

TRASI BEACH SA

We're running behind schedule along the unending coast, full speed ahead in the direction of Udipi, eager to get to Sringeri by evening. Our first ground rule, no road travel after sunset had been broken on day one of the journey. The xxxx kms we have covered have been largely thanks to the resilience of our wonderful mates, Ayub, Sawat Bhai and Mihir and last and not least Sumit, who has driven with caution and ease, due relief provided by Shai and after dark, Jangle and KG. The drivers seem to have had a rest period in Yellapur and fully charged take us through this fast speeding coastline that none in our crew have travelled before. The road curves off the coast, we are on a hill ascending rapidly pleasantly disoriented by the absence of the green blue sea. Suddenly it appears down below us, a sandy beach, a gentle shore, fishing boats tied to rocks and trees, nets spread out drying in the delicate sun. We pause for a rest, and jump out of the car to take in, rather take this scenery. I try to run down the steep cliff, eager to perch myself midway on a loose rock, eager to listen to the sea, feel its calm, its quiet, its slowly building tumult as dark clouds move from the horizon. A tape is required. I abandon my desire and respond to the call of duty. Silence. Rolling. Our unit sits by the road and attempts to appreciate the beauty as the camera records. A slow, gentle pan from us, tilting down to the fishing boats and zooming out to encompass the vast seascape. I can't savour beauty, when our end is to capture it.

Back at sea level, the sea runs parallel to the road again. Water bodies are locked on the left of the road forming tiny lagoons and back waters. Lush and green in the pre monsoon summer, coconut trees and fishing boats recurring with regularity, all too idyllic to the eye. Strangely human form is absent, the road ahead, empty. We have passed stretches of such like Elysian fields, a particularly stunning vista has passed us by from yet another bridge. Saeed does an about turn to backtrack and capture. The rest of the crew drives ahead. It's early evening now and the sight of Trasi beach, as a board tells us, forces Sumit to stop. "We'll wait for the camera car to catch up", he says. KG is about to protest, but soon relents, this beach is too beautiful to miss. We turn up the volume in the deck in the green Sumo. Fleetwood Macs Tusk distorts out, its jungle beats drawing us out of the cars. We break into an impromptu dance, Raju, Parvej, Barkat, Ravi, Sawat, even shy Ayub and stuck up Brown. Right leg and right hand, left leg and left hand, we march and bop to the beat. I am reminded of a Films Division cartoon, one in a line of many memorable features in the early 80's, this one, a classic all of us grew up to in the days of only one channel, Doordarshan. *Ekta ki jeet*, The victory of unity. Egg shaped men, flapping their elbows like 'chickens' argue in gibberish over the cutting of a tree. The film ends with the different coloured men circle dancing round the tree in a left left right right movement. I articulate this random flashback. It takes all of us to different stages in our childhood, and regressing for the time being we dance in a circle on the road and then fall apart, laughing hysterically, arguing with each other in the deep throated gibberish of the line drawn egg men.

(Owowowowowowowwahhh Owowowowowowowoweeeah!!!!!!)

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The camera car drives up. Saeed looks in horror at his crew behaving like hooligans hanging out on a highway. But, the master was away and the ambience too spectacular for the children not to play. The classroom comes to order. Sumit, unanimously bestowed the title of monitor is pushed forward to speak with Sirji. He walks up confidently, spits the frog out of his throat and asks Saeed whether we can go 'frolic on the beach'. To our surprise, Saeed agrees. The class scatters almost instantaneously, as we all run into the water. The sun is close to setting as we 'frolic on the beach' - salwar kameez, jeans - n- all. "Samundar mein nahaake aur bhi namkeen ho gayi HO HO HO" Laxmikant Pyarelal's hit rings in my head. Visions of the one and only Amitabh Bacchan flash before me. He stomping the water doing his famous 1-2,1-2, hands up - leg down, hands up - leg down (dance director ji ab aap jaa sakthe hain) with a very wet she (Parveen Babi in little bikini) by his side. OOOOH I love it. But I've just succeeded in destroying my Trasi moment. This wet salwar kameez look is just too too too...NOT for me. Completely embarrassed with my behaviour, I step out of the water with clinging clothes-n-all. Eat your heart out Parveen!

Through all this the camera continues to roll. We pile into the cars. Wet. Sandy. Salty. Tired.

The stop at Trasi beach - an answer to my prayers. Finally I was able to actually soak in and experience all that the landscape offered. But we've lost our race against time. We're never going to reach Sringeri before dark. It's already 6:15pm. So, into the hills of Karnataka and up to the Sringeri 'math' we go. A math? What's a 'math'?

I ask Shaina, sure that the all-knowing research girl will have an answer. It's a pilgrim centre she replies. Thank you Sherlock, that bit I've always known, but what does the word math mean? And what is its particular significance to a documentary on the 50 years of India's independence? Between Sumit and Shaina they figure that a math is the headquarters of a particular sect or following of a particular saint. In this case the saint is Adi Shankaracharya and the beautifully located Sringeri math is a well renowned pilgrim centre for his followers. A deep-seated religious fervour is what governs the lives of most of us Indians', and at a pilgrim centre this fervour is accentuated and therefore it becomes more overt and easily manifested. Through our numerous conversations with Saeed, we figure that it is this fervour that Saeed is attempting to comprehend. Sringeri is the most revered pilgrim centre in all of South India and therefore an obvious choice of destination for such an analysis.

The sun begins to dip in the horizon. Suddenly it disappears and the moon slides in. Sumit's in his element. Driving at night with darkness all around and just 1 lone headlight on the road before you, shadows darting in and out of the trees, crickets filling your ears. He turns up the music and rolls down the windows. A cool breeze is blowing outside - a rise in altitude no doubt. The ghats are upon us, and we hit our first hairpin bend. Sumit manoeuvres it comfortably with Abhinav alongside holding his breath. I look through the rear window and watch the rest deal with the bend with ease. Shaina and I get cosy in the back and laugh at the craziness we'd started at Trasi beach. Huge grown men metamorphosed into 5 year olds! Laughing. Giggling. Shouting as though entranced, hypnotised by the echoes, drawn into the organised chaos of 'Tusk'. Sumit, Ayub, KG, Barkat, Abhinav, all our unit hulks slowly one after the other, round and round in a circle dancing on the highway, waving to other bewildered travellers driving by. Everyone seemed equally horrified as some magical power seemed to take control of limbs, facial muscles, and vocal chords.

Don't say that you love me!
 Just tell me that you want me!
 Tusk! Tusk! Tusk! Tusk!
 Tusk! Tusk! Tusk! Tusk!
 Tusk! Tusk! Tusk! Tusk!
 Tusk! Tusk! Tusk! Tusk!
 Tusk!

'Tusk' 1979 - a rock version of a tribal march. Fleetwood Mac's most experimental track with its Burundian-European chanting, a marching band, polyrhythmic, countermelody, Ghanaian drum beat, with simple yet ambiguous lyrics and a circling array of indiscernible voices, that build and crescendo into each other. At that moment at Trasi beach, we loved it all. Highway No 15 will never be the same. Pure and simple excitement just to be free. Free from the master. Free from the emotional upheavals in Yellapur. Free from the walls of the Sumo. And free at last to finally soak in the landscape.

Suddenly, the moon disappears behind the clouds and the sky is enveloped with dark and heavy rain clouds. I look at my 3-year-old black swatch watch. It's still ticking. It's 8pm. Shaina and I exchange a glance. Our rain dance worked!!!! The clouds explode above. It begins to pour and pour and pour. Catastrophe hits. All our luggage, equipment, trunks and other stuff loaded onto the carrier are getting soaking wet. We stop. Everybody leaps out and in a matter of a few minutes everything is unloaded, space is made in the dikkies and reloaded inside and onto the carriers. The blue tarpaulin is pulled out and thrown over the carriers, tied up, and we're ready to go. But go where? We'd been travelling for 4 hours already and hadn't seen any sign of a town or milestones of familiar places, or anything. Is this route right? Where are we? How far are we from anywhere? Saeed's anxious questioning begins. The rain holds up for a bit giving us time to pull out the maps and confer. We'd just been driving and driving. And here we are now on the ghats at the brink of a storm, and if that first hairpin bend we encountered is any reflection, we're in for a pretty treacherous drive. As Saeed and Sumit (no more class monitor, but navigator) pour over the map, KG comes around doling out wafers and biscuits for each car. We hadn't eaten since 1pm and since the frolic on the beach we were all starving. Ravi - our production guy cum mumbai Mahim bhai - slips into his bhai mode. Ravi's really cool. Very chilled out. Very mumbai. Very bhai type. Shaina & I get along with him really well. He's obnoxious, chauvinistic and loud and a typical Bombay boy with a rasta chaap sense of humour-n-all. Something we both miss a lot, in the midst of shudh Hindi interspersed with attempts at Urdu. " You know the shopkeeper at the wafer ka dukaan told me that tigers have been found in these forests. I swear. I'm not lying. He even warned us not to travel at night." For some inane reason I choose to get spooked and jump into the car. Loud hoots and howls follow. Just then, it begins to drizzle a bit, rain a little and then thunder down.

The route is ascertained - this was it, we'd made no mistakes, no wrong turns. We're destined to deal with this rain, this ghat, this route, this 'math'!!!

We drive some more. The ghat gets steeper.

