheels of rural economy, provision of constructing cattle troughs in villages has been made. Here, a camel drinks water from a reservoir during the Pushkar Mela in Rajasthan

Goa has become the first state in India to provide all households with tap water supply

Left: The availability of piped water in every rural household would of great benefit, especially for women who travel great distances to fetch potable water in traditional vessels. Here, local women carry clean drinking water on their heads in Bhuj, a small town in the Kutch district of Gujarat; **Right:** Villagers gathered at a public supply water tank in the outskirts of Odisha's capital Bhubaneswar

nominal rates. Currently, there are 2,233 government-owned water testing labs in the country. The mission is also pushing for the development of portable domestic water testing devices, so that water can be tested for a few common quality parameters without going to a laboratory.

Besides opening labs to the public, the endeavour is to promote water quality surveillance activities by empowering and engaging the community. For this, the entire value-chain - from timely procurement of field test kits, supply of kits to the community,

identification of at least five volunteers, preferably women, in every village like school teachers, paramedics, etc. and training them in the operations of the field test kits - is being nurtured so that water supplied to households can be tested locally. The idea is to make it a reliable and trustworthy process to ensure potable water supply.

CREATING JOBS

For sustenance of water supply infrastructure and long-term service delivery in each village/habitation, skilled manpower in areas like masonry, plumbing,

To ensure water supply and improved sanitation in India's villages, in 2020-21, rural local bodies in the country have been allocated about USD 4 billion as grants


Right: A litmus strip is one of the fastest and economical ways of determining whether or not water is acidic; **Below:** Water sampling procedure for microbiological analysis

fitting, electricity, etc. is needed for construction as well as regular operation and maintenance. Jal Jeevan Mission aims to create a pool of such skilled human resources in every village to make them self-reliant without external dependence for upkeep and maintenance of water supply systems. This step will also create employment opportunities and promote local entrepreneurship.

It is expected that the implementation of this programme, will lead to increased demand for various kinds of materials like cement, bricks, pipes, valves, water/ energy-efficient pumps, solar pumps, faucets and the like for household tap connections, bulk water transfer and distribution network, treatment plants, grey-water reuse, etc. thereby driving demand for local workmanship as
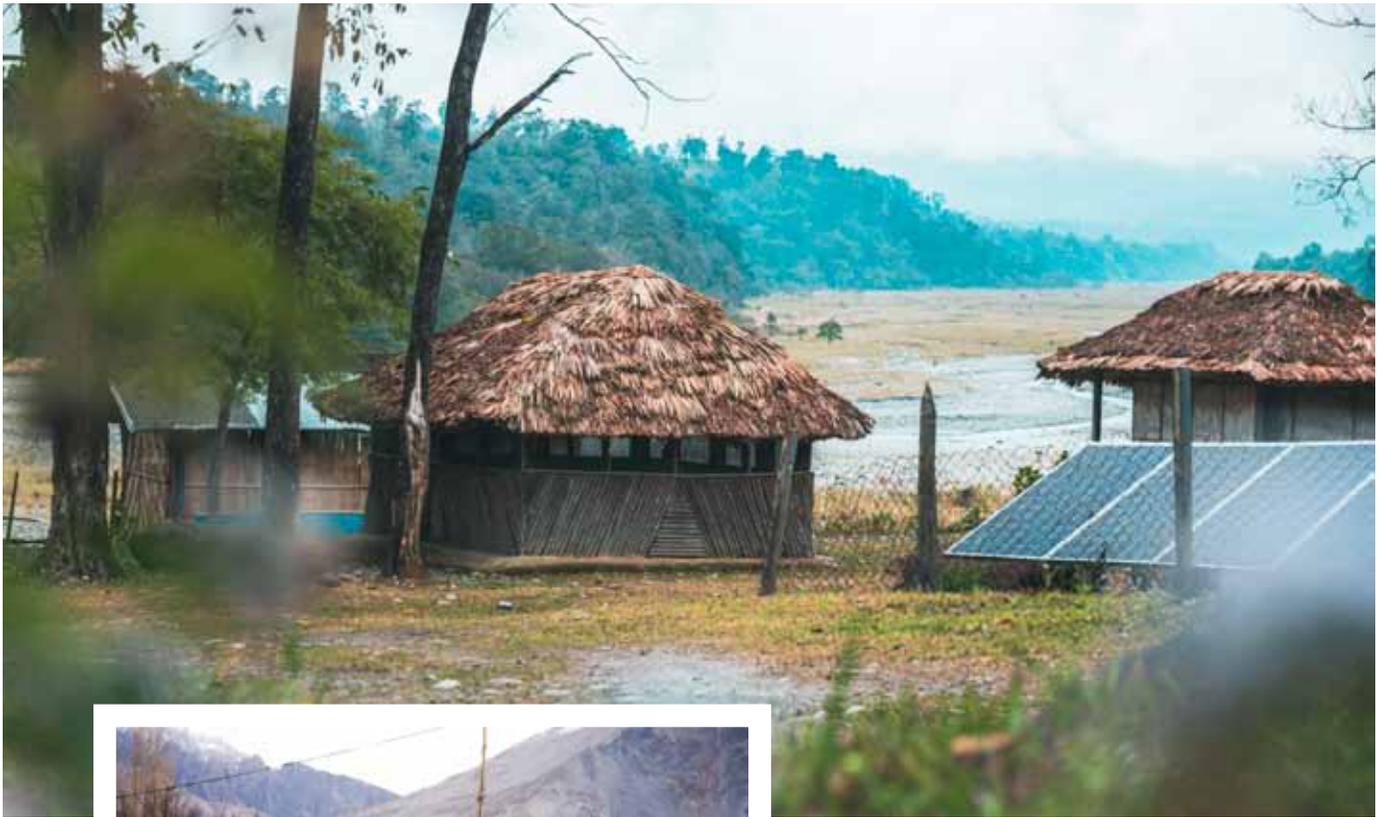
Top: Solar panels are environment-friendly ways to generate power required to pump/lift water. Here, solar panels are being utilised in the small town of Miao in Arunachal Pradesh; **Above:** Here, solar panels are being used in Hunder, a village in the Nubra tehsil of district Leh, Ladakh

well as manufacturing industries. All this will also lead to furthering the goals of a self-reliant India or 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'.

Providing piped water supply to all households in India's villages and rural pockets will boost demand for energy to pump/ lift water. It is envisaged that barren/ uncultivable lands available in the villages, especially in drought prone areas, will be used for tapping solar energy by installing solar panels to provide additional power for this purpose.

Such innovative approaches will not only bring down the energy use and lower the maintenance cost but will also promote the use of clean and green energy.

In the last 15 months, despite COVID -19 pandemic, 27 million households have been provided with tap water connections and at present, about 59 million (31 per cent) households are getting tap water in their homes. Within a year's time, every home in 16 districts and 56,000 villages has started getting assured water supply.

Manoj Kumar Sahoo is the Director, Jal Jeevan Mission, Department Of Drinking Water And Sanitation, Ministry Of Jal Shakti, Government of India

A LITTLE BIT OF
Gandhi*ji* in Mexico

In one of his monthly radio addresses to the nation, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi applauded the work of the indigenous Zapotec community of Mexico, which is propagating khadi, an indigenous textile of India and the symbol of Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle. Mark Brown, the man behind the revival of the fabric in this North American country, recounts his journey and what inspired him to carry forward the Mahatma's philosophies of self-reliance

Image: khadioaxaca.com

The khadi products, including garments, woven in Oaxaca, Mexico, are often decorated with traditional Mexican patterns

Ever since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, he has been at the forefront of promoting khadi. This handspun fabric is synonymous with Mahatma Gandhi, who resuscitated it as a symbol of nationalism, self-reliance and equality. Almost a century after Gandhiji's original Khadi Movement helped make Indians self-reliant during the independence struggle, the movement is having a revival among the indigenous Zapotec communities of Mexico. This little-known fact would have remained a secret had not PM Modi highlighted it in his monthly radio address to the nation Mann ki Baat in November 2020. He spoke highly of the wonderful work the Khadi Oaxaca project is doing in Mexico and the man behind it all – Mark Brown.

In an exclusive article, Mark Brown pens his thoughts about how this hand-spun

Image: khadioaxaca.com

fabric has re-established a farm-to-garment ethic that restores dignity to its producers.

The story begins with me, a young, professional magician from Mexico City who originally travelled to the traditional indigenous Zapotec village of San Sebastian Rio Hondo in the state of Oaxaca, southern Mexico. It was 1974 and I was 14 years old at the time. In San Sebastian Rio Hondo, there were no roads, electricity, schools or modern conveniences. I saw how a self-reliant village outside of the modern industrial complex thrived. This experience changed my world

view; I realised that a life in harmony and sustainable with nature was possible. It was a whole new form of education.

Several years later, I travelled to India in search of perennial philosophy and spirituality. There I studied traditional yoga and Vedanta (a Hindu philosophy based on the doctrine of the *Upanishads*, especially in its monistic form). My life changed in 1984, when I saw the movie *Gandhi* (1982). I was so touched by Mahatma Gandhi's life and philosophies that I travelled to Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat, where I met Dilkhush Divanji, a humble, wise

Left and right:
Elderly women of Zapotec village of San Sebastian Rio Hondo (a town in the Mexican state of Oaxaca) spins cotton on a traditional Indian *charkha* (spinning wheel) and weaves the khadi fabric

"NOT ONLY IS THE POPULARITY OF KHADI RISING, IT IS ALSO BEING PRODUCED IN MANY PLACES OF THE WORLD. FOR INSTANCE, VILLAGES IN THE MEXICAN CITY OAXACA WHERE THE LOCAL VILLAGERS WEAVE KHADI. A LOCAL RESIDENT MARK BROWN VISITED INDIA AFTER WATCHING A MOVIE ON MAHATMA GANDHI AND LEARNED ABOUT KHADI AND THE WAY IT IS INTERTWINED WITH RURAL ECONOMY AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY. HE INTRODUCED THE VILLAGERS OF OAXACA IN MEXICO TO KHADI AND TRAINED THEM. AND NOW OAXACA KHADI HAS BECOME A BRAND."

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

> **MY LIFE CHANGED IN 1984, WHEN I SAW THE MOVIE *GANDHI*. I WAS SO TOUCHED BY MAHATMA GANDHI'S LIFE AND PHILOSOPHIES THAT I TRAVELLED TO SABARMATI ASHRAM IN GUJARAT WHERE I DISCOVERED HOW GANDHIAN ECONOMICS WORKED IN SUPPORTING A HEALTHY VILLAGE LIFE."**

Mark Brown
Founder of Khadi Oaxaca

Image: khadioaxaca.com

Top: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spins a yarn on a *charkha* during his visit to Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad on June 29, 2017; **Left:** The yarn used in Oaxaca is derived from the pre-hispanic Mexican cotton seed called coyuchi cotton

and impactful Gandhian activist. Living, studying and travelling with Dilkhush *bhai* (a colloquial term for brother) throughout the state, I discovered how Gandhian economics worked in supporting a healthy village life. I learned to spin and weave my own clothes and at the same time came to understand the philosophy behind it. I became a spokesman for truth and non-violence, a view that if truly applied today would change the world as we know it.

Sometime in the 1990s, I returned to Oaxaca and brought a *charkha* (spinning wheel) designed by Gandhi*ji*. I began teaching local residents how to spin cotton with this wooden spinning wheel. There was an ancient tradition in the village of spinning and weaving wool, so learning to operate the *charkha* was easy for the villagers. With a passion and love for the khadi philosophy and way of life, I teamed up with local families along with my wife, Kalindi Attar. Together we began the journey with the sustainable cultivation of a native and nearly-abandoned pre-hispanic Mexican cotton seed, coyuchi cotton. We restored ancient practices for every step of the process: from spinning, weaving, dying with local natural dyes to designing, making the garments by hand and finding markets

Weavers and artisans associated with the Khadi Oaxaca project

that understand the true value of handmade clothing.

Today, there are over 400 artisans in and around San Sebastian Rio Hondo working with Khadi Oaxaca, our project, and a staff of nine people managing the programme locally. Under this project, weavers create beautiful garments, home décor objects like covers for pillows and cushions, and fabric bundles. The Khadi Oaxaca project addresses some of the most relevant demands of the current generation, including "fast fashion" and the devastating impacts it has on its workers and the planet; migration; indigenous self-determination; and the scars of colonialism and neoliberalism on the social fabric of Latin America.

Mahatma Gandhi was an enlightened visionary for all times. It is clear we must return to one of the main sources and roots of our painful problems today – the disregard of Mother Earth. We cannot be violent towards her without being violent to our future generations. We must return to care for our planet as we do for our children. Khadi shows us a way forward to a way of life that has a future for our villages and generations to come. It speaks of living within our means. Let us honor our ancestors by using what is true and good, that which supports beauty and a wholesome, sustainable way of life. We can make the change together.

Mark Brown is an entrepreneur who has revived the Indian heritage khadi fabric in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. He has re-established a farm-to-garment ethic that restores dignity to its producers and promotes the cultivation of the indigenous Mexican coyuchi cotton.

THE MAN
behind Apu
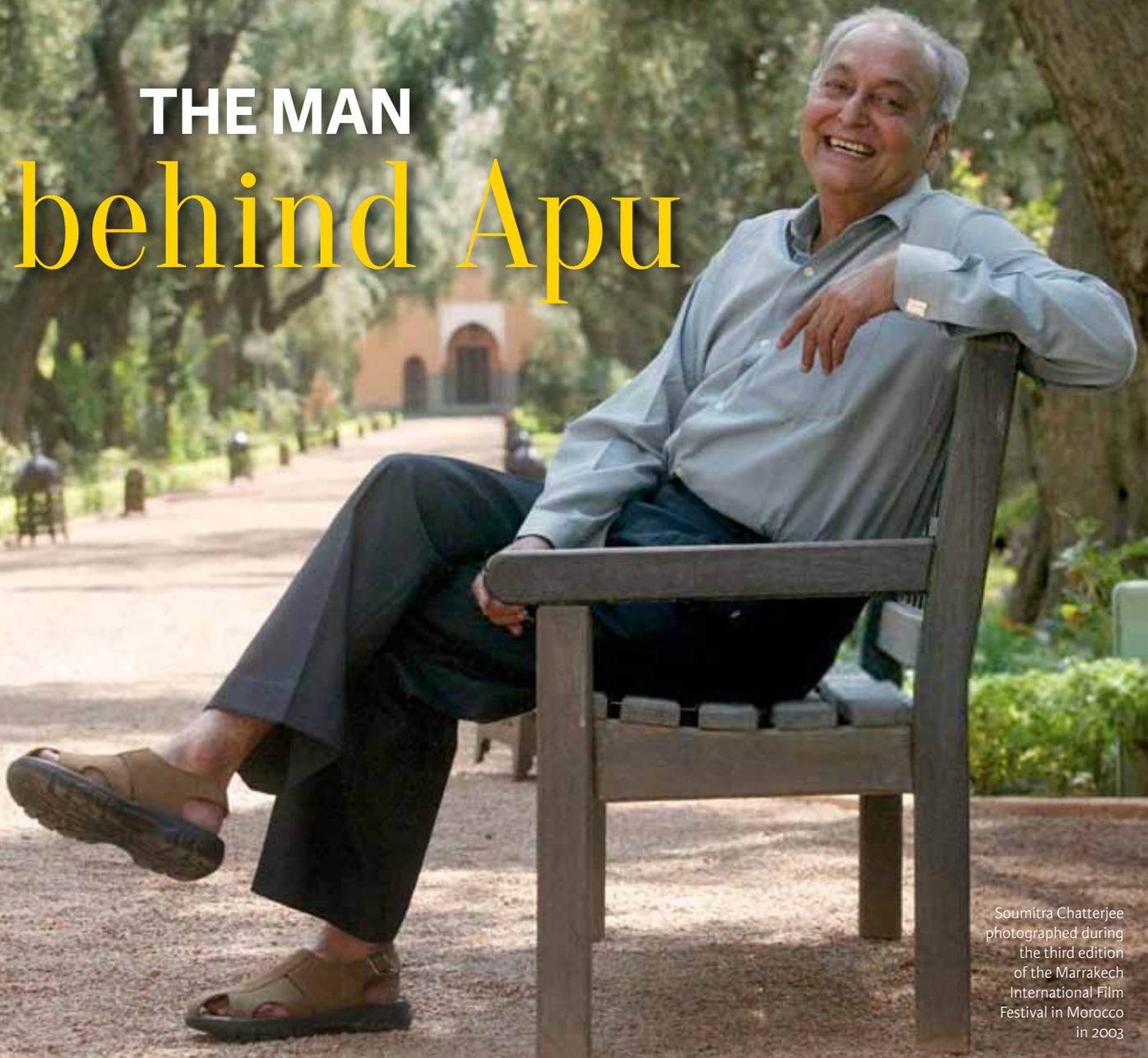
Soumitra Chatterjee photographed during the third edition of the Marrakech International Film Festival in Morocco in 2003

Soumitra Chatterjee will be remembered for not just his performances but also as one of the first 'thinking actors' of Bengali cinema. As the acting community mourns the loss of this luminary, we take a look at his body of work that crossed the boundaries of films and theatre to such other forms of art as elocution, writing and even painting

BY AMITAVA NAG

t was August 9, 1958. The place was Beleghata CIT Road, Calcutta (not Kolkata yet). Academy Award recipient Satyajit Ray was shooting the third part of his Apu trilogy, *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu). The protagonist, a young Apu (Apurba Kumar Roy), was being played by a debutant who, till then, had his training on stage under the tutelage of legendary Bengali theatre veteran Sisir Kumar Bhaduri.

Retrospectively, that date remains a milestone in Indian films as it marked the day an actor rose on the sky of Bengali cinema – Soumitra Chattopadhyay (anglicised as Chatterjee). He continued to rule the worlds of Bengali and international cinema, and theatre, uncontested till his demise on November 15, 2020. With him, Bengali cinema not only lost a great artiste but also one of the last legends of black and white celluloid that boasted such exceptional actors as Uttam Kumar, Utpal Dutt, Chhabi Biswas, Rabi Ghosh and the like.

During this long tenure in the sphere of performing arts, Chatterjee over-encompassed the

Soumitra Chatterjee (left) made his silver screen debut with the movie *Apur Sansar* directed by legendary director Satyajit Ray. The movie also marked the debut for noted Indian artiste Sharmila Thakur (Tagore)

Image source: Niyogi Books

Ram Nath Kovind
President of India
With the passing of Soumitra Chatterjee, Indian cinema has lost one of its legends. He will be especially remembered for the 'Apu' trilogy and other memorable performances in Satyajit Ray's masterpieces. He made immense contributions to the craft of acting.

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister
Shri Soumitra Chatterjee's death is a colossal loss to the world of cinema, cultural life of West Bengal and India. Through his works, he came to embody Bengali sensibilities, emotions and ethos. Anguished by his demise. Condolences to his family and admirers. Om Shanti.

Mamata Banerjee
Chief Minister of West Bengal
Feluda is no more. 'Apu' said goodbye. Farewell, Soumitra (Da) Chatterjee. He has been a legend in his lifetime. International, Indian and Bengali cinema has lost a giant. We will miss him dearly. The film world in Bengal has been orphaned...A great loss. Saddened. Condolences to his family, the film fraternity and his admirers across the world

Bengali psyche in various forms of art ranging from cinema, poetry and prose to even painting. Equally illustrious was his magnificent association with his mentor Ray until the latter's death on April 23, 1992. Between *Apur Sansar* and Ray's passing, the two collaborated in 14 feature films and created a legacy of unparalleled symphony and artistry on screen. Some of their most iconic cinematic ventures include *Devi* (1960), *Charulata* (1964), *Kapurush* (1965), *Ayanyer Din Ratri* (1970), *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and *Ghare Baire* (1984). It was often said that what famous Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune was to Akira Kurosawa and, currently, American star Robert De Niro is to Martin Scorsese,

Chatterjee was to Ray. In fact, noted American film critic Pauline Kael described Chatterjee as Ray's "one-man stock company".

And not just Ray, in his distinguished career spanning over six decades, Chatterjee worked with such legendary National Award-winning filmmakers as Tapan Sinha (*Jhinder Bandi*, *Atanka* and *Wheel Chair*), Mrinal Sen (*Akash Kushum* and *Pratinidhi*), Asit Sen (*Swayambara* and *Swaralipi*), Ajoy Kar (*Barnali* and *Saat Pake Bandha*), Rituparno Ghosh (*Asukh*) and Goutam Ghose (*Dekha*).

In 1988, he even worked with French filmmaker Nicolas Klotz in his film *La Nuit Bengali* (The Bengali Night), which was set in Kolkata,

Soumitra Chatterjee (centre) after receiving the Dadasaheb Phalke Award (the highest honour bestowed in Indian cinema) at the 59th National Film Award ceremony held in 2012 in New Delhi. The award was presented to the actor by former Information and Broadcasting Minister Ambika Soni and former Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari (right)

appearing alongside noted English actors Hugh Grant and the late John Hurt.

By his own admission, Chatterjee had worked in over 300 films and numerous stage productions. "But what I regret is that of all my work, very few have been for children," he had once said. Perhaps he couldn't fathom the impact he created in the minds of his audience, especially children, when he portrayed the character of Prodosh (Pradosh) Chandra Mitter, popularly known as Feluda (a detective character created by Ray), in the movies *Sonar Kella* (1974) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979), both directed by Ray. Such was Chatterjee's portrayal of the character that even though Feluda has been played by various actors over the years, for a true-blue Bengali, the mere mention of the detective brings visuals of the pensive actor.

Chatterjee possessed, among other acting traits, the unique ability to delve into the psyche of a character and portray emotions that best suit the role. In one of his earlier interviews he had mentioned how he
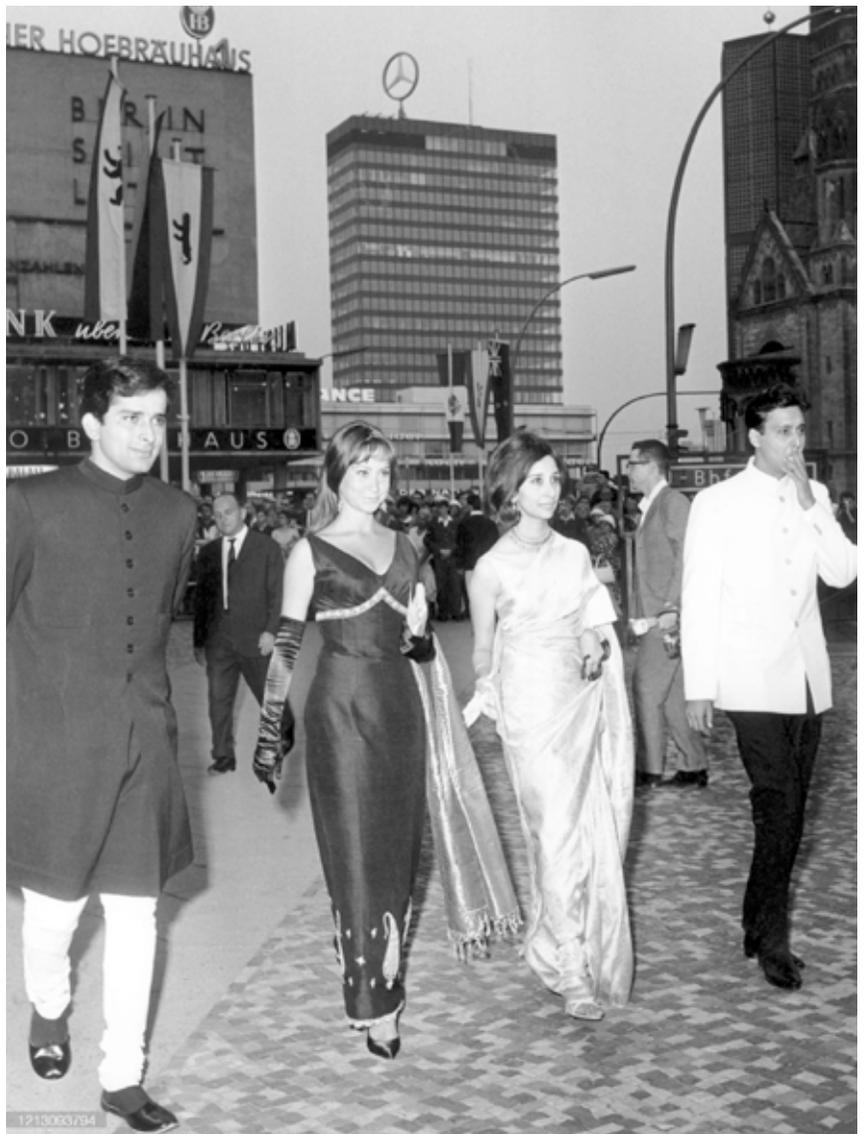
Soumitra Chatterjee (extreme right) with (from left) Shashi Kapoor, Felicity Kendal and Madhur Jaffrey at the 15th edition of Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival)) in 1965

By his own admission, Soumitra Chatterjee has worked in over 300 films and numerous stage productions

had thought long and hard about the role of Feluda. "I realised that Felu is a person who thinks deeply, so much of his expressions would have to be depicted by the subtle movement of the eyes," he had elaborated.

Award-winning filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan found in Chatterjee "the quintessential Bengali – intellectually inclined, of middle-class orientation, sensitive and likeable". While talking about Chatterjee's acting, National Award-winning director Shyam Benegal observed, "Is Satyajit [Ray] *babu*'s magnified artistic world fully radiant without Soumitra Chatterjee? It will be a futile exercise to think of a substitute for Chatterjee who portrayed so many tough and multi-dimensional characters on celluloid. He did not get any assistance from the sophisticated technology and unique camera of Hollywood; he had to work within a very limited technical support. He could cover many technical flaws with his magic of acting. What is most striking about Soumitra *babu* is his sensitivity, the unfading asset

Soumitra Chatterjee (left) shared screen space with popular English actor Hugh Grant in the 1988 film *La Nuit Bengali*
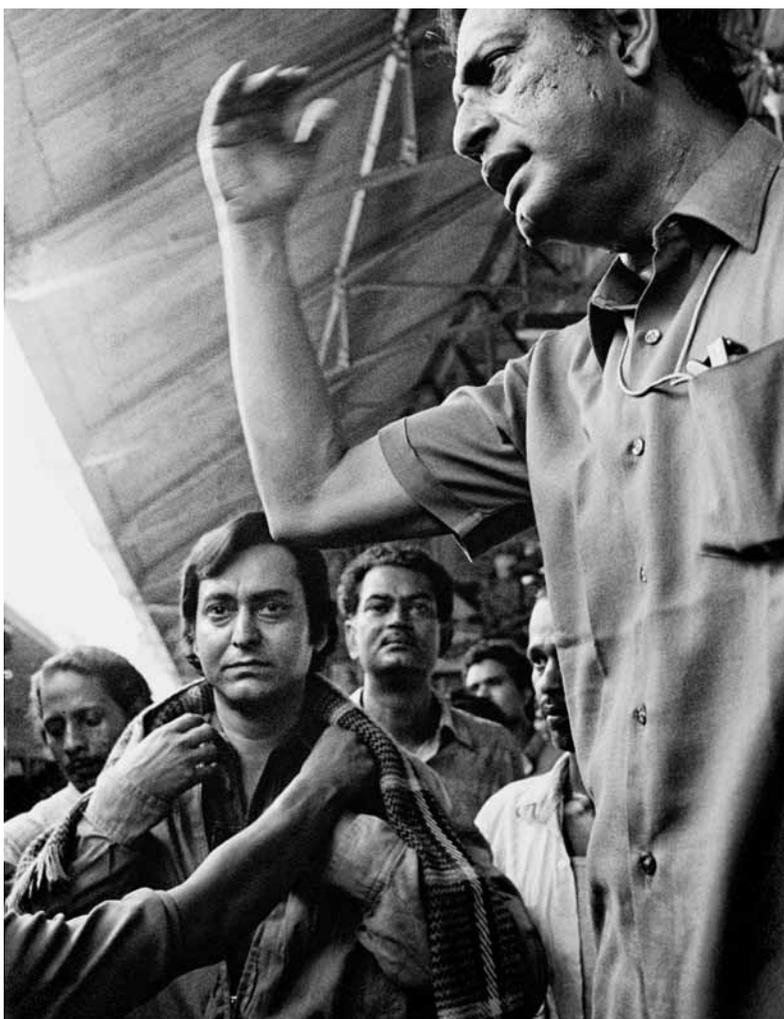
Image source: Niyogi Books

A behind-the-scene photograph of Soumitra Chatterjee (second from left) with director Satyajit Ray (right) during the shoot of one of the Feluda films

of a born actor. Charlie Chaplin [the UK], Toshiro Mifune and Gerard Depardieu [France] were sensitive actors who dominated the world of cinema with their brilliance. The contemporary scenario helped them develop their sensitive feelings to a great extent. But in case of Chatterjee, there was no easy grammar of sensitive acting, he had to frame everything on his own."

But, most importantly, Soumitra Chatterjee was much more than just being a Ray actor. A matinee idol in his youth, he was one of the few in international standards who could dabble both mainstream films and the more artistic ones with equal poise and ease, and also lend his credibility on stage. Amongst his peers and seniors, he probably matured most gracefully with age.

In theatre, his first love, he satiated his hunger of creative artistry beyond a mere performative one. He

Soumitra Chatterjee's iconic roles

Apurba Kumar Roy in *Apur Sansar* (1959)

Chatterjee's debut in cinema was in the concluding film of Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy as an adult Apu (protagonist). The film, with Chatterjee and a then 13-year-old Sharmila Thakur (Tagore), is widely considered one of the most romantic on-screen pairs in Bengali cinema.

Mayurbahan in *Jhinder Bandi* (1961)

Considered to be one of director Tapan Sinha's best cinematic works, it cast Chatterjee in a negative role. The film is also etched in the annals of Bengali cinema as the first to cast both Chatterjee and Uttam Kumar.

Amal in *Charulata* (1964)

Many consider this Ray's most intricate work of art where Chatterjee played the dashing Amal who shares a complicated romantic relationship with his sister-in-law. This film is based on Rabindranath Tagore's story *Nashtanirh*.

Dr. Pratul Bhattacharjee in *Baksho Badal* (1970)

A romantic comedy screenplayed by Ray and based on a story by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, it features Chatterjee as a psychiatrist who uses his knowledge of the human mind to find his way into the heart of the girl he loves.

Soumitra Chatterjee's iconic roles

Feluda in *Sonar Kella* (1974) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979)

He was the original Feluda, just like Sean Connery was the original James Bond. Undoubtedly, one of his most popular avatars on screen, his rendition of the *bhadralok* (gentleman) detective in these Ray films continues to be the yardstick to match for actors who took up the role after him.

Sandip Mukherjee in *Ghare Baire* (1984)

This romantic drama by Ray is set in a zamindar estate in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. Chatterjee played Sandip Mukherjee, a revolutionary, whose arrival jolts the happy marriage of the affluent protagonist couple.

Khid da in *Kony* (1984)

Based on sports writer Moti Nandi's novel of the same name, the Saroj Dey film cast Chatterjee as the passionate swimming coach Khitish or Khid da. His dialogue in the film, "Fight Kony, fight", exhorting teenage swimming phenomenon Kony (played by Sriparna Banerjee) in the film, is iconic.

Biswanath Majumdar in *Belaseshe* (2015)

This coming-of-age film questions the institution of marriage through the story of publishing house owner Biswanath (Chatterjee), who announces his decision to divorce his wife after nearly half a decade of marriage. It was an unconventional role in an unusual film for the veteran icon.

Source: zeebiz.com

wrote plays, adapted them from different sources, directed and acted in them. He brought stylistic naturalism in the commercial Bengali stage and remained one of its biggest stars, intellectually and commercially.

Being a regional actor and confining his talents only to his vernacular Bengali language meant that Chatterjee's reach was largely limited to a Bengali diaspora. His magnificent histrionics in smaller films and with emerging directors remained unnoticed beyond the shores of the Ganges. However, clinging to the soil livened his soul, nurtured it and helped him to explore and expand in the written word. It was in his poetry (with more than 15 collections) that we find the man strewn with doubts, filled with emotions and inflicted with melancholy. The creative hunger made the child in him run for new things, thereby conceiving newer creative paths for himself. He simply never remained idle.

The luminance of his oeuvre hosted awards that would glorify any actor of international resonance –

Image source: Niyogi Books

(Clockwise from top left): Soumitra Chatterjee (in front) in the role of Feluda in *Joi Baba Felunath* with actors Siddhartha Chatterjee (left) and Santosh Dutta; the actor in his first comic role being filmed by Satyajit Ray in *Samapti* (1961); a screen grab of the actor in the movie *Sonar Kella* where he portrayed the role of Feluda; a scene from the movie *Aranyer Din Ratri* which cast Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore

Commandeur de l' Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1999) and the highly prestigious Chevalier of Legion d'Honneur (2017) bestowed by the Government of France. In India, he was honoured with the Padma Bhushan (2004), the Dadasaheb Phalke Award (the highest award in Indian cinema, 2012) and a National Award.

In his acceptance speech of Dadasaheb Phalke Award, Chatterjee had said with utmost honesty, "I have always been in doubt about my work. I always thought that the entertainment business was not worthwhile but time and again, for more than 50 years, I have been accepted, loved and made to feel as one of their own by my countrymen. I love them [viewers] and that is the reason I am doing cinema. I salute them as they have supplied me with energy and dedication of what I think is a good art."

In numerous private conversations, Chatterjee spoke about repaying his debt and recompensing the love and joy he received from life. He will be remembered as the last link of an enlightened Bengali mind, the Renaissance grit and compassion. His body of work, including his writings, paintings and his cinema, provide us with an insight into his thoughts and his vision of unvanquished liberation of the human spirit.

Amitava Nag is a noted senior film critic and author, and one of the founder members and current editor of the film magazine Silhouette. One of his several books is on a few of the iconic film characters portrayed by Soumitra Chatterjee.

A *Bahurupiya* (impersonator) artiste dressed as Hindu deity Lord Hanumana. This image was taken on October 07, 2018, at the Behrupiya festival held in New Delhi

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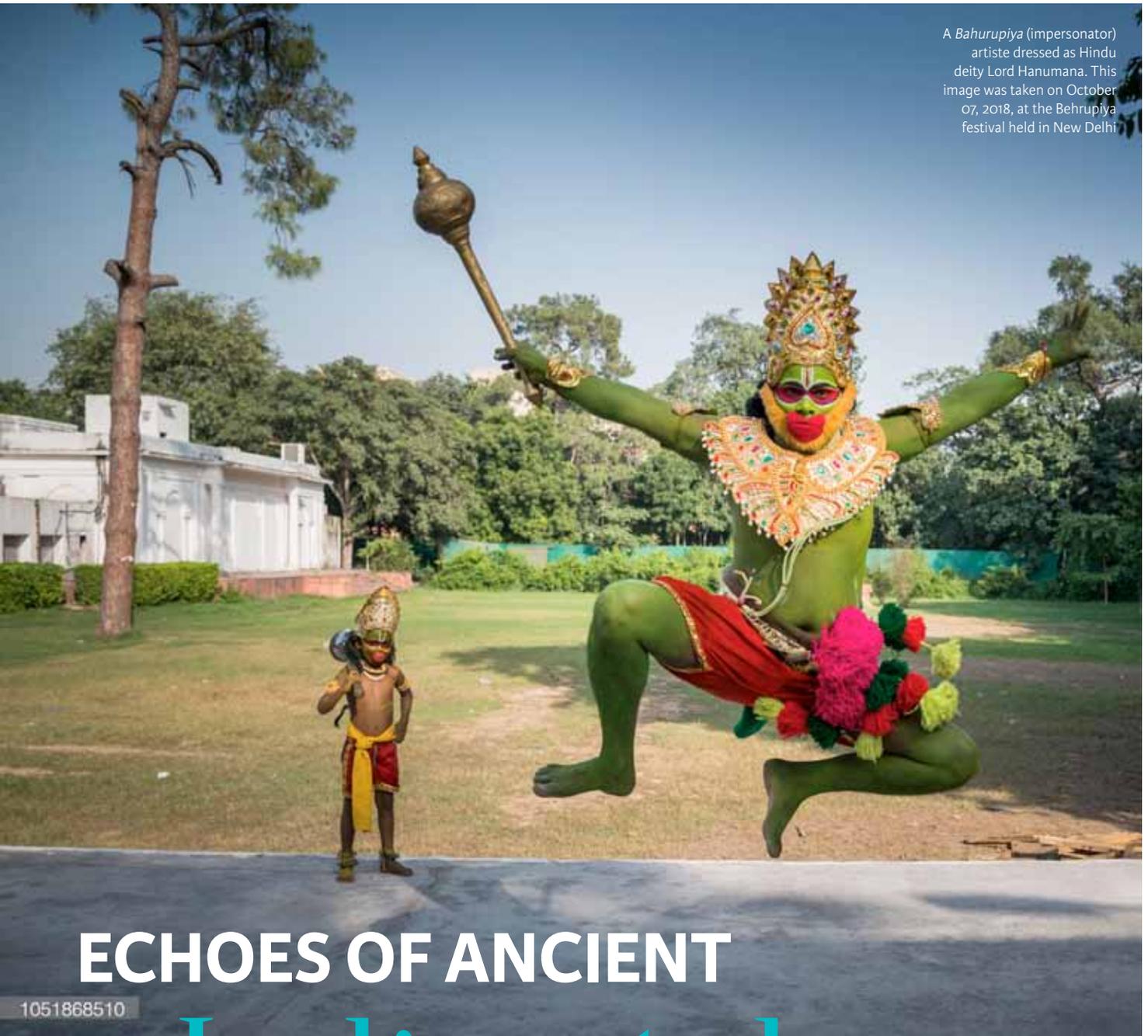
ECHOES OF ANCIENT
Indian tales

India's storytelling traditions are as diverse as the culture of the country.
Nalini Ramachandran explores a few of India's traditional storytelling methods
that not only have immense social relevance but are ways of preserving the
nation's heritage and passing them down to the next generation

Tanaji (Tanhaji) Malusare, the commander of the Maratha army under Shivaji's rule, was determined to win back Kondhana Fort. From inside an enclosure, he brought out a *ghorpad* (monitor lizard) named Yeshwant. As Tanaji tied a rope around its torso and placed it against the wall, Yeshwant clambered up. A *ghorpad*'s grip was said to be so strong that after it latched on to the ramparts, the entire army could climb up using the rope tied to its torso. But that day, sensing Tanhaji's life was in danger, Yeshwant turned back halfway. Tanhaji realised that Yeshwant had had a premonition, and said, "I've won 27 forts. Not once has the monitor lizard turned back! But I'm a true Maratha, and I'm not afraid of death!" And so, led by Yeshwant, he scaled the wall.

This episode may or may not appear in official records, but it does in a centuries-old *Powada*, a form of Marathi folk poetry-cum-ballad that thrived during Shivaji's reign.

Powada is one of the several Indian storytelling methods that chronicle

Chhau, a masked folk dance, is a unique Indian storytelling tradition that is prevalent in Purulia (West Bengal), Seraikela (earlier Bihar, now Jharkhand) and Mayurbhanj (Odisha, where artistes do not use masks). Here, Purulia *Chhau* artistes, dressed as Goddess Durga and her children, enact a scene where the goddess defeats Mahishasura

" **WHERE THERE IS A SOUL, THERE IS A STORY... THERE HAS BEEN A THRIVING TRADITION OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA. WE ARE PROUD THAT WE ARE CITIZENS OF THE COUNTRY WHERE THERE HAS BEEN A TRADITION OF *HITOPDESH* AND *PANCHATANTRA*. IN THE STORIES, AN IMAGINARY WORLD OF ANIMALS AND BIRDS WERE CREATED SO THAT WORDS OF WISDOM AND INTELLECT BE EASILY UNDERSTOOD. LET US ALL MAKE EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN OUR COUNTRY."**

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

Top: One of the 400 types of Kerala's traditional Theyyam. Through this ancient dance, performers present stories of regional deities, forest gods and folk heroes; **Bottom:** A Chamba *rumal* (kerchief) is a folk style of embroidery that narrates mythological tales

historical events. But often, they present lesser-known accounts, thereby highlighting that history, like storytelling itself, is diverse.

So, just as *Powada* uses verse, prose and music to narrate tales of valour, the glorious lives of the Rajputs, the Mughals and the Deccan sultanates are, respectively, presented through Rajasthani, Mughal and Deccani miniature paintings. These artworks also depicted scenes from mythology,

especially from epics such as the Ramayana.

Similarly, *Pattachitra* painting, practised widely in Raghurajpur (a heritage village in Odisha's Puri district), is also known for its mythological renditions. Intricate and vibrant, this art often comprises the 'frame within a frame' layout, with each section presenting iconic episodes. *Pattachitra* artists also practise *Tala pattachitra*, a storytelling method where tales are engraved on dried palm leaves. Odisha is popular for *Chhau* too. A dance form that is also performed in parts of West Bengal and Jharkhand, *Chhau* originated from ancient warrior camps. Using energetic dance, superfast spins, high jumps and swordplay, it presents stories of legendary and divine warriors.

PRESERVER OF LANGUAGE

Tales of brave heroes have also been the mainstay of *Dastangoi*, a popular form of storytelling during the Mughal era that was traditionally rendered in Urdu. But these characters lived in fantastical worlds alongside *djinns* (spirits) and dragons. When listeners of the time began preferring realistic tales, *Dastangoi* faded from the storytelling horizon. Decades later, modern storytellers revived the tradition and today, one can enjoy a *Dastangoi* performance at art festivals. Preservation of languages and dialects has been at the centre of Indian storytelling. Several traditions have never had written texts, and yet, they have lived on for hundreds of years.

STOREHOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE

Apart from language, storytelling has also turned the spotlight on traditional knowledge — be it scientific concepts or ways of living. *Kolam* (sacred floor design) from Tamil Nadu is based on mathematical calculations and geometrical concepts. Agricultural

> A great tool for mass communication, storytelling traditions are also an effective way to raise awareness on various subjects

Former Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh (extreme right) presents a Chamba *rumal* to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (second from right) on October 18, 2016, during an event at the state's Mandi district

CULTURE

Treasure Trove

From puppetry, music and performances to art, craft and embroidery, varied traditions are used to present tales in India. Here are a few noteworthy storytelling traditions of the country:

Tholu bommalata

An ancient form of shadow puppetry theatre from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and parts of Karnataka, *Tholu bommalata* presents episodes from mythology using translucent leather puppets. With some even measuring up to 2 m, these leather puppets are among the largest in the world.

Chitrakathi

An art form from Maharashtra where storytellers sing episodes from the epics while displaying a set of 50 or more paintings. The Chitrakathi museum in Pinguli village, set up by one of the last families practising this tradition, is keeping it alive.

Chadar Badar

This rare form of box puppetry is practised only by the Santhal community in India. By manipulating a single string, the puppeteer makes a group of male wooden puppets play the drums and another group of female wooden puppets dance.

Chamba Rumal

These kerchiefs, with embroidered tales from mythology, were once used to cover gifts given during special occasions. Art and textile enthusiasts are breathing new life into this craft today.

Noted *tholu bommalata* (leather shadow puppetry) artist S Maruthi Rao (right) makes leather puppets and paintings during a workshop held at the National Institute of Rural Development in Hyderabad on February 2, 2011

folk songs of Arunachal Pradesh narrate tales about the origin of grain, the process of *jhum* cultivation (slash-and-burn) and more. Wooden and clay dolls and figurines from Channapatna (Karnataka), Krishnanagar (West Bengal) and Kondapalli (Andhra Pradesh) beautifully portray people from all walks of life and depict, to the minutest detail, their dressing styles and professions.

VEHICLE OF FAITH

For ages, storytelling has helped people learn about shared beliefs and religious teachings. Sculptures and engravings in temples, stained-glass paintings in churches and Jain manuscript paintings are a few examples. Such visual depictions have been one of the best ways to explain religious teachings to those who were unable to read the sacred texts.

Take for instance, the vibrant *thangka* art. It is a Tibetan Buddhist practice that is popular in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, and depicts teachings and tales from the lives of Shakyamuni Buddha and other gurus like Padmasambhava, Marpa, and Milarepa through painting or appliqué work.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Not just religious beliefs, but stories have also helped impart socially-relevant messages. *Bahurupiyas* (*Behrupiyas*) from Rajasthan, who take on the personas of mythological, historical and everyday characters, use cosplay and wit for this very purpose.

A great tool for mass communication, storytelling traditions are also an effective way to raise awareness on various subjects like gender equality, girls' education, hygiene and healthcare, and environment conservation.

The identity of communities, especially of storytellers, comes from the storytelling traditions they

Top: *Tholu bommalata* puppeteers can easily manipulate the intricately crafted leather puppets as these have articulated joints; **Bottom:** Behind the scenes, at a *tholu bommalata* performance, the puppeteers use lit-up oil lamps to cast colourful shadows of the leather puppets on the other side of a white screen

"I URGE ALL STORYTELLERS TO INCLUDE ALL INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM THE PERIOD OF FOREIGN RULE AS WE ARE GOING TO CELEBRATE 75 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE [2021]. ESPECIALLY BETWEEN 1857 AND 1947, ALL SMALL AND MAJOR INCIDENTS. WE CAN INTRODUCE OUR GENERATION TO THEM IN THE FORM OF STORIES. YOU MAY TAKE OUT SOME TIME FOR STORIES EVERY WEEK. IF THERE ARE GRANDPARENTS IN YOUR FAMILY, THEN YOU SHOULD ASK FOR STORIES OF THEIR CHILDHOOD..."

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

Tales of brave heroes have also been the mainstay of *Dastangoi*, a popular form of storytelling during the Mughal era

follow, which, in turn, is closely associated with their primary occupation. Telangana's *Cheriyal* scroll painting epitomises this point.

Cheriyal scrolls, which look like traditional, hand-painted, narrative comics, are created by the Nakash community of artists. However, nine different communities narrate nine different sets of mythological stories that are depicted in these paintings. Often, these are tales about the origin of certain communities. For example, the Koonapuli (Kunapuli) community of storytellers uses specific *Cheriyal* scrolls to narrate tales to the Padmashali people (a weaving community) about legends related to the weaver community.

PROTECTOR OF NATURE

Theyyam, a ritualistic performance held inside Kerala's sacred groves, is deeply rooted in nature worship. There are about 400 types of *Theyyam* and in each, the performers appear as manifestations of a tree or forest spirit, a tiger or serpent god,

(Clockwise from top left): The traditional Kolam, an art form popular in Tamil Nadu, is believed to represent the mathematical concept of infinity; stories of deities of the Hindu pantheon are intricately depicted in *Pattachitra*, a storytelling tradition from Odisha's Raghurajpur village; Kerala's masked dance *Kummattikali* is believed to be the dance of Lord Shiva's *bhuthas* (spirits); a vibrant *thangka* painting depicting the Buddhist Wheel of Life or *Bhavachakra*. Also called the Wheel of Becoming, it is a complex *mandala* (circular design) representing the Buddhist view of the universe
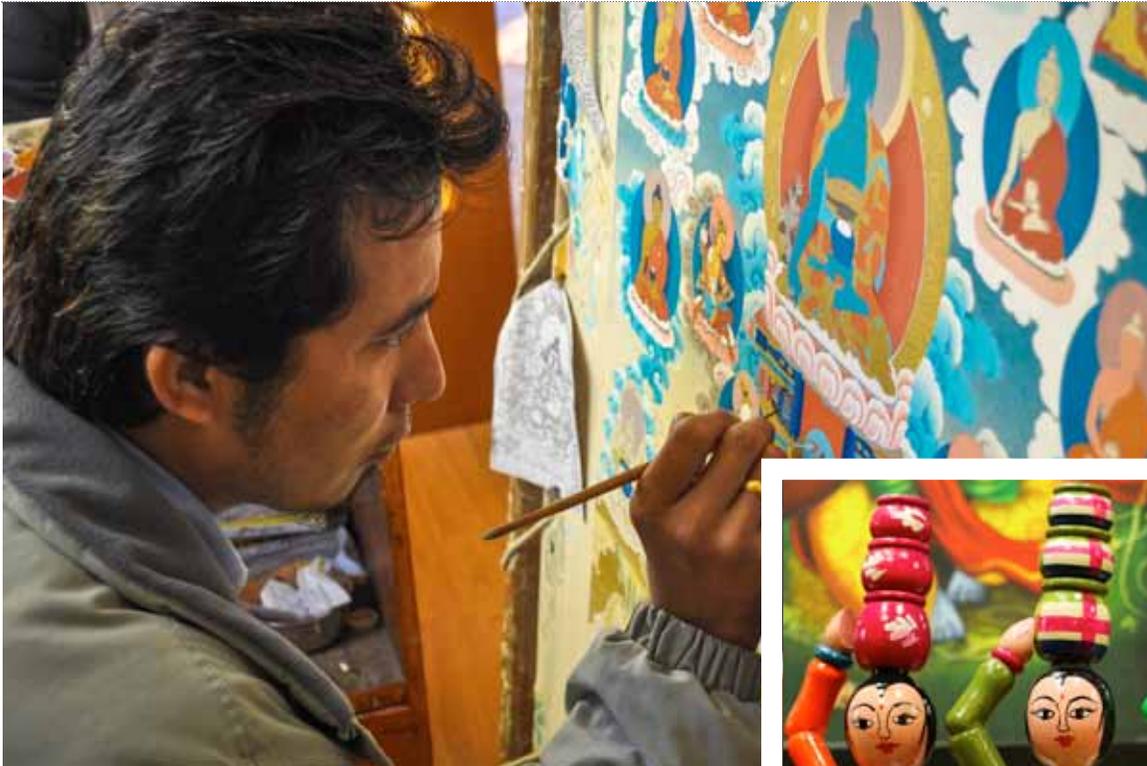
or some other local deity. Considered to be one of India's oldest art forms, *Theyyam* performances present tales of ancient tribal gods and heroes.

Nature forms the basis of most traditions. Which is why, conservation of the environment guarantees, to a large extent, the continuation of these rich and indigenous traditions too.

THE GUIDING LIGHT

In his monthly radio address to the nation (*Mann ki Baat*) in September 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had pointed out, "The traditions created by our ancestors are significant even today. When they cease to exist, there is a void. One such tradition is storytelling."

All these methods not only connect people to the past, but guide us towards the future too. Understanding their significance,

culture enthusiasts, heritage conservators and NGOs are innovating and finding modern mediums to keep them alive. Also, with the Prime Minister's encouragement and the initiatives of various government agencies, stories are set to find newer audiences. Meanwhile, the traditional storytellers continue to look ahead and scale barriers with determination, just as Tanhaji had done at Kondhana.

Nalini Ramachandran is an author with multiple books to her name. She takes a keen interest in Indian traditions, especially in the art and craft of storytelling. She has worked as a writer and an editor across various media — film and television, newspapers and magazines, and children's books and graphic novels.

A PLATEFUL OF
traditions

Christmas, like any other celebration, is incomplete without food. And in India, the traditions get a local flavour. Celebrity chef Thomas Zacharias takes us through a few of the lesser-known yet time-honoured recipes from across the country

Spiced mulled wine, relished during Christmas, is flavoured with such Indian spices as cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and star anise, and is best served hot

Christmas is one time of the year the Christian community looks forward to the most. It is the day when families gather to celebrate the birth of Christ, attend midnight masses and gorge on festive treats. The dining table on Christmas afternoon is traditionally filled with an assortment of different meat and vegetable delicacies, which would seldom be made at any other time of the year. And celebrations in India are no different, save a few variations in traditional culinary delights.

Take for example, Kerala's rendition of the Christmas roast chicken that is cooked in a *cheena chatti* (a local version of *kadai* in Kerala resembling a Chinese wok) is a far cry from the Western style of preparing it in the oven. It is served with dark caramelised onions, crispy fried potatoes and a rich brown broth with accents of clove and cinnamon made by deglazing the pot once the chicken is done. The result does, however, resemble a Western roast chicken in appearance yet it is far juicier, a texture owed to the reverse braising technique used to prepare it.

In Kerala, where I grew up in a Christian home, we would sip on homemade pineapple or grape wine that my *ammamma* (grandmother) carefully stored in her cool, dark attic for months. Another delicacy that is hard to shake off from memory is *ammamma's* frill, a deep green coconut curry with tenderloin,

(Above): Rich rum balls are traditional sweet treats that are relished during Christmas. This truffle-like cake is flavoured with chocolate and rum and are often stuffed with almond or glazed cherries to accentuate the taste

(Bottom): *Dodol*, a pudding-like dessert, finds its presence in both Puducherry and Goa. Cooked using rice flour, coconut milk, salt, cashews and dark palm jaggery, the Goan *dodol* is simpler in its composition. The *dodol* made in the houses of Puducherry, however, incorporates the flour of black glutinous rice and is cooked with sugar, cardamom powder and nutmeg giving it a more complex, spicy flavour

potato and thickly-sliced onions. Seasonal vegetables like *koorka* (a small furry tuber also known as Chinese potato), stir-fried with red chilli and garlic, balanced out the meats. An endless supply of her ubiquitous Christmas plum cake meant that we could nibble on it post breakfast, for tea and even as an after-dinner dessert.

In India, and across the world, Christmas is when families and communities come together in celebration over gifts, cake and elaborate feasts. Given that Christianity's origins in India date back almost 2,000 years, different regions across the country have evolved their own distinct traditions.

Although Christianity is represented in only 2.3 per cent of India's population, there are several prominent Christian communities spread across the country, especially in the states of Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and in the Northeastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

Evidently, the food-related traditions in these places have been

Top: *Bolinhos de limão* or lemon cupcakes, a favourite Goan Christmas treat, is often decorated with whipped cream

Bottom: The Goan Christmas specialty *queijadinha* or coconut custard tarts are made with cheese, coconut, eggs, butter, wheat, baking powder and sugar

shaped by how Christianity spread in that region. The people, establishments or influences that brought the faith to different parts of the country have determined the kind of practices that have evolved there. For example, Apostle Thomas, who arrived from present-day Jerusalem, is credited for introducing the religion to Kerala in 52 AD. This means that the cultural and culinary customs in Kerala would vary from that of Goan Christians who were colonised by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Diasporic Christian communities like the Anglo Indians, who emerged as a direct result of the British Raj, have their own set of traditions.

Mangaluru, in Karnataka, also has a significant population of Christians

There are several prominent Christian communities spread across the country, especially in the states of Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and in Northeast India

— many of whom migrated from Goa. According to popular Youtuber and city resident Avril Rodrigues, Christmas in her city is synonymous with *kuswar* — an assortment of Mangalorean Christmas treats comprising homemade *guliyos* (crunchy fried rice marbles), *nevriyos* (coconut and sesame-stuffed wheat pastries) and rice laddus.

In Puducherry, Anita de Canaga and her mother Pushpa run a small venture named Chez Pushpa, a reservations-only home-cooked

Above: *Papos de anjos* or angel's chin, a Goan Christmas dessert of Portuguese origin, is made by whipping leftover egg yolks with sugar

Left: A traditional Mangalorean Christmas *kuswar* platter with an assortment of savouries and treats, including rose cookies, *murukkus* (lentil paste deep-fried in circular shapes) and more

Above: A traditional Christmas cake shaped like a log, the Yule Log is a form of sweet roulade. It is decorated and shaped to look like a log, hence the name

Below: The traditional roast chicken that is served along with an assortment of winter greens is a holiday favourite in most Christian homes in India, with each family having their own set of recipes for its preparation

meal experience with a focus on French-influenced Puducherry cuisine. The grand feasts in lieu of Christmas generally begin a week prior here, with the family and the neighboring community coming together to exchange food and gifts. "Banana sweet *vadas* are prepared first, while reciting a prayer to signify an auspicious start to the festivities. The ingredients are split *urad dal*, ripe bananas, sugar and oil," de Canaga recounts fondly.

A host of such other pastries and sweets as *nei murukkus*, *ghee* balls, laddoos and a decadent called *adarasam* (a deep-fried dessert made with rice flour, *ghee* and cardamom, and soaked in sugar syrup) are also prepared in the week preceding Christmas. These are traditionally distributed to neighbours and relatives before being consumed in-house. On Christmas day, the menu is an elaborate one with specialties like *vivikam* cake, the Puducherry take on the Christmas plum cake, and the *vennaiputtu*, a flan-like dessert made with rice flour, coconut milk and sugar. A simple creole salad of boiled eggs, carrots, beetroot, tomatoes and beans dressed with vinegar, olive oil, salt and freshly-ground black pepper is customary as well. The *piece de resistance*, however, is the fragrant meat biriyani that is served with tomato sweet chutney, onion *pachadi* (traditional onion chutney) and aubergine tamarind chutney.

Christmas festivities typically begin by the end of November in Nagaland, where red meat dishes

are especially relished. A member of the state's indigenous Ao tribe, Lipokienla Echa points out, "The most special Christmas dish is the *pongsen*. Literally translating to 'cooking inside bamboo', it is prepared with cubed meat, which is cooked along with ginger, garlic and fresh bamboo shoots inside a hollow bamboo stem." Another Christmas specialty of Nagaland is the sticky rice biscuit. Made using the indigenous red sticky rice, the rice grains are first ground into flour and mixed with lukewarm water and jaggery, after which it is flattened with the palms and carefully fried.

Goa's distinct traditions and food associated with Christmas are perhaps more popular than other parts of the country. But apart from the sugar-glazed curly sweets called *kulkuls*, there are many recipes which aren't as common. Margarida Tavora, who owns the celebrated Goan-Portuguese restaurant Nostalgia in South Goa reminisces the unique sweets which were prepared in Portuguese-influenced Goan households back in the 1950s.

The Goan version of the date-and-nut Christmas pie called *torta de nozes e tamara* incorporates jaggery and sesame in addition to the dry fruits and nuts used in Portugal. *Teias de aranha* are pearly white, tender coconut strips cooked in sugar and presented on star-shaped paper cutouts. *Papos de anjos* or angel's chin — another dessert of Portuguese origin — is made by whipping leftover egg yolks with sugar. There's also *bolinhos de limão* or lemon cupcakes and

Rissois de camarão or crumbed prawn turnovers are traditionally had as appetisers before the main Christmas meal in Goa

The Goan version of the date-and-nut Christmas pie incorporates jaggery and sesame in addition to the dry fruits and nuts used in Portugal

queijadinhas or coconut custard tarts. Goa's savoury contribution to Christmas foods is extensive as well. Meals could begin with *pasteis de bacalhau* or cod fish croquettes and *rissois de camarão* or crumbed prawn turnovers, and be followed by oyster pies and oven-roasted meat.

Even though many grand old traditions across the country are disappearing, there are attempts being made to preserve and celebrate some as well. Nahoum & Sons, an iconic bakery located in the historic New Market in Kolkata,

has been making their rich fruit cake ever since Israel Nahoum, who arrived from Baghdad, set up shop in 1902. Although this Jewish bakery has over 140 products in its arsenal, the rich fruit cake and plum cake are undoubtedly its most popular, especially during Christmas. Isaac Nahoum, the current fourth-generation owner of the establishment, shares the secret to their consistent success. "An uncompromising focus on high-quality ingredients with unique techniques that enable us to keep the prices well below that of our closest competitors," he says confidently.

Hunger Inc Hospitality Pvt. Ltd. is a Mumbai-based restaurant company which manages the regional Indian restaurants The Bombay Canteen

(Clockwise from above): Customers make a beeline in front of Kolkata's iconic bakery Nahoum & Sons for its rich fruit and plum cakes - Christmas specials; the rich chocolate cake is another specialty of this confectioner during the holiday season; Nahoum's popular plum cakes are traditionally baked with plenty of dry fruits

Cod fish croquettes or *pasteis de bacalhau* are served as appetisers before the main course in a traditional Goan Christmas meal

and O Pedro. Both the eateries have consistently indulged in India-inspired Christmas menus over the years. Whether it is a spin on dishes like traditional delicacies and rice porridge from Nagaland, or the east Indian meat preparations, guests have always gotten a taste of the real Indian Christmas that they otherwise rarely have access to. O Pedro's exquisite Christmas menu last year, put together by executive chef Hussain Shahzad and pastry chef Heena Punwani, featured dishes like broccoli escabeche, canned sardines and Christmas strawberry pie. The company's latest venture Bombay Sweet Shop helmed by chief *mithaiwala* (sweet maker) Girish Nayak offered a special Christmas dessert menu with chocolate rum balls, kaju (cashew) marzipan bonbons and winter spice chocolate

butterscotch barks reminiscent of the Christmas cake.

Although Christmas culinary traditions unique to India seem to be losing its sheen in recent years, the sentiment of coming together with family and loved ones over good food is still very much intact. In my own family, with my grandmother having passed away a few years ago, the Christmas spread may not be as elaborate or extravagant as she would've made it. But her roast chicken and duck curry certainly continue to be on the menu.

Thomas Zacharias *is a celebrity chef and the former head of the kitchen at The Bombay Canteen, a Mumbai-based restaurant that was awarded first place in India's top 50 premium dining establishments by Condé Nast Traveller in 2018.*
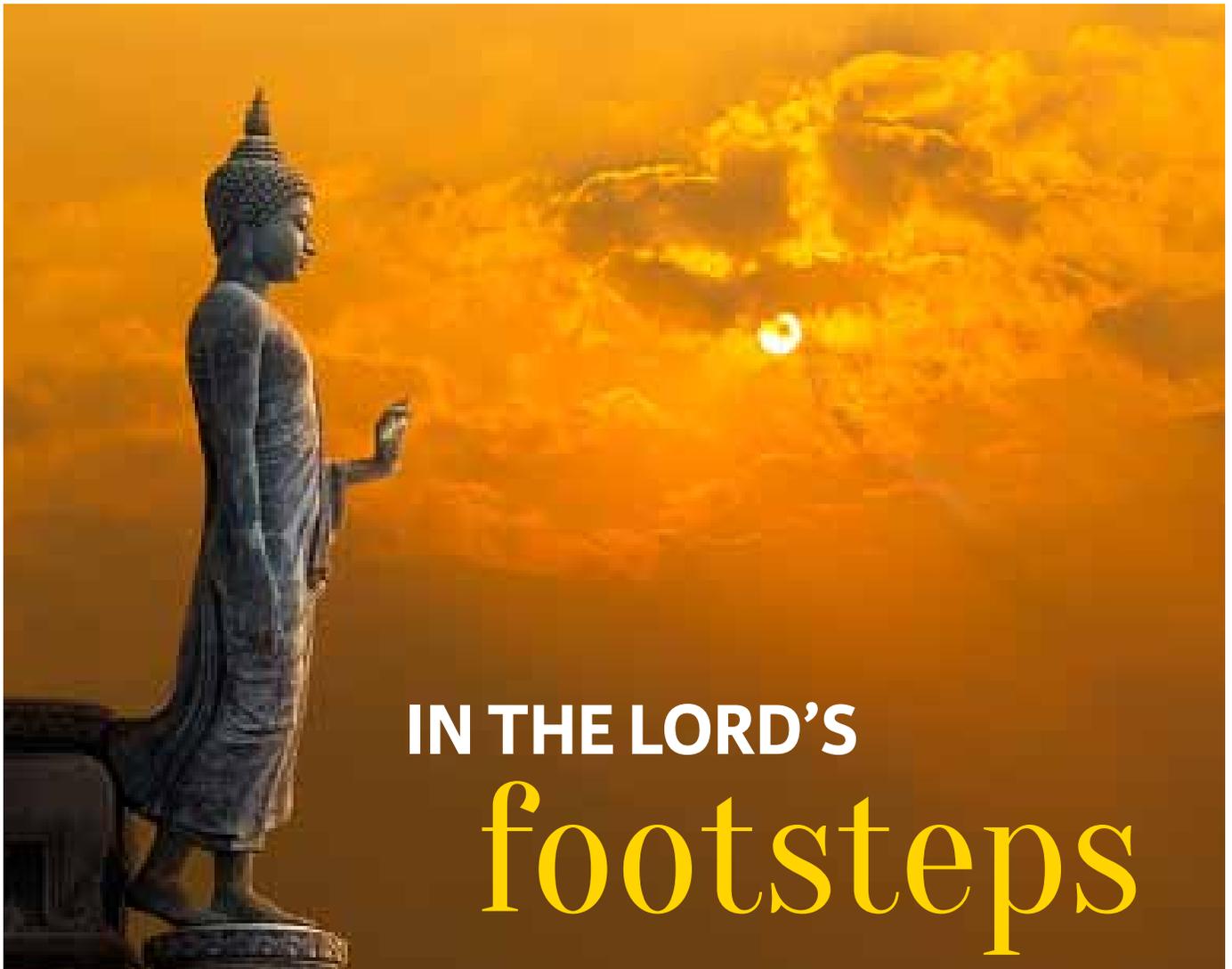
IN THE LORD'S
footsteps

Recently, the Kushinagar airport in Uttar Pradesh was opened for international flights, facilitating the arrival of tourists and pilgrims from across the world. On this occasion, we visit some of the revered Buddhist sites in the state that will become more accessible

BY **ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY**

While the world decked up for the holiday season in December, Buddhists in many parts of the world prepared to celebrate Bodhi Day (December 8), the day Siddhartha Gautama is said to have attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya (Bodhgaya), Bihar, to become Lord Buddha or the 'Awakened One'. While Bodhgaya remains an important site associated with Lord Buddha, it is Uttar Pradesh that is home to two of the four most revered Buddhist sites: Sarnath (where the Lord delivered his first sermon after being enlightened)

and Kushinagar (where he breathed his last and attained Mahaparinirvana). Add to this the news of Kushinagar airport being recently declared an international hub and Uttar Pradesh's Buddhist sites become more prominent in terms of tourism opportunities. Here's tracing the Lord's journey across the state starting from the first site he arrived to his final resting place.

SARNATH

After attaining enlightenment in Bodhgaya, Lord Buddha travelled to Sarnath, located about 229 km from Kushinagar. At Sarnath's Deer Park (also called Mrigdava), he delivered his first sermon as the Awakened One

The Ashoka Pillar in Sarnath was capped by the Lion Capital, which was adopted as India's national emblem in 1950

to five disciples that he had met at the Chaukhandi Stupa nearby. In his first preaching, the Buddha spoke about the Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path that frees people from suffering. He explained the two ways of life – to indulge in all the pleasures of the world and to deny oneself these pleasures – and the middle path that leads *nirvana* (salvation). Lord Buddha laid the foundation of his *sangha* (an organisation of Lord Buddha's disciples) in Sarnath.

The massive 34-m-high Dhamek
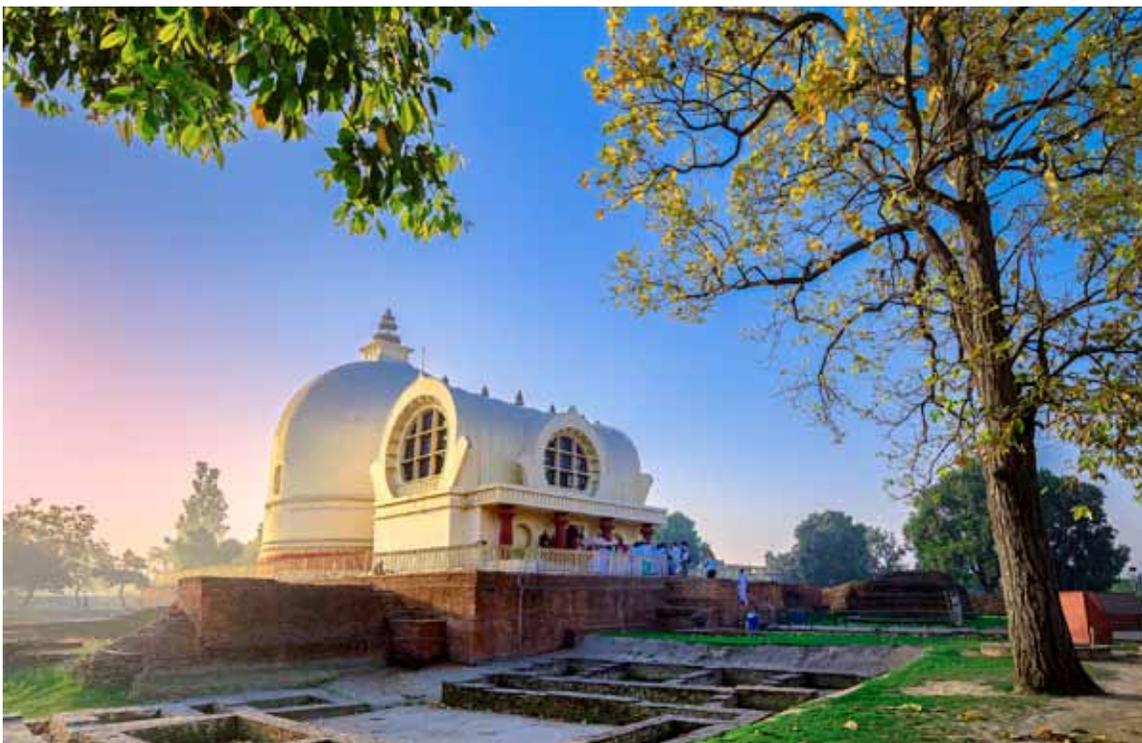
The Mahaparinirvana Temple and the stupa in Kushinagar were excavated under the supervision of British archaeologist ACL Carlleyle in 1876-77. The temple and the stupa assumed their present form in 1956 during the 2500th anniversary of Buddha Jayanti

The Wat Thai Temple, one of the major Buddhist sites in Kushinagar, is said to have been originally conceived as a forest monastery and is, therefore, located amidst greenery

Buddhist sites

Lord Buddha grew up as Prince Siddhartha in Kapilavastu (about 187 km from Kushinagar), the present day town of Piprahwa in Siddharthanagar district.

Sankisa (about 529 km from Kushinagar) is regarded as the spot where Lord Buddha descended after giving a sermon to his mother Mayadevi in heaven. Emperor Ashoka erected a pillar to mark this holy spot.

Stupa is a major Buddhist attraction here, as it marks the exact spot where Lord Buddha preached his first sermon. The floral patterns and the geometric engravings on the facade of the stupa are said to date back to the 5th century AD, while the brickwork harks back to 200 BC.

Another crowd-puller in Sarnath is the iconic Ashoka Pillar. Established by emperor Ashoka sometime between 272 and 232 AD, this glistening pillar is said to mark the foundation of the Buddhist *sangha*. The pillar was once capped by the Lion Capital, which was adopted as India's national emblem in 1950. Today, the Lion Head can be viewed in the Sarnath museum. One should not miss the Dharmarajika Stupa here. It denotes the spot where Lord Buddha is said to have rested and meditated.

KAUSHAMBI

Located about 378 km from Kushinagar, Kaushambi (Kosambi), once the capital of the Vatsa kingdom, one of the 16 *mahajanapadas* of ancient India, was Lord Buddha's next stop. He spent his sixth and ninth year (after attaining enlightenment) here. He delivered several sermons in

One of the holiest sites associated with Buddhism, Kushinagar is where Lord Buddha left his corporeal self to attain Mahaparinirvana

Kaushambi, regarded as one of the most prosperous cities during that time, and established it as a premier centre for higher Buddhist learning. Excavations here have revealed ruins of an Ashoka Pillar along with an ancient fort and the Ghositaram Monastery, all of which draw tourists and pilgrims from the world over.

SRAVASTI

Situated on the banks of River Rapti about 237 km from Kushinagar, Sravasti (Shravasti) was the capital of the ancient Kosala kingdom (6th century BC-6th century AD). According to local lore, Sravasti is named after Sravast the mythological king who founded it. This town, strewn with a number of ancient stupas, majestic monasteries and beautiful temples, hosted Lord Buddha for over 20 years and was his favourite annual monsoon retreat. Sravasti is where Lord Buddha is said to have performed some of his greatest miracles, including creating multiple images of himself. According

The statue of the reclining Buddha inside the Mahaparinirvana temple in Kushinagar. Every evening, monks cover the statue with a cloth, as if putting the deity to sleep

to legend, Sravasti is where Lord Buddha encountered Angulimal (Angulimala) and reformed him from a highway brigand to a monk. The Angulimal cave is one of the popular tourist sites here. Visitors can also visit the Anand Bodhi tree in Sravasti. Locals believe that the tree has grown from a sapling that was brought from the original Bodhi tree by one of Lord Buddha's main disciples, Anand.

The town is associated with the remains at the twin villages of Saheth-Maheth. Two main attractions of Mahet, sprawled over an area of 400 acres, are the Pakki Kuti (permanent hut) and Kacchi Kuti (temporary hut). Another attraction that should not be missed in Sravasti is the gigantic World Peace Bell that was established with the help of the Japanese. The bell is believed to convey Lord Buddha's message of humanity through its toll. Other noteworthy sites that should not be missed in this peaceful and serene town include the Thai-Sri Lankan-Myanmar-Chinese-Korean Buddhist Temples, the Shobhnath Temple and the Swarna Gandha Kuti.

KUSHINAGAR

One of the holiest sites associated

Above: A map of the Buddhist circuit promoted by the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department. For more information, visit: uptourism.gov.in/pages/top/explore/tourism-circuits; **Right:** The Chaukhandi Stupa in Sarnath was where Lord Buddha met five disciples who received His first teachings
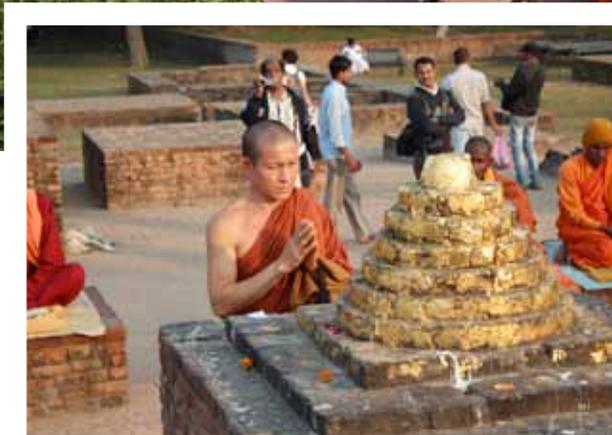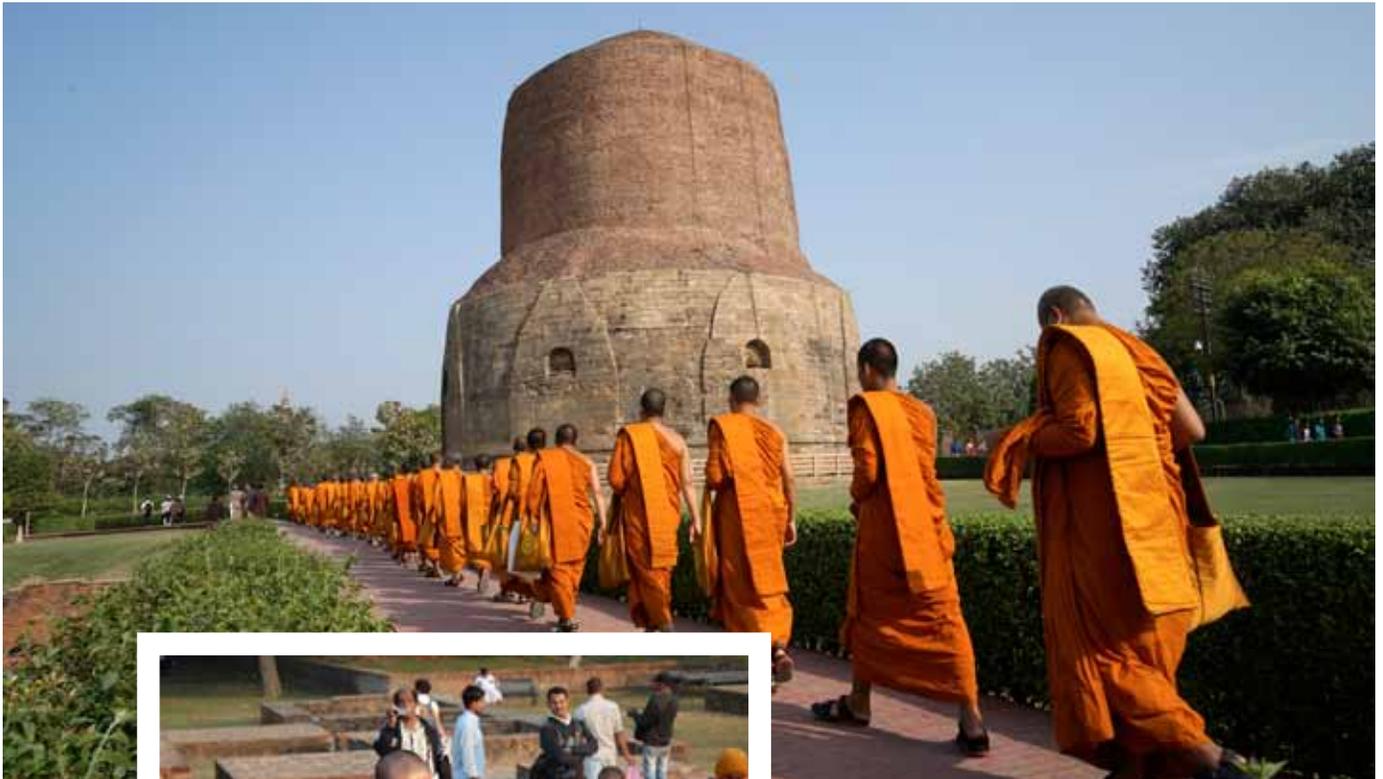
Top: Monks walk towards the Dhamek Stupa in Sarnath. This marks the spot where Lord Buddha preached his first sermon after becoming the Awakened One;

Bottom: Monks from the world over come to offer prayers at the Chetiwan Temple in Sravasti

with Buddhism, Kushinagar is where Lord Buddha left his corporeal self to attain Mahaparinirvana. The Mahaparinirvana Temple, which was excavated in 1876 and attracts thousands of devotees, pilgrims and tourists annually, houses a 6.1-m-long golden reclining statue of Lord Buddha. This monolithic sandstone sculpture depicts the Lord resting on his right side with his face towards the west probably indicating the sunset of his life.

The archaeological find that revealed the temple also unearthed a stupa next to it. The excavations also led to the discovery of a copper vessel that bore inscriptions in the ancient Brahmi script which stated that the remains of Lord Buddha were buried there.

At stone's throw distance from the temple lies the Mathakuar shrine where a black stone statue of Lord Buddha in the *bhumi sparsha mudra* (earth-touching pose) was recovered. It is believed to be the site where the Lord delivered his last sermon. The 49-ft-high Ramabhar Stupa nearby marks the spot where the Lord was cremated.

Anurag Mallick and Priya Ganapathy *work closely with tourism boards and publications to help promote travel and tourism. They contribute to leading Indian publications - both newspapers and magazines. Their social media handle is: @red_scarab*

A SLICE OF
village life

As the world recuperates from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is changing the norms of travel – with a increasing focus on rural tourism. With government assistance, this trend will not only encourage exchange of culture and experiences but also ensure financial support for the villages

BY **KUMAR ANUBHAV**

I n Lamhi village, on the outskirts of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, planning is afoot to start welcoming international tourists again post the COVID-19 pandemic. Popular among domestic tourists as the birthplace of legendary Hindi author Munshi

Premchand, Lamhi is a quintessential Indian village, surrounded by farmland, and its serene landscape dotted with grazing cattle and thatched houses. Its slow and basic lifestyle, a stark contrast to the hectic pace of cities, offers visitors a chance to enjoy the idyllic charms

A Theyyam performance in Kannur, Kerala. Rural tourism offers visitors to experience local traditions and art forms from a close distance. Kannur is one of the districts being developed by the state and central governments

of Indian village life, making Lamhi a part of the rural tourism circuit being promoted in Uttar Pradesh.

What makes this small village even more attractive as a tourist destination is its proximity to well-known destinations like Varanasi and the Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Sarnath. "Tourists would be given the option of arriving at these rural destinations along the banks of River Ganga by boats," regional tourism officer, Uttar Pradesh, Keertiman Srivastava said, addressing the media to explain how the state's Tourism Department is working on a mega-plan to develop rural tourism in and around Varanasi in the post-pandemic times. As a part of the initiative, tourists would be given a tour of the idyllic surroundings, will be taken to see the village life in Kaithi, or be driven to Ramna and Kakarahia, or to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's adopted village Jayapur.

Top: For foreigners, rural tourism is an immersive experience that allows them to be acquainted with the local customs and traditions. Here, a foreign tourist is photographed with local women near the Mamallapuram cave complex in Tamil Nadu; **Left:** In exchange for experiencing rural life, visitors engage in several volunteer work like medical assistance, teaching and cleaning

Rural tourism also encourages travellers to explore lesser-known yet stunning sites in even remote locations. Here, a visitor takes photographs in Basgo, a village in Ladakh

Rurban Villages

Under the Ministry of Rural Development's Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM), clusters of villages are being developed to preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life with a focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising on facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature. These are being termed 'Rurban Village'.

Under the mission, 300 clusters are being developed across the country and 67 'Rurban' clusters have proposed tourism-related activities in gram panchayats.

IN FOCUS

While over the past few years the tourism industry globally has been focussing on the importance of enjoying unique and leisurely experiences rather than ticking off sites from mass bucket-lists, the necessity to explore the unexplored and stay away from the crowd and as close to nature as possible, has been driven home during the pandemic. In India too, the treasures of the country's agrarian life are being revealed to travellers more proactively, with state tourism departments working towards it. Their efforts were complemented by the theme of last year's World Tourism Day

(September 27) – Tourism and Rural Development. The theme set by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation has a vision for utilising the tourism sector's ability to support economic development of rural areas.

In Rajasthan, the state government is working towards creating innovative tourism programmes to attract travellers with unique experiences and to generate new opportunities in the rural areas. Alok Gupta, Principal Secretary (Tourism), Rajasthan, had said in a recent interview that while promoting rural tourism, the state's focus would be on lesser-known tourist

Tourism helps build a symbiotic relationship between urban and rural pockets via knowledge transfer

> ❝ **THE OBJECTIVES OF THE SWADESH DARSHAN SCHEME INCLUDE CREATING EMPLOYMENT THROUGH ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND PROMOTING COMMUNITY-BASED DEVELOPMENT AND PRO-POOR TOURISM APPROACH.**❞
>
> **Prahlad Singh Patel**
> Union Tourism Minister

destinations and experiences. In Bihar and Kerala too, rural tourism circuits are being developed and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, has sanctioned two projects in these two states with a total budget INR 125 crore as a part of its endeavour to take tourism to the villages of the country. The projects will focus on the development of Bhitiharwa, Chandrahia and Turkaulia village circuit in Bihar (INR 44.65 crore) and in Kerala, the development of Malanad Malabar cruise (INR 80.37 crore).

TOURISM AND EMPLOYMENT

Rural tourism, or encouraging tourists to visit villages, not only enriches a traveller's experience but also boosts the local economy. When tourists arrive in a village, they spend on fooding, lodging and on buying indigenous handicrafts and memorabilia.

Local artisans and craftspeople not only get new and direct buyers for their products, but also receive on-spot feedback from their customers. In certain cases, when international tourists arrive in villages, local craftspeople are exposed to design demands from across the world that they may have been receiving through middlemen, aiding them to evolve their work.

Above: India's rural pockets offer travellers an opportunity to delve into their local craft practices, enriching the holiday experience. Here, a foreign national tries her hand at a traditional *charkha* (spinning wheel) at Sabarmati Ashram, Gujarat

Below: A few rural clusters around Gujarat's Rann of Kutch run homestays. Called *bunga* mud huts, these accommodations are beautifully decorated

Homing in on homestays

Travellers are not only looking for accommodation when they are travelling. They also want to experience the cultural variations, know the history and traditions of the place, understand the local lifestyle and participate in local festivals.

Homestays are not just a place for accommodation but are actually homes. More often than not, villagers open up their houses for tourists, offering them a slice of their lives. The tourists and the host share meals, tales and traditions. This is a two-way channel where, along with the traveller, the host gets a chance to learn and create reliable networks.

The biggest impact, however, can be seen in the rise of hotels and homestays. With the rise in rural tourism, household owners in even remote villages of the country have been encouraged to run homestays, offering tourists an opportunity to indulge in local traditions, culture and cuisine, thereby boosting the host's income. In several villages, tourists, especially from abroad, often participate in voluntary work for community growth, for example teaching in schools.

Tourism helps build a symbiotic relationship between urban and rural pockets via knowledge transfer. Travellers from urban areas can visit rural clusters and impart their knowledge, technology and resources to local communities in exchange for experiencing their culture and heritage.

CULTURAL RELEVANCE

India's rural communities are rich in cultural diversity and heritage. The villagers in these communities rely mostly on agriculture for their source of livelihood and are unable to capitalise their cultural heritage,

Top: Indian villages are treasure troves of the nation's rich culture and offer tourists a chance to experience a plethora of aspects, including traditional costumes and jewellery. Here, we see a lady from Rajasthan's remote Sabalpura village sporting ethnic clothes and ornaments

Below: Rural tourism also opens up the diversity of India's culinary traditions to visitors. Wood fire ovens (*chulhas*), fresh farm produce, regional spices combine to elevate the holiday experience

Top: Tourists participate in a *matka* (earthen pot) race at Rajasthan's annual Pushkar Fair; **Bottom:** Women cooking in a tourist homestay in Hankar village along the Markha Valley trek, Ladakh

resulting in the extinction of various age-old practices, arts and crafts. In today's world, the relevance of rural tourism lies in the fact that there are many urban travellers who want to learn about these hidden cultural assets but are unable to, due to a lack of awareness about them. With the advent of tourists, these assets can become financially self-sufficient and self-sustainable. Rural tourism, thus, will not only act as a second source of livelihood but also as a means to protect the rich cultural heritage being slowly forgotten.

Away from bustling cities and popular tourist spots, villages can become sanctuaries of peace and wellness for travellers. Especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, when being close to nature, staying fit and boosting immunity in natural and traditional ways have become the

new norms, a vacation in the village is an ideal solution. In India, with plenty of avenues for sustainable and rural tourism coming together with the collaboration of local people, responsible village travel is surely going to be what we call the new normal.

Kumar Anubhav, a social thinker is a certified mountaineer & professional working with culturally rich rural communities across India. He is founder & CEO of NotOnMap, a social-driven travel centric initiative that works to preserve & promote the cultural heritage of India's rural pockets.

Touch the sky

India's 72nd Republic Day celebration at Rajpath in New Delhi was marked by a vibrant display of the country's progress in diverse sectors and a representation of its rich cultural heritage

Indian Air Force aircraft flypast during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi on January 26, 2021. One of the highlights was the flypast of the recently-acquired Rafale fighter jets

Top: After being declared a Union Territory in 2019, Ladakh participated in the Republic Day parade for the first time. The tableau prominently featured the iconic Thiksey Monastery along with a beautiful display of Ladakh's composite culture and communal harmony

Bottom: Flight Lieutenant Bhawana Kanth (second from right) became India's first woman fighter pilot to participate in the Republic Day fly-past and parade

SNAPSHOTS

Top: Uttarakhand's tableau featured stunning depictions of the revered Kedarnath Temple, musk deer (state animal), Brahma Kamal (state flower) and monal (state bird). The tableau was declared one of the top three displays

Bottom: Indian Army soldiers march during the Republic Day parade. Adhering to the norms of Covid-19 restrictions, masks were worn during the event

Top: Secretariat buildings illuminated during the full dress rehearsal of the Beating Retreat ceremony at Vijay Chowk on January 27, 2021, in New Delhi. At this year's Beating Retreat, a special new composition was played to commemorate 50 years of victory of India in the war of 1971 against Pakistan

Bottom: School children present a cultural performance on Rajpath as a part of the Republic Day celebrations

COLOURS OF THE
white desert

The annual Rann Utsav that is held in the salty marshes of Gujarat's Kutch district is a spectacular display of the state's indigenous art and craft, cuisine, folk traditions and traditional way of life

One of the highlights of this annual festival held at the Great Rann of Kutch (November 12, 2020 to February 28, 2021) are the mesmeric sunrise and sunset views. Visitors patiently wait for hours to feast their eyes on the breathtaking sights of the horizon that changes colours every few minutes with the accent or descent of the sun

Top: A panoramic view of the tent city at Dhordo, a small village situated on the edge of the Rann of Kutch. Semi-luxurious tents with such amenities as air conditioners, heaters and state-of-the-art restrooms host guests attending the Rann Utsav

Bottom: A bright *mela* (fair) is organised to celebrate the annual festival near the tent city. This fair offers guests a glimpse of Gujarat's vibrant culture, indigenous decorative arts, cuisine and handloom traditions

SNAPSHOTS

Top: Local women apply a fresh coat of mud to a hut in the Dhordo village. As a part of the overall Gujarati experience, visitors are offered accommodation in these traditional circular thatched huts known as *bunga* or *bhunga*; **Bottom:** The *bunga* huts are painted with bright colours that present a contrast to the surrounding landscape. The roofs are constructed with bamboo sticks tied with dried grass rope and topped with another thick layer of dried grass
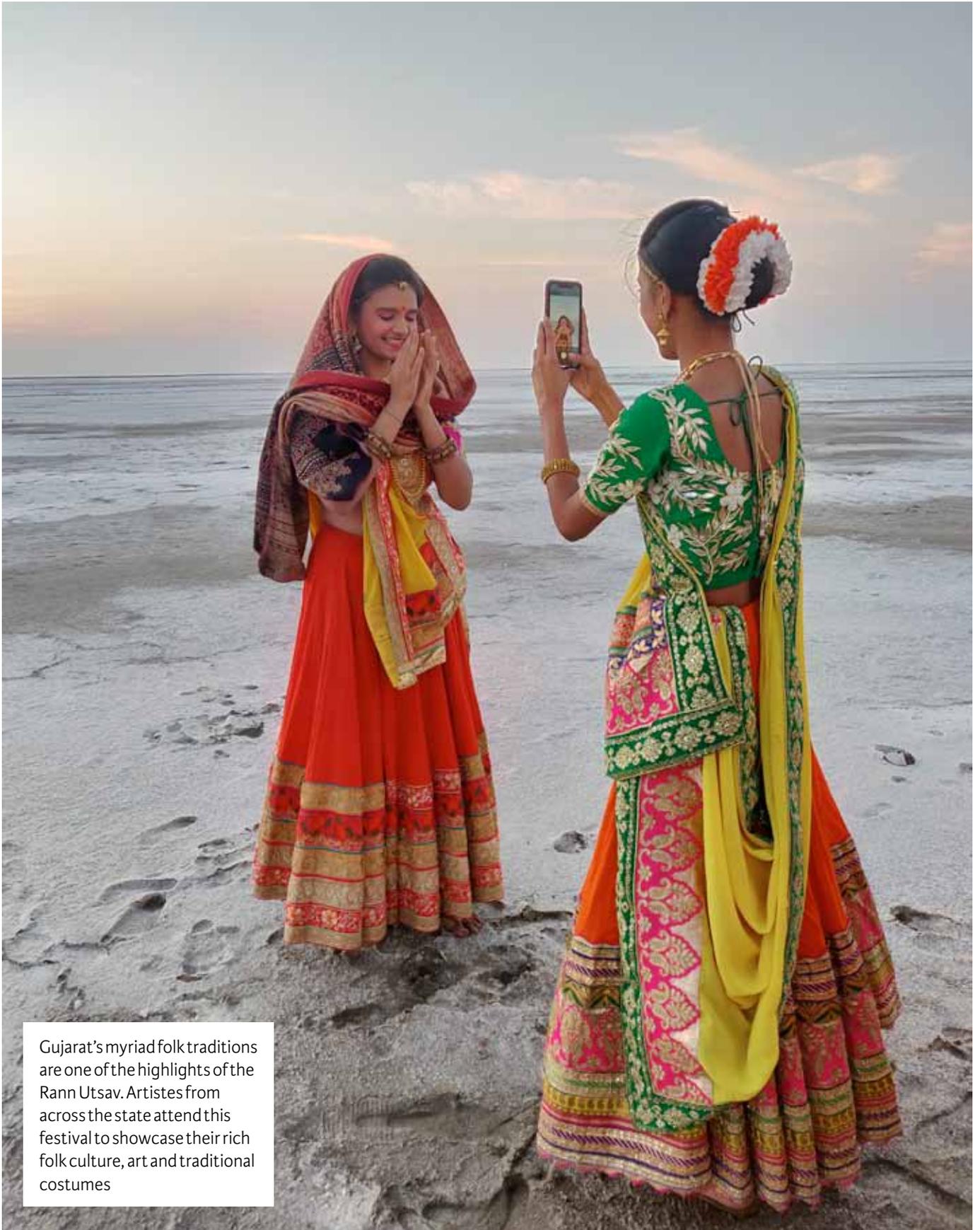
Gujarat's myriad folk traditions are one of the highlights of the Rann Utsav. Artistes from across the state attend this festival to showcase their rich folk culture, art and traditional costumes

Top: As beautiful as they are from outside, the interiors of *bunga* huts boast ornate decorations and comfortable sitting arrangements. These huts are considered as engineering marvels as they control the internal temperature - keeps the hut cool during summer and vice-versa; **Bottom:** Figurines of flamingos welcomed visitors to the fair area of the 2015-16 edition of the Rann Utsav. The greater flamingo, the state bird, breed in the Great Rann of Kutch in August

Images on this page: Shrabasti Anindita Mallik

Top: A beautifully-decorated *chakda*. A three-wheeled mode of transport, it is popular in the villages of Kutch and Saurashtra and can carry more than 10 passengers at a time. A ride on this indigenously-crafted vehicle is an experience not to be missed at the festival

Bottom: Gujarat's annual International Kite Festival also coincides with the Rann Utsav. Rann of Kutch is one of the several venues of the kite festival. For more information on travel, visit: *gujarattourism.com*

INDIAN
IMPRESSIONS

Know India a little more with these interesting facts

MISSION SUCCESSFUL

On December 17, 2020, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched a communications satellite into orbit. The satellite, called CMS-01, lifted off a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV)-C50 rocket from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre. The new satellite will replace and enhance the services of GSAT-12, which was launched on July 11, 2011, with an expected mission life of eight years. ISRO announced that the new satellite will provide service across India's mainland and some island regions.

Image: isro.gov.in

BEST FROM WASTE

• At a time when the world is trying to curb plastic pollution, Kerala-based Ambili Prasannakumar has come up with a creative solution - making beautiful table mats and carpets using the element. She stitches a layer of plastic between two pieces of cloth cut in the desired shape and then embroiders on it for decoration.

• For 59-year-old Vijayanand Shembekar from Maharashtra, creating intricately-detailed art pieces from coconuts is a passion. He carves a wide range of objects - from miniature vehicles and temples to animal figures and home decor items. He uses broken and damaged coconuts, husks, leaves and stems for his art.

Image: betterindia.com

L to R: Ambili Prasannakumar stitching a mat that has a layer of plastic between two sheets of cloth; Vijayanand Shembekar with a miniature model of a temple built with coconuts

Image: swarajyamag.com

COMING HOME

On November 18, 2020, three 13th-century bronze idols of Lord Rama, Lord Lakshmana and Devi Sita, which were stolen from Tamil Nadu's Sri Rajagopal Vishnu Temple in 1978, were handed over to the Government of Tamil Nadu, by Minister of Culture & Tourism Prahlad Singh Patel at an event in New Delhi. These idols were located in the UK and were handed to the Indian High Commission, London, by the Metropolitan Police. Speaking at the event held at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) headquarters in the capital, the minister pointed out that the government has been able to retrieve 40 antiquities from foreign countries between 2014 and 2020, while only 13 pieces were repatriated to India between 1976 and 2014.

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