

BIRADARI



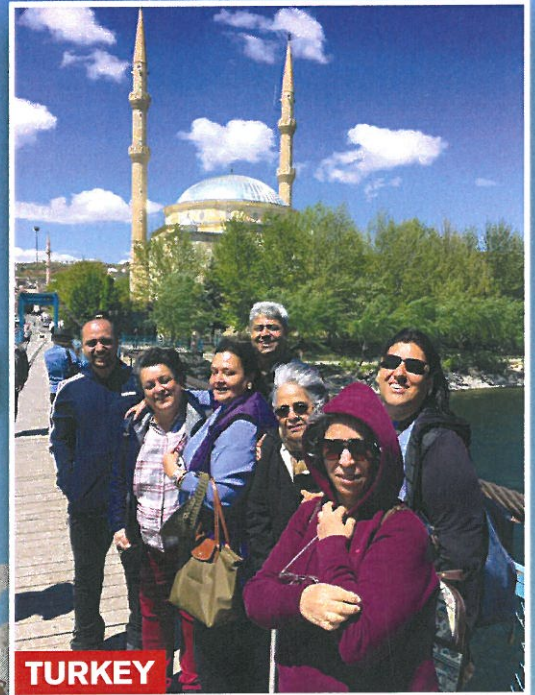
A Biannual Newsletter

www.kpadelhi.org

Issue: **DECEMBER 2019**

From Turkey and Tawang

TRAVELLERS' TALES FROM
KPA'S ADVENTURERS



TURKEY



TAWANG

■ **The New Executive Committee**

■ **Saraswati: Tracing the Lost River** ■ **Poems**

Cappadocia, Turkey,
dwellings of stone

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

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Col Valmiki Katju

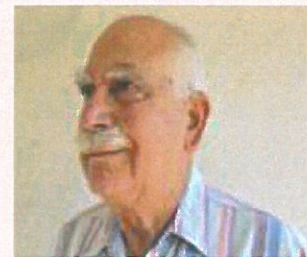
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Dr Vinita Dar
Dr Vaibhav Kaul

FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR EMERITUS



After a Nauroz function, generally held in March, it is a long wait for the *biradari* to get together, exchange notes, welcome new members and, of course, enjoy our Kashmiri culinary delicacies. Our past president, Mr Vivek Kaul and his gracious wife Vandita have been very successful in organizing these gatherings and we all are grateful to them and the entire organizing committee for these memorable events.

We would also like to take this opportunity to welcome Ms Madhulika Bahadur as the first lady president of KPA. On behalf of the *biradari* I take this opportunity to welcome her and wish her and her team a very eventful tenure. We also thank Justice Sanjay Kishan and Shivani Kaul for accommodating us on their well-manicured lawns for the two yearly functions.

The last one year has seen many outdoor activities involving visits to interesting places like Arunachal Pradesh and Turkey. From the experiences of those who were part of these adventures, one can say that everyone enjoyed the outings in full measure. I am sure the new vice president will continue planning such visits in the future.

— Col Valmiki Katju

WELCOME THE NEW TEAM!

In the Association's AGM on 20 October 2019, the following decisions were taken regarding the office bearers and other roles in the KPA.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (2019-21)

President: Mrs Madhulika Bahadur; elected unopposed at the AGM as president of KPA Delhi for a two-year term.

Vice President: Mr Vivek Kaul

General Secretary: Mr Ajay Dar

Treasurer: Mr Utsav Dar

Joint Secretary: Mrs Pooja Paul Pandit

Senior Advisers: Col Valmiki Katju, Mr Kailash Baqaya, Mr Surinder Zutshi, Dr V.N. Reu, Mr Ajit Gurtu, Mrs Asha Taimni

IN-CHARGE OF OTHER ACTIVITIES

Events, marketing/ads for the newsletter, donations and WhatsApp monitoring: **Mrs Madhulika Bahadur**

New Memberships: **Ms Pooja P. Pandit**

Website: **Mr Ajay Dar**

Matrimonials and Classifieds: **Mrs Vinita Dar**



KPA's

Daredevils in ARUNACHAL PRADESH

SWAROOP DAR

Dear friends,

I am excited to take you on our journey of an adventurous rendezvous with the magnificent beauty of one of the gems of our northeastern states, Arunachal Pradesh. Geographically, it is bordered by Bhutan in the West, China in the north and northeast, Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast, and the states of Assam and Nagaland in the south. While we, 19 KPA members, spent most of our time in Arunachal Pradesh, we landed and flew out from Guwahati, Assam, and managed to see some historical sites there too. We spent most our time outdoors and in transit, and felt truly connected to nature in its raw form. In fact, our very first night was spent amidst the mountainous terrain inside tent-like rooms in the rustic Nameri Eco-Camp. It truly felt like we were one with nature, with lizards and huge spiders as roommates, and howling animals outside!

We travelled almost over a thousand kilometres by road during our journey and even drove all the way up to an elevation of 16,500 ft above the mean sea level – to Bumla Pass, the point where the Indo-China border begins, and is roughly 37km from Tawang, in Arunachal. Bumla Pass was the passage used by the Dalai Lama to escape from Tibet to enter India. Visiting the Pass was quite the highlight of my expedition. There was excitement as well as trepidation in the air as we set off at just a little before 8 a.m., clad well in woollens for the journey ahead. The road was in a dreadful condition, to say the least, and even though our driver was good, it was an extremely challenging drive. Fortunately, it was a bright and sunny day with a cold breeze blowing. This gave us strength! Although we were advised against it (due to lack of oxygen in that area), once we reached the top at Bumla Pass, we stayed there for almost over an hour! The Indian Army Border personnel cordially took us to the checkpost on the Indian side and explained details about the LOC. Through binoculars, we could see the Chinese people building bunkers on their side. This is indeed something so different from what you usually witness in daily life that it fills you with gratitude towards the people who are guarding your borders under such extreme climatic conditions.

After absorbing the beauty of the serene mountains at

KUDOS TO OUR ARMY TROOPS!

At the high altitude of 15,200 ft in Bumla Pass in Arunachal Pradesh, beyond the tree line, there were no birds or animals, minimal vegetation (if any), and even the yaks were left far behind. It was very cold with icy winds blowing in the face. Only one thing was in sight – the Indian Army Camp. This was the Indo-China border. In the middle of nowhere, the troops served us hot tea, not to forget delicious pakoras, *bondas* and samosas. As I talked to the army doctor on duty, he told me that they were posted for two years at a stretch. Surviving in such harsh and unfriendly conditions is no child's play. It needs a brave heart and dedication...

- Vinita Dar

Picnic at Sangti Valley



THE DIFFERENT COLOURS OF ARUNACHAL

I was delighted to have the opportunity to join the KPA group for the trip to Arunachal (my brother-in-law Vijay Vatal being a Kashmiri). My earlier concerns about not knowing anyone in the group were blown away as everyone in the group was very friendly and inclusive. Arunachal is very beautiful and unspoilt because of the lack of too many tourists and fully developed tourism. Because of that the tourist facilities are also not so well developed but it is balanced by the eagerness of locals to please and give what they can. I was a bit disappointed about not being able to go to the China border but was more than compensated by visiting the wonderful school and meeting dedicated teachers and children. Our guide Amit was also very good and courteous and I felt privileged that he was in our car and we got to know a lot more about the culture and life in Assam and Arunachal from him. He took care of everyone's needs and made sure that everything was well organized.

This trip was memorable and will stay with me for having made some very good friends and for visiting a place that I may not have had the opportunity to visit otherwise. Thanks to the group.

- Dr Sushma Acquilla

clockwise from top left: The backdrop...a lush tea garden with an elephant for company; Stopping by at a beautiful waterfall!!; A midway break!!; Posing outside the hotel in Tawang

the Bumla Pass, we proceeded to see the Shungatser Lake, also known as the 'Madhuri' Lake, as the graceful actor has filmed a song and dance sequence with Shah Rukh Khan for the movie *Koyla* at this spot. Once you reach the lake (an altitude of 12,500 ft), you forget about the bumpy ride and the never-ending road that we had just traversed to reach it, as we remained awestruck at the breathtaking beauty of the lake between the mountains...it is a sight to behold! As I walked over the wooden bridges and the pine trees with the yaks grazing at a distance, I could feel an inner peace, and a sense of belonging, as I watched our Tricolour flying high just close to the lake.

This lake used to be an open pasture, but a devastating earthquake resulted in the lake being formed by the falling of rocks, boulders and trees, the stumps of which can be seen in the lake. Canteens are run by the army personnel at all these places and serve hot, savoury food items at

THREE MOST IMPRESSIVE THINGS:

- Koftas mentioned only thrice.
- Everyone on time, great stamina and endurance, great arrangements, nothing to beat the riverside picnic and, of course, China and Bhutan 'discovery' with childlike enthusiasm.
- Everyone coming back bonded and yearning for more!

Sanjay Kaul

very reasonable rates. They even sell beautiful local gift items at these stores. Most of us did not lose an opportunity to purchase things of our choice for gifting to family and friends.

During the span of nine days, we travelled by road, visiting some important historical sites as well as enjoying the natural, untouched beauty that Arunachal has to offer.

The Sela Pass is a high-altitude mountain pass with an elevation of 13,700 ft. It connects the Indian Buddhist town Tawang to Dirang and Guwahati. We passed it both on our onward as well as our return journey. The road leading to it was uneven, rugged, slushy and slippery; in fact, there seemed to be no road at all and it is a really treacherous drive. Yet when one reaches the top, it seems worth the effort. It was extremely windy at the pass, but the view was heavenly and divine. The River Kameng flows along as we drive to the Sela Pass and it is one of the most stunning gifts of nature to the Northeast. An interesting feature of Sela Pass is that there are nearly 101 lakes around the Pass. One such spectacular and famous lake is the Sela Lake, which can be seen once you reach the top.

It is believed that this pass gets its name after a local girl, Sela, who loved Jaswant, an Indian soldier, against her father's wishes. During the Sino-Indian war, Jaswant Singh single-handedly fought the Chinese for three days by fooling them, while Sela brought him ammunition and food from the camp. The story goes that Jaswant positioned himself on a hilltop in a long trench and placed rifles to give an impression that the entire army was behind him. Finally, he was betrayed by Sela's father and was captured and beheaded by the Chinese. Sela, in agony, committed suicide by jumping from a hill. A brass bust of Jaswant is kept in Jaswant Garh, also the site of the battle.

On our way to the Sela Pass we stopped by at the Nyukmadung War Memorial to pay our respects to the soldiers who were martyred in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. The names and regiments of these bravehearts are engraved in stone. The beautiful

flowers blooming in the garden and the Buddhist's flags waving in the wind seem to be paying silent tribute to them.

Another spectacular sight was the Nuranang waterfalls, commonly called the Jang waterfalls, just a short detour off the main road on our way to Tawang from Dirang. It falls from over the cliff originating from the northern slopes of the Sela Pass and flowing with the River Tawang. A trail of about 200 steps leads you to the base of the waterfall; however, none of us ventured down (the steps are too slippery and steep). All of us just stood transfixed and watched the sheer beauty of the volume of water gushing out. The surrounding greenery, mountains and the hill stream flowing calmly below add to the magnificence of the waterfall. Phew, what a stunning sight!

If you ever are in Arunachal, you definitely should visit the famous Tawang Monastery. This is the largest Buddhist monastery of the 16th century in India and the second largest in the world, making it the most important site of pilgrimage in India for Buddhists. It is perched on top of a mountain at an altitude of 10,000 ft, which gives a brilliant panoramic view of the entire Tawang River Valley. The monastery welcomes devotees with a vibrant gateway shaped in the form of a hut and elaborately decorated with mandalas on its roof. The monastery is a three-storeyed building that is surrounded by wall of about 925 ft. It consists of a huge assembly hall, a residential area for monks, a school and a museum. The walls of the monastery are beautifully decorated with colourful thangkas and curtains that have Buddhist symbols painted over them. The assembly hall, which is the main gathering area in the

AMAZING ARUNACHAL

A beautiful part of India, extremely green with clean environment and lots of waterfalls. Very low population density and not yet inundated by tourists like the northern hill states. Tough hill journey due to road conditions, basic but comfortable hotel accommodation. Travel up to China border at Bumla (15,200 ft) was exciting. Visited the largest Buddhist monastery in India at Tawang and also others. A short 'intrusion' into Bhutan on return journey and visit to Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati were a bonus. Good bonding within the group and excellent organization by Vivek and Vandita made it a very pleasant trip. Look forward to more of them.

- Vijay Vatal

A REJUVENATING TRIP

Arunachal was all about the journey rather than the destination! Every day brought with it new experiences. There is a certain calmness and serene vibe about this place... nobody is running or rushing... just living! It is absolutely lush green, untouched and mesmerizing! Definitely a soul-rejuvenating experience.

My most favourite places were the Thupsung Dhargyeling Monastery, which is beautifully built with a lot of architectural detailing, perched on top of a hill with breathtaking views of the Dirang valley; and going up to Bumla i.e. the Indo-China border at an altitude of 15,200 ft.

- Jigyasa Kaul



monastery, has an enormous statue of Lord Buddha.

There was a ceremony going on in the monastery the day we visited and we were glad to witness it. Many people, both young and old, in bright, colourful clothes were coming to pay their obeisance at the monastery. The ambience generated a lot of positive energy and we spent more than an hour there, visiting the museum that also showcases all kinds of local attire and other artefacts from the 14th to the 20th century. There were copper vessels, kettles, wooden cups, masks, beads, bells, gongs, manuscripts, currency notes of Tibet, shoes, silken gowns worn at that time and even had a skull of one of their great commanders. Meaningful quotes were inscribed on the walls of the monastery. One of them which touched me the most was as follows:

*'You are the Master of Yourself;
What other Master could there be?
Through calming Yourself alone,
You find a Master hard to find.'*

This truly captures the essence of Buddhism and resonated with me as well.

We also visited the Ani Gompa, another popular monastery at Tawang, operated only by nuns. This is considered one of the oldest Ani Gompas of this region.

Tawang is also host to several such gompas, monasteries, and a Buddha statue! In fact, I was surprised to discover this

above: At the revered Kamakhya Temple

beautiful imposing Buddha statue, visible even from our hotel room, and in fact, from almost anywhere in Tawang. It is located on a small hill and offers a really good view of the city of Tawang.

I also learned that the once glorious, now a small forgotten structure, Urgelling Gompa is the place where the sixth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang. In its early days, many monks used to reside here, but now, there is barely anyone. Locals visit the Gompa occasionally. Nothing much to see around, but it's worth spending a couple of minutes looking at its lost glory.

Later, one evening, a few of us went for a sound-and-light show at the Tawang War Memorial, conducted by Army personnel. It was good to watch the half-hour show – mostly about the Sino-Indian War.

Another interesting monastery we visited was a ten-year-old beautiful monastery in Dirang, recently painted in vivid colours, known as the Thubten Dhargye Ling. Lots of flowering plants in pots made it a very vibrant and colourful atmosphere. Surrounded by mountains, it made for a great scenic view.

Travelling from one monastery to another, we also briefly stopped at Dzong Fort, which was used as a jail during the Second World War. It is an old structure with

A SUNLIT VISIT TO JHAMTSE GATSAL CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY

While the adventurers were traversing the Bumla Pass, I joined a group of five to visit the Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community near Lumla, about two hours by car from Tawang. It was a beautiful sunny day and the short stop en route at a quaint pastry shop in Mangnam, offering delectable pastries and savouries, added to the cheer.

Jhamtse Gatsal, Tibetan for 'garden of love and compassion', is a community, a school and a home for about 90 children ranging from toddlers to adolescents, set up by Lobsang Phuntsok, a Buddhist monk from Tawang District in 2006. He used his experience at the Sera Jey Monastery in Mysuru district, Karnataka, and his travels around the world to actualize his dream to help the neediest children of remote villages of Tawang district and create a model community. He is ably supported by Vasudha Wanchoo as the managing director.

The school's philosophy is based on three pillars - intelligent mind, kind heart and sound body. The school provides quality 21st-century education (up to class 12 under CBSE) and experiential learning, while preserving Monpa and Tibetan cultures. There are four *Ama las* or mothers, who work round the clock, each caring for a family of 20 children. They help create a safe, loving environment so that the children build trusting relationships, and teach the children compassion. They learn how to keep themselves and their environment healthy through sustainable practices, use of clean energy and recycling.

Teke Subba, the school's secretary, and Tenzin, an *Ama la*, were our lovely companions during the visit. The sunlit and airy classrooms were humming with energy and positivity and the cosy dormitories were a safe haven. We strolled around the green slopes, inhaling pure air laced with the delicate scent of flowers. We admired the healthy vegetable garden and observed how an eco-friendly home was being built from hay and mud by experts and volunteers from the USA and India. This whetted our appetites and we were treated lovingly to a soul-satisfying meal in the school dining room with the rosy-cheeked smiling children.

As we departed, hugging our new friends, our hearts were full of the light of love and compassion, which will linger forever.

- Vandita Kaul

The Jhamtse logo is in Lentsa/Ranjana script, and is a combination of the two syllables for Love and Compassion.



local villagers living around now.

The River Kameng (earlier known as Bhareli) flows through Dirang, and on our way we stopped by and some of us ventured close to it and sat by the

side enjoying the tranquility and the gurgling sound of the river flowing by. Most of the homes not only had beautiful flowers displayed in pots on their terraces but also corncobs tied together and left for drying for the winter months. Some homes had little kitchen gardens in their backyards with kiwi trees, tomatoes and chillies being grown in abundance.

The Sangti Valley, en route to Dirang, is surrounded by bewitching mountainous ranges. It is a very popular tourist spot and driving through it on a bright, sunny, pleasant day with the River Kameng flowing by made it a perfect destination for a picnic. Finding an ideal spot for us, Amit (our tour guide) made arrangements for us to have our lunch there, a simple home-made meal of rice, dal, mixed vegetables, papad and salad. Most of us, especially the women, happily dipped our in the water, and sat on the bank collecting and admiring the fascinating seashells. The others relaxed on chairs in the sun and chatted, appreciating and soaking in the beauty of nature around us. A couple of ducks waddled by looking for leftovers. A

lovely, well-spent day!

On our way to Bomdilla one of the days, we stopped by to see the Tipi Orchidarium situated on the banks of the River Bhareli. It has more than 500 species of orchids displayed in pots and hanging baskets. Its orchid glasshouse was unfortunately not open that day, so we could just peep in 'through the looking-glass'.

Bhutan lies strategically between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam and as we sped on our way back to Guwahati, we stopped by at the Bhutan border. The imposing gate at the checkpost seemed to beckon us towards it and after talking to the security personnel at the gate, we walked through it and onto the land of Bhutan. A small tuck shop was selling juices, biscuits, beer and even their famous paan. I sat there reminiscing about my trip to Bhutan just last year! After our short break, we walked back to our Innova cars and moved on with the last leg of our journey to Guwahati, soaking in the beauty of the lush and extensive green paddy fields on both sides of the road.

Our last morning in Guwahati would have certainly been incomplete without a ferry ride on the River Brahmaputra and a visit to the famous Kamakhya Temple. So, post a sumptuous breakfast and checking out of our hotel, we set off with our luggage in tow, for our ferry ride, boarding at the Umananda ghat. It was not a fancy ferry, but the deck was huge and quite a few of us could be accommodated on it. It goes to Peacock Island and back. There is an Umananda (Shiva) temple on this island. However, we did not get off

AN UNFORGETTABLE INCIDENT

Our visit to Arunachal Pradesh in September this year was a thoroughly enjoyable and memorable one, courtesy the efforts of Vivek and Vandita Kaul. The group arrived in Guwahati on 21 September 2019, and spent nine wonderful days enjoying each other's company and visiting beautiful sites in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh. We went right up to the Sino-Indian Border at the famous Bumla Pass. On our return journey, we also made a brief foray into the Kingdom of Bhutan.

On our onward journey to Tawang Township, our group had stopped at an Army Canteen opposite the Jaswantgarh War Memorial for our midday chai. This war memorial is at an altitude of about 10,000 ft in the Tawang region, about 20 km from



the Sela Pass. At this place we met a 39-year-old gentleman, Mr Krishna Kumar, and his 70-year-old mother. His devotion, simplicity and love for his mother moved us all.

Apparently, the mother had spent her whole life attending only to domestic chores in their home in Mysuru, Karnataka. Her ignorance of her neighbourhood shocked him, and he vowed to take her around the whole country. A 20-year-old Bajaj Chetak scooter, which had been gifted to him by his late father, was their mode of transport (the scooter made him feel that his father was with them). By the time we met them, the duo had already been on the road for about 21 months, had travelled 46,700 km (in west, north and central India), and were now touring the eastern parts of the country. Their meagre baggage included two umbrellas and a five-litre plastic can for petrol. They expected to return home in another couple of months. Some of the KPA members used their contacts to give a little well-deserved publicity to the duo, which now appears to be bringing results.

- Vice Admiral Brij K. Kaul



above: A stopover on our way from Dirang

the ferry due to lack of time, but returned via the same one. We enjoyed the expanse of the River Brahmaputra, the cool breeze blowing on our faces, and the opulence of the surroundings, which all added up to the surreal and serene ambience.

Post this serene ferry ride, we went on to pay our respects to the Devi at the Kamakhya temple, particularly because it was the first day of Navratri. However, we were all in for a bit of a disappointment as special passes could not be arranged for us to visit the shrine from inside, yet all of us were very keen to have a *darshan* even if it was from outside. We were indeed blessed to be able to take a *parikrama* and the inner peace and happiness that we all felt is beyond words. The temple was brightly and colourfully decorated with red and yellow flowers, and even though it was extremely crowded, there was no jostling and pushing around. The innumerable little shops lined up on the two sides of the temple had lots to offer and in their own way added to the beauty of the sacred space.

The most wondrous part of our excursion was that even though some of us were meeting for the first time there was camaraderie amongst all nineteen of us. We shared a great sense of bonding, be it at mealtimes in the hotels we stayed at, or even during travelling and sightseeing, or when we stopped for tea or coffee and snacks. It was good fun, and a great time to connect with each other and bring back with us fond memories of our time well spent together.

An impromptu birthday celebration of Vice Admiral Brij K. Kaul added to our bonding and conviviality. The Kauls hosted a tea party for all of us at the hotel in Guwahati where we were putting up for a night. Four of us (Meera, Sadhana, Vinita and I) asked our driver, a local man, to take us to a mall to buy a gift for him from all of us. It was good fun to have a small KPA party in the Northeast!

As I landed in Delhi, I felt so blessed and fortunate to have been a part of nature and its enormous beauty for nine days. I said a prayer in silence to the Almighty for letting me experience His touch and benevolence in the serene mountains, deep valleys, the rugged terrain, the colourful wild flowers, the radiant rainbow, and for being able to interact with the simple yet, hospitable people in this northeastern part of India.

MY LAND AND YOUR LAND...

Oh pundit! Use your wit and wisdom read the destiny of land...
 my land and your land...
 showered with golden chinars
 delightful voices
 murmuring *koshur* rhythms
 sprinkled with nectar of sufi
 resonating in *kailash* the Shiva's mantras
 echoing the lyrics of Kheer Bhawani
 trailing on land and in sky
 receding clangor of *Zul Jalal*
Pantsol Kav Khata Hor
 warming the morning
 notes of welcome
 ripples in water the land's mark
 Dal - reverberating Shankaracharya
 adi and anant
 blooming lotus
 birthing souls
Om Mani Padme Hum
 Lal Ded rested in her *vakhas*
 beyond landlessness...
 god's chosen soujourn
 on my land and your land....
 the destiny of land
 my land and your land too.

- Meenakshi Khar

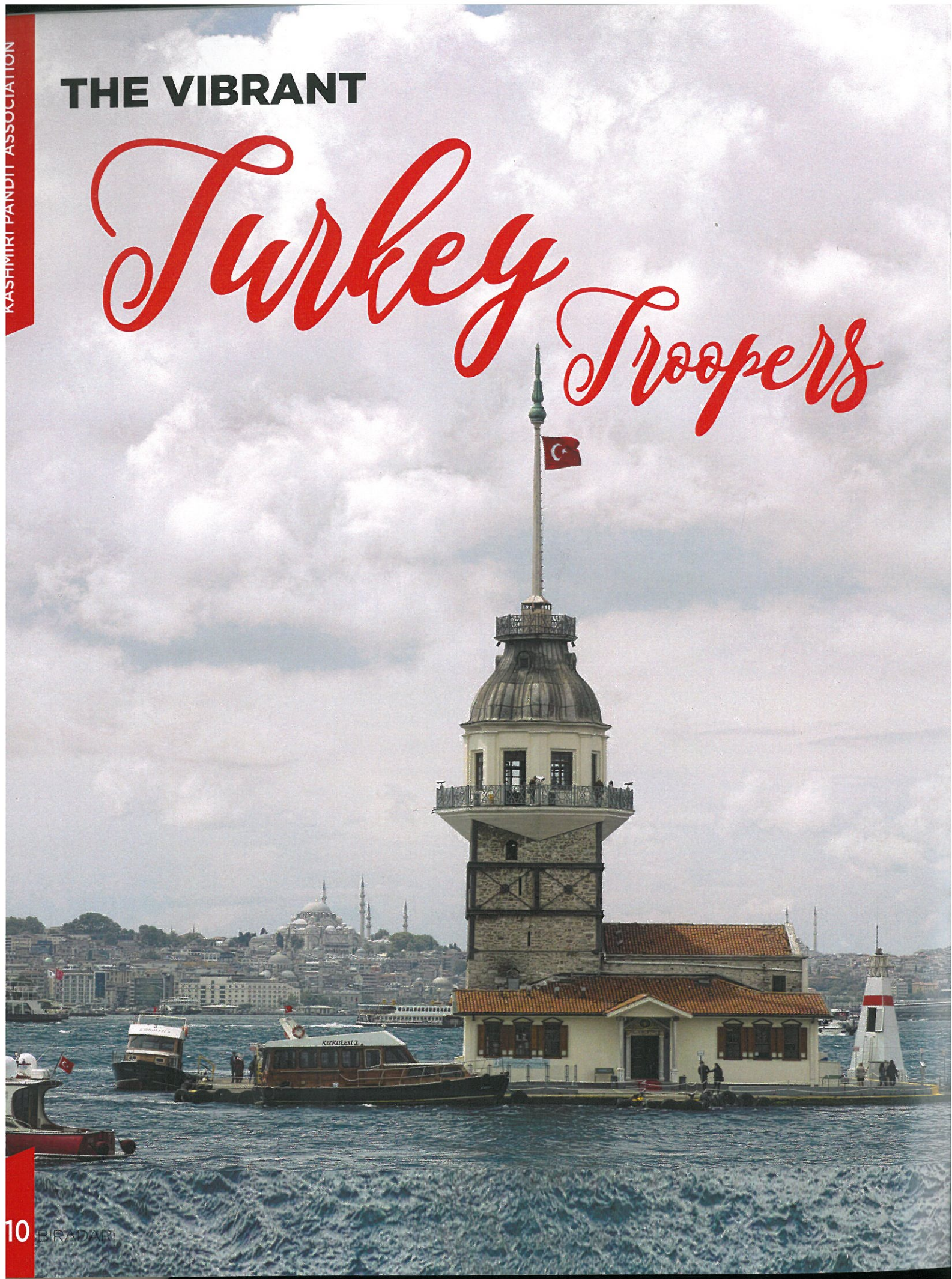
STORIES FELL FROM MY LAP...

The door opened in the backyard
 currents in the breeze
 marks of yesteryears
 leaf by leaf
 sounds of music mingling in innocence
 child in hopeful hopes
ju always came
 to say
 good-words meeting-words wise-words
 enthralling *didda*
 consoling benevolence
 sheltered guise
ju came
 to the sounds of stones shouting dread and fear
 for *didda* - the piece of paper
bab and *mauj* with trusting eyes
 tones of music, shades of
voharvod mubarakh zai doh mubarakh
 from the door in my backyard.
 Time to go, rush... tearing hurry
 eyes on the door in my backyard
 gossamer tears
 the pull of *didda*
 stories fell from my lap
 scattered sounds of disbelief
 pestering resounding
 the door unopened in my backyard.

- Meenakshi Khar

THE VIBRANT

Turkey Troopers



Dear Reader,

I return to you, this time with tales from Turkey, a land of rich historical and cultural heritage. I am excited to share my experiences of this unique geographic landscape, situated partly in Asia and partly in Europe— as history has witnessed, Turkey has served as a barrier and a bridge between the two continents. It symbolizes a confluence of cultures co-existing in today's times. So off flew the KPA Turkey Troopers, to witness this unique historical land for seven days. Subhadra Didda (Nehru), her daughter, Radhika, Salina Takru, Vivek and Vandita Kaul, Utsav Dar and I began our expedition on 4 May 2019 from Delhi. Our itinerary included the first two nights in Istanbul, the next three in Cappadocia, and the remaining part of our trip back in Istanbul.

After arriving in Istanbul at about 6 p.m., we were picked up from the airport by our hotel, the Best Western Antea Palace Hotel. Instantly, I observed a language barrier with the local people as most of them do not speak English. While our contact guide was able to navigate these issues, we had our own share of tales to tell! As soon as we reached and checked into our hotel rooms, Utsav and I ventured out for our dinner in a small but beautiful quaint restaurant just across from our hotel, with its entry through a park, and the others were to join us there soon. A large menu was presented, but we could not read it as it was written in Turkish. This led Utsav to use Google Translate so we could decide what we eat! Just in this while, Nonita (Salina's younger sister who has been in Istanbul for the past five years) came to our rescue and suggested some delicious treats to order. We ended our meal with their famous Turkish tea (served in tiny cute glasses), and a dessert, quite akin to our own *kheer*. By this time, a bit of rainfall had cooled down the night, and as we crossed the park back to our hotel, we were delighted to see and hear a group of seagulls hovering above us, almost as though they were welcoming us and wishing us a good first night's rest!

Next morning, having feasted on a sumptuous breakfast platter at our hotel, the seven of us set out to explore the city with our guide for the day. Our first stop was the Spice Market. This is a must-visit for all. What a magnificent display of colorful spices of all kinds, dry fruits, differently flavoured teas, soaps, and more. One can lose all sense of time as one meanders along the narrow street after street, intoxicated by the fragrance of spices and hypnotized by the bright colours of Turkish candy. All the shopkeepers are friendly and happy people, calling out to you to buy their wares but not perturbed even if you do not purchase from them. Packed with bags filled with goodies Turkey is famous for – such as sumac, Turkish Delight, and even a beautiful tea set! – we met our guide outside. He was waiting patiently to take us to one of our most exciting

parts of the trip – a cruise on the Bosphorus!

The Bosphorus Strait is a natural sea channel connecting the Black Sea to the north and the Sea of Marmara to the south. It is what separates Europe from Asia and offers a view of some of the most historic sites of Istanbul. The cruises on the Bosphorus (both the day and the night ones) were a highlight of our trip. Seated happily on the deck outside to get a better view, we went past the Dolmabahçe Palace that was home to the Ottoman Empire, the Topkapi Palace, Istanbul's soccer stadium, crossing under the Bosphorus Bridge, past the Rumell Fortress and the beautiful homes girdling the shores, all standing tall and awe-inspiring, as we sailed past the breathtaking and enchanting beauty of Mother Nature and of distinct old and modern architecture, all at once.

During the day, we also saw the Dolmabahçe (which means 'filled garden') Palace from inside! The largest palace in Turkey, this royal building is situated between the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara, on the European coast of the Bosphorus. As such it has European influences, yet it retains elements of traditional Ottoman palace life, and also represents features of traditional



top right: Bosphorus night cruise... enjoying our dinner;
below: At the Spice Market!

Turkish homes. The palace was built in the nineteenth century and is one of the most glamorous palaces in the world. It was the administrative centre of the late Ottoman Empire with the last of the Ottoman sultans residing there. The audio-guide service at the palace is indeed a great asset to the tourist as it takes you through a journey of not only the opulent structure of the building, but also gives you a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the sultans during the Ottoman Empire (all in the language of your choice!). The main staircase is made of crystal. The palace is decorated with beautiful chandeliers, European furniture, European and Far Eastern porcelain pieces and glasses, lush carpets, old pieces of art and a unique collection of paintings – which was most interesting to me, personally!

We were also taken to the highest point in Istanbul, the Çamlica Hill on the Asian side, to witness the majestic bird's eye view of the city and the Bosphorus. It was really windy and cold, so we all enjoyed a cup of hot cappuccino while we sat down together to soak in a stunning view of the city. The café owner was kind to offer all of us shawls to keep us warm while we chatted and sipped our beverage, gearing up for our part two of the cruise– dinner on the river!

The Bosphorus night cruise was roughly a sparkling three and a half hours of good fun and entertainment, with a three-course delicious dinner and unlimited soft drinks. It was a delectable treat, except for the mackerel that Vandita had ordered for herself. The fish was so dry that it inspired Vandita's poetic juices. Here goes her lovely poem:

A Macke-real Story

*On the Bosphorus cruise, the logical dish,
Was, of course, a course of fish.
At an elegant table, as we sat to dine,
My Pavlovian reflex was working just fine.
There laid out on a salad bed,
Was a mackerel complete with its head–
I avoided eye contact and stabbed at it,
But the fork didn't dent it even a bit;
A sharp knife was my next weapon;
The terrible deed was finally done.
A bite was all it took me to deduce,
Alas! the fish had lost its juice;
I chewed and chewed to no avail,
Not a tender spot from head to tail;
At last my jaws conceded the fight,
The mackerel lay strewn – a sorry sight.
I sighed in despair and left my chair,
On the dance floor I let down my hair.*

– Vandita Kaul (5 May 2019)

After dinner, we enjoyed the entertainment planned on the cruise. Each group had their country's flag in the centre of their respective table, reminding us of our global locations and possibilities for sharing and exchange. Popular songs from each country represented on the cruise were played and the emcee called out to the people of that particular country to come up to the centre and join him in the dancing while the music played on. The emcee, although not a very young man, kept the audience enthralled with his infectious energy and performance. The glittering entertainment package also included a traditional Turkish dance by two young men and women; a dance in which the 'mehndi ceremony' of a young bride was enacted, followed by a whirling dervish (Turkey's traditional dance form) and the finale was a belly dance by a beautiful young woman. The global and local mesh of music, revelry and dance was just too good and so much fun! We unwound after this by going to the top deck to enjoy the fantastic view of Istanbul at night, as well as revel in the cool breeze blowing on our faces. The stunning view of the city – including the palaces we had seen in the day – was beautifully illuminated at night. It was a perfect finale to a wonderful first day!

Our encounter with the dervish performance we saw on the cruise did not end there. Later during our trip our guide took us for a divine dervish experience at Hodjapasha, which showcases the city's striking cultural mosaic. Hodjapasha has been transformed from a large fifteenth century *hamam* (Turkish bath) to a hall welcoming visitors since 2008 under its high-dome ceiling to showcase this country's traditional dance form. The foyer area is used as an exhibition hall and inside the seats are arranged around the circular dance floor. Perfect lighting and live music turns

above left: Sumptuous feast at Kybele cafe, Istanbul, just across the Blue Mosque; **below:** Göreme....the 'fairy chimneys' as a backdrop





left: At the imposing gate of Dolmabahçe Palace;
right: All set for a walking tour in the Sultanahmet area, Istanbul

this historical building into a mystical place once the hour-long show begins. I was so mesmerized and transfixed by the performance that it almost felt as if I was transported to another world, and the time just flashed by within seconds. The 'Sema Ceremony,' which was the performance of that evening, is a spiritual journey of the dervishes whirling for divine love. It was an out of the world experience and one that will always remain etched in my memory for times to come.

The remaining days in Istanbul were filled with explorations of historical sites in the city: the Hagia Sophia, the Topkapi Palace Museum, the Blue Mosque, and the Şerefiye Cistern.

cover nearly every surface, stone inlays, columns and pillars of marble. It is indeed a breathtaking and spectacular amalgam of two distinct religious traditions. The walls of Hagia Sophia represent a blend between Islamic arts and symbols of Christianity. Every year millions of people visit Hagia Sophia to admire its architecture and feel its atmosphere of peace, harmony and tolerance throughout the centuries. I left the space thinking that India too could learn a lesson from this!

Another museum with a unique history is the Topkapi Palace Museum or as in Turkish 'Topkapi Sarayı Müzesi', located at one of the highest points, close to the sea. It served as the main residence and administrative headquarters of the Ottoman sultans in the fifteenth century. At the end of the Ottoman Empire it was transformed into a museum of the imperial era. The

Palace has a large collection of dainty porcelain pieces, weapons, shields and so forth, as well as an impressive display of Ottoman treasure and jewellery. There is a Holy Relics section where religiously important items are displayed, such as the mantle, footprint, a tooth and hair of the Prophet Muhammad, swords of the first caliphs, container of the Black Stone from Ka'ba, and so on. Next to this hall, there are several other rooms with the paintings of the sultans, miniatures, old clocks. The Palace is indeed magnificent and is made up of four main courtyards and many smaller buildings and rooms. It has an amazing view of the Sea of Marmara along with the Bosphorus. Walking through the palace, one is transported to a time when the Ottoman Empire was at its peak.

The unique thing about our next destination, the Blue Mosque, is that it is a functioning mosque open for tourists. However, it is closed for tourists during prayer time, so

Every year millions of people visit Hagia Sophia to admire its architecture and feel its atmosphere of peace, harmony and tolerance.

The Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya Müzesi in Turkish) in the Sultanahmet area, I found to be one of Istanbul's most impressive architectural structures. It was originally a Basilica (Roman Catholic Church) in the sixth century and became a mosque in the fifteenth century when the Ottoman Empire came into power after conquering the city. In 1935, it was converted into a museum. An amazing fact is that the dome of the Hagia Sophia is 180 ft high and 100 ft wide and was considered a revolution in the history of architecture when it was built. Today, the massive dome is surrounded by four minarets that were built during the Ottoman period. There are abundant mosaics that

before we could enter as planned, we took a detour for lunch at a cute and beautiful Turkish restaurant, called Kybele Cafe Restaurant, right across from the mosque. From the moment we stepped in, we were awestruck: not only was the place beautifully decorated with quaint old cameras, exquisite porcelain plates and colourful Turkish lamps, but they also served us flavourful food. And to top it all, the divine baklava was served with tahini ice cream! Did you know that the Blue Mosque is also known as Sultanahmet Camii? It was built between 1609 and 1616 and contains the tomb of the founder, Sultan Ahmed I, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire during this period. The mosque has six

minarets (all others have four) to show the supremacy of Sultan Ahmed. This, however, did cause some controversy as the only other mosque with six minarets was the Prophet's mosque in Mecca. This problem was overcome by adding a seventh minaret at Mecca.

There was a serpentine queue at the entrance and as the queue moved along excruciatingly slowly, Salina and Utsav opted not to go in. The rest of us stood our ground to enter and experience the beauty we had heard so much about. The women are supposed to cover their head and no one is allowed to wear footwear inside. The mosque – well lit by large windows – has a huge central prayer space, which is well carpeted and the high ceiling is lined with hand-painted ceramic blue tiles (hence the name) featuring different patterns of tulips, carnations, lilies and many more. This striking building with its sweeping architecture is considered one of the most majestic Ottoman mosques.

technicolour display of hundreds of lanterns hanging from ceilings and sitting on shelves add to the overwhelming experience of shopping. Just like in the Spice Market, one can easily get lost inside in the corridors of the bazaar and lose all sense of timing. So we split up into two groups of Vivek and Vandita, and Utsav and me, and decided to meet outside after three hours (which did seem little for shopping in such a big bazaar!). Going through a maze of shops selling Turkish rugs, beautiful ceramic ware, coffee sets, antiques, copper pots, leather bags, Evil Eye key chains, delicate bracelets and beautiful jewellery... there is much to choose from and buy as souvenirs! The shopkeepers appear friendly and chatty, and like to know the country you are from. Although tiring, it was a fun-filled experience. Back at the hotel, we took delight in showing our purchases to one another!

On our last day in Istanbul, though, we discovered

The technicolour display of hundreds of lanterns hanging from ceilings and sitting on shelves add to the overwhelming experience of shopping.

Personally, I was not as impressed as I had expected to be; perhaps, I had heard so much about it that I had built up my expectations very differently.

A visit to Istanbul would certainly be incomplete without a trip to the Grand Bazaar and so off we trudged to the market after our tryst with the Blue Mosque. However, Subhadra Didda, Radhika and Salina went back to the hotel where Nonita was coming to pick them up to take them to her home. The Grand Bazaar is one of the oldest covered markets in the world with over 4,000 shops! The

something unexpected. Vivek, Vandita and I were strolling along the lanes of Sultanahmet area when we came upon a transparent building-like structure from a distance. Wondering what it was we ventured close to it and found that it was the Şerefiye Cistern. The cistern was built by the emperor Theodosius II in the fifth century to store and distribute water to the city of Istanbul in those days. It was located beneath the former Town Hall building and was discovered when the Town Hall was demolished in 2010 by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality– fortunately, without any damage to the historical monument! The interior and the exterior of this cistern was restored and was preserved through the use of steel girders and a glass surface on the exterior. The roof is supported by marble columns. It has been beautifully restored and renovated combining ancient and modern architecture. We went down by a lift and there was some water at the bottom to give us a feel of what it must have been like when it was functional. Happy at having made an unplanned discovery on our own, we went off to find a good place to have lunch.

Our next stop for three days, Cappadocia – an hour's flight from Istanbul– was another very exciting sojourn. It was as though we moved into a totally different time period and space! Cappadocia, a semi-arid region in central Anatolian region of Turkey, incorporates the provinces of Aksaray, Nevşehir, Niğde, Kayseri and Kırşehir. It is known for its distinctive 'fairy chimneys' – tall, cone-shaped rock formations clustered in Monks Valley, Göreme and elsewhere. This place is so picturesque, unique and magical that words are not enough to describe the beauty. Its peculiar landscape is what makes it all the more surreal, especially

left: Enjoying a bright, sunny, windy day at Cappadocia



with its famous hot-air balloon ride – our primary reason for visiting this city.

After checking in at the Roma Cave Suite Hotel we were free to explore on our own that evening. After freshening up, we set off for the tiny, beautiful marketplace on foot, not without a little bit of adventure by Vandita. She had stepped out to have a little walk while everybody was getting together and, unfortunately, slipped and fell into an open manhole just outside the hotel, and her foot got stuck in it. Not wanting to lose her shoe, she took help from a gentleman standing close by and asked him to hold on to her shoe while she took out her foot carefully. The chivalrous man obliged. Mercifully, although the foot was slightly swollen, our brave girl was up and about right after applying a cold compress and having good old Arnica. We did get the hole outside covered by the hotel authorities lest anyone else suffer the same fate, and went about the city to scout for a meal for our starving and perturbed troopers. On the suggestion of some local people we went to the Büyük Adana Restaurant, which had a lovely terrace with a panoramic view of the fascinating township.

The next day, after enjoying our lavish spread at breakfast, we started off on our day's trek accompanied by our guide, Ahmet. We took a small break at a lookout point called Secret Garden and witnessed the beautiful rock formations at Göreme. These rock formations or the fairy mushroom chimneys, as we see them today, are a result of the solidification of lava that erupted from three active volcanoes about 12 million years ago. A fascinating natural formation that distinctly characterizes this city!

Our second destination was the Göreme Open Air Museum, the centre of monastic life in Cappadocia from the fourth to the thirteenth century. The founder of the monastery life, St. Basil, aimed to bring all people together. The museum resembles a vast monastic complex composed of scores of refectory monasteries placed side-by-side, each with its own fantastic church. It is one of Turkey's Unesco World Heritage sites.

Pottery has always been vital in Cappadocia and dates back to the Hittites period (around 2000 BCE), so a visit to a pottery workshop at Sultan Ceramic in Avanos was a must for us. This company has been in existence since the past 50 years and had beautiful pieces of ceramic ware for sale and a demonstration of how they are made. The red clay of the longest river in Turkey, the River Red, is used for making

pottery on a kick-wheel system. After the demonstration, Utsav tried his hand at making a piece of pottery, and watching him, one could tell this was not an easy feat!

Post a buffet lunch in a restaurant called Han (meaning Kingdom) we were taken to the Alkazar Leather Centre in Uçhisar. A short live fashion show was put up for us and it was really enthralling to watch the young people model really smart leather jackets, some of which were reversible. They had a huge showroom, with a vast variety of all kinds of jackets for one to try on and buy. How could one resist buying these after such an exhibition? Vivek and Utsav bought one each for themselves and maybe they will twin at our next KPA meet-up wearing these!

Did you know that pigeons have had vital significance in Cappadocia? When we visited the Kocabag winery in Uçhisar, we learned that their droppings are used to make the soil fertile. So much so that the city has named a beautiful viewing point near the vineyard Pigeon Valley! We were welcomed in Kocabag with warm salutations and invited to taste their delicious award-winning wines! Don't miss out on their rose wines; they're unique.

The next day, sparkling and fresh with renewed energy, we got into our vehicle for our day's jaunt. Our first stop was Monk's Valley. The valley gets its name from the Christian monks who isolated themselves from society and did not work even for their basic needs. They simply prayed for the presence of God in their lives and did not attach any importance to earthly things. Unsurprisingly, this secluded valley is also unique visually. It has several extraordinary fairy chimneys that never cease to amaze you.

Another interesting site to visit in Cappadocia is the Özkonak

Underground city. There are more than 200 underground cities and about 30 of them have been opened for tourism. It is said that the Christians carved these underground cities to protect themselves against the invading Romans. The one we visited had four floors and although the tunnels are very narrow, the circulation of air inside is good. Ahmet took us through the various interconnected rooms built for protection, storage of essentials, and fodder for animals. The temperature inside was exceedingly cool. This was a very interesting insight into the lives of the people in those times.

There were tiny shops outside, where we picked up knick-knacks and then went on for lunch at a restaurant

TURKEY TIDBITS

Despite the language barrier, many Turkish words are similar to our Urdu/Hindi words and seemed so familiar.

Kitap for Kitab

Kagid for Kagaz

Badem for Badam

Helva for Halwa

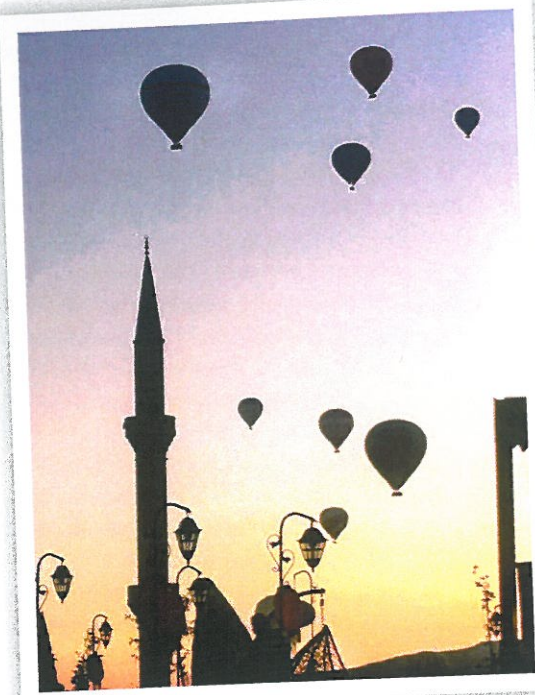
Peynir for Paneer

Köfte for Kofta

Wherever some construction work was going on causing inconvenience to the public, the word 'Dikkat' was put up on a placard.

Wherever a monument is undergoing repair work, it is covered by huge white plastic sheets with the sketch of the actual building so as to retain the aesthetic beauty of the building.

Most of the people are very fond of Hindi movies and knew about Shah Rukh Khan. In Cappadocia, Katrina Kaif seemed to be a hot favourite. And if you are strolling around in Cappadocia you may even come across a self-proclaimed Shammi Kapoor look-alike! Keep a look out for him if you visit any time soon!



Hot-air balloons silhouetting in the morning sky

with a beautiful view in an old, Greek village, Çavuşin, where we could see the abandoned caves of the Greek people. Before we sat down to our lunch, we went for a short but pleasant walk along the River Red. A quick stop at the Love Valley panoramic viewing point, just taking in the beauty of the fairy chimneys was indeed love-ly!

A visit to an onyx workshop called Ozler Onyx followed, where a display of the most exquisite pieces of jewellery did enchant us, especially the Sultanahmet stone. This workshop was located near the Uchisar Castle, which is at Cappadocia's highest point, formed as a result of volcanic eruptions. The castle, dating back to the second century, and now a museum, was used as a watchtower by the Romans, the Seljuk empire and the Ottoman empire, particularly during the Arab and the Mongol invasions. The people could control the whole area and, because of its height, were able to see the enemy's advance from a distance. There are a lot of caves inside the castle, used for food storage, living rooms, wineries and graves. Graves are located on the top of the castle. These caves are man-made and till the 1960s, the local people were still living in them, but soon after it was included in the World Heritage list by Unesco, the government financed the local people to help them move to other houses.

Our days in Cappadocia were hectic and lovely and time just flew by. Unfortunately, we could not enjoy the most sought-after experience in this city—the Hot Air Balloon ride. All the three days we were there it was too windy, so all rides were cancelled. It was not for us to experience the thrill of being high up in the air...sigh! Just our luck! However, the day we were flying out of Cappadocia, we woke up to see countless hot-air high up in the air—painting the skyline with their multicoloured hues, ensuring that we receive a vibrant goodbye! So long, Turkey, we seven will fondly remember our sparkling times together with you.

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River Saraswati

A MYTH OR REALITY?

BY COL VALMIKI KATJU

Kashmiri Pandits may be having different *gotras*, but all of them are Saraswat Brahmins. As the name suggests, the title Saraswat indicates the affiliation with the so-called mythical, Rigvedic River Saraswati. What was so powerful an aura which the river generated that the people who lived on its banks wanted to associate with it in perpetuity? What is so special about this river that makes an entire race faithfully believe of its presence without having any physical experience of its existence? What is that powerful enigma that virtually attracts a sea of humanity (over a million on auspicious days like Makar Sankranti or Mauni Amavasya) to have a dip at Triveni or confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati.

The attachment for me, personally, is due to my good fortune of being born on the banks of the three great rivers, at the holy city of Prayagraj. Not only I, but my wife and two children are also fortunate to have been born at this sacred *bhoomi*. This attachment continued due to my frequent visits to Uttarkashi and Gangotri. Instead of taking a hot water shower at the ashram I used to walk over to the Bhagirathi every day and have a bath in the icy cold waters of the river and feel refreshed and rejuvenated. This is *shraddha* (literal meaning *shrad* or truth and *dha* to hold) or unflinching faith in the validity of Vedantic scriptures.

The question arose whether the river is a figment of imagination, its existence a myth, and a belief, which could not be corroborated with scientific evidence. To further reinforce this theory the believers associated the river with a goddess, a symbol of reverence which could not be questioned. Those foreigners who ruled the land ensured that the controversy be put to rest and tried to convince the people that its existence was simply humbug. But our ancient rishis, who wrote the Vedas, must have had really imaginative minds to give a so-called mythical river a name, associate it with our early civilizations and even revere it like a goddess with certain glorifying attributes!

Present-day scientists say that new evidence could unearth the River Saraswati.

The legend of this subterranean river has lived on in India since times immemorial. This river is vividly described in the Vedas, and the hymns eulogizing its life support to a grand civilization are evidence to its importance. In a new radio programme, Madhur Jaffrey recounts the legend of the River Saraswati and explores startling new evidence that it may not have been a myth after all.

Vast and awesome, the Saraswati's holy waters are supposed to have flowed from the Himalayas passing through the fertile plains of north-west India and into the Arabian Sea, nourishing the land along the way. But as centuries passed, nobody could find the reason for its sudden disappearance. Myth, belief and religion came together and the Saraswati passed into the realm of folklore.

The modern search for the Saraswati was first sparked by an English engineer called C.F. Oldham in 1893 when he was riding his horse along the dry bed of a seasonal Rajasthan river called the Ghaggar. He was surprised to note that the Ghaggar, when it flowed, was a small stream and there was no reason for its bed to be up to 3km wide in places unless it occupied the former course of a much larger river - the Saraswati. Although he accepted that there were great changes in the hydrography of Punjab and

Sindh within the recent period of geology, this sudden drying up of a large river was illogical, unconvincing and could not be explained. The discovery of a vast prehistoric civilization that lived along its banks has further reinforced the belief that the Saraswati has been found.

Dr J.R. Sharma, who heads the Remote Sensing Services Centre in Jodhpur, which is mapping the images, is slowly getting convinced that a major tectonic movement was responsible in the disappearance of Saraswati. This tectonic movement may have blocked its flow and it went underground without a trace, leading to the formation of our present-day Thar Desert. Sharma and his team are definitely of the view that they

This river is vividly described in the Vedas, and the hymns eulogizing its life support to a grand civilization, are evidence to its importance.

have found the Saraswati and are excited about what this discovery could mean for India. If its underground flow is substantial, it could be tapped as an enormous water source. They are working with India's leading water experts who are using satellite imagery as clues.

Not far from the international border with Pakistan, Indian earth scientists are carrying out an extraordinary programme to map the course of this river. Scientists have accepted the existence of what they call 'Ganga Water Machine', a huge reservoir of water flowing beneath the riverbeds, which are potential sources of water for irrigation. Similarly, scientists are using giant drilling rigs to probe deep into the dry, arid earth of the Thar, pulling out undisturbed layers of soil and sediment which will provide the scientists with credible evidence to the existence of this river.

Water engineers are exploring the region's ancient riverbeds for what they call groundwater - underground reservoirs that contain perfectly potable water. If they are successful, their discovery could transform the lives of thousands of inhabitants who currently experience harsh droughts during the summer months. Dr K.S. Srivastava of Rajasthan State Groundwater Board is also of the view that these ancient buried channels point to the existence of Saraswati. His team of scientists is convinced of the presence of a large water body flowing through this area and says excitedly that carbon dating has revealed that the water they are finding is 4,000 years old, which corresponds to the dates and time period of the River Saraswati.

S.R.N. Murthy, a researcher who conducted a geological survey, published in the *Indian Journal of History of Science*, supports this view. 'The Vedic River Saraswati is not a myth. It was a live river in the Vedic time, and irrigated large areas

SARASWATI (GHAGGAR-HAKRA)

PAKISTAN

Indus

Jhelum

Chenab

Ravi

Satluj

ADI BADRI

BHIRRANA

HANSI

GANGANAGAR

HANUMANGARH

INDIA

KACHCHH

Coming together,
glorious,
loudly roaring,
Saraswati, Mother
of Floods...
- *The Rigveda*

supporting the Vedic Culture to a considerable extent,' he writes. 'Its extinction is due to geological changes in the subcontinent.'

Dr Mayank Vahia, a scientist working at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, who has written a report in *DNA India*, is of the view that there was only one river that flowed between the Rivers Yamuna and Sutlej. In India it is called the Ghaggar, and as it moves into Pakistan, it becomes the Hakra. Apart from the monsoon period its riverbed stands dry today. However, ground surveys and satellite imagery clearly indicates that it was once a huge river. 'The Harappan or Indus Valley Civilization – the world's largest civilization of the time – covered vast areas of modern-day Pakistan and western India from Kashmir to Gujarat,' writes Dr Vahia. 'Its cities were spread across what appears to be a waterless desert in the western part of the Indian subcontinent. A careful plot of these sites suggests they lie along the path of a dried riverbed, and the river, if filled up, would rival the Indus in size. It could have arisen in the upper reaches of the Shivalik Hills in the foothills of the Himalayas, and then flowed west.'

French scholar Michael Danino, in his book on the River Saraswati, is convinced of its existence. With full authority, scientific evidence, passionate conviction and childlike excitement, he states that when it flowed some 5,000 years ago, it gave birth to the most mind-boggling, massive and advanced ancient civilization that existed. The almost million square kilometres of land that formed the Indus–Saraswati Civilization saw the development of the most sophisticated methods of urban planning in the ancient world, a system of standardized weights and measures that jolts the mind out of slumber, a social order that was more egalitarian than has ever existed anywhere since. When the river stopped flowing – severely depleted by the "double desertion" of the Sutlej and Yamuna – it caused a complete abandonment of the Indus Saraswati sites, with its residents moving to the Gangetic plains and giving birth to a new phase in the evolution of the Vedic dharma which saw its birth amidst the fertile plains of the Indus Saraswati.

More than 1,000 archaeological sites have been found on the course of this river and they date from 3000 BCE. One of these sites is the prehistoric town of Kalibangan, south of present-day Suratgarh, in northern Rajasthan. The town has provided valuable information about the people who actually lived on the banks of the Saraswati during the Bronze Age.

From the artefacts discovered, archaeologists do certainly believe that there were priests, farmers, merchants and very advanced artisans and craftsmen living there. Highly sophisticated seals on which there is evidence of writing have also been found, indicating that these people were literate, but unfortunately the seals have never been deciphered. They may well hold the clue to the mystery of what happened to the Saraswati and whether it has really been found again. An Italian hydrologist, Robert Raikes is of the view that Kalibangan had to be abandoned because the River Saraswati (Ghaggar) dried up. This has been reinforced by radiocarbon dating, which suggests that the

approximate date of vacation of the city was around 2000–1900 BCE.

According to our ancient religious texts, the River Saraswati was so dominating in the psyche of the then settlers that it inspired the Rig Veda to be composed on its banks. Saraswati, meaning 'having many pools,' got associated with the goddess Saraswati, and is always depicted sitting on the banks of a flowing river. It started being revered as a goddess, of knowledge, music, arts, wisdom and nature. She became a part of the twin trinity – Saraswati/Brahma, Lakshmi/Vishnu and Parvati/Shiva.

In our religious texts, the Saraswati has been described as huge, far superior and glorious than the Sindhu and the Ganges. Since its existence was controversial, it was dismissed as a mere legend, a figment of poetic imagination. However, the recent revelations are throwing new light on its existence.

It is interesting to note that the Rig Veda is explicit about its existence and approximate location. According to the ancient text, the majestic river flowed between its two tributaries, the Yamuna and Sutlej, unhindered, from the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea. Later, geological changes diverted the Sutlej towards the Indus and the Yamuna towards the Ganga, resulting in it drying up in the Thar Desert. Another theory is that due to high levels of tectonic movements the river changed its course completely, flowing underground and joining the Ganga at Allahabad. Also, according to recent geological studies, major seismic activity in the Himalayan region caused the rising of the Bata–Markanda Divide. This resulted in the blockage of the westward flow of Saraswati, forcing the water to open the Yamuna Tear and flow in south-easterly direction.

Even our ancient texts, the Brahmanas, mention that the river was in full flow till a massive tectonic buckling-in made it dive under and its flow altered from the southwesterly to the southeasterly direction. It continued to flow underground till it reached the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna at Prayag. Its major tributaries, the Sutlej changed its course towards the Indus and the Yamuna towards the Ganges. It is presumed that the glorious civilization shifted to the banks of Saraswati and the people, who called themselves Saraswats, moved further south and settled in present-day Maharashtra and the Konkan region. One can distinguish them by their fair complexion and light eyes. Even today, the Saraswat Brahmins continue to follow their ancient culture, venerating the lost river as their mother goddess of knowledge, dance and music.

The river remained a mystery so much so that its mention in the ancient texts has invariably been termed as mythological reference. Now, experts believe that Saraswati flowed as a large beautiful river taking a southwesterly course passing through the plains of Haryana and Rajasthan. In this long journey, during her monsoonal flow it made western Rajasthan, which is now a stark desert, look green and fertile.

Many scholars have identified the Vedic River Saraswati with the River Ghaggar–Hakra, which flows in northwestern India and Pakistan.

This was proposed by several scholars in the 19th and early 20th century. Satellite images in possession of the ISRO and ONGC have confirmed that the major course of a river ran through the present-day River Ghaggar.



above: Ruins of Kalibangan near present-day Suratgarh

Scientists are categorical in their findings that the absence of a prominent river from the map is not something unnatural, as long time periods can have drastic impact leading to geo-morphological changes. In their latest geological probe, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Mumbai, has made a breakthrough in its search for the existence and probable location of the mythical River Saraswati. The Rajasthan Ground Water Department undertook the task to locate the river with the collaboration of BARC and Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad (a wing of ISRO) in 1998. Borewells in the Thar Desert have located water at a depth of 35 to 40 metres and the paleo channels from 15 to 40 metres thus implying huge resources of water. The Government of Rajasthan has increased the number of borewells to 50 in two months and has earmarked Rs 40 million for the project

These paleo-channels have numerous tentacles throughout the Thar Desert which reveal the traces of a mighty river which once flowed through the desert. More than 1200 ancient settlements on the basin of the River Saraswati have been dug out, giving clinching evidence of existence of a mighty river, which sustained maritime civilization and metal-based economy prior to 3,000 BCE. Archaeologists have also found several zones of less saline under-ground water which is dated more than 5,000 years old.

The question, however, regarding the true identity of the River Sarawati remains unresolved, but with the dogged determination of Indian scientists the mystery is close to be unraveled by the following evidences:

HYDROGEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES: Lunkaransar, Didwana and Sambhar, the Ranns of Kachchh, Jaisalmer, Pachpadra, etc., are a few of the notable lakes, formed as a result of the changes. Although the water is highly saline today the proof to their freshwater descent is the occurrences of gastropod shells in these lake beds.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES: In the basin of the River Saraswati, there are four Harappan and pre-Harappan sites in Punjab, in addition to the sites in Rajasthan and U.P. These sites are located at Ropar, Nihang Khan, Bara and Sirsa valley. Historical evidence suggests that the Harappans entered through the Indus Valley into Kalibangan valley on the left bank of the Ghaggar and spread to Punjab along the River Saraswati. Carbon dating of the material at Kalibangan suggests that Harappan culture flourished around 2500 BCE in India and existed for 1,000 years.

EVIDENCES FROM REMOTE SENSING AND GIS: A remote-sensing study of the Indian desert reveals numerous signatures of paleo channels in the form of curvilinear and meandering

courses, which is identified by the tonal variations. The River Saraswati could be traced through these paleo-channels as a migratory river. Its initial course flowed close to the Aravalli ranges and in stages, took west and northwesterly shifts till it coincided with the dry bed of the River Ghaggar. There it is believed to have gone underground.

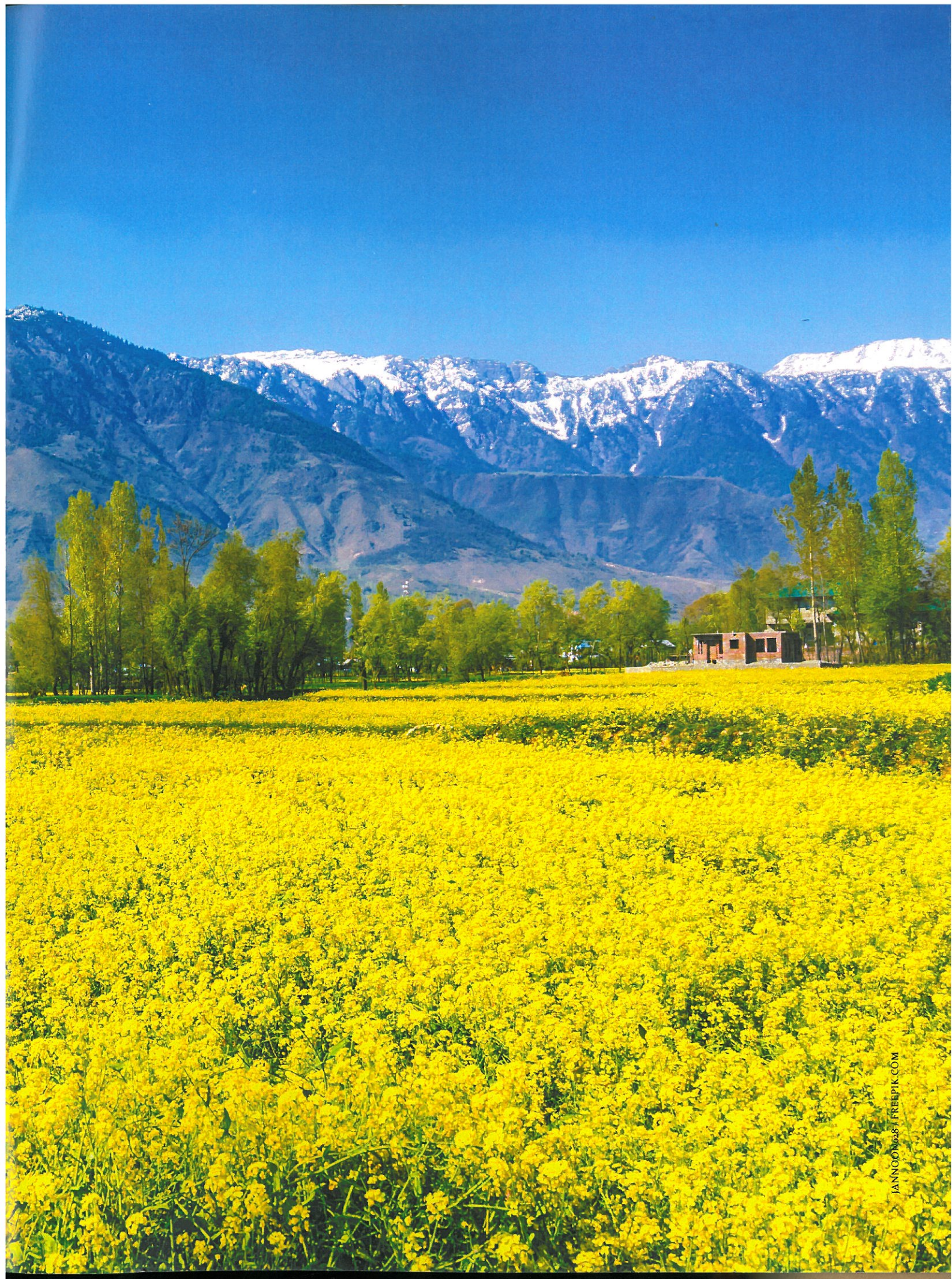
Sarawati, in a sense is like modern India, having forgotten its glittering past and glorious heritage. With modern technology, efforts are on to uncover its mysteries. Scientists are of the considered view that to term Saraswati as mythical is unhistorical and unscientific.

In fact, our ancient texts and modern technology should now combine to trace step by step the evolution of Saraswati. It should remind us, particularly the people of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab and Uttarakhand that the greatest and most ancient Vedic civilization flourished in these areas, and that the Vedas were written in the settlements along the course of the river and its tributaries.

Allowing the propagation of a false view of one's own cultural heritage is not tolerance but self-degradation. The scientific evidences gathered indicate that both India and Pakistan were home to the oldest as well as the greatest civilization, which flourished along the Saraswati-Indus river basin.

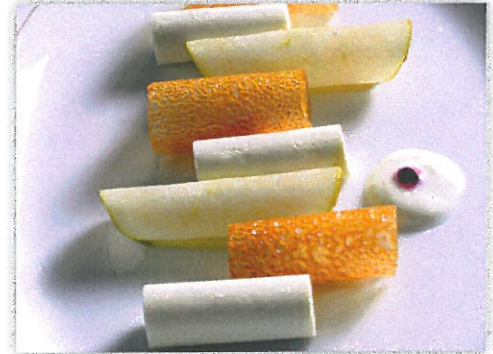
As custodians of this great tradition it is incumbent on us to continuously make efforts in working out more accurate view of our history. In the settlements along these rivers, the Vedas were composed, which are a source of invaluable and profound knowledge, and the common heritage of everyone who lives in this ancient land.

References: Kind courtesy free Wikipedia; **Acknowledgements:** Madhur Jaffrey, in her BBC Broadcast on 'The Miracle River'; C.F. Oldham, 'Saraswati, The River that Never Was'; Dr J.R. Sharma, Head, Remote Sensing Services Centre, Jodhpur; Dr K.S. Srivastava, Rajasthan State Groundwater Board; Dr Mayank Vahia, 'Did the Mythical Saraswati of the Ancient Vedas Really Exist?'; Michael Danino, 'The Lost River: On the Trail of the Saraswati'; S.R.N. Murthy, 'The Vedic River Saraswati - A Myth or A Fact? A Geological Approach'



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