I climb over the bag and baggage now squeezed into the dikkie, not much help for the car sickness that's been coming up in my throat since the last 7 hairpin bends. I swallow hard and reach for my little haversack. I pull it out, reach into the front pocket and take out the little green Rizla packet. With Shaina's help, try a crazy balancing act and attempt to roll a joint - big, small, slim, fat, whatever. These hairpin bends are too much to deal with. Saeed's got his whiskey, we've got our ganja. How he's holding up I wonder? Balancing a glass of whiskey in 1 hand, cigarette in the other. Wooooops I've dropped the mix on the seat. Jesus! How am I ever going to be able to roll this joint? Actually, how are we ever going to make it up to Sringeri? Round and round and round, 1 bend after the other. 1 wrong move and that's it. With each car pacing the other, like 9 pins all will automatically follow. Off the steep drop. Off the cliff. Being the 1st car Sumit's got that huge responsibility sitting heavily on his shoulders. Fortunately, he's carrying it with ease and is showing no sign of anxiety. He's driving like quite a God, I have to say. This crazy storm is not helping any of the driver's a bit, all its managing to do is freak me out big time. Maybe getting stoned is not such a great idea after all - I'll just get even more paranoid. Hmm... or maybe not!

Scrounging around for all that we've dropped Shaina and I get back to work and roll the loosest and weakest joint in the whole world - what with some of the maal at the bottom of the car, outside, in Sumit's hair, some even in Brown's hair. He's too nervous though to register anything. If he does, 'drugs' in the hair will not be taken very lightly. Anyway, at least there's something I can get remotely high on, particularly since I find alcohol totally boring - an unintelligent, uninteresting high.

2 hours later, 11pm, and we finally drive into Sringeri. A ghost town. Dodgy buildings. Dark. No electricity, no people around, no hotel around. Man!! Where have we come to? After that ghat if we can't find a hotel, spending the night in the car is not going to be fun. It's so cold, so wet. We drive around in circles through the town asking for a hotel. "No hotel. Hostel. Hostel" we're told. Okay "Hostel". We head in the direction pointed out. 1 Hostel for rich pilgrims in the math complex, 1 for poor pilgrims outside the complex. Accommodation for 18 people is naturally only available in the Hostel for poor pilgrims. We bundle out of the cars and bundle into a very wet and very dark Hostel. Is there ever going to be a light at the end of this tunnel? A disoriented lot, we stand helpless in the lobby, hall, space or whatever you'd like to call that 4 walled room at the entrance of the Hostel. We can't see a thing. Where are our rooms? How can we carry our bags up in the dark? What do we do now? Exhausted and starving by now, I sit down on my bag waiting for some miracle to happen. It does. Ravi yells "Sir hum generator lagaa de?" The superb production guys that he and KG are, they bust out the generator, set it up, get it going and WOOOP the 'Hostel for poor pilgrims' bursts into light. Imagine the horror on the faces of the Sadhus living in the Hostel within the math complex next door. HAH!!!

As Shaina and I head upstairs, me with haversack, big bag (my full fledged apartment for 5 months), laptop, VCR and Shaina with handbag, big bag (her full fledged mansion for 5 months), tape box, dupatta...she trips on the 1st stair, everything she's carrying comes crashing down. She's twisted her foot. Great! "Man Shaina with the lights on you manage to do this. If the lights were out I dread to think..." Carried up to our room - a dark, dingy little hole I might add - she immediately instructs me to pull out the Madhiwala from her bag. Yes Shaina one of your many dodgy cures. If it makes you feel good. Fine. Amidst 40,000 little bottles with white balls, tubes, boxes of Softovac, Kailash Jeevan, syrups and God knows what else I find the Madhiwala. She sighs. Just the mere sight of it is enough. She's feeling better already. Shaina! Shaina! Shaina!

A little later, starving, I head down for dinner. What do we have here? Some dal in a big degchi, some mixed ver. type thing in another big degchi and some other mixed veg. type thing in a third big degchi and chapattis in a fourth big.... I grab 2 chapattis and run up to the room. Upstairs Shaina is lying in bed with her foot all bandaged up. She eats a little dinner that KG brings up for her. I put a dupatta (protection from the bed sheet) on my bed and lie down beside her. It's been an exhausting day for us all. I wonder what Sringeri's really going to be like. Daylight will bring new sights, new smells. How exciting! I turn off the light. The generator whirrs on.

**SRINGERI
SA**

Sringeri has a sanctity and peace, that is not violated by the swarming devotees who come here to meet the current head of the Matt, Bharati Tirtha (II), the 36th in the line of Gurus since the formation of the matt by Adi Shankaracharya that propagated a revivalism in Hindu Vedanta. Fresh and bathed, they come here to offer their prayers. The atmosphere is colourful, women in bright south cotton *sarees*, fresh *gajras*, *mukkuttis* twinkling in the sunlight. Men in *mundus*, their sacred threads belting them, cast marks on their foreheads. Children in colourful *ghagras* and bright silk *dhotis* enter and exit the temple, their strict upbringing apparent in the deference displayed to their parents and elders. We interview three siblings, Srinivas, Gangadharan and their elder sister Meera Gayatri who have come with their families from Bombay. Saeed introduces the crew to the young interviewees. He asks them what they thought of the future. "Very bad. Very very bad." "Why do you say that?" asks Saeed. "Because, I think the young generation of today have lost all their values. They have no concept or clue about their culture and tradition." Sitting on the temple steps, calm and composed, dressed in a simple cotton *ghagra choli*, flanked on either side by her 2 younger brothers, both draped in shocking pink silk *dhotis*, caste marks on their foreheads, a sacred thread across their chests. It was hard to believe that they were all from Bombay. They come to the matt every summer and revelled in the peace and calm that they derived from the space. "I look forward to this visit every year. We go back refreshed and spiritually awakened". There is something to be said about the traditional South Indian. They have certainly retained their culture, while continuing to churn out academic and scientific geniuses and professionals. On the face of it, they represent that ideal of the modern Indian that Nehru was so much in search of. Retain what's good of the old and constantly adapt to the new. But I always feel that there is a chip the average South Indian living in a cosmopolitan big city like Bombay carries on his shoulder. And this constant denial of western influence does to an extent stymie their exposure.

The singing of the aarti echoes from all around. Suddenly all attention is diverted to the entrance of the complex. A talk dark man, trying to blend in with the milieu stands out as he quickly crosses the complex and makes way to the sanctum sanctorum. We can't hide our excitement. It is Javagal Srinath, India's much loved spin bowler, one of many in the long and venerated cricketers from Karnataka. As our camera trains on him, he politely refuses us permission. The people leave him alone, surprisingly there is no mob rush for autographs and photographs. The cricket fiends in our unit fall into a charcha about his hiatus from the game. He has been back in his hometown nursing his bowling shoulder after strain and injury. We hope he will be playing the field soon. Not many people have ill to say about him. Here, divest of his sports gear and national identity, clad in a traditional south cotton dhoti, sacred thread across his bowling arm, he appears much the same as he does on the field. A serious, determined young man, no overt thrills and spins, his dedication and devotion to the mission of the moment apparent even here, as he walks purposefully toward his goal. In my earlier days of cricketing mania, Srinath had been one of my favourites, never letting down his team, even as a last order batsman, always managing a few crazy and crucial whacks in his short innings before being sent out, his funny half smile never ceasing to warm my heart. Its hardly been a few months since I had a moment of clear transmission, while sitting like a half baked potato, on the edge of my seat, enfused by the waves of energy bursting forth from the tube. The ball had hit me smack on the head, the glaze in my vacant eyes had disappeared as I had jumped from the couch to the armchair and declared "Cricket, a National Waste of Time."

SH

"Look Srinath!" someone says in quiet excitement careful, not to destroy the sanctity of these hallowed premises. There he is - our very own fast bowling cricketer in lungi, sacred thread-n-all walking past. As the camera is immediately turned towards him, he puts out a very annoyed finger "Uh Uh" he seems to say, "leave me alone". Jangle does, and quite respectfully pans away. And then of course the analysis begins. "His arm is injured that's why he isn't playing at the match in Hyderabad." "Man! He's so great." "Kya speed hai yaar!" "Poor guy must be praying to get okay". Shaina and I smile at each other. Cricket. What a mad mad game and how crazy does it make everyone in this country? Well, at least there's one thing that unites us, however superficial that unity may be... Anywhere, everywhere if there's a cricket match on; people will talk about it to death. You could be rich, poor, high caste, low caste, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, 50 years old, 10 years old, a boy, a girl but you will have an opinion on cricket and you will be heard. Even language poses no barrier, for if something has to be said about cricket it will. God knows how, but this is the magic spell of cricket that the entire country of India is under. It isn't a national waste of time at all. It creates a nationalistic spirit (shallow thought it may be) that we've somehow lost along with the loss of our great leaders.

Where is that nationalistic fervour that the entire country was enveloped in post independence? Why can't this country throw up visionaries like it used to? If a sport is going to create some semblance of patriotism, which people today yearn for, I'm not complaining.

Our eyes follow Srinath as he walks out of the math while Saeed's eyes follow a very distinguished old south Indian gentleman walking into the math. Dressed in a perfectly starched white dhoti, a green and orange shawl over his shoulder he walks in with an elegantly attired elderly woman dressed in an obviously expensive south Indian silk sari. Saeed decides that he wants to speak with them. We snap out of our cricket hypnosis and rush to chat up the couple, make introductions, exchange niceties etc. Mr. Subarayappa and his wife agree to be interviewed and are even quite glad to meet Saeed whom they recognise as a highly reputed filmmaker. The camera is adjusted onto the tripod, the couple seated, the frame is set in the usual fashion - Saeed's side in foreground, couple facing the camera.

Mr. Subarayappa seems to have slipped into patriotic retired judge mode. For the next 20 minutes we are enthralled by the views of this gentleman who had heard Nehru's speech on that historic day of 1947.

"Today there is so much progress despite the political unrest. However, I feel it must all be properly harnessed. That is not being done. It is all helter skelter development. If it is streamlined, there will be quicker progress instead of this slow pace. Politicians are the main problem. They only think 1st for their party and therefore themselves - this is what is holding up the progress of the nation. Like so many rivers in the country, human assets are not being properly harnessed. Engineers have to look to the sky. He should instead be absorbed. His talents should be used."

"Nehru had a very high conception of democracy and secularism that is very different from the interpretation that is being given by his followers and the present generation. His idea was that this is 1 country although there is diversity. Like a string of pearls that unity pervades throughout the country. From Assam to Gujarat, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. This is the unity of India which none of our people have at heart. I say with great respect. Just like the rivers are channelised human energy, thoughts, etc should be channelised. Only then will people really enjoy their freedom.

HASSAN SA

Yet, for all this free thought and postulation, I leave Sringeri with a sense of calm.

We stop for lunch at Batkal and drive straight on to Hassan. The sky is cloudy, the weather comfortably muggy. I wonder if we are going to witness an early monsoon. We shoot the sunset through the Sumo and drive on to reach Hassan by 7:30.

What a find this hotel is!. Hassan is a small university town. It is also the hub for tourists coming and going from the architectural marvels of Belur, Halebid and Shravanbelagola. It is obvious that it has also become the venue for small growing corporates in Karnataka to host conferences and HRD camps. This hotel provides for A/C non A/C rooms, room service, restaurant, fast food idli dosa joint outside and even a conference room and convention centre. All this at absolutely affordable prices. This hotel must be very recent. A product of the early booming nineties.

Needles to say, the unit is thrilled and excited, we run into rooms spreading our arms wide, Hindi movie style circular track following us round and round, the intro notes giving way to the song. And yes, we have cable TV! In every room. Wow. We have been starved of satellite feed for over 10 days now.

We gather into Saeed's room to watch the footage. Most of the unit is missing in their inaction. The compulsion of viewing had died out before it had really begun and a quick and disappointing realisation had dawned on Saeed. His unit couldn't care less about the documentary in the making that they were all part of. Saeed's game plan of seeing his unit grow, seeing every member, drivers, attendants, technicians, assistant directors understand the country, see it like he did, look and learn, get humbled, was not working out. And why should it? Everyone had their jobs to do, drive, wire, light, spot, run, record, shoot, feed, that they did with adequate efficiency. If Saeed had wanted a unit sensitive to the poverty, to the tragedy, to the exploitation that is India, he should have selected his people accordingly. Most were here to do their jobs and collect their pay; some for here for the prestige attached to working with a noted director on a monumental project such as this, some to learn technical skills.

Last and least, were the one or two who had sooner than never expected, abandoned his *raison d'être* in its worldly sense, quickly disillusioned as they were. We had discarded all notions of understanding encapsulating seeing internalising and had harshly resigned ourselves to the fact that we would try to traverse our country in own manner and keep our 'job' distinct from our feelings.

Saeed, Jennifer, Jangle, Hari, Chandi, Sumit, Shai and myself. The core unit. The intelligent thinking bunch. While viewing the footage Jangle never saw beyond his exposure and composition. Even while shooting, most times he was not paying attention to the interview, his camera panning, taking gentle beautiful close-ups of women's hands, faces, children, ambience, often resulting in important parts of the interview falling over pans and zooms, a problem that was not only going to deem some footage unusable but also create problems in editing. Shyamol, the editor. We often wondered why Saeed had asked the editor to come along. He did no work, his part of the work really commencing on our return to Bombay. Save for nursing his ankle, providing Saeed with a drinking companion and providing the unit with some comic relief and in generally playing devils advocate to all and sundry, he did not do anything. But he watched the footage, a good percentage of which featured himself, kissing-cuddling children, back slapping villagers, hanging around the periphery of the frame lost in thought. Hari, whose path people would not dare to cross, had he been more manly, more physical. Anal to the core of his eardrums, serious about his work to a fault, Hari never seemed satisfied with the sound. His only comments while watching the footage were about how we didn't lock up efficiently, how we were too soft. Even Shai, who reconciled to getting the boom rod once in a way, looked forward to a word either which way, but if was never forthcoming. I wished he wasn't such a loner, it would have been nice if this guy could smile sometimes, take a joke or two. Chandi, the 5th crew member who comprised the esoteric cabal of FTII graduates in our cartel. As Assistant cameraman, he seemed to have a very perfunctory interest in really learning cinematography. He diligently held up the thermocol sheet for white balance, checked exposure readings, pulled the focus. Beyond that he didn't seem to care. It didn't come as such a surprise to us that Chandi had actually graduated from the FTII as a sound engineer and after 8 years in the field, had decided to switch to camera and learn on the job.

That left us, Sumit, Shai and myself, and yes, Jennifer. The over-qualified. Jennifer, carried her technical inadequacies like a heavy white shroud on her shoulders. One of the most vocal members, indeed a guide to us, providing us with educated judgements, a granary full of trivia for almost every conversation, she clearly short sold herself as executive producer and nothing else. She perpetuated the institute-non institute divide by being hugely hierarchical when it came to hearing our grouses. "See, what do you'll know, you might have a point, but these guys have learned their art, they must be right". So Shai, Sumit and I belonged to the category of young brats, the dilettantes. Strangely though, Sumit was never made to feel aware of these apparent or thwarted upon us inadequacies. Sumit, has absolutely no film background or experience and had only been working with Saeed a few months prior to our departure. Shai had done a one-year course in mass communication at Sophia Polytechnic and I too had done a similar duration course in Film & Video Production in from XIC, both leading institutes of communication in Bombay. Shai too had a couple of years work experience, and I had been working with Saeed for almost 2 years writing scripts and screenplays and had attending film festivals all over the country. Yet, Sumit's voice would be heard, ours ignored or nulled by louder older wiser and not coincidentally male ones.

2nd May 1997

The entire unit is upbeat. The comfortable stay has put everyone in high spirits. Parvej & Mihir are sporting new singlets, which no doubt they have picked up from Goa. Parvej has a carton of 555's and another carton of Dunhill lights! What is this guy's trip? Why is he blowing up his hard-earned money on flashy accessories? Who is he trying to impress? In Goa he bought cartons of Marlboro lights. And he must be the only guy in the unit to have entered the tiny in house shopping counter that this hotel provides. No one is getting paid on this trip. We were all given 25% of our payments in advance. Shai and I spent our sum in gearing up for the trip, the remainder of which we made travellers checks with. Only the camera attendants get weekly pay, as per agreement with USL, the equipment rental agency. Since stay & food is all taken care of we have found no real expenditure incurred save for personal effects, most being functional supplies which I'm sure no one has run out of. The big spenders Parvej & Mihir must have already blown up a couple of grand each on acquisitions for attire and attitude, to impress who or what I wonder. I myself have shifted into social reject mode, content in my comfortable full sleeve cotton kurtis and hideous batik shirts purchased from Bandra's elco market at Rs 100 a piece.

Satiated on a breakfast of idlis and dosas (me of course, I wonder about our paratha and achar die hard north Indians), we made our way to the Hassan college of architecture in the hope of interviewing students who will soon be out in the real world as draftsmen and planners of our modern day buildings and cities. The students seemed most uninterested in our agenda for the day and we dub them as an uninspiring cynical lot whose state of mind reflected the state of the country and its modern day architecture.

Around noon high we enter a zone of lively activity. Swarms of people are crossing fields and railway tracks, truck loads are coming and going, bullock carts buckling with load as they attempt to cross the main road to the field ahead. It is market day, a weekly phenomenon common to many villages in India. A railway sign indicates the name of the town, Mosalehosenalli, a tongue twister. Most towns in South India seem that way to the northern Indian. Yet, I have to admit, this one sounds dramatically different from others. We get out of the car, eager to check out the haat. Saeed sits in the car, to him this is a waste of time, this haat is on the national highway, this doesn't seem like a backward tribal area, and hence not worth looking at. Yet, this is a first for a lot of us. We cross the railway lines and lose ourselves in the swarming droves. A quick look around proves disappointing. There is no pottery for sale, no baskets, no hand made jewellery or farm fresh produce. We are amazed to see an influx of plastic: chappals, buckets, toys, even matkas in cheap neon tie-dye colours. I am tempted to buy one, but a sharp shove from Shai forces me to move on. A man carries 5 trussed up chickens on his shoulders passes us by, leaving me with a sneeze attack for I am allergic to foul feathers. A lambani woman sits with a small bunch of tiny fish looking for a fair trade. Of course, we take her pictures, their aura of exotica surrounding the lambani tribe never fails to excite a tourist or photographer. Jennifer is keen to interview a woman who is selling seeds, eager to ask them if they have been affected by the seed MNC, (read vandana shiva's work for more info) but Saeed has dismissed the idea..

Drums are beating, we follow the throbbing and menacing rhythm to the center of the market. Food stalls selling deep fried delicacies cordon off a square. An old woman, sweating and in a trance, her eyes dilated, her pupils invisible jumps with flagging strength. She holds a plate in her hand, every now and then the trance-fixed audience puts some coins into the plate. Our camera crew is already present, our DP milling in and out of the crowds, camera on his shoulder. I can't watch this anymore. It seems like some sort of exorcism ritual, but I could be wrong. I wish our camera man would leave them alone, such footage we can do without. I have seen a hundred documentaries on mystic India, I don't want to be part of the making of another.

We are in Holenarsipur town. We are sitting on the terrace of a highway joint called blue heaven. The roof is made of fibreglass top sheets, imaginatively bright blue in colour. It is creating a thermal wave, I am afraid we might just fry in our sweat. Holenarsipur.(hole-in-arse-poorr!) We have poked so much fun at the name of this town and it has taken its just revenge. A huge nut has put a hole in one of the Sumo tyres. Barkat brandishes the demon, it is a mean bolt, our tyre tube must be ravaged. In the seemingly endless wait for the food, Barkat eases our 'slow pakao' by starting a game of catch. He has rolled the nut in his bandanna. He hurls it at Saeed, who in the course of the game proves himself master catcher, his quick reflexes and agility belying his weight and gait. I'm am dubbed an embarrassment to the unit, I either don't know the catch is coming my way or duck in anticipation of the bolt from the blue. Parvez aims it hard at Brown, and in mid flight the scarf abandons the nut, its trajectory heading straight for Brown's face. Thankfully he dives for cover and declares the game too dangerous. I hope lunch arrives, this blue heaven is soon going to be hell's fire.

Its early evening, a cool breeze is blowing, the landscape outside is picture postcard perfect. Flatlands spread out on either side of the road, paddy fields delimited, land boundaries demarcated. All seems quiet. Sometimes little red tractors pass us by, a bullock cart or two, women and men on their way home from a hard days work in the fields.

WASTEFUL CONVERSATION SH

Suddenly the Green Sumo comes to an abrupt halt. Saeed gets out and points across into the fields. "I want to speak with him." I look across into the fields to see a farmer ploughing his field. A woman works alongside. Spontaneity makes life so much more exciting and Saeed is the king of spontaneity.

The camera attendants are summoned, the camera is taken off its designated travelling shot position on the tripod in the car and picked up gallantly by Parvez - the cool dude camera attendant with the

packet of 555 cigarettes sticking out of his pocket. Only foreign cigarettes for this Punjab da putthar who smokes nothing Indian. Well, he's doing what he should do .i.e. Spend the money he's earning on this trip. At least the lucky bastard's getting paid now in the 1st place, unlike the rest of us who'll have to wait till we get back to Bombay. I wish I was a daily wage earner too. This scrounging thing can get really pathetic, and besides, shopping in every state would be so much more fun. Raju standing alongside with recorder strapped onto his shoulder, unlike his counterpart, obviously doesn't believe in spending his daily wages as lavishly. Apart from his comb, I've never seen anything remotely foreign sticking out of this guy's pockets.

I get into work mode. Pick up the sound bag with cables, mikes, batteries etc, put it on my shoulder, pull out the boom rod from under the seat and follow the rest. Saeed indicates that only a few of us can go. A band of 8 we are. We have Raju on the recorder (also the official Kannada translator), Parvez on the camera, Hari on the headphones and Sennheiser, Sumit, Chandi, Jangle, Shai and of course Saeed. Plodding through the fields, sweating away as our body temperatures shoot up with the sudden lack of air condition, we tread very carefully on the dry field. As we approach him I take a closer look. A middle aged man, dressed in a white dhoti, white vest and white turban with his black body, burning in the hot sun. He glances up from his work for a second as he notices us walking towards him. We reach the edge of his field. He continues to work. Doesn't look up at all.

Jangle sets up the camera. "Roll..." Saeed says softly. "...And be quiet now. Don't disturb him. Let him work." A few still moments follow as we all exchange confused glances at the farmer's apparent nonchalance.

Saeed indicates to Raju to take over. Ask him what he's doing?

Raju does. But the farmer doesn't answer and continues to work, with the camera following him as he goes up and down with the bull, as it ploughs his field.

Raju shouts out again, louder this time, wondering whether he wasn't heard the first time around. But again no reply. Instead, the woman in a yellow sari beside him looks up. She smiles at us, looks at him and mutters something. They exchange a few words, and then she too goes back to her job of fertilising the field.

Parvez runs up to him and slips a lapel mike into his pocket. He doesn't flinch. Without even bothering to check what's been thrown into his pocket, he just continues to work ceaselessly.

Raju shouts out loud "Why won't you talk to us?"

"Hall..hall...hall" The sound of the farmer herding his bull is all we can hear. It echoes through Hari's headphones.

Finally a very impatient Raju shouts, "Why won't you talk to us?"

Finally, the farmer looks up for a second and shouts back "No time...I don't have the time."

"You have no time to speak to us?"

"No...No time to speak."

Sumit forces Raju to ask the farmer for how long he's been working. The man replies "35 years."

"So in 35 years you haven't had the time to talk?" Sumit says, unable to resist a smart comment.

"I pay for these bulls by the hour, I can't waste that time. To do this work only I don't have the time, how will I have the time to talk to you?"

We stare at him dumbfounded.

The camera continues to roll.

We have finally been silenced.

SA

I sat by the road watching our unit attempt to interview the farmer. We waited patiently, time continued in circles, its ticking punctuated by the farmer's calls. After what seemed like eternity, Saeed signalled for a cut and made his way back to the crew, his shoulders sagging, his face frozen. The farmer had told them to get lost. His real words were lost in translation, but he could have well told us to Fuck off. His wife and he had hired the ox and plough for a day and had to finish their work. He had no time for us. For our questions of how and how much he earned as daily bread. He had spent 30 rupees on the hire of the ox. His silence spoke heavy words. Time costing him precious money. Leisure and idle chat costing him time. It added a new reading to a well-known poem, us urban bred children had recited as our paean to fast bred city life.

What is this life, if full of care
 We have no time to stand and stare.
 No time to stand beneath the boughs
 And stare as long as sheep or cows.

MYSORE
SA

Hotel Sri Krishna Continental. I just knew this place was going to be a dump. Urban design slump. An architectural eyesore in otherwise beautiful Mysore. Heavy name cheating us all the same. We wait around in the lobby for the production guys, who have gone on a recci in an optimistic hope of getting accommodation at the (what was the lovely place?). Nope. Sri Krishna it is. Continental...whatever that is supposed to mean it is not.

Brown is officiating and doing the room allotment. His daily fix of power. 5 minutes everyday when he gets to boss us all around and come on to everyone's overt hit list. I scribble a note to Shai. "Tell Brown to give us a nice room since it's my birthday time."

Every room has a phone extension except ours! So much for that. Shai dearest. you did not work your charm. Charm? Shai?? I shouldn't have bothered. Dinner is fixed. Thalish. Why on earth have we ordered Punjabi thali in Karnataka? The palak paneer is insipid, the dal not quite right. Maybe they should have added coconut...I can get a wafting aroma of rasam and chutney, tomorrow I will demand authentic cuisine. Almost our entire unit hates South Indian food. My only companion being Hari, who has opened up to me a little bit, our bonding has largely to do with our compulsive consumption of hot water and ayurveda. And South Indian pickles.

3rd May 1997

A relatively late get up. 7am. Brown shows up for breakfast dressed in trousers and shiny leather hush puppies. His special bank outing outfit. Today, Jennifer and Brown will encash a bank draft they had made in Bombay. This is one main reason we are here in Mysore. Random big towns had been selected prior to our departure and bank drafts have been made in advance. Now Jennifer's zip and lock handbag will weigh a ton again. The unit eats and goes off to shoot. They take the camcorder. Shai and I are left behind with the recorder to do some serious logging. We lounge about in the room, building up a good & steady work rhythm that we intend to follow. Shai logs a tape on paper and then puts it on the laptop while I do the next tape and so on. Its a good system. Shai has worked out our logging columns on Excel. This is her department. She has been well trained in the fine art of organising things on a computer. Dev Benegal-ry as I call it. That's all she claimed to do at his office, continuity sheets, logs, call sheets, shot breakdowns, for almost 2 years for a film that never saw the lights camera action. Still logging is fun. Very conscious of describing shots in short lines, initially I went through a serious guilt at objectifying the very subject that we objectified visually into descriptive words : woman in red saree, man with big moustache, CU of woman with 3 nose rings, we now have reconciled ourselves to the nature of our duty and are having a lot of fun.

SHOT NO	TCR IN	SHOT DESCRIPTION	LOCATION	REMARKS
A8	30th April	Karwar to Shringeri		
60min	1st May			
0	10:27:14:00	COLOUR BARS		
1	10:28:17:00	T shot 1 - driving to Shringeri : Karwar Sea		
2	10:30:48:00	T shot 2 - houses + sea + coconut palms	Trasi Beach	
3	10:34:06:00	Young man + crowd of locals on beach		
4	10:34:29:00	Locals + unit on beach		
5	10:35:16:00	Unit on the beach		
6	10:35:30:00	Unit in the water 1		
7	10:36:56:00	Unit in the water 2		
8	10:37:58:00	LS of beach - L to R to L pan from trees to sea		
9	10:38:55:00	Handheld through Shringeri streets - ambients 1		
10	10:40:07:00	Handheld through Shringeri streets - ambients 2		
11	10:40:18:00	Handheld through Shringeri streets - ambients 3		
12	10:40:53:00	Kannada Hoarding - tilt down to temple		
13	10:41:32:00	Heading board of 'math' - tilt down to LS of temple zoom in		
14	10:42:35:00	Handheld entry into temple		
15	10:43:09:00	Saeed entering temple grounds		
16	10:43:48:00	LS of temple - zoom in		
17	10:44:28:00	Tourists/ devotees walking around		
18	10:44:44:00	People walking around - zoom in to man		
19	10:45:22:00	Guide talking to tourists		
20	10:45:53:00	Door of temple		
21	10:46:09:00	MS of door w/ boy in pink dhoti - zoom out		
22	10:47:21:00	MS of door		
23	10:47:35:00	NG		
24	10:47:44:00	Brothers in pink dhoti (Srinivas & Gangadharan) Entry & Exit		
25	10:48:35:00	Tourists enter temple		
26	10:49:06:00	Saeed talking with children's parents		
27	10:49:13:00	Tourists exiting temple		
28	10:49:28:00	People outside temple 1		
29	10:49:35:00	People outside temple 2		
30	10:50:11:00	Carving on temple wall		
31	10:50:27:00	R to L pan of carvings		
32	10:50:43:00	Faces		
33	10:51:13:00	Syamol/Jennifer/Mihir		
34	10:51:40:00	Saeed's interview w/ Srinivas/Gangadharan & Neera Gayatri "on future of India"		
35	10:53:44:00	Guide talking to tourists 1		
36	10:57:37:00	Guide talking to tourists 2		
37	10:58:52:00	TIME CODE BREAK		
38	10:58:53:00	People praying		
39	11:00:00:00	CU of pooja thali/pooja being performed		
40	11:01:20:00	TIME CODE BREAK		
41	11:01:21:00	MS of pujari 1		
42	11:01:36:00	MS of pujari 2		
43	11:01:51:00	MS of aarti 1		
44	11:02:24:17	MS of aarti 2		
45	11:02:42:00	Women praying		

0	11:38:2 8:00	T shot 8 w/ left side view mirror coconut trees at sunset.		
1	11:39:0 8:00	T shot 9 left mirror twilight		
2	11:40:3 2:15	TAPE END		

SHOT NO	TCR IN	SHOT DESCRIPTION A9 60 minutes 1st may towards Hassan 2nd may Hassan College	LOCATION	REMARK
0	11:40:3 2:00	COLOUR BAR		
1	11:41:3 3:00	T shot 1 Driving to HassanCars passing w/ headlights twinkling .Twilight		
2	11:42:0 9:00	T shot 2 Sumos passing w/ headlights		
3	11:43:1 6:00	T shot 3 Vehicles passing by pink sky		
4	11:44:5 5:00	Interview w/ students of M.C College of Engineering Hassan Dilip Kumar and long haired guy Jebbee		
	11:46:0 0:00			
5	11:27:3 0:00	On architecture of our country-Nivedita Shukla		
	11:49:4 0:00	On the food poisoning article On Nehru		
	11:52:5 4:00	On the poor		
	11:54:4 5:00			
6	12:00:3 3:00	Exterior of collee campus zoom on heading board		
7	12:01:2 3:00	TCR break		
8	12:01:2 4:00	Interior corridor of college		
9	12:01:5 3:00	Corridor girls walking by		
10	12:02:0 1:00	Corridor 3		
11	12:02:1 0:00	Corridor 4 Pan into other corridor L-R		
12	12:02:3 5:00	Students walking in compound		
13	12:02:4 6:00	TCR break		
14	12:02:4 7:00	Tractor and road construction pan to van on the road and crane pickin up debris zoom into to truck		
15	12:04:4 9:00	CU of worker + CU of machine + Kid helper		
16	12:07:1 8:00	CU of machine at work Going back and forth.		
17	12:08:1 7:00	TCR break		
18	12:08:1 8:00	Interview w/ Chugmath & little kid (crane driver)		
19	12:17;0 0;00	TCR break		
20	12:17:0 1:00	2 women walking w/ plastic matkas on head		
21	12:18:0 2:00	Static shot of crane		
22	12:18:1 3:00	Crane moving up & down+ LS of Sumo alongside		

After lunch, Shai and I take a break and get out of the hotel. We take a rickshaw and hunt out a beauty parlour! Lets do it while we can, who knows when we'll get another chance. We get our upper lips threaded and indulge in the purchase of a face pack, a timeless blend of Multani Mitti and Chandan, fuller's earth and sandalwood powder.

Back at the Continental, excited by our outing and shopping we mix our pack with rose water and continue logging. The sandalwood's instant cooling effect does wonders for our skin; regular use of the powder might relieve us from harmful effects of daily exposure to the summer sun. Mysore is famous for its Sandal wood produce, the goodness of which has spread the world over. Ofcourse, we have bought our stock of 100 gms. powder, for Rs 10/-, the more exotic essential oils, perfumes, soaps, and pastes cost a lot more.

The unit is back. Apparently, they had a productive day shooting. (They interviewed tourists and students around the Mysore palace gardens and then interviewed an old man who Jennifer was told about when she went to the State Bank of Mysore to encash some drafts.)

In the evening, we hang outside our hotel at this juice and milkshake kiosk. Their chikoo and anjeer milkshakes have become quite a hit with the unit. I have been quenching my thirst with a ginger-masala flavoured herbal digestive juice that seems to have more harmful sugar in it than honest-to-goodness herbs. The boys buy up the stall's junk food stock, Uncle Chipps, Ruffles, Dairy Milk and Five Star bars. I can see that South Indian snacks are not tops on their lists.

This time round, dinner is a more palatable fare. Hari and I seem satisfied with our South Indian Thalīs. Bonding over matters of the stomach, I pick up conversation with Hari. Casually, but not without due effort entailed in displaying a forced nonchalance, he tells me that he's a big bull too; and that according to the Hindu calendar, it's his birthday, today being the third of may. Excited, I turn to tell the gang, but he silences me with a surprisingly hostile look. The unit has already demanded a treat from me, so vocal have I been about the heralding of my birthday. I'm a gregarious sort and I can't imagine why anyone would want to hide the auspices of being alive on earth, much less why anyone would want to spend this day in solitude.

At close to midnight, my little sister calls to wish me. I rush to take the call in Jangle & Shyamol's room since our room has the sole privilege having no phone extension. I confess to her that I am happy to be away from Bombay, that city and its excess baggage I have thankfully & wilfully left behind. Travel light has been my credo for the journey and along with the arm chair and luggage, I have locked away the several lives, loves, friendships, debts, favours, cuboid facets that seem to tie one down to one place and sometimes one time. This new found liberation has been all too empowering, at this point, on this day that marks 23 years of my life I don't seem to want to ever return to unlock that room. But I know I will, soon enough. For now though, the time being the next 18 weeks, I wish to walk tall, with no rest on a cosy chair, walk light, without the burden of my past..

I lie on the bed smiling to myself. Somehow, I know I am being naïve, it can't be that simple, indeed it should not be and won't be at all. A knock-knock on the door. Outside, the long corridor is empty, but lying at my feet is a little bag of goodies. Sumit! A birthday card peeps out of the bag...for someone very special...and a variety of chocolates come tumbling out. I call out to Shai, who comes out of the toilet with a big hug for me and an even bigger spliff signed happy birthday babe...enjoy, love Shai. I drag Sumit out of his room and quietly, the 3 of us, like school children staying up after hours huddle on our bed and enjoy our midnight feast. Within minutes, with only the wrappers left from our spoils, Shai and I, blissfully blitzed feel the onslaught of the monster munchies and cravings for some more debauchery in the name of my birthday set in. Sumit, sober Sumit watches us in delight as we lick off the remnants of goo from our fingers and wrappers. With a knowing smile, he makes a tempting offer. "Bachha's, wanna go for a drive?"

Such excitement. Such a rush in doing what we're forbidden to do. We push the car out of the hotel parking in neutral...create for ourselves, a whole intrigue of spying watchmen, hotel staff and a fear of being caught. Soon though, we're in overdrive zipping through the beautiful roads of Mysore a ghost town at this hour, yet a fairy town, each beautiful building lit displaying the city's royal heritage. Sumit feels guilty for not including his roommate Brown in our little sneak-out, but Shai and I silence him. It's my birthday; I want to be with friends.

Sumit has the handycam with him. It's all part of a nasty plan that we're hatching. We'll hide one tape away. Mark it secret and personal. Document our lives away from the documentary, away from being documented as subjects. Save it for posterity. Rather for our personal thrills. Hugely stoned, we sing songs as we ride, the camera barely managing to get the picture.

Sumit takes us to the Mysore palace. Having been there before and spent hours inside taking in the gaudy and opulent and very ostentatious interiors...painted glass roofs, 1 dimensional murals, paintings I didn't seem to mind missing the afternoon shoot. Now, it stands before us, with not a soul in sight, just for us to take. As Shai admires the building and Sumit circles us with the camera, I am realising a thought that sends me into an insane laugh attack. Wait a minute friends...this is not the front entrance to the palace ground...this is the back of the palace. Our erstwhile camera crew shot the wrong side! Ha ha ha ha. I cannot wait to tell them. We let the camera roll placed on top of the bonnet and sing happy birthday to me. Laughing breathless, we take a wide shot of us in front of the back of the palace. And keep on our personal record the irony of shooting the wrong side of the palace ground. Oh well, this documentary is about the less often seen and the less often heard, naa?

Still on a high we drive on, I watch the captured moments of my birthday in the view finder, and as our heartbeats come back to normal and our senses take over, monster munchies attack again...rumble rumble...sweet yearnings. Its half after midnight, no sign of open ice cream parlours or dhabhas. There's the _____ hotel. Sumit our tour guide casually remarks with a cursory gesture to the right. Al right then. Let's stop and eat. I can't believe we're actually doing this. Our self styled consciences nag us, this is forbidden too, according to the unwritten rules we've laid down for ourselves. And being in the mood to break rules, its ironic that we do so in the 5***** sterility of a coffee shop. We devour chocolate mousse and crème caramel, the pyjama party of three, and then scrounge for cash. Ofcourse Sumit comes up with the bulk, its my birthday treat though, I promise to pay back...

At the hotel, car safely in the parking we call it a night. It's been fun, though. An unusual beginning to a new year that promises to bring in a bundle of contradictions as to who I am and what understanding of myself in relation to my country I am to acquire and come to terms with.

SH

The fog clears, the picture gets clearer. The magnificent Mysore palace, softly lit comes into focus. In front is parked a Sumo. A green Sumo. 2 people are standing in front of the gate, a 3rd is walking around them with a camera in hand. They're all singing "Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Shaina, Happy Birthday to you." Laughter.

Oh, I realise, that's Sumit and Shaina and that's me shooting them with the handycam.

Suddenly, a hand comes in and grabs the camera from me. "Are you guys crazy? Sneaking the Sumo out like this at 12 in the night? I'm going to tell Saeed." I look up to see this tall, fair guy with glasses. It's Abhinav!

I scream "What's wrong with you?" and grab the handycam back. "Don't be an asshole. Just shut up and don't open your mouth. You're such a tell tale. Why do you always behave like this? You're always trying to be a Mr. Goody 2 shoe. You're so selfish. You don't care about us. All you care about is yourself and your damn image with Saeed and Jennifer. Constantly lickin ass. Ass Licker!! Why can't you just chill out."

WHAM!!

My face starts to sting.

Abhinav just hit me.

I stand there frozen to the ground.

Sumit and Shaina run up. Shaina pushes me into the car. Sumit pushes Abhinav away, jumps into the driver's seat and we zoom off.

We're in a 24-hour coffee shop of _____ Hotel. We're drinking coffee in the lobby and all I can hear is Sumit's voice. "You have to understand what's been happening to him. Since we've been sharing a room, I know. We talk a lot. He's been really depressed because nobody's given him a chance to do his job. He knows what is expected of him. Saeed had a chat with him before the trip because he knew that Abhinav didn't know shit about a Production Manager's job. He's really been trying. In fact, he feels that some guys are trying to sabotage all his attempts and are pushing for him to leave."

"I understand all that. It makes me feel bad that we've been mean to him all this while. But why does he cook up crap all the time. Why is he always trying to cover his ass? That's what irritates me, he's always trying to seem so 'holier than thou' when actually he's just an ass licker."

WHAM!

My face starts to sting again.
Abhinav just hit me again.

WHAM!! WHAM!!

"Stop it." I shout and jump up in bed. There's a Loud Knocking on the door. I put my hand on my face. I can still feel the sting. Did he really hit me? Did Abhinav really hit me? NO! NO! THAT WAS ALL A DREAM SHAI. Probably the guilt of all that Sumit told us last night. But did Sumit tell us all that at all? Or was that a dream too? My mind's all over the place. Hanging outside the Mysore palace, 'Happy Birthday to you', chatting about Abhinav, all that, was that real or not? Did it all happen or not? Hmmm...YES YES, OF COURSE IT DID SHAI. We did sneak the car out. We did hang out at the entrance of the palace. Jesus Christ! What a crazy dream?

I fall back into bed.

Loud Banging again. Oh man I forgot - its this stupid stupid chai thing. As everyone likes to have their morning cup of chai as soon as they wake up, they will have the privilege of being served 'bed tea', or more accurately, will be woken up with a loud banging on the door and a cup of chai will be thrust into their faces as soon as the door is opened. Of course this rule is steadfast - whether wake up is 3am, 4am or 5am. A luxury for some can be a sleep destroyer of the worst kind for others. Shaina & I fall into the latter. Naturally, Ms. Naturel does not indulge in any beverages, no toxins will she consume and wreak havoc on her insides. I, on the other hand, love my morning cup of coffee. 'My morning fix' I like to call it. The special aroma, the caffeine sliding down my throat and into my blood stream. The perfect wake up call. But what romance is there in being jolted out of your slumber to have a tray filled with cups of luke warm tea and coffee shoved into your face? Without teeth brushed, or face washed, throwing down luke warm or rather luke cold coffee, milk, and spoons and spoons of sugar into your throat is a pretty gross way to start a day. I'm forced to get up and get the door. Shaina ain't budging, today being her birthday and all. I open the door only to decline the very special morning beverage offered. He moves on. I fall back into bed.

"Wake up Shai, we have to be down in 20 minutes." I half open my eyes to see Shaina lying in bed beside me with her eyes shut. "Oh Shit!! You go to the loo first." I shut my eyes again.

LOUD BANGING!!!!
EVEN LOUDER BANGING!!!!

Shaina leaps out of bed, opens the door, "Haa Haa we're ready." I jump up and we begin our morning whirlwind. I run to the loo. Brush my teeth. Throw some water on my face. Pick up my toiletries. Chuck them into my bag. Glance at Shaina. She's chugging a flask of water down. "Screw your water therapy. Are you mad? We have to be down in 10 minutes." The last drop out of the flask and she's in fast forward. Runs into the loo. Brushes her teeth, washes her face. Runs out. Pulls out her clothes. Changes. And then begins her major task - PACKING!! Why major?? Well, because Shaina unpacks everything in her bag every time we stop in a place - which incidentally is every night. All these little packets with medicines, shampoos, dirty clothes, shoes etc are always strewn in the vicinity around the bag. Something I have forced myself to ignore coz if I don't, well... I'LL JUST HAVE TO KILL HER. Why can't she be like me? Simple. Straightforward. Pull out whatever's on top and put it back on top, in anticipation of days like this. Forget it. Forget all this Shaina analysis. I change into a salwar kurta, throw in other random things into my bag. Zip it up. Put on my chappals. I'm ready. All in 4 minutes. "I'm going down." I announce to Shaina. I pick up the VCR, the laptop, open the door, summon a guy to take my bag and I'm out and in the lobby trying to look as fresh as a lily but the dark circles under my eyes - a telltale sign of last nights secret escapade.

5 minutes later Shaina follows. Man, how she does it, I don't know. Why she does it in the 1st place, I guess I'll never know.

Srirangapatnam Round Table.
SA

We leave the portals of the Sri Krishna continental and drive on to Srirangapatnam. This little detour in our journey is very important for Saeed. He wants to pay his 'salaams' to Tipu Sultan and wants his crew to do the same. Tipu was perhaps the earliest of nationalists who endeavoured to unite a certain part of princely India to fight against what he identified as the single largest enemy, the British. Yet, in our north-centric reading of history, Tipu Sultan for reasons not unfathomable doesn't get the great mention he should. We drive past the old Juma masjid and pause to take a shot of the stone....? Here lies the body of Tipu Sultan, who was slain while battling the British. Saeed stands around meditatively, commanding a sombre presence that automatically sends us all into a contemplative mood as we join him in paying respect by taking note of the many achievements that Tipu Sultan should be renowned for. "He was a monarch. But he was a true secular democrat too", said Saeed. "Its contradictory, but if one can be both, then Tipu surely was." This too was an ideally romantic notion. True, Tipu had been influenced deeply by the French revolution. The tri-colour notion of liberty, equality and fraternity and the idea of a republic had really appealed to him. Still, if in our understanding of History, if we wish to read history in a manner where communal overtones don't threaten to re-write legacies, then we must at the same time, not over romanticise certain historical facts that appeal to our sense of secularism and democracy. Surely if a demarcated nation state India-Hindustan did not exist till 1947, neither did the concept of secularism and democracy.

We encounter what seems like endless delays in our attempt to secure permission for shooting at Tipu's summer palace, the Darya Daulat Bagh?. We eat breakfast and hang around outside the monument as Brown, KG and Jennifer go about securing permission for our shoot. This I & B letter of ours doesn't seem to be the carte blanche we think it is. Between the tehsildar and The Archaeological Survey of India, they spend hours trying to secure permission to shoot. Or rather, shoot 'for free'. We have tried every trick in the trade to wangle our way without paying the requisite fee, an amount-that once you look beneath the endless triplicates of white paper and red tape amounts to no more than Rs. 5000/- a figure our production team sees as an unnecessary expenditure.

So, we lounge about in the grass while our cinematographer takes handheld shots of the façade of the palace. An unusually simple structure this palace has been converted into a museum with rich lithographs chronicling the life and times of Tipu and his father Hyder Ali and their courageous and vivid trysts with the British Government. We take a quick '10 minute tour' of the interior. I am reminded of a historical fact that has remained etched in my memory for no other reasons that selfish gratification. Tipu Sultan died on the 4th of May, this day, my birthday, nearly 200 years ago while engaged in mortal combat with Lord Wellesley's forces. It strikes me as ironic, that his dream for a 'Republic' nation was realised 150 years later and that we, this unit on a trip had come to his capital in commemoration of 50 years of that independence from colonial rule. This day marked yet another milestone for us, the unit. It's been exactly 2 weeks since we left Bombay and a quick flash frame back is all too overwhelming. Each of us has internalised this journey in our own way, for some, even the vicissitudes of daily travel and uncertainty of the quality of room and board has proved to be quite a 'culture shock'. In keeping with the interactive nature of the documentary - Saeed sees the documentary series as being not just about the people of India, but also about his unit - he wants to document our changing perceptions, as our observations, he feels could provide him with a multitude of reactions, given the various classes and creeds that make up the unit and thereby, perhaps reflect the mind set of modern India. He wants to sit with his crewmembers and hear us out. We are to document this talk.

SH

So, in the shade of a banyan tree in the garden outside the summer palace the crew (minus Abhinav and Shymole who have suddenly developed some terribly urgent business they have to attend to) are seated in a circle. The inquisition is about to begin. Inquisition, though, is too harsh a word to describe Saeed's finale to Episode 2. It's more an attempt at introspection for all the members of the crew. For Saeed, a key aspect of this documentary is the growth of its individual crewmembers brought together by fate to share an entire gamut of poignant experiences. From issues discussed with the people we've met, to beautiful places we've travelled through, to the implicit nature of manipulation in documentary filmmaking that we've been exposed to, the transformation we have all experienced this past month has been tremendous. A perennial state of introspection has been upon us. Some of us conscious of this, others not.

It is this introspective experience (or the lack of it) that Saeed feels it's extremely important to document. We are the common link between everyone we meet and everything we see. How have we assimilated it all? What have been the transformations we have made in this 1st month of our journey? What do we have to say? Saeed wants to know what we all (from the cameraman to the camera attendant to the driver) think and feel about our experiences so far. This is why, for me, (in comparison to the other directors floating around today) Saeed's a breath of fresh air. For more than any of his technical or directorial skills, I admire Saeed for his strong respect in the spirit of the individual human being. Whoever you may be or from wherever you may come, Saeed will most definitely give you his time and energy. And if you are one fresh out of film school, full of hopes, dreams and ideals, with a strong drive to achieve, the self confidence that Saeed nurtures will make you go out there and make things happen. Sumit and Shaina 24 and 22 can say anything to him, argue with him, disagree with him, laugh with and at him...and he encourages it all. They share a very special relationship. One that I can't compete with and have therefore foolishly made no attempt at developing my own. They have both worked with him longer and know him better than I do. But this rationale is one that I have created, for Saeed has made numerous attempts to draw me out but I have remained tremendously inhibited in his presence.

In my 2 and a half years of film experience my exposure to directors has been limited. For 2 years I worked with one of India's first independent English filmmakers after which I spent 3 weeks on a film directed by one of post liberalised India's first upstart filmmakers. Fresh out of Mass Comm school, and one of those full of hopes, dreams and ideals, with a strong drive to achieve types, I got a job with a terribly insecure director/producer team (is there any other kind today I wonder). These were people for whom any thinking, mature mind was a huge threat (to what, I'll never understand) whether that mind is that of an 18, 14 or 35 year old. The more stupid and easily manipulated you are, the more productive and worth your Rs3000 salary you will be. How? Well...simply because by doing this that person is unwittingly drawn into the vicious program of lose your identity and become an unthinking dog, and the more insecure you are made to feel about yourself, the more subservient you become to your master. And there you have it. A loyal slave. Not an Assistant Director. A slave. It's pathetic. It's true. This is just how the cookie usually crumbles. Yes yes... you Assistant Director type; you're not alone. There's a club of us exploited ones out there. Wipe that silly smile off your face, raise your right arm and vow that when you take that big leap into the (not so exclusive anymore) club of Directors, no sweet revenge on young bright minds will you attempt to take. Screw those damn crumbling cookies.

Saeed in comparison is a God.

The other night, we were sitting in Saeed's room and chatting and he began to ask me what I thought about something or the other. I muttered something under my breath -doing the "yes S..aa..ee.." mumble thing. Saeed promptly turned to me and with a very gentle voice said "Shai I want to know what you're thinking? What you feel is very important to me. I know you have an intelligent mind, you wouldn't be here if I didn't think so. I'd like you to share whatever's going on in that mind of yours?" I looked up at him in complete amazement. Never before has anyone that I've encountered in a position of authority ever been so encouraging - an encouragement that could only come from an individual completely secure with who he is. I burst into a 10minute monologue. He's "Saeed" for me now - the mumble thing is long gone.

So today is Saeed's finale to Episode 2 day. An analysis of our growth, introspection, and self-discovery...hmmm...concepts one would consider highly appropriate within the context of the documentary. But what is the real nature of this documentary in the 1st place? Where the hell is it going? Before we voice our opinions on the viewpoints of people that we've met, maybe we should stop and analyse the significance of questions that we've asked? What I would like to discuss, is how well are Saeed and indirectly the rest of us, playing our roles as sutradhaars of the progress of a nation as articulated through its people? Well, this is finally, the forum where our issues with the documentary can be voiced. Hopefully what the crew has to say today will make a significant impression on Saeed and subsequently on the content and structure of the film. For me personally, Saeed will stand the ultimate test today. To what extent is Saeed the director really encouraging and accommodating? When the comments pour forth, how will he handle our critique?

INTERVIEW WITH CREW
SH

Saeed - Now see from tomorrow we're going to Ooty. We've done a lot of shooting, seen a lot, but I'm going to conclude my 2nd episode here. We're sitting here in front of Tipu Sultan's 'mazaar', in your opinion why am I ending this episode here at this place. Who was Tipu Sultan?

Barkat - A freedom fighter.

S - What do you mean? Freedom fighters started really in 1947, but he was there much before?

When the English came first, the fight started and he launched the 1st missile.

S - Anyway...up to now in all the shooting that we've done, what all have we heard, what all have we seen. Parvez you tell me what all have we seen?

Ravi, Barkat and Raju smile at Parvez, as though mocking his ability to comment anything remotely serious. With his machismo at its peak in front of the camera, Parvez summons the 'Punjab da puthhar' in him and looks up at Saeed through his dark glasses.

Parvez - Bahut kuch suna, bahut kuch dekha. Oh... heard a lot, seen a lot.

Saeed - Kya? What?

Raju (pipes in) - Just this... that there's so much corruption and all.

Parvez - What progress we've made... what the country has won what it has lost...at what level are the people. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer.

Saeed - This 50 years of independence that we've been following, and speaking to people about. What are our opinions about this?

Raju - The people's choice should count. You see corruption in Bombay, Hyderabad, and in Maharashtra State, where it's the most. This should not happen. All these politicians come and go in 2-3 months. Earlier, Indira Gandhi was there, Rajiv Gandhi was there, they were in power for 20 years, each completed their 5-5 years entirely. That's how it should be.

S - Shai what do you think?

I look up at him visibly disinterested with his line of questioning.

SH - Hmmm...about what?

S - About what we've gone through...it's been 2 weeks now.

SH - Well... from the people we've met just complete disillusionment with the country and with the system, I guess. I think there's just 1 or 2 odd people that we've met who do have any element of hope.

Sumit enters the conversation seemingly very concerned.

SU - What really disturbs me is that all the young people that we've met they just seem to have lost hope. Unme koi umeed hi nahin hai. They're going their own way. And all the older people we've met, they're optimistic. They feel ke hum log sudhenge, things will settle down. But 1 thing that I don't understand is that the older generation maybe our parents, our teachers, who are an influence on us. If they have hope why can't that hope filter onto us? Why can't we take some inspiration from them? Why is it that the younger generation is not optimistic enough?

Parvez - koi disha nahin na... there's no direction.

Su - But this is only what I don't understand. Why?

To everyone's surprise, Parvez goes on to articulate himself quite emphatically.

Parvez - It's the same old thing... our politics, our politicians keep changing daily...who's going to influence people...who's going to make people understand. See any new politician who comes, 1st he will fill his own coffers apna bharega maal. The old ones that are there, they've already got their car, bungalow...what more does he need to wish for? Nothing. Now he'll move on and another politician will come tomorrow. He will again look out for himself and his own family first. Apne rishthedaari, who are my relations that need help, this one I'll give a job, the other I have to settle, yeh karoo, voh karoo...like this it'll go on. And who will do anything for the people?

Sumit smirks at Parvez, and gives him a condescending look.

SU - In going on doing for his family, everything will get finished. Nothing will be left for the country.

P - Ya. The ordinary man will get no benefits na...

Saeed interrupts this sparring and directs a question to KG.

Saeed - KG tell me what is your opinion? We've been shooting and we've seen a lot. What do you think? What is happening today?

KG 'Mr. Shudh Hindi from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh' takes the stage. And in his high funda hindi, throwing 10 letter incomprehensible words around, he articulates himself most eloquently.

KG - I think in our India, as much as there are cultural differences, we are that much united. Jitna hi differences hai utna hi hum joode hue hain. There are no differences really. A unique colour - alag rang. Every state we go to has its own unique khushboo, alag mahaul hotha hai. It's own local language, aroma, and ambience... And yet, we're still steadily travelling and are speaking to everybody. I mean, koi anjaan nahi hai hamaare liye. This is the biggest thing. The 2nd thing is about what Sumit said. I feel that our younger generation wants to acquire too much too fast. And because of this their attention is diverted. They only look to see from where is it the easiest to take? From here? From there? How do we take it? In all this they get diverted. The other issue is that of politics. I feel that saamrajyavaadi pragati hamesha se rahi hai, nishchith roop se, ho yeh gaya hai ki bahuthinkthavaadi sanskriti ke aathe aathe every person wants more and more things, and to acquire those things he uses the wrong methods. Looking at him, the person below him also feels that I should also get something- a piece of the pie. What mistakes have I made, where have I done wrong?

S - Why am I left behind?

KG - yes...why am I left behind? So he too goes in the same direction. And as this goes on and on and on, such an atmosphere as we have today, gets created. We personally, each man, has to try to change this. Of course this will not happen by just 1 man standing up or 1 man raising his voice. It will not happen so easily. Everyone must make an effort. Now with what all of us here are doing, somewhere or the other a point is left in those people's minds. Nischith roop se chodenge. Now see, It a big thing that we still have this darohar, otherwise this would never have been there. Ke hammare aise darohar hamaare saamne abhi bhi pratheek hai... and they're ours. Otherwise, if we were not united then things would get to a stage where they would be destroyed. They would break... would be distributed into parts.

S - Do you think that maybe it is breaking?

KG - It seems like that. But when we meet and talk with people it seems that no we're not divided but a man khud itna atma sukhaai hotha ja raha hai...he's concentrating so much on himself that other things mean nothing to him anymore. That's why things like emotions, yeh woh, he's cut off by things slowly.

With a very pensive look, Saeed turns to Jennifer.

S - Jennifer what do you feel?

J - I think, when we've observed people and they've talked about themselves...they do admit that there has been progress between what their parents experienced and what they've experienced in material terms, educational terms. And so when we are looking we're looking for an ideal which maybe too much for this country to take at the best of times, to achieve at the best of times. But we've complicated by having a corrupt system. But even with the best of times I think our aspirations have moved too far ahead for this large country to cope with. Because if you ask anybody, from all of us all our parents were less educated than us, our mother's certainly. So there has been some progress but too much for the country to take in keeping with the democratic set up that we've chosen to have, you know. And then we're internationally linked up with the media and so aspirations are very high...

Sumit - if you see other countries have been independent for a longer time. We've been independent for only 50 years. In 50 years, we've achieved quite a lot.

J - Take a small country like Italy. It doesn't have a country for more than 1 year! And they became independent and a democracy in 1861, and still cannot have a government for more than 2 years!

Saeed - Shaina?

SA - I don't know, especially in the last week, it's shaken me up to some extent. And not necessarily with what people have had to say as answers but primarily because we, (and maybe I'm just too cynical in my 2nd week, it's hit me so hard that from a whole lot of hope, I've gone the other extreme and maybe by the next month, I'll find a middle path somewhere)...but it's just been upsetting me that we've come with questions such as secularism and what is your national identity and what does it mean for you to be Indian, and some people have not even given it a thought. To a lot of people that means nothing.

S - we've given it a thought I think...

SA - Exactly. But it means nothing to them because...

Saeed cuts a very emotional Shaina, and turns his attention to Hari.

Saeed - Hari what do you think? What do you think? What is this whole exercise about? Yeh hum kyon kar rahe hai?

Hari turn the Sennheiser mike towards himself, says a word, then quickly unplugs his headphones - finding the sound of his own voice booming into his ears terribly disturbing to his sound recording. We giggle at his eccentricity.

H - I think that between what we're saying and what we're doing, there's a lot of difference. Most for the people we've interviewed you know, they're saying something maybe for the sake of the camera, or the unit being there. But if you observe them closely, their nature doesn't relate to that. So I think we have to purify ourselves before doing anything. As some sage once said:

"Boora jo dekhne main chala

boora na milli yahan koi.

Jo dil khoje apna

mujhsa boora na koi."

So when we have to purify ourselves, you know, there's no point in blaming others or the rulers who rule this country. So it will take time I think. And again, we can apply the wave theory here, you know, we have to find our wavelength as a nation, you know.

S - Is there a wavelength? Do you think that is possible?

H - There is. There is. For a nation and for a person there is definitely a wavelength according to which we have to move, you know, because we got independence during the middle of the century and that too during the midnight know (he laughs) So people were sleeping actually, (everyone laughs) the whole country was sleeping. So it will take time to wake. We're still in the process of awakening, getting used to this kind of thing, you know.

Everyone is smiling. Having said his piece and bringing warmth to the discussion with his gentle voice and sensitive viewpoint, Hari plugs the headphones back in. Shaina and I look at each other. We connect instantly. Our faces light up with a smile as we exchange the "oh my God, I'm going to cry" look. We both look back at him. He has our undivided attention. Why won't he say more? But a loud voice booms in from beside me.

Su - Ya. People are very happy asleep. People realise things, but they don't want to make any effort. They want secularism, they want democracy, they want a system that works, but how many of us have actually given a thought to doing something about it. We're very complacent in our own lives, in our idealistic dreams.

So much for the warmth created by Hari. Sumit had just burst our bubble. We had been dragged back into reality. Having lost the strain of thought that Hari started, Saeed turns to Ravi (the Bombay mawaali) and restarts his questioning.

S- Ravi you haven't said anything? Ravi?

R - What? What to say? There's nothing worth saying.

Next to him, the best friend Barkat obviously embarrassed with Ravi's bindaas attitude laughs nervously. The way things are going let them go on.

Let them go on?

R - ya let them go on. The farmer will plough his field. He's human, what else. Where do we want to go? Up to when are we going to live? For how long will we live? Till 70-75. After that there's nothing.

By now, I am terribly irritated that the questions and answers floating around are beginning to develop as much focus as the documentary. Everyone seems to be using this as a stage for individual pontificating! Besides Hari and Shaina (whose viewpoints were unfortunately heard only for a moment and then chucked by the wayside) nobody else had really said anything of consequence about our roles and responsibilities with the making of this documentary. An analysis of the content of what we have in the film so far is in no way an analysis of our growth. We haven't really grown at all because we haven't challenged ourselves. We haven't challenged our questioning.

The ideas and questions have not changed from Day 1 - they remain the same. Therefore won't the answers we get remain the same too?

SH - See. We're talking about concepts like secularism, and about how people should do something for the country and things like that. I just think we should first realise that for the average person, their 1st priority is to feed their faces. And if that itself does not happen then nobody is going to look beyond, they just need to, you know, get their 1st meal. And on that level...

SU - I don't think it's just a question of feeding their faces. It's not. It's not just a question of feeding themselves.

SH - No Sumit, I think...

SA - ya how ridiculous a question like this sounds...

SH - ...ya exactly, you're asking the Siddhis...

SA - Ya you're talking to Sunita and you're asking her what does it mean for you to be bharatiya, what does Indianness mean to you, and it's just...

SH - As a concept, it's alien to her.

Saeed - Sunita kaun?

SH - That siddhi family.

S - haan. Yes. Yes.

SH - You ask her about her next meal and she might be able to tell you if she'll get it or not...but to ask her about 50 years of independence and all...it's just....

SA - no, I mean you can ask her, it's in our course of asking but when you reflect back you have to think about it...it's not her concern.

Saeed attempts to kill this argument, by steering the discussion onto another topic. He's run away once again, I'm thinking.

S - What did all of you feel when we went to that siddhi gaon? What did you feel?

Raju - In the 1st village that we went to, people were so poor. They get to work only for 3-4 months and so they don't have enough food at other times. The 2nd village that we went to, there were 5 houses. Each of them had some 5 - 5 acres of land at least. But they don't have the bulls to plough the land. They have to hire them. After hiring them, they're left with 4 annas. With 4 annas what can you do? Our govt. should at least think a little about the poor. It's obvious why the siddhis don't get anything, because they're Negro log, udhar se aaya, usko koi puchtha bhi nahin. This should not happen. Everyone should get equal opportunities. They should also get jobs; they should also get water. In all other countries it's like that only.

P - Now they've become Indians only no. They vote here. They're Indians now. Some thought should also be given to them no? They said that people ask them for votes and all...

Parvez's voice peters out. He looks down, visibly distressed and concerned by the images he seems to recall. A silence ensues. Shaina quickly grabs this opportunity and quietly says...

SA - You know what I felt...

...but a host of louder voices burst in one after the other.

SU - Nahi, besides the govt. it's this feudal system also. There are bhats, Brahmins, bonded labourers... legally, this is not supposed to be practised, there is just no accountability anymore.

Raju - Its not even a question of money.

Su - Now see, the man, who was bitten by a snake, who we took to the polyclinic. So obviously out there we offered to pay for it but look at the dignity of the man, he refused to let us pay for it. Ultimately we literally had to force ourselves on him to pay for it. I mean for him it must have been an outrageous amount - Rs. 30 gone. We just meant it as a goodwill gesture, but he felt offended in a way. For him he doesn't even know where his next meal will come from.

Parvez - No, no. Progress has happened. In 50 years a lot has happened, a lot has been jeopardised as well. The rich by using the poor people's money, they ask them to invest Rs. 5000 and all, and they open textile mills all this, but what's happening for the poor, nothing.

SU - Progress for 20 % people, doesn't mean progress for the country.

SA - and how relevant...

P - But in the world there's a name na, that India koi hai...

Su - Ha but when the world shows India, what do they show? You should look at that as well.

Shaina, finally raises her voice and makes a last ditch effort to get Saeed's attention.

SA - Saeed uncle how important our questions were to the teenagers we met on the ghat, the same questions just become completely senseless when your asking it to someone at the opposite end of that strata. How important it is to ask a business baron what unity and secularism means that's how senseless it is when you speak to Sunita. See. The questions that we're asking and the answers we're getting are just showing you how divided the whole thing is, your 20% and 80%. And yes there is progress, but it has been for the 1st 30-40% and not for the rest. So sure we've made our progress but then...

SH - it's marginal.

SA - it's very marginal.

Perturbed and seemingly confused by the views expressed, Saeed attempts to end the discussion.

S - We've only done 14 days and I'm already beginning to wonder what will happen when 5 months of travel are completed. I know what's going to happen but anyway...badthe jaayenge...dekhthe jaayenge...sunthe jaayenge.

B - In 50 years the country has progressed but unity has been lost. At a political level, they have made the people fight with each other...

S - What does 'progress' mean? In my opinion, progress means care for those who are poor. To make those who are already strong, stronger, - that's not progress. Progress means that those who are poor to take them ahead. That's what's most important.

Parvez - that's happening.

S - that's happening?

P - those who want resources, those who want loans for new plans and all, they're getting them.

S - they're getting it?

P - yes.

J - What we're not considering is...we're all falling into the trap that material level, equals a person's whole level. And you cannot understand India.... These people, these siddhi people should all be committing mass suicide with the actual state of their condition. And what is that human spirit that keeps them smiling, laughing, and paying that Rs. 30 bill. What is that? That's another India which we have...yesterday in that old man's house which was very stuffy, claustrophobic, the camaraderie he had with his tenants you would not see among wealthy people. So what makes that happen in a country like India? Those were his tenants. That girl was saying, I wait everyday for this man's friends to come because they talk and I learn so much from them.

S - He was a lower middle class man when you look at it, but there was a strength wasn't there? Ek shakthi thi unme, which is amazing to me. Where has that strength come from? They have no relationship with money. Then what is that relationship? Where does that shakti come from?

B - Sir this is it. They don't have anything, but bhaichaara rehthe hain na?

Su - See look at our unit we're all like friends, brothers, whatever...

B - Exactly. See if there's unity in us only then can we go together for 5 months. If there isn't any unity then?

SA - Jennifer aunty has a point when she says that those Siddhis can still laugh and smile and have their tremendous dignity, see the potential we have in us. If they've given just that little bit...and yes, just that immense reserve is what's being exploited by the politicians and by power...

J - you know yesterday, that young man, that Krishna he is a local level in a cricket club. He's related to Srinath or something he said. With such generosity he let us shoot and not put the TV on loud. He was damn interested in that cricket match, but it was so gracious of him to say acha they don't want the TV noise, I'll put it off. Actually why should he have had to, he should have said take them in to the other room, you know, but this kind of Indian, doesn't make the headlines.

Saeed turns to the one person who hasn't expressed a viewpoint on anything at all in the past hour. The one voice that has from Day 1 very consciously remained outside the realm of any such discussion. For him, work and personal opinions are 2 very separate, very distinct, entities, which must never be mixed.

Saeed - Chandi, