

Indian Diary

Manana Dumbadze
January – June 2001

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”

Manana Dumbadze

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's 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, had we 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 Orissa, 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 footstep 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 any more. 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'ts 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 squeeze 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 decor 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 hour's 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 banian 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 banian tree. Did you know that?" - asked Mr. Chakravorty. Yes, I knew, but I was sure it was a baobab-tree, not a banian. 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 7th 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 Dhyani Budha 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 climatic 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 Banderlogs 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.

Chapter III

On the Way to Darjeeling Make a Stop in Kurseong, and Have Hot Momo at the Kurseong Tourist Lodge!

With twelve hours delay we at last reached a small and very motley town Shiellar. We were dead tired and decided to stay overnight in one of the city hotels and continue our journey to the Himalayas the next morning. I had a cup of aromatic night tea with a biscuit, which Mr.Chakravorty ordered for me. When I decided to go to sleep, a member of the service staff knocked at the door and asked me to allow him to make my bed. It was quite a picture: The man fixed four sticks around the bed and made a canopy with a mosquito net. It was the first time in my life I slept under a mosquito net. The room was dimmed with the pink smoke of the mosquito repellent tablet smoldering in the corner of the room. I dozed off and, while I slept, very strange sights and images visited the entire night.

On January 5th, we left the "mystical" town of Shiellar for Darjeeling - a land of breathtaking beauty, which is crowned by the majestic Himalayas. It was a wonderful January morning at the doorstep of a great Mountain. The air was fresh, the sky - the bluest - and the land - covered with emerald green tea gardens drawing a picture of a calm and peaceful ocean. It was warm enough to roll down the windows of our yellow mini van and enjoy the freshness and the cleanness of the mountain air. The serpentine road led our van to a beautiful Himalayan town called Kurseong.

The local name of Kurseong is called “Kharsang”, which in the Lepcha language means “Land of White Orchids and enjoys a mild but very healthy climate throughout the Year. This congenial and hospitable climate coexisted with lush green forests and valleys covered with tea bushes as far as the eye could see. The merging of the rolling hills and the distant vegetation make for a memorable sight worthy of a postcard. The majestic Himalayas as a backdrop make a lasting impression of the serenity, beauty and ecological purity of Kurseong that has attracted many a noble soul to it. Here people can find oneness with nature and can feel truly at peace. Guru Rabindranath Tagore derived inspiration for many of his literary works here. Mark Twain also spent some time in Kurseong in 1885.

It was almost lunchtime when we stopped at the entrance of the Kurseong Tourist Lodge, which is situated right on the way to Darjeeling. The Tourist Lodge has a nice multi cuisine restaurant, cozy decorated bar and fast food center. We chose a small table on the restaurant balcony, which overlooked the passing of the famous Toy Train of Darjeeling and the scenic rambling hills. Then we had delicious Chilly Chicken and hot Momo, which looks and tastes so much like my native Khinkali - traditional food of the mountain regions of Georgia. And for a moment I imagined myself sitting at the fire with my beloved heroes of Georgian and Indian mythology. They all spoke a common language, a language of music, love, and mutual understanding. And I admired watching those enjoying fresh Mountain breezes while sipping a cup of a delicious Darjeeling Tea.

Darjeeling is easily accessible by road from Kurseong, but if you are fond of adventures, you should travel in a delightful Toy Train. The locomotive and cars have changed little in the last hundred years. The train, which ascends with the help of loops and zigzags, is a marvel of engineering. The highest point in this line is Ghoom Railway station (7407 ft) – the highest one in the world. The journey takes more than 7 hours.

Nevertheless, the narrow and curved road to Darjeeling is no less fascinating. The serpentine routing follows the edge of green forests and tea gardens. Our small van climbed such a great altitude that it was scary to look down. And still it was more than tempting to watch the road winding its way around the loop. At every turn, a huge blue ceramic tea cup was placed on a concrete pedestal and welcomed us with all signs encouraging us to protect nature love one another, save our souls and so on.

About seven kilometers from Darjeeling, situated on Hill Cart Road there is the Samten Choling Monastery, Ghoom. Amarendra asked the driver to stop at the gate. In the December-2000 issue of his travel magazine entitled "Bhraman," a very picturesque article was published about one of the main religious festivals celebrated in this Monastery. Amarendra said he was going to show the article and pictures to the Lamas. This gave Tuku and me the opportunity to explore the monastery. It was really a great idea. Young Lama Dorjee Bhutia was very kind and a great guide as well. The first thing we learned was that the monastery belonged to Gelugpa of the Yellow sect. Lama Dorjee was very hospitable as well and, when the excursion was over, he invited us to have a cup of salty buttermilk. It was a great privilege for me to sit in a very simple and modest dining room or kitchen of a Buddhist Monastery and have a friendly chat with its "servant" about this or that - just about life. But, there is one but: have you ever tasted that unbearable salty buttermilk? In my opinion, only Buddhist monks are mentally and physically strong enough to drink it.

Darjeeling - Queen of Hill Stations

"Darjeeling is the natural choice" -- this phrase is written on both sides of the road as you come into the main entrance of Darjeeling, one of the most magnificent hill resorts in the world. This heavenly retreat is bathed in hues of every shade. The flaming red rhododendrons, the sparkling white magnolias, the miles of undulating hillsides covered with emerald green tea bushes, the exotic forests of silver fir - all under the blanket of a brilliant azure sky dappled with specks of clouds, compellingly confirms Darjeeling as the Queen of hill stations.

The name is derived from the Tibetan word "Darje", which means the precious stone or ecclesiastical scepter, which is emblematic of the thunderbolt of Indra, and "ling" - a place, hence the land of the thunderbolt. The scepter of Indra is believed to have fallen at a place where the Observatory Hill now stands, which apart from the magnificent view also has a great religious importance for both Hindus and Buddhists.

We spent January 7th and 8th in the Indian Tourism Center Hotel on the top of the hill and were admiring the snows of Kangchenjunga right from our bedroom window. I wrote in my diary "If it was my choice I would not go anywhere from here" dated from January 7, 2001. Darjeeling. 11. PM.

In the morning we visited the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, which is a new home for Siberian Tigers, Himalayan Black Bears, Deer, Red Pandas, Snow Leopards and a great variety of birds. A famous Everest Climber, great Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, was a director of the Mountaineering Institute, which has museum containing an interesting collection of mountaineering equipment. Another Institution, which is directly connected with Tenzing Norday, is Tenzing Rock and Gombo Rock Mountaineering Institute, which conducts an introductory course on rock climbing.

Right after dinner at one of the fast food restaurants on the mall, we drove to a point about 3 km. from the town, where the first passenger ropeway in India called Darjeeling Ranet Valley Passenger Ropeway is located. The site is beautiful, the view - even better, but the ropeway was under repair and we missed an even greater experience and an exhilarating sensation.

Chapter IV

Sikkim

Expose Sikkim - Secret of Himalayas

I would never have imagined there could be anything more exciting in the entire world than Darjeeling and its extravagant surroundings. It is necessary to realize that when you travel in India you must always be prepared for newer and greater surprises, even when you are already punch-drunk from its natural beauty and grandiosity. I experienced this feeling on several occasions while traveling in Orissa - a land of great temples and again in Darjeeling - an area of breathtaking beauty crowned by the majestic Himalayas.

We said Good-bye the morning of the 8th of January to Darjeeling and continued our journey to another state of India - Sikkim, which is sandwiched between the kingdoms of Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east. On its northern border towers the plateau of Tibet where it shares its southern border with West Bengal. Sikkim is a land of monumental mountains. These mountains form a part of the long mountain range - the mighty Himalayas. Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world,

majestically towers over smaller mountains in its vicinity, like a God over lesser deities. Thrusting its mighty shoulders high above the lush verdant valleys, Kangchenjunga can be seen from almost any part of Sikkim. Another mountain ridge runs through the center of Sikkim, lying in a north to south orientation. This mountain ridge separates the Tista and Pangit valleys and ends at the joining together the mouths of two rivers. Here you can find a variation of climates that range from the sultry tropical to the dry arctic. There are also many wild animals such as the mongoose and red panda. Aside from the fauna, much selection can also be found the range of flora; from primulas (a sort of flower) to the magnolia. The horticultural characteristics and growing conditions of the different plant communities found here presents a kaleidoscopic picture.

The primary means of transportation within Sikkim is by road. Many of the people in Sikkim have never traveled by train. However, Sikkim is well connected to the rest of the country by rail and by air through Siliguri, which is in West Bengal, 115 kms from Gangtok, the Capital of the State of Sikkim. There are two common routes connecting Darjeeling to Gangtok. The one road is shorter but steep via Peshoke, and the other is somewhat longer via Mongpoo. We took the shorter road, which can be only traveled by small vehicles. From the window of the car the famous Lapchu Tea gardens and evergreen Kriptomaria forests could be seen. The Tista River runs parallel to the road for a long distance. It is one of the rivers that nearly flows the length of Sikkim, snaking its way through the deep gorges and tributaries. The Rangit River is the major tributary that connects with the Sikkim at the border region between Sikkim and West Bengal. When the rivers flow together there is a transformation. The Tista River turns into a mighty emerald color flow. As you approach of the border area between Sikkim and West Bengal the river becomes wider and free of rocks; here it is possible to raft across. The many densely packed white water rafting camps can be seen along the riverbanks. Our visit of Sikkim coincided at the same time of the final stage of the famous Tista Tea Tourism Festival, which is held in three Himalayan regions – Darjeeling, Sikkim and the Dooars.

There are great sightseeing opportunities on the way to Gangtok, many which can be seen from the road itself, especially the funny inhabitants which can be watched from the car - monkeys. These monkey troops are living in small communities and "control" quite a vast portion of the main road, behaving as the supreme rulers of the territory. They do not pay much attention to the passing vehicles with the staring passengers. They don't react

to the "wild" exclamations and cheers that emanate from the car windows. These monkeys are very aware of human nature and are great experts on the topic of human behavior. They understand to keep calm most of the time and usually wait until somebody throws them something to eat. Little time is wasted in running to grab handouts with a quick retreat. It is quite a sight to observe how keenly they will inspect their food before eating. I witnessed a baby-monkey diligently rubbing a piece of cracker upon his shaggy hand, then blowing at it, and eating only after completing these playful manipulations.

Tashi Delek

We arrived at the Hotel Tashi Delec in the afternoon. Tashi Delek means "good fortune" in the Sikkimese language. Sikkimeses exclaim this phrase in making their toasts, wishing someone well and when they greet friends. The hotel staff welcomes their visitors to Gangtok in this same spirit and language. Mr. Chakravorty told me a lot about the exciting adventures of the ninety-year-old owner of the Hotel Tashi Delec, who gained a reputation in his youth as a brave and honest merchant. He would travel with a caravan of mules delivering salt to Tibet through the Nathula Pass. Chinese and Indian border troops face each other at the Nathula Pass. You can see them facing off at breathing distance since they are so close. Tourists are allowed to approach them under these conditions.

While traveling to our destination, we became acquainted with all this interesting history. Nathu La (Nathula Pass) that lies a distance of five to six km from Gangtok at an altitude of 14,200 feet. The Tibetan Plateau serves as the border between India and China. The Nathu La and Jelep La were located on the historic trade route between India and Tibet as late as 1962. The distance across the pass is about one-and-a-half kilometers. This tranquil section of the pass was recently opened to tourism. It is richly covered by many varieties of Alpine flora; the delicate primulas and the unique Himalayan Rhubarb are but an example of some of the exotic species found here. The observation point, where one can see across into the territory occupied by Chinese, was one of the most memorable sights. Nathu La is definitely one of the great well-kept secrets of Himalayas, and Tashi Delek hotel owner (unfortunately forgot his name) is a living witness to this secret. I had wanted to meet with him and hear all his adventures first hand, but unfortunately he was not available during my visit. Even though

he was absent, the spirit and a very special atmosphere left me with a lasting impression.

The hotel was exotic and extraordinarily comfortable with all the mystique and trappings of a "Hidden Paradise." The spacious and richly decorated hotel, in traditional Sikkimese style, offers warm hospitality. The Tashi Delek Hotel suites are the namesakes of the great mountains—Sikkim, Kangchenjunga, Kabru, Pandim, Talung, Jongong and Siniolchu. Only in case you are an indifferent tourist, you may not be interested in the reason why most of the peaks of Sikkim have remained unclimbed. The old ghost guarding the Sikkim peaks will wrap you in the thick mist of the Himalayan fog and tell you a sweet lullaby about the Houses of the Five Treasures. It derives its name from Kangchenjunga, the name for the summit where holy treasures belonging to the Gods are hoarded. The Sikkimese people consider their mountains to be sacred, believing the mountains will forfeit their sanctity if climbed.

The Tashi Delek Hotel is centrally located in the heart of Gangtok. From here you can have a magnificent view of the Himalayas from its rooftop garden and two open terraces, where you can bath in the ocean of sunbeams during the daytime, and gaze upon shining diamonds in the night sky. The hotel is located on Mahatma Gandhi road (M.G. Marg), which is slightly less than a kilometer in length. The road is flat and lined with shops that continue along the main market and makes its way towards downtown Gangtok. Located just below the Main Market, and a few minutes walk away, is the Lal Bazaar - an open space market encircled with many shops. Lal bazaar reminded me of a huge Persian carpet with millions of tiny ornaments. It is magnificent spot, where different and diverse cultures, old and new blend together. Lal Bazaar on Hat Day, which is every Sunday, is a quite a spectacle and experience. Villagers from Bakhus, Daura-Saurals, and Bihari businessmen in dhotis, brush shoulders with urbanites that are wearing sport jeans and chic fashions, communicating with each other in one of the many local languages, Bhutia, Leppcha, Nepali and Hindi and somehow they must be heard and understood over the blare of both Indian and Western songs. Visiting the Lal Bazaar on Sunday is a weekly ritual for those who live in Ganktok. The Lal Bazaar is a special place, which transcends all social and economic classes, a place where a King and a Pauper are both naked to the observer.

Enchey Monastery

The Enchey Monastery is an important seat of the Nyigma order, and is built on a site that was blessed by Lama Druptop Karpo, who was a larger-than-life master known for his power of flight. The monastery adjoins the Siniolhu Tourist Lodge, three kilometers from the town of Gangtok, which is located in a dense forest. It is impossible to see the Kangchenjunga range over the horizon of a canopy of the spiking trees tops. There are 131 yellow prayer wheels leading to the 200-year-old monastery, where images of gods, goddesses and other religious objects can be found. Around January of each year a religious masked dance, the "Chaam," is performed with great fanfare at the monastery for two days.

Meanwhile, the old lamas tell me the legend of when a hundred lamas and eight servants. A younger lama came out from the forest with a plate of fresh butter that was prepared in the monastery and kindly offered us to taste it. We did so and found it delicious - very tender and slightly salted.

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

The Research Institute of Tibetology - the most prestigious of its time in India, even now a renowned worldwide center for study of Buddhist Philosophy and religion was the next site on our excursion schedule. This Buddhist Institute is a vast treasure trove of vast collection of rare Lepcha, Tibetan and Sanskrit manuscripts. Many rare statues and over 2000 Buddhist icons and other prized objects of art can be found here. The building housing the institute is an excellent example of Tibetan architecture. The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology is the only institute that conducts research in the Tibetan language and culture. There are about thirty thousand volumes, mostly xylographs, translations of the original teachings of the Lord Buddha, and treatises by distinguished Buddhist scholars from all over the world. It was here, where I first saw and touched the manuscript of Atish Diponkar's great book - Kudom Bucho.

Blue Sheep Restaurant

It was a cold January evening in Gangtok and all three of us were dead tired and hungry. The day had been eventful program that was filled with lots of fresh air and new experiences. To bring it all together, it was an occasion to experience a hot Sikkimi soup and momo, drinking delicious Indian rum. Amarendra gets the credit for the idea to visit Blue Sheep Restaurant - a very

special place where traditional Sikkimi food is served. Thanks to the energy crises in Gangtok, lamps and blue candles beautifully illuminated the restaurant. We ordered rum but the waiter in a very polite form reminded us that today it was prohibition and he was not able to serve hard drinks. We didn't know anything about prohibition in Sikkim but quickly learned that twice a month, when the moon is either crescent or full, there is prohibition in Sikkim. The rule is without exception among all the restaurants that serve hard drinks. We obeyed the traditions of the country and enjoyed our dinner, which I should confess could tempt even the most devout and pious of Gods. Instead of the rum we had a glass of lemonade and mineral water with our meal.

On January 10 early in the morning I had "Solja" – a tea that famous for its exotic taste and flavor--Sikkim, then bowed to Kangchenjunga, which was hardly visible through a thick morning mist and started packing. We planned to depart the hotel at ten that morning and to and before leaving Gangtok, to climb to the Tachi viewing point, which is situated along the north Sikkim mountain. Siniolchu, one of the most graceful peaks in the world could be seen from this point.

Chapter V

Remote from Civilization

Murti

For those who long for nature in her purest form, the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation provides a great opportunity to visit virgin forests and mountain ranges of the Eastern Himalayas. Among such famous spots as Lava Loleygaon, Samsing, Tarkhola, Kalimpong, Jaldhaka, Suntaleykhola, Rasik Bill, Mongpong and Makutmanipurs, there is Murti - one of the best places in West Bengal for eco-tourism. We decided to go there.

By evening we arrived. Murti is 73 km from Siliguri, the most important town of North Bengal and the ideal junction to embark on different parts of the enchanting wilderness of the Eastern Himalayas. Nature reveals herself here with amazing intricacy. The refreshing green, clean air and the blue sky will take anybody to what is called "Heaven." Here is also a great opportunity to become a part of the land of elephants. Excursions to Gorumara and Chapramari forests gave the visitor a real feel of virgin, lush

green woodland. Goruma Interpretation Center (Murti Forest Banglow, Center for the Nature and Environment Studies, Government of West Bengal) is situated right at the bank of the Murti River, one of the tributaries of Jaldhaka.

It was almost getting dark when we registered and settled at the Center. The suites were named after local rivers. Mine was called "Murti." It was a single-bed suite with a wide window and a balcony overlooking the riverbank and a small community of local foresters. However, the most attractive part of the building was "Gayatri Watchtower," a lookout point that gives you a bird's eye view of the green cover all around.

Right after having supper, the waiter warned us not to leave the territory as wild animals can appear from the riverside. He suggested having a night tea at the veranda, and we concurred. It was cool and very refreshing sitting outside. The full moon spread its silver beams all over the area and the village looked like an old fleapit medieval ship berthed to the bank of a mighty river - one capable of gulping it down with the next flood. The air was full of the sounds of running current and innumerable insects. It was also full of expectations. The atmosphere was promising most exciting adventures.

The orchestra of various kinds of birds performed a fantastic "good morning" concert right at my window. Bulbule, which means "nightingale" in Bengal and Georgian languages, sang a solo. Regardless of my admiration and a great desire to listen a bit more, it flew away like a spoiled "primadonna". The tree next to my balcony was full of the Kingfisher - a divinely colored bird. From my balcony, I saw the villagers leaving their cabins with huge sacks upon their backs, crossing at the shallow part of the stream, and disappearing into the forest. I wanted to watch this "caravan" more closely, and I hurried to the riverbank. It was too early, and I didn't want to wake up my hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Chakravorti. I went alone.

While crossing the bridge, I passed a young couple sitting on the side walk, but I didn't pay much attention to them. Normally, at that time of the year, the Murti recedes so that one can walk along its wide silver sand bed. I didn't go very far from the bridge, but it was far enough to feel myself remote and absolutely isolated from civilization. It was a strange and very exciting feeling, but nevertheless, I felt very happy and comfortable when I noticed Amarendra with his huge camera coming from the opposite side. Amarendra

said he made some beautiful shots of the river and the birds performing their morning toilet.

On our way back to the Gorumara Interpretation Center, I collected some exquisite marble stones from the Murti riverbed. Again I noticed the young couple that I passed on the bridge. They were walking along the clear-way. The girl's vivid yellow sari fluttered like a butterfly in the valley. The fellow wore a long, colored shirt and looked like a Kingfisher haunting the butterfly. These wonderful creatures attracted me so much that during breakfast I went out to veranda several times to see whether those two were still there. Then I saw them sitting on the big white stone billing and cooing.

At noon a number of trucks arrived, and a lot of people started erecting camps on the Murti bed. Commercial modern Indian music was played loudly and it irritated Amarendra, as he didn't like this kind of music at all. Megaphones persistently reminded the picnickers about their responsibility for keeping the environment clean and safe. The smell of delicious Indian food flavored the air and was most inviting. We decided to join the festival later after we explored a bit of the Gorumara forest.

The car was waiting, and we left the Center at noon. The bridge led to a narrow road running through the forest. It was about a two-hour, very slow drive. We tried to be watchful and not miss anything, but the woodland was silent. From both sides huge trees surrounded the road, but the real forest was beyond those trees. Trees were hiding the forest and made it more and more invisible, drawing you into the depth - the very heart of the forest, where the key to the mystery lies. Suddenly a horrible sound broke into my exultant thoughts. We saw a fantastic scene right in front of our car. It was the tail of a male peacock standing in the middle of the road, singing a love song to a not-so-attractive female peacock that was walking slowly along the edge of the road. The car stopped, and Amarendra and I jumped out with our cameras ready to capture this beautiful picture. After finishing there, we continued safely on our way through the timber. Amarendra mentioned that it wasn't the best idea for us to leave an automobile in the forest, and he added that during the last few years a number of kidnappings were committed in this area, particularly on the roads running through the jungle.

About lunchtime we were back at the Center. The picnic on the riverbed reached its climax at that time. People were enjoying food, music, drinking and dancing in the fresh air. Nature continued to provide its own rhythmic

chorus of buzzing insects, flowing water and singing birds. From the veranda, the place looked like a big exotic fair and we decided to join the feast. Individuals were very friendly, warm and hospitable. They were inviting us to their camps to taste their cooking, but unfortunately we had very little time for socializing. In a few minutes we were to go to a local farmers market - another exciting event in Murti. Among the picnickers was a well-known folk singer of that area who recognized Amarendra Chakravorti - the editor of his favorite travel magazine, "Bhraman." The singer showered Amarendra with compliments, and even sang a lovely Bengal folk song in his honor.

The most interesting part of the Murti farmers market was a fish market. The variety of river inhabitants here is absolutely unimaginable - big and small, and the smallest, and the biggest, and those of average size. There were fish similar to snakes, and fish like extraterrestrial creatures. I think some of these species I have seen in the famous aquariums, but most were absolutely unknown to me. The fish that Amarendra bought for dinner was also unfamiliar to me, but it was the most delicious I have ever tasted in my life.

At sunset, sitting on the veranda and having a cup of hot tea, we watched the villagers coming back from the forest. They moved slowly in a long line along a special route designated with colored stones that led to the shallow part of the river, which they then crossed. All of them, men and women, carried huge branches and logs on their heads. I admired how gracefully they managed to do that, as if wearing big, but very light, traditional headwear.

After supper, another masterpiece of the Indian cuisine, we fell into the mood for poetry reading. This went on for about half an hour when suddenly the doorman rushed into the hall and cried out that a wild elephant had appeared from the forest. We hurried to the veranda. Although there was a full moon, only the dark contours of the giant body of the elephant could be distinguished. Along with a group of foresters, the doorman and some four or five employees of the Center gathered in the yard, and I was with them. We all climbed the flood wall. What looked like a black mountain was now crossing the river and approaching the village. "Huss! Huss!" shouted the villagers. They drummed the fence with huge iron sticks, dogs barked hysterically, and women screamed at the top of their voices. The dark form stopped as if petrified in the commotion, and now it looked like a gigantic monument. After a while, the monolithic creature turned around

and moved back to the forest. It disappeared like a mirage in the desert. I would have never believed elephants were so fast! I saw the story continued in my dream that very night, and in the morning I couldn't clear out which part of the story was real - and which was fantasy.

Chapter VI

The Jungle

Early in the morning on the 12th of January we packed our bags and departed for the Galdapara Wildlife Sanctuary which is another famous jungle in the West Himalayas. Arriving at 1:00 PM on the nose we reached the Holong Forest Tourist Lodge situated on located on bank of the Holong River - dead center in the "heart" of the Galdapara forest. Our arrival was delayed by an on-going strike at the crossroad. Local I Congress went on strike, I don't really know why, but it delayed us for two hours.

The closer we came to our designation, the more knowledgeable we became about the local fauna and how to conduct ourselves in the Park. There were billboards with complete descriptions of everything. The most striking was one that forewarned the novice visitor to be patient and to not expect to see live animals as a matter of routine.

Other noteworthy rules and suggestions were listed as follows: “ Science and discipline pay; Small groups are ideal; Early morning and late afternoon are best suited for visiting; Don’t travel alone; Do not wear colorful clothes and perfumes; Do not smoke or light a fire; Radios and tape-recorders ate better left behind; Do not through litter around including food; Respect animals and their customs; Do not take anything from the Sanctuary; Do not swim in unfamiliar water it may cause decease; Do not carry firearms or any kind of weapons as it is strictly prohibited.”

I would never suggest anybody to violate any of these rules. Jungle punishment is swift. Mr. Chakravorti told me another "funny" travel story from his own experience. Once, this Bengal Paparazzi, as Mrs Chakravorti use to calls him, decided to make a close-up shot of a wild elephant in a field of rice. He asked the driver of the mini-bus driver to get as close as possible to the animal. The driver did his very best, but it was not a "suitable"

distance for Amarendra, the driver refused to get even closer and Amarendra jumped out from the bus and made quick close up shots. He took a great risk to get his picture. Both driver and passengers breathed freely at last.

Amarendra was very happy and very proud of himself; others were too, except the guide, who mentioned that just a couple of days ago this very elephant played "football" with an automobile parked on a nearby road. "The driver of the automobile was lucky to have only been a spectator and not a active participant", said the guide.

Regardless of this little tale, Amarendra is a very experienced traveler, he knows all this and much more about Jungle life but forgets everything when he has camera in hand; he converts wild things into Paparazzi.

The Holong Forest Tourist Lodge is surrounded by thick forest and two narrow roads, just big enough for one lane driving; these roads lead deep into the dark and wild jungle. There is a beautiful garden situated in front of the lodge, just above the riverbank, some two or three benches are well placed on the bank, giving guests opportunity to watch animals, to lap some salt on the meadow across the river. Animals usually appear in the evening, the meadow looks like a stage and the spectators - like an audience of an high fashion-show. As in the human world, from time to time some of the animals show up for their performance.

Not far from the Lodge is a breeding nursery for trained elephants and a small community of their trainers' families. Our schedule was flexible and we decided to take a walk and on the way we dropped in to the village. As we crossed the bridge separating us and the village, there was an elephant with opposite plans. He stepped on the bridge and we decided to wait until he passed by--he was bigger than us. There was shouting from behind, it seems that this elephant was in no mood for training and had an escape plan instead. There were people shouting and waving their hands for us to back-off and run. Only then we fully understood that this was not a trained elephant.

We set a new record in making it to the safety of the Lodge. Not looking back to see what the elephant was doing at that moment, but we first heard the sound of a motorcycle coming from the direction of the jungle. Turning to look, the motorcycle was heading right for the bridge where the elephant was standing. People yelled again, and we knew there was still danger. Both, the rider and his passenger could be seen jumping as it ran into the gates of

the village. While catching our breath we watched the elephant peacefully cross the bridge and return into the bush. Shortly thereafter, gaining back our nerve, we joined a small group of tourists who were on their way to visit the trained elephants.

The village was approximately as big as an average city parks with two or three tiny houses, about ten or more wooden cages a huge hayloft and a number of cattle shed. Some of the cow elephants and their calves were enjoying an outdoor dinner; others were scrubbing their back against trees that they were chained. The smallest ones were enthusiastically nursing their mothers. If one has ever watched a baby elephant playing tricks with its mother or a trainer, or just playing with children, he or she will be surprised to see the similarity with the play habits--one should never miss this opportunity. It's really an indescribable and joyful sight.

This was one of the most memorable moments that I experienced during the jungle elephant ride. Returning home we stopped at cabins to have a chat with a small girl sitting on a fence. Amarendra started off the conversation. He asked the little girl if those elephants had ever knocked at her window. She said, yes. Then he asked if one of those elephants had ever grabbed its trunk around her and up and lifted her on his back? And the girl said yes. And finally Amarendra asked if she was afraid of elephants. The girl nodded in the positive and said "yes" -- without hesitation. Her answer was so naively and frankly said that we couldn't help but to laugh. Amarendra patted the little girl's beautiful curly head and told her something very sweet in the Indian language. She returned a smile and kindly advised us to be very careful since there was a "jungli" (wild) elephant nearby. We thanked her and promised that we would follow her every instruction. The rest of the day we spent at an observation point, hoping that any of those famous wild animals of Galdapara would show-up -- but as the sign warned, it was in vain.

Darkness was closing in and we visited the souvenir shop located in one of the small rooms of the Holong Forest Tourist Lodge office. Only gifts of Galdapara jungle and some local goods were on sale in this tiny shop.

Next to the shop there is another small room called museum where I learned that the Sanctuary shapes 216 square km-s with 64 narwhals, 7 tigers and lots of ordinary, unique, and even endangered species of plants and animals.

The following day at breakfast we were told that the elephant ride in the jungle had been postponed for an undetermined time. They said that the wild elephant, the one that appeared on the bridge, attacked the breeding nursery last night and took out his anger on some trained animals too. There some damage in the village but no victims.

Aside from our group, there were 10 other tourists and we spent our spare time in the nice garden at the riverbank viewing a lush green forest and a meadow carpeted with a variety of wildflowers. It was hot, the river was crystal clear and so inviting, if it was not for the warning sign: "Do not swim in unfamiliar water, it may cause disease", we would have been tempted to take a splash.

Time passed very slowly and I started hating all wild elephants that lived on the globe. Finally, in early afternoon, the instructor appeared and told us that the problem was solved and we could proceed with our plans. We gathered together at the viewing platform. Within minutes two cow elephants and tree calves showed up on the pass. We, after today's events, were happy see the elephants, that we even applauded. The smallest one was so flattered by the sound of applauds that started posing and finally stumbled over a root that protruded from the earth. He felt so embarrassed that he ran to his mother to bemoan his failure.

In order to ride on the elephant back, we climbed high concrete ladder. We were divided into two groups and during the whole trip kept close together. One of the baby calve accompanied his mother deep into the jungle. The baby elephant felt completely safe between the large frames of his mother and untie and joyfully strolled for a family hike. He would sample some of the dry leaves from the forest floor. Tender branches became a sort of bubble gum for him.

It was a hard work through thick brush and twisted branches while riding on the back of an elephant. One of the tourists lost a scarf, but Mahoot (an elephant rider) whispered some magic words in the elephant's ear and she at once started seeking a scarf by her trunk among the dry leaves on the floor of the jungle. The scarf was soon found and we continued our way deeper and deeper into the jungle until we came to the riverbank. Elephants crossed the river at a knee-deep crossing and waited until the baby would make his way across too. Suddenly both elephants came to a sudden stop and Mahoot pointed us to look at a spot in the thicket, which was next to us. Then we

heard a desperate roar. It was a large wounded narwhal (rhino) lying in the thicket and bleeding. We gave a gasp. Both elephants pulled up their mighty trunks and hooted like two military vessels. The wounded narwhal capitulated and ran away. We followed the animal step-by-step and finally we found ourselves in a wide-open meadow, where the grass was high. The yellow and bronze body of the rhino (narwhal) looked like a gigantic movable sculpture. The animal tried to escape from our sight. Surely he preferred lying quietly in the thicket and nursing his wound than to deal with us. As our time was limited, we at last left the wounded narwhal alone and went on further exploring the Galdapara Sanctuary flora and fauna. On our way back I saw a very beautiful natural canopy built up with lianas and knitted with green and golden leaves. Mahoot said this was a python's bedroom. I believe it was a real masterpiece of a design art.

"Onquish" is mahoot's special tool for riding an elephant - a sort of short iron stick with a spike and a hook on the point. If an elephant refuses to obey, the mahoot imposes a severe penalty: he beat the animal with this heavy stick or prods the elephant's enormously thick neck with the spike. Every time the mahoot did so I shuddered, it was as if he had been beating me or prodding my neck. Then I realized why the wild elephant - the ruler of jungle – attacked the village last night, why he crashed all those cages and cattle sheds or why he hit those trained "brothers"? That was his protest, a declaration of the power and eternal liberty and of his breed. When we came back to the lodge Mahoot patted the elephant and allowed us to also pat it. I embraced the calf and Amarendra took a picture. This picture is my favorite souvenir from the Galdapara Sanctuary.

Shortly thereafter, we had the opportunity to watch a heavenly sunset from the riverbank. Suddenly a large family of trained elephants (some seven calves and parents) showed up on the other side of the river. Crossing the meadow, the herd arrived to the bank of the river, showered their babies, ate some salt and fresh-cut banana trees, and hung around for a while and then, in a strict military order marched out from the meadow as if stepping off the stage.

It was to be my last night in the Galdapara Wildlife Sanctuary. In a couple of days my trip in West Bengal would be over, and I started writing a Thank-you letter to Amarendra and Tuku Chakravorties, the magicians, who turned 15 otherwise ordinary days of my life into 15 of the most extraordinary days

in paradise. I am still writing this letter in my essays, and will be writing the rest of my life.