

Indian Diary

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Near death a rich man divided his property between his wives. And the youngest wife said: “But all this wealth is worth nothing, unless you give me “omrito” (Omrito in Bengali language means eternity).

This old Indian tale reminds me of a Georgian legend about God dividing territories between nations. God had parceled out all the lands and had saved the Caucasus for himself. But Georgians, as usual were late. By the time they appeared all had already been divided and God had to give the Georgians the saved land.

While the Georgians got the Caucasus, I believe the Indians got “omrito”

Chapter I

Welcome to the great land of India

It was the last day of the second millennium, when I first landed at the Calcutta International Airport. My friend and colleague, Mr. Amarendra Chakravorti, the Editor in Chief of “Bhraman” the Travel Magazine was anxiously awaiting for me on the other side of customs. As soon as I was finished with all the custom formalities, Amarendra was holding out three purple roses and told me, “Welcome to the great land of India. One of these roses symbolizes the great cultural traditions of India, the second rose – the great natural beauties of India and the third – the warmth and hospitable of the India people.

The date was December 31, 2001. The temperature was 24°C in the afternoon and 15-14° C in the evening, much the same as in the “velvet season” (early autumn) in my own country of Georgia. And though I was well instructed about the seasonal weather and climate, the first touch of sunshine on my cheeks finally awoke me from a long winter sleep. I happily realized that it was the best time of all for traveling around India.

It took us about an hour to get home from the airport. So, I had plenty of time look around and view the “nooks and crannies” of the airport and the city center. My first impression of the city, particularly of the suburbs wasn’t very exciting. The sights were typical of the standard run-of-the mill urban architecture, short on greenery and open spaces, with more shades of gray and brown, terracotta color blockhouses on both sides of the road – actually the same as in the most industrial cities anywhere in the world. However, I found Calcutta much prettier, especially from my airplane window. It looked like a huge palm with hundreds of big and small lines crossing it, and the deepest and longest like a lifeline was the river Ganga.

Amarendra, my host was giving me very useful instructions about traveling in India on the way to his home, outlining his entire plan, which included the complete route and itinerary. In between suggestions he was complaining, it was rather difficult for him to work out a 15-day travel plan. He said that even one month is not enough to feel the grandiosity of this country. So, he had to think hard and work out a very intense schedule, which would help me to taste at least one little “spoonful” of India – of its great earth, ocean, rivers, forest and the Himalayas Mountains.

With this pleasant “warning” of Amarendra fresh in mind, we reached the center of Calcutta and found ourselves right in the middle of a traffic jam. Our Japanese car moved ahead like a small submarine among “millions” of both larger and smaller vehicles, bicycles, and rickshaws; the means of transport were as colorful as sail ships floating in a huge ocean. Cars were buzzing loudly, drivers were yelling at each other from their car windows, not only at each other but also at rickshaw drivers and the people who were only trying to increase their chances of survival by improving their odds in crossing the street safely. It was a great fun watching this ordeal and once again, I was convinced that life is the same the world over-different exterior dressings but equal passions.

Driving away from the center, we turned a corner and found into a totally different area. It was a narrow crossroad surrounded by old fashion two story houses, a couple of cozy cafes, small and tiny cheap shops, and lots of empty rickshaws, which were waiting for paying customers. The place was quiet, peaceful and neat as a rural garden.

Amarendra Chakravorty’s family lives on the sixth floor of the apartment house, which is separated from the neighborhood by a high brick wall and an iron gate. The guard who is mostly dressed in national garments maintains the peace and safety of the territory. On the roof of the apartment house, Mrs. Chakravorty grows a beautiful garden. She is a professional botanist and keeps a wide variety of exotic herbal, decorative plants and flowers in her garden, the garden also provides a gorgeous view overlooking the whole city, which includes hills and valleys and a great river. There are larger and smaller temples, parks, and a huge web of highways and railways. Distant cars are seen as insects running about in to and forth motions.

Building a Team

The objective of my visit to India was traveling; we had discussed the details in dining room over a cup of Darjeeling tea and delicious Indian sweets made with jaggery. The VIP participant of the decision-making committee was Princess Aladdin who is the beloved golden-color dog of the Chakravortys, who was definitely not very much in favor of his Master and Mistress leaving home for any extended periods of time. But in spite of the stubborn resistance, a fortnight expedition was carefully planned, and the team of three (Mr. And Mrs. Chakravorty and myself), excluding the dog. The starting point of the first phase of the tour was the Calcutta Railway Station and the final destination would be the Bay of Bengal, the famous coastal city located in the state of West Bengal, Puri. We had a day and a half to spend in Calcutta before we started on the journey of all journeys.

First meeting with the River Ganga

The same evening of my arrival, Tuku (Mrs. Chakravorty’s name), Amarendra, and their younger daughter Tushi invited me to Millennium Park, which is located right along the riverbank. At the exit there is a small lively street market with lots of souvenir shops and the counterpart of Indian fast-food outlets. Unexpectedly the park was closed and we spent sometime in the noisy but very joyful, brightly illuminated and colorful market.

It was getting late, dark and foggy. From distance I couldn't clearly see the river in its full shape. Its waters were blending with gray sky. But I could see sparkling silver chains, like millions of silk threads outstretched from the bank to the sky. It is a new hanging bridge, one of the unique constructions of nowadays. I went down to the boat dock. Two boats were leaving the bank and other ones were floating in the water like lighted lamps. It was a great picture, heavenly art, created by nature. And I was awoken, I realized that this very night, on the last day of the second millennium, fortune, or fate, brought me here to the bank of the holiest river of the world and I had a chance to touch its holy waters. And I did so, dipping my hands in the holy waters of the Ganga. It was along this river that the largest public gathering ever of people occurred last year. Hindus and other religious people consider its waters to be capable of washing away the sins of humanity.

There was a cafe called Scoop located on the nearby riverbank. I was told that in 60's it was one of the favorite places of contemporary artists and other noted celebrities. They loved meeting each other here for a chat, a cup of coffee and a scoop of delicious Calcutta ice cream. We followed traditions and entered. The cafe was full of modern music and joy, noise and loud laughs, there was a wide choice of ice cream and sweets, but this time there were no artists and writers in the Scoop, in their place were lots of teenagers and people from the street market.

A Man Came from Cashmere

The excitement started right next morning when Mr. Chakravorti's sister Ditu told me, that a man from Cashmere had arrived to sell shawls. I immediately stopped packing my bags for Puri trip and went into the dining room to meet the visitor. A man from Cashmere, with a big bundle of shawls was sitting on the floor, with a small brown rag under him. We surrounded him and soon the "performance" began. Like a fisherman throwing a net into a river, the "Cashmere man" started swinging his shawls in such a magician way, that in a second, thousands of flowers and colorful ornaments scattered in front of my very eyes. I could not resist myself; I wanted to buy them all – all the flowers of Cashmere, and all the shawls, everything that this man had to offer, without exception, to the very last item. I did buy one, with orange color roses, wrapping myself and proceeded to look at myself in the mirror. When I came back the Cashmere man was no longer there, disappearing as quickly and unexpectedly as he had arrived-like a wizard.

Indian Museum of Calcutta

Monday is a day off day at the Indian Museum of Calcutta, but out of the great respect for my host, Amarendra Chakravorty, Doctor Shyamal Chakravorti, who is the director of the museum, kindly permitted to have a tour of some of the more important exhibition halls in the museum.

The Indian Museum of Calcutta is one of the oldest in West Bengal. A Danish scholar and botanist founded it in 1814 and since the museum has been a cultural center of West Bengal. In contrast to European museums, 6 sections of Indian Museum include 60 exhibition halls. Not long ago a feature-documentary called "Ghosts of Museums" was shot on location. The film is dedicated to the history and present circumstances of the Museum. Bengalis maintain an honored tradition of donating historically significant items, antiquity and other works of great art to Indian Museums. We eye witnessed when the 97 years old Poet Laurie of India Annanda Shankar Roy give the Museum a 10th century sculpture of a Buddhist Goddess.

There are collections of saris donated by Rabindranath Tagore's mother, which is exhibited in one of the halls, giving the place a kind of romanticism and warm intimacy.

The majority of Tagore's manuscripts, the greatest Indian Poet and a winner of a Nobel Prize are also part of the museum collection. Frankly speaking I have never been much of a museum fan. I always preferred exploring the natural beauty of the countryside; getting closer to people, and becoming involved in ongoing events. However, there is always an exception; museums excite me more than anything else in my life.

I actually became dumbfounded when I first saw Mohammed's mustache and fingerprints in the Turkish National Museum in Istanbul, the Golden Sarcophagus of Tutankhamun, the 18 years old Egyptian Pharaoh in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo; Pieta in Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome and now, a footprint of Buddha in the Indian Museum of Calcutta. These wonders fascinate not by their age or holiness, but by their being visible to the public, sometimes even touchable, by making you feel yourself to be an integral part of their life and histories, their joys and tragedies, which is fully part of human history.

Chapter II

On the Beach of Bay of Bengal Puri

"If a Bengali leaves home for a vacation only once in his life, he goes to Puri"- said Amarendra. We left Calcutta in the evening and next morning arrived at the Puri railway station, hired a taxi and in about 15 minutes came to a small beach side hotel, that had a beautiful rose garden on both sides of the walk way to the main entrance, a velvet lawn at the back door and two wide verandas looking over the Bengal bay. A path through a shady grove next to the backyard leads to the golden sands of Puri beach. It was a widest beach that I ever witnessed, with the exception of the world famous Copacabana beaches in Rio de Janeiro, River of January in Portuguese) which is located in Brazil.

"Love is as old as the world and as new as a moment" – This was the beautifully engraved message in the elevator cage of our hotel. Another quote about the power of friendship was highlighted on the wall of our stairwell. When I occupied my cozy room on the second floor and viewed the area from the balcony, I felt glorious and in the mood of crying out – "Beauty is as old as the world and as new as a moment."

I walked barefooted but dressed in civilian clothes along the beach. Very few people here, with the exception of tourists and foreigners usually wear swimsuits, even Nulia the lifeguard is dressed. I admired from a distance a great picture a scene against a background of wild foamy waves glittering on the afternoon sunbeams, beautiful Indian women dressed in pastel color saris and gracefully carrying huge woven baskets on their heads, walking as if they were dancing along the soggy beach. Their children running after them looked like wildflowers reaching to the sun in a sun-filled field. Puri beach looks very much like the one in my home place Gulripsh, gorgeous coastal Abkhazian villages of the Black Sea which are located in a formerly semi-autonomous region of Georgia. This region of Georgia, which separated from my country in 1992, as the result of a secessionist war is now lost. Now Georgians are not allowed to live or vacation there anymore. We, me too, are only allowed to miss it and be nostalgic about returning home one day. The sea has always been a great place for meditation and concentrating. I can talk to sea for hours; I can follow the sun path across the sea to the infinite space where it burns itself into a restful night and return next day with the path of the moon.

The undulating waves are warmly inviting to me as they extend open arms; I ran to embrace them.

They roared, splashed my face and dearly tossed my hair with salty foam. I saw Tuku and Amarendra jumping on the waves next to me – experiencing the same joy and happiness, the same feeling of unlimited freedom and peace of mind. I could see it in their eyes. I started talking with the Indian Ocean the same way as I did before with my beloved Black Sea in Georgia.

Then I was lying on the warm sand in the shade of a wooden and very exotic fishermen's boat. It looked like a big fish with two blue man-like eyes and was drawn all over with some Indian ornaments on its body. I was drinking sweet coconut juice from a shell and was listening to Amarendra's instructions not to enter into any dialogue with people selling "precious stones" and other stuff like that on the beach. There I was just drinking and listening to the hitting of the waves and his commentary on the do's and don't of cross cultural negotiations. I said, I was well aware of this type of "trades people" from my native Georgia and I knew how to deal with them. Yes, this was what I said and Tuku and Amarendra left me on the beach with a peaceful sense of right and wrong. They didn't know that people selling "natural" emerald, pearls, corals, turquoise necklaces and many other goods immediately surrounded me. They didn't insist on my buying any item immediately and suggesting that I should take my time, concentrating what I really needed and even provided me with valuable consultations on discerning the difference between false and natural stones. In between the bargaining they discussed wider politics and social issues in India, criticizing the government for not taking necessary measures in reducing poverty and improving the demographic and economic makeup of the population in the country. One of these well-informed individuals highlighted the strong friendship that existed between India and the former Soviet Union, even pronouncing some Russian words. He said he would be happy to visit Georgia one day and with these wonderful and kind words held out a beautiful green necklace. The "special price," just for me, was four hundred rupees. I remembered for a moment the warning of Amarendra but only shortly, acting quite to the contrary, I started bargaining and told that one hundred rupees was a good price. He said, no; then I said I wouldn't buy his necklace and he immediately "surrendered" giving in to my offer. I paid hundred rupees and upon completion of the deal, three other men bombarded me with their merchandise as well. I guessed that I had made a big mistake but now it was too late. It took me quite a time to get rid of "troublesome intruders". It was my first and the last attempt to "do business" in Puri. As a result of this big business I came home that day with "one-day-green" necklace, which lost its color the first time it became wet.

Swargadwar – Go the Heaven

Swargadwar is a place where deceased people are cremated. Their cremated ashes are then poured into the sea. Swargadwar – is also a boulevard and the liveliest and jolliest place in Puri. The sounds of popular Indian music are heard here in the evening. The sound is a mixture of music and the hysterical signaling of cars, buses, rickshaws, and motorcycle-taxes trying to squeezem through a disorganized crowd walking carelessly on both, sidewalks and traffic road. Another spot, Beach market – is a favorite place of foreigners for spending their last rupees on gifts from the ocean side – looking somewhat like a fairyland under the moonlight. Little me, among the huge army of ordinary tourists of Puri beach, just had to keep with tradition—I was right in there with them best of them, looking admiring at all the souvenirs and handicrafts that were exhibited in the market, especially those huge ocean shells. I would love to have bought them all, but the logistics of carrying them home was the greatest restraint. I just had no idea how to carry them home.

Eventually a boy about six years age approached me with a bunch of hand-made seashell trinkets and advised to take the entire lot, each and every one. I said that I really didn't need them, but he said I was wrong. "If you go back home with lots of candies and sweets your friends will eat them and soon forget about your presents, but to give such trinkets will bring joy to even more people and everybody will remember you for years" – he said. Considering that this was the most persuasive speech that I have heard, at least in the last ten years, I gave in to the boy, buying each and every trinket; happily I hurried-up to the concert being held right on the beach. A number of foreigners and tourists from different parts of India were scattered around the band performing Indian folk music and showing the audience the elements of modern Indian dances. Foreigners tried their best to imitate the performers and the Indian spectators couldn't help from laughing as they watched the foreigners give a real performance. In half an hour or less the "show" was finished. We caught a black motorcycle-taxi and left Swargadwar for the Heritage Hotel, where Mr. Chakravorty and his "dependents" were cordially invited for dinner.

Heritage Hotel

Puri is Huriyas's most beloved coastal city with its secret of simple charm and easygoing life. There is a unique combination of life and vacation that are really affordable for the majority of the population, even for the low-income classes. In addition to the highest rate hotels, there are average priced ones that are also fully equipped with reasonable rates for both accommodation and entertainment. But frankly speaking I was greatly surprised, when learning that the Heritage Hotel was among the second tier. This hotel impressed me with its loftiness, grandeur and stateliness. It is a long two-story building, frame construction, all white, like a sailing vessel, with wide, open verandas overlooking a big green lawn where Hindu and Buddhist statues beautifully situated. The only disadvantage was that the beach was a bit far from the hotel, nothing more.

The Heritage hotel is about century old and was constructed by the State Railway Department of India. This organization maintains the upkeep to this day. In addition to its age, the hotel is remarkable for its unique collection of arts and historical treasures that are housed there; also for its big, light rooms with high ceilings and conservative style furniture. Another point of interest here is a billiard room, the interior of which has never been changed.

Tables and other equipment are still in the best fettle. The current administration is very sensitive about maintaining the true Indian ambiance, as in German "gemulichkeit" and décor in the hotel. The atmosphere must be experienced to fully feel the infinite hospitality and benevolence from the moment you first step into the lobby. Restaurants in the Heritage Hotel are also designed in old classical fashion with huge halls with beautiful chandeliers, these for big parties and banquets, and some smaller rooms, where one can taste the best of the Indian and local food served by waiters dressed only in traditional white uniforms.

The longer you stay at the Heritage Hotel the more dignified and upbeat you feel and with every step you become imbued with the grandeur and belonging of India.

On the way to Bhubaneswar

Konark

January 3, 2001 – after breakfast we said goodbye to Puri and the Bay of Bengal, and rode to Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. The itinerary for today's travel included visiting Konark Surya Mandir – the crowning glory of Oriya temple architecture, the 13th century Sun temple also known as the Black Pagoda'. I was looking forward to seeing this miracle of art that Rabindranath Tagore had once declared: "Here the language of stone defeats the language of man." It took us a couple of hours to reach Konark. Parallel to the highway were wide rice-fields, which had been already harvested and deciduous forests, the branch ripped and tattered by a recent hurricane that was quite severe. The destruction was a horrifying picture, but the aftermath of the storm held optimism as well. We could see from the security of our vehicle, as we passed villages of various sizes, the eagerness and hard work of local villagers to take care of what the disaster had ruined, and to save and rebuild what was left of their lives after the cruel hurricane. A long chain of trucks and bullock-carts loaded with broken branches and whole trees that had fallen in the forest moved slowly like a caravan along the edge of the road that was leading us to great Konark.

Legends say that Samba, the son of Lord Krishna, was afflicted with leprosy, and that the ailment was brought about by his father's curse. Surya, the Sun God in whose honor the temple was built, finally cured him after 12 years of penance. Chronicles say that Raja Narsimhadeva of the Ganga dynasty constructed the temple in the 13th century. The temple is a pageant of human grandeur, from its very first conception, and later to the final execution of even the finest details. It resembles a colossal chariot with 24 wheels pulled by seven straining horses. It has a three-tiered pyramidal roof complete with an exquisite tapering steeple. The Sun God's chariot also represents the seven days of the week and the 24 hours of the day in its symbolism. The temple is a brilliant chronicle in stone with an array of impressive sculptures. The Konark temple had two smaller outer halls completely separate from the main structure. The assembly hall and the tower were built on an imposing platform that was carved into 12 pairs of meticulously crafted wheels, each measuring 10 feet in diameter. The entrance is accessed by a broad flight of steps flanked on either side by prancing horses. This scene represents the chariot in which the Sun God rides across the heavens. The court of the temple was decorated with large freestanding sculptures signifying elements of great strength and beauty.

The Museum of Archaeological Survey of India, which is just outside the temple enclosure houses carvings from the ruins of the Sun Temple and is one of the main tourist sites of Konark. The stone architecture displays images of nine planet deities, the Navagrahas, which originally sat above one of the temple's ornamental doorways and is now kept as a shrine.

While I was admiring the architecture and art, a group of very special people had just arrived in their fashionable cars. The fascinated crowd reacted to the visit with cheers and applause and flocked to meet them. As they walked, there was a long tail of beggars and paupers following the stately visitors. Then a middle-aged man dressed in white national clothes stepped from the car and saluted towards the cheering audience. I asked out of curiosity, "what is going on" ... and learned that a Prime Minister of Orissa and other high officials had arrived in Konark to worship.

I made some quick photos of the Prime Minister entering the main ark of the Sun Temple with my “stupid” camera and continued with my exploration that day.

The weather was very hot but I found a shady spot under an old banyan tree with its almost hundred bare roots hanging in a mid-air. The space between the earth and trunk created a cozy hut but I couldn't see the trunk of the tree; it was a hollow space and a really superb place for isolation, relaxation and deep concentration. “Buddha meditated under the banyan tree. Did you know that?” – asked Mr. Chakravorty. Yes, I knew, but I was sure it was a baobab tree, not a banyan. Anyway, I entered that “hut” and relaxed for a moment.

Through the thick curtain of roots I gazed at Konark, which was aflame in the afternoon sun. It was a blinding beauty created by wisdom and the hardened hands of great people, artistic geniuses, mighty people who were undefeatable and powerful, whose glorious deeds outlived their physical existence, and whose fame covers not centuries but millenniums. People are still driven to create songs, poems and legends about them, and proclaim, “They are Gods!” Udaigiri The largest Buddhist site in Orissa Udaigiri (1000 km from Bhubaneswar), which is located about five km away from Ratnagiri at the foot of a large hill, was known in ancient times as Madhavapura Mahavihara. This site was recently excavated, and a large complex of brick monasteries, housing several priceless Buddhist sculptures was discovered. But still, the treasures buried deep within Udaigiri are still hidden to the outside world. Udaigiri monasteries are believed to have flourished between the 7 and 12th centuries. A brick dome-shaped mound serving as a Buddhist shrine, a couple of brick monasteries (one excavated, the other yet to see the light of day), a beautiful stone lined well with inscriptions on it, and some detailed rock sculptures that adorned the top of the hill forms a doorway to this historic site and all its archaeological treasures. The rock sculptures comprise of some marvelous Buddhisattva and Dhyanī Buddha figurines. The 13 5ft high Udaigiri and 118ft high Khandagiri hills have ancient caves built by Kharavela around 1st and 2nd century BC for Jain monks, they are excellent examples of Jain cave art.

It was a climactic moment when I found myself at the gates of the ancient palace/town that was built among the rocks and which was described so impressively in my favorite childhood book, “Mowgli.” One amazing fact that any visitor in India will soon discover is that every legend you have ever heard about this country is true and lives on. And still, any time you meet with this reality, you cannot help yourself from pondering its significance. How could I have ever imagine as a child that one day I would walk in that mystical dead town and feed Monkeys (called Bandarlogs in “Mowgli) who are the full rulers of the palace.

On the way to Bhubaneswar is Pipli, famous for its exquisite appliqué work, which depicts the essence of Oriya culture. This place is also the home of the most colorful and original awnings, canopies, gardens, beach umbrellas and shoulder and handbags. The rainbow effect of the colors is certainly a feast for the eyes.

You will notice while traveling to Bhubaneswar, how stone mason workshops are located right on the sidewalks and road edges. We stopped at one such workshop and watched the process of bringing to life a legend in stone. It was purely a creative process, and the workers made it seem so natural, as if anyone could do it! Miniature “Baby Krishna” created by a living master here cost much less than the inexpensive souvenirs at the beach market. Artists are bad burglars; craftsmen are also bad burglars or dealers.

What Does Daya Say?

The recorded history of Orissa begins with the conquest of Kalinga (Orissa) by Emperor Ashoka in 260 BC. The battle that led to this conquest shaped three great kingdoms and completely changed the color of the river Daya with the blood of Kalinka's citizens. The great Emperor's uncontrolled and cold-blooded reign of power left Ashoka full of remorse. He converted to Buddhism. Meditation and strict adherence to non-violence became his credo for the rest of his life. On one of the hills that overlook the battlefield and the Daya River – the river of tragedy, Japanese Buddhists constructed a monastery, which symbolizes peace, mercy and tolerance for the entire world. We climbed the hill and viewed the vast fields of Daya. Clouds and light fog, like huge wings, peacefully floating between the river and the hill and ruled the area with divine tranquility. Birds were singing sweetly and Daya was murmuring something in a mystical, prehistoric language that none of us could understand.

Late in the evening we reached Bhubaneswar, a big crowded city, very brightly and beautifully illuminated. We had dussa and sweet yogurt in a nice fast-food restaurant, lingered for a while, and then quickly left for the Bhubaneswar railway station to catch the train back home to Calcutta and begin the second stage of our great journey in India — the Himalayas.