

Twenty three People in Three Boats

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Early in the morning on January 11, 2000 when we were taking the elephant ride in the Corbett National Park, we had suddenly come across the half-eaten kill of a tiger in the forest— only the *sambar's* head was visible beneath the cover of dry leaves and branches. It was so perfectly hidden that anybody would think it was done by man. The *mahouts* too were surprised to see it. They said that they had never seen a tiger hide its kill so perfectly. I only remembered that last evening I had taken a picture of a *sambar* when in the softly fading light Corbett National Park not only looked secretive but mystic as well.

I was staying in the old Forest Guest House at Dhikala, inside the jungle. That itself was an experience.

The two nights preceding our night stay at Jim Corbett National Park in Nainital district, were spent at Haridwar, in the lap of the Ganga— in the tourist bungalow. One day we were seeing quintessential India reflected in the waters of the Ganga flowing since the mythical days, another day we are experiencing the pure fragrance of Mother Earth in the primordial forest— gaining such fundamental and deep feeling while travelling is not an everyday experience. From Haridwar, Jim Corbett National Park is 225 km via Ramnagar. It is not the usual route to take to visit the national park. It is easier to reach Ramnagar by train. We had taken this circuitous route to Ramnagar because we had both Haridwar and Jim Corbett in our itinerary. After travelling through Haridwar, Rishikesh and Corbett Park we would visit Lucknow, Varanasi, Sarnath, Chunar, Allahabad, Chitrakoot, Mahoba, Jhansi, Orchha, Deogarh, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri. We would be travelling continuously for 15 days in a tourist coach starting from Delhi. We would be seeing, besides some world famous destinations in Uttar Pradesh, the different districts of the state, its towns, markets and roadside villages. So many places, so much variety was incorporated in our trip that the mind was always perked up. Sometimes it surprised us, sometimes it brightened our world.

My travelling companions were no less interesting than my trip. Phillipa Saxton had come from Australia. She was an Indophile and had written for the famous Lonely Planet India book. In two minutes we discovered that we had known each other earlier. Where did the meeting take place? At Sikkim, said Phillipa. She is also the editor-publisher of a beautiful travel magazine called Saffron Road. Till now, two issues of the magazine have been published. British travel journalist Stephen Mc Clarence, from the second day itself became very close to us and was nicknamed 'Stephan'. He had already toured India six times, once it was a five month long trip. Lively but thoughtful Stephan was a regular travel writer for the The Times from London.

Sergei Stokan from Russia was a student of Tamil at Madurai's Konark University. Naturally Tamilian travel writer Shyamala Swaminathan heaved a big sigh of relief and immediately broke into her native language.

Compared to them Jonathan Siskin from USA spoke very little. He was an expert travel writer, editor and radio journalist. Presently he is a contributing editor for the magazines Travel Agent and Outbound Traveller as well as the writer of Fodor's Worldwide Cruise Guide. Till now he has travelled to 120 countries.

Donata Pizzi and Barbara Aloisio had come from Italy. Donata is an accomplished historian, an excellent photographer, writes for all leading papers in Italy; she has to her credit a published volume on Kazakhstan and is writing two more books— one on the Roman archaeological remains found in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya and another book on the Italian architecture from 1920 to 1940 in Eastern Africa.

Donata's friend Barbara managed the Rome office of the global photo agency Image Banking. She was an expert in editing and publishing travel photos.

Frank Jorg Richter from Germany, Rauni Vornanan from Finland, Isodoro Merino from Spain, Chollada Teasuwan from Thailand, Dharmasiri Gamage from Sri Lanka and Kyaw Zeya from Myanmar— may have come from different countries, spoke different languages but now shared the same boat. The metaphor even became true one early morning at Varanasi. We, twelve foreign and six Indian travel writers, shared two

boats between us as we went to see the sunrise over the Ganga at the ghats of Kashi. Six Indian writers belonged to six states, spoke six different languages. Bholabhai Patel from Gujarat, Mahinder Singh from Punjab, Usha Dhurandhar from Maharashtra, Shyamala Swaminathan (Shyama) from Tamil Nadu, K. S. Bhagwan from Karnataka and your truly from West Bengal. In another boat there were two local guides, three officials of Uttar Pradesh Tourism. 23 people in three boats. Sharing three boats at Varanasi, four elephants at Corbett Park, travelling through Uttar Pradesh in one coach— integrating the different language travel writers was no mean feat. Helped by Government of India Tourism, Uttar Pradesh Tourism by arranging this International Travel Writer's Convention has really mooted a unique and futuristic effort regarding tourism in India.

On 8 January, around four-thirty in the afternoon while I was running down from my second floor office at Calcutta in 30 seconds and rushing to the Dum Dum airport, little did I realize that such a tremendous 15-day travel-luck would lead me to a fantastic streak of friendship, only four hours later. Outside the Delhi airport, as I found my name written in beautiful handwriting on an upheld placard, all my anxiety about the trip drained away. The smiling and prematurely balding gentleman who extended a hand in welcome would be our 'Seekaysing' for the next 15 days but for now he was C. K. Singh, Manager, Uttar Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation. The man carrying the placard was his assistant, our faultless Man Friday, Ahmad.

At the back of my mind there always loomed the question if it was at all possible to arrange such a tourism conference? Will I be able to attend it when the time came? On the day of my return from my month long trip to Tenerife, Madrid, Zurich and Munich, in June, when I got the invitation, I was sure that I will never be able to make it to Uttar Pradesh this time. The hesitation vanished at four thirty in the afternoon at Calcutta and the anxiety dissolved at eight thirty in the evening at Delhi.

Me and my elephantine luggage case (the time was early January 2000 when Uttar Pradesh was experiencing a horrible cold wave and people were dying and so I couldn't afford to leave behind all my warm clothings) were dropped off at Jay Pee Group's Hotel Vasant Continental located in West Delhi's Vasant Vihar.

Next day we started off on our tour of Uttar Pradesh from here. It is impossible not to realize the agrarian grandeur of India while travelling from Delhi to Haridwar. Moreover, with the impact of the green revolution, these areas of western Uttar Pradesh grow plenty of wheat, sugarcane and mangoes. Everytime I have travelled on this route and if it was a harvesting time of sugarcane, there was a strong and sweet the odour of boiling sugarcane filling the air. Like before, this time too we stopped at the Cheetal, the best place on this route for a quick rest and a bite. We had quite an enjoyable lunch over here.

The memories gained while travelling is as much important as travelling itself. A simple reminiscence of the road may stoke the fire of remembrance on a later trip. After reaching Haridwar when on the same evening I sat on the steps of the Har-ki-Pauri, the vision of the lighted lamps seen many evenings before, danced before my eyes; the memories of a blind mother enjoying the *arati* flashed to my mind, for all these days I was not even aware that the picture of the delighted face of the mother listening to her son's description of the lamps as they floated down the Ganga river was so vivid in my mind.

The devotees and visitors took the small packets of flowers and lamp and floated them down the river, the little sparks danced their way riding the crest of the waves. Why call them sparks, they are like firebirds or fireflies to be more correct, they could not fly away with their feet enmeshed in the waves. On the other bank, tall priests held out their earthen firebowls ignited like a flaming torch. It was like a fire dance against the evening sky, its broken, shaky reflections caught in the water.

It is the same Haridwar, the same Har-ki-Pauri where, in 1986, I had not only taken a dip in the freezing Ganga during the *Purnakumbha* Fair but also swam in it. In that year, many of the devotees met with a most unfortunate death. The heart breaking incident had occurred a little after I had taken my dip although I heard the news for the first time much later at Uttarkashi.

I did not like Haridwar on my first visit. On my second visit too I could not exactly appreciate the place. Then, I came to recognise Haridwar little by little. I became one of the most devout – not in the usual sense— visitor to Haridwar. The so-called religiosity of the place does not appeal to me but I am attracted to the place because I find the echoes of ancient India still lurking here. I had heard that my great grandmother-in-law would often take off to Haridwar, when disgusted with her family and daily chores. From there, she would take off sometimes to Kedar-Badri, sometimes to Gangotri-Yamunotri. There was a pocket in her woollen petticoat where she would hide some money and leave. Several times a year and

many times in her life, she had gone to Haridwar like that. Here I have to acknowledge the contributory effect of the great granny's granddaughter on my delayed liking for Haridwar.

The readers of *Bhraman* magazine may disbelieve me if I say that I can go to Haridwar just for the sake of the place only. Not because I have to pass the place on my way to Kedar-Bardi, Gangotri-Yamunotri or Chamba-Dhanolti, like before.

At dinner, hosted by the Hotel and Restaurants Association of Haridwar, I noticed the glamour of modern hotels in Haridwar, for the first time. I always put up at the government tourist lodge on the bank of the Ganga, therefore I was not aware of these pleasant hotels in Haridwar. Whatever it may be, I was really impressed by the brief talk given by the District Magistrate of Haridwar during the dinner party. Her ideas—as transparent as the waters of the Ganga—about the legendary past and the present times of Haridwar, will not only helped the foreign travel journalists but the Indian journalists as well to enjoy their trip to Haridwar. I have never seen such a pretty looking District Magistrate ever before.

Organised by Uttar Pradesh Tourism, Haridwar has been the venue of the annual Yoga Festival for several years now. Now there will be an Ayurveda Festival as well. As far as I can recall, the Yoga Festival is organised in the first or second week of February and the Ayurveda Festival is organised at the end of February. I feel that the Festivals must follow in each other's wake, then any one wanting to attend both festivals can easily do so. The District Magistrate had asked my opinion about the Festival dates. This was my answer to her. Her own belief and judgement about the tourism prospect of Haridwar is also very deep.

While travelling around Uttar Pradesh, I was also impressed by another District Magistrate's dedication towards tourism. I am talking about the energetic DM of Chitrakoot. We had reached Chitrakoot quite late in the evening. Next morning, in the middle of our sightseeing, he gave each of us 18 journalists, a photocopied booklet containing the details of all the tourist attractions of Chitrakoot, written by him. Not only while travelling around Uttar Pradesh this time but also when I am travelling in other states during other times in the year, I feel that for the sake of tourism, for tourism development to take place and to incorporate new tourism policies, it is very important that the state administrative machinery, specially at the district levels, work hand in hand with the tourism department.

Purified by the Ganga river, as the gateway to the Himalayas, as the place associated with many happy memories of my travelling days, as the balm to my dissatisfied mind, Haridwar has manifested itself to me in different ways—how can I possibly talk about such a place at one go?

But who can predict the future of Haridwar? Specially when we see the criminalisation of an uncaring Indian body politic. How long will the clear water of the Ganga remain free from this murky situation? With all my heart, I hope it remains free forever!

On our way back after seeing the *arati*, we came across crowds of near-naked, half naked *sadhus* in front of the shops. May be one or two beggars were also in those groups. The *sadhus* stood in two rows to receive their food. A young man approached me and said that if I gave only one hundred rupees, he would arrange to feed 25 *sadhus* on my behalf. Observing the boy talking to me in an undertone, Stephen wanted to know what it was all about. The translation left him really puzzled. What is the pound equivalent of a hundred rupees? Not even two pounds! And arranging a supper for 25 people. Even though I told him that supper would consist of only *puri* and *halwa*, he was still very surprised indeed.

Next day when everybody was taking a look at the modern Bharatmata Temple at the locality called *Rishi Elaka* in Haridwar, I walked ahead of them for sometime and reached a pitch road. A few years back, somewhere near this road I had made the acquaintance of a young *sanyasi* who ultimately admitted that he had run away from home after failing to pass his school leaving exam and then had become a *sadhu* to earn his food.

From the Bhramatmata Temple, we all proceeded to the Shantikunj. It was a centre of hectic activity. A faithful devotee cum worker took us around the place. Then we sat on the matted floor in rows and were served lunch. The food and the hospitality was both simple but pleasant. The *ashram* was headed by a lady called *Mataji* who asked us to treat the *ashram* like our home and visit the place at will. She inquired if we faced any problems on the way and why didn't we come with our family?

Before we could reply, Uttar Pradesh Tourism's Regional Manager Bimalesh Kumar hesitantly told her that the government tourism department had invited only one person each.

Mataji replied by saying that in her voluntarily built *ashram* everybody was welcome to visit with their family. Taking into consideration the peaceful atmosphere and the sincerity of the invitation, many of us agreed to come back sometime or the other. Promise? Promise, we said. Shyama from Tamil Nadu murmured to Dhurandhar from Maharashtra or to Bhagwan from Karnataka perhaps, that she would probably come and stay for a long period.

We left Haridwar at seven a.m. on the morrow. Our destination, the Jim Corbett National Park. After travelling for about 150 km, we stopped briefly at a place called Yakshapur. I got down from the bus and stood nearby. A group of local boys were excitedly trying to peer through the closed panes of the glass windows and see the people inside. A boy about 16 or 17 years of age came to me and asked me in a merry tone— are there some English people in the bus too?

To the rural people of India, even today, any European is an English. The person to whom he was pointing at was Barbara Aloisio from Italy.

The boy's name was Harendra Singh. When I told him that I needed some warm drinking water, he eagerly said, "my house is a little to the left up ahead on this road. Come with me and I will give you not only warm water but hot milk as well." Hearing that I had a cough, he waved his hands vigorously and said, "If you have a glass of hot milk with ginger, cardamom and honey boiled in it, your ant-like cough will disappear in a minute."

An ant-like cough! The mobile lifestyle frequenting the roads is the right place to learn the language!

Once I was at Silchar in Assam to study the folk dances of India and asked an aged farmer why did Silchar's old 'Jari' dance disappear? He had replied, "There is no other reason, only the wind of poverty."

The wind of poverty! I was amazed at the use of his vocabulary.

Pointing to Rauni Vornanan, the former chief editor of the monthly magazine National Road Direction from Finland, Harendra said in a quite decided tone, "She comes from Mother Teresa's country, doesn't she?"

Talking about roadside hospitality, I must also talk about the invitation to tea at Hangsarampur. We had come across Yakshapur on our way to Ramnagar. Hangsarampur was on our way to Lucknow when we left Ramnagar the next day. We were supposed to reach Lucknow from Dhikala via Ramnagar after our trip around the Jim Corbett National Park. Ramnagar to Lucknow was 220 km. The midday lunch would be at Bareilly.

But we had to stop miles ahead, at the edge of an unknown village. The bus needed some repairs. I thought it would be interesting to take a walk around the village. It was two in the afternoon and the sky was overcast with rainbearing clouds.

I was following a dusty path off the main road when I stopped. In the courtyard of a house six small boys were playing cricket. The youngest one was about six or seven, the eldest probably has just turned 13. The two boys in between looked like twins. In a small hut across the courtyard was perhaps the boys' mother, busy cooking.

I stood watching their game. There was only one bat. Therefore to take a run, the batsman dropped the bat at the crease after hitting the ball and went across; the batsman from the other side rushed over to the crease at this end, picked up the bat and began to play. If there was a chance of a second run, he would not pick up the bat run to the other side.

Suddenly seeing me, the batsman came forward with his bat in hand and requested me to sit inside the house while he brought me a glass of water. He also asked me what I wanted to eat?

Seeing me reluctant to eat anything, he asked me in a crestfallen tone, then with what shall he serve his guest?

Pointing to our bus on the main road, I said that once the repair work was over, I would have to rush there. So I would be delighted with a hot cup of ginger-tea.

Though amazed by their sincere hospitality, my request for the ginger tea was genuine too. The window beside my seat wouldn't shut properly and the draught had given me a sore throat.

The boy looked at the distant bus and asked how many were we there in all? That is, he would make that many cups of tea. Meanwhile his mother had come out of the kitchen and hearing that she would have to make tea for twenty odd people, retired contentedly to the kitchen. The boy too returned to the crease.

Hearing the horn of the bus, I began to walk in its direction. The boy came running once more and along with me walked quickly towards the bus saying that he would request the driver to stop for 10 or 15 minutes more, after all even the driver needed to drink a cup of tea.

The village was called Hangsarampur. I had forgotten to ask the name of my little host. Now I think that today in the cities of India, one would not find such hospitality. But this is the real India of the past.

Travelling through Uttar Pradesh in this two week tour, I saw many such faces of India.

Marathi Usha and Tamilian Shyama had occupied the front seats near the step from the very beginning. There was no problem in that but the long legs of Germany's Richter was giving him a lot of trouble.

Sitting on my left, he tried his best to fit his legs within the narrow confines of the seat but in vain. Seeing him like that, I appealed to Usha and Shyama. Because their seat offered a lot of legspace.

Richter went up front. 'The lady from Mother Teresa's country', went to sit beside him. Rauni could speak German and so both had an enjoyable time talking in a common language. Now my left ear was assailed by a remarkable conversation laced with English spoken in a distinct Marathi and Tamil overtone.

In a couple of days, the Spaniard and the Thai girl were sharing a rear seat. In front of me was Sri Lanka. To my rear and on the right was Myanmar. Dharmasiri Gamage was the Sunday editor of a Sri Lankan daily. He has been travelwriting for the last 40 years and has a dozen travel books to his credit. Kyaw Zeya from Myanmar was the Chief Editor from his country's Information and Public Relations department.

Right at the moment we were being introduced, hearing Zeya was from Myanmar, I asked 'How is Suu Kyi? Is she still debarred from talking to people in her own country?' I had genuinely wanted to rest my anxiety. Zeya could not understand English spoken fast and so this perfectly gentle and simple-hearted man didn't realize the import of my questions. As soon as I got an inkling of his official designation, I never repeated my question. Now I feel surprised to think that in a couple of days, Zeya and I became fast friends. Everyday as I got into the bus, he extended his hand, took my bag from me and kept it on the seat next to him so that I could sit comfortably. It was fixed that at the end of our trip, Zeya would return to Calcutta with me, would go and stay at my place for the couple of days when he would have to await his flight to Yangon.

Zeya would often ask me when I would visit his country? Myanmar was waiting to welcome me. He gave me an extremely tastefully printed brochure on Myanmar, full of pictures and said that I would have to stay for at least seven days.

It was also decided that on 24 January we would be reaching Calcutta by the evening flight and next day Dharmasiri too would join us for dinner.

Alas, we are often the victim of many circumstances just opposite to what we actually think of. On 21 January, after reaching Agra, while we were attending a lunch at the hotel, Zeya collapsed on the floor, suffering a massive heart attack. We were extremely lucky and there was immediate medical help. Everybody marvelled the promptness of the tourism officials. He was first treated at a local hospital and then taken to Delhi's Indian Institute of Medical Science. D. K. Burman, the Jt. Director of UP Tourism at Agra had the experience of managing a *Purna Kumbha* Fair at Prayag in the past. Using the same prompt expertise, he transferred Zeya from Agra to Delhi, on Zeya's way to recovery. The young officer Bimallesh Kumar, a perfect gentleman accompanied Zeya to Delhi. Later on we heard the Embassy of Myanmar had also co-operated.

The vacant seat of Zeya was like a formidable load to me. Later on Dharmasiri occupied that seat. Meanwhile our friend from Munich, Richter had been suffering from a stomach upset and had refrained from joining us. His vacant seat was now occupied by Shyama's companion Dhurandhar.

Although C K Singh and Ahmed applied all the physical force they could muster to close the glass panes of the window next to me, it would always open as the bus moved. Even a minute gap allowed the cold wind to prick my face with its needlesharp tongue. Although I lovingly gazed upon the passing scenery, I could always feel that the panes were beginning to open up. In about ten to fifteen minutes, the thin gap would appear like a cold and cavernous mouth trying to swallow me in its frigidity. Again C K Singh and his assistant came running to help me. But in vain. For a little while, the window remained closed and then again it started to open – the cold January wind first tried to insert its nose tip like the proverbial camel and then ended up wholly occupying the place.

Seeing my predicament, Shyama lets me sit next to her. Later on, I always found that she nearly gave me the entire seat. Such unselfishness is always welcome and on a trip, much delightful.

I have been to Lucknow quite a number of times. I have seen almost all the famous attractions. Once while attending a literary meet, me and my friend, poet and Gyanpith award winner Subhas Mukhopadhyay had come upon the little known shop of Bade Miya and had a superb time while sampling the *shami kababs* prepared with the culinary skill acquired over several generations.

The seminar on world travel literature added a new touch to my visit to the city this time. Hotel Taj Mahal is one of the grandest hotels of Lucknow, the seminar was also organised here. There were many speakers from the field of tourism talking on a diversity of topics, unfortunately some of it was not so useful. The selection of speakers had no rhyme or reason to it – most of them had come to think that since so many travel journalists had gathered there, it was a compulsion on them to lecture us on how to write

about travel. Adding injury to insult was that travel literature was defined variously by them – to some it was a guide book, to some it was travel-classics or even the memories of Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang and to others travel literature dealt with the promotional brochures published by the tourism department. The day was ultimately saved by Ravindra Singh, Director General of Uttar Pradesh Tourism. His concepts, plans and dreams about the tourism potential of this gem of a state again reaffirmed my faith in the tourist appeal of Uttar Pradesh. It was quite nice to talk to him too.

A ten point declaration was submitted at the seminar although neither its content nor its usefulness could be determined. But I fully agree to the idea that travel literature must be made a part of the school and college syllabi. In an editorial in the *Bhraman* magazine I have already spoken about it. From *Bhraman* we have also been urging that travelers in a place of unrest must be given the same immunity as enjoyed by Red Cross personnel at war-torn areas. But whoever has heard of any changes being made for good because some editor has said it? At the seminar on travel literature, IGNOU's Professor Kapil Kumar, despite his impressive eloquence, complained that why didn't the travel writers condemn the hijacking of the Indian plane at Kathmandu?

If the travel writers had the power to make the miscreants to hang their heads in shame they would always allot some space to it. Alas, the troublemakers do not bother to listen to travel writers!

I had visited Chitrakoot twice before. About 15 years ago I had written serially about those glorious days in a Sunday magazine section of a leading daily newspaper. The memories of Chitrakoot are so deeply etched in my mind that a few years ago when I wrote a book for children called 'Amar Banobas' (My Days in the Forest), Chitrakoot came alive in my stories with all its hills, forest, temples and allusions to Ramayana.

It is usual to begin early if you intend to sightsee around Chitrakoot. We also left very early and saw the 'Gupt Godavari' (or secret Godavari river) inside a cave. Outside the cave, a man in shabby and scanty clothes was rocking himself and reading the version of Ramayan written by Tulsidas. Probably he was the keeper of this cave. While roaming around Chitrakoot, I always feel that I must have gone back in time, in the days of the Ramayana – the legendary past of the place so well illuminated in the epic poet's description of the place and still living in the memories of mankind. We would see Chitrakoot, attend Chitrakoot Festival and then again our coach would leave. We would go to Mahoba. Suddenly, the District Magistrate of Chitrakoot makes me and a few others go in his car. "There is a clerk in my Collectorate who is a Monkey-Man, he can talk to the monkeys. Won't you like to see him once?" he asked. His driver would take us there and he would come in our bus. Seeing the black coats of the lawyers assembled like flocks of crows, we knew we had arrived at the Collectorate, the District Magistrate's office. The DM himself had already arrived and probably had sent for the Monkey-Man of whom he was so proud of.

With a frighteningly dark complexion, a hirsute face and hair tied in a ponytail – the man looked quite convincing and capable of some spiritual supremacy. No sooner than he made a fast, piercing whistling sound than there appeared some movement among the branches of the farflung trees. Gradually the sound of monkeys became clear. As the noise grew louder, the number of monkeys increased too. Slowly they came and assembled in the nearby trees. All this time, the man went on making the strange sound and scattering grams on the ground. Seeing the food, the monkeys now came out from the trees and gathered around the man. I have never seen so many monkeys at one place except in the pages of the Ramayana. I was really delighted to see man and monkey so involved with each other. The DM was sitting next to me and I asked if I could go near those monkeys? He looked at me for a minute and then relented. Happily I went in their midst. Probably thinking me to be one of them, they accepted me well enough. Perched on my shoulders, my back, my lap, in front of me and behind me, the monkey brigade frolicked. I took some grams from the clerk and fed the monkeys. The monkeys are most fond of snatching their food and so would grab my hand with one of their forelimbs and then with the other forelimb forced me to open my palm and snatched the grams. Some would push me by my shoulders or legs and loot the scattered grams, the push revealed that the monkeys could be powerful too.

After the midday feast was over, the clerk again instructed the monkeys in their own tongue to go back to the trees. They too listened to him and soon the whole place was empty.

I came back to my seat. Shyama was still cowering with her eyes closed. Philippa said, 'You love animals surely. Even I do. But why did you have to trust the monkeyman? If you call out to the monkeys in a familiar tone and feed them everyday, they would always come, like the pigeons which are fed every morning at Haridwar and Benaras. But of course, I admire your courage. Nobody else was brave enough to

go among the monkeys. I am going to sell your picture with the monkeys to the Time magazine. I have two photographs and I'll send you one.'

The animated charge of the monkey brigade was so captivating that for sometime nobody spoke. This was one time when even Captain Mohinder Singh (retired) from Patiala, failed to deliver his lecture. This friendly Punjabi was usually requested by the local hosts and the officials of the tourism department to speak during the midday meal or at supper. Sometimes he would even lecture on unasked. With a clear and deep voice, he was a good speaker.

One evening we were watching an unforgettable folk dance of Bundelkhand. She was very talented and looked like a born dancer. It was a rural dance-drama, a duet between a husband and wife. The female dancer's lip synced with the singer in the background and she danced perfectly. Her demeanour and her expressive eyes said it all. The husband too sang in unison. The words were, *Gori, nayane na mar* –O Fair Maiden, do not kill me with your eyes– the boy went on singing about the wonderful expressive eyes of his lover and how he would surely die if she looked upon him in that manner.

Captain Singh had already taken the microphone from the organisers, he was asking the organisers the meaning of the songs in Hindi and then translating the same into English for our benefit. He interpreted this song by saying, the husband is telling his wife that they had been married for two years and she had already given birth to two children– now he was eager to take on a second wife– hearing which the wife was crying and asking her husband in what did she lack that he was looking for another wife. But the problem was the husband in front of us was piteously crying out, *Gori, nayane na mar* –the strains of the song was however lost under the booming voice of our beloved Singhji. Probably, he had got mixed up while interpreting and was telling us the meaning of one song while we were watching another. If you look upon the whole thing as the fun-part of travelling together, it was a rare one indeed!

As soon as the dance was over, Shyama ran to catch up with the dancers, probably to their makeup room on the second floor. On her return, she said that she had gone to take an interview with the wonder-girl and the interview was thrilling too.

This enjoyable look into the folk culture of Bundelkhand was also another happy and memorable incident for me. Actually, I never quite enjoy looking around Jhansi as much as I enjoy reading its history. After travelling through religious and history– laden Varanasi-Sarnath-Chunar, a person cannot really rest without seeing Deogarh-Orchha-Baruasagar. Just as we visit Kumaon and Garhwal repeatedly, these two circuits too attracts the visitor time and again. Jhansi being the gateway to Deogarh, Orchha and Baruasagar, you end up seeing around this historical city.

Deogarh left me spellbound. I tried to imagine the place as an old village of sculptors, as a land of sculpture. While roaming around Deogarh I recalled a place called Madankamdev, about 30 km from Guwahati, where too I was amazed to see the ruined sculptures lying in a heap in the temple courtyard. In 1996 when I was visiting Jammu, I had come across a village called Krimchee, lying in between Jammu and Mansar or, may be, Sanasar. There was an old but magnificently carved 12th century temple in the village. Khajuraho is famous all over the world. But how many people are aware of Deogarh, Madankamdeva and Krimchee?

You cannot actually just visit Deogarh, Orchha and Baruasagar fleetingly. I had always wanted to spend one whole season touring Varanasi, Sarnath and Chunar, boating in the Ganga, roaming among the monasteries and forts– and then write a travelogue. Now, after seeing Deogarh-Baruasagar, I feel that I must spend sometime here whether I write or not is a different matter. Till then Deogarh remains as one of my dream vacations.

Travelling, dreaming about travel destinations and reading travel literature– these are the three of my favourite things without which my days cease to be colourful and interesting, my life seems to come to a halt like an unwinded wall-clock.

Travelling awakens the mind. It uplifts me from the sadness that accompanies ignorance and helps me turn the pages of the grand book– our world. Moreover this trip made me doubly happy because I had acquired so many friends on this single trip. The road itself and friends met along the road are two of my life's greatest attainments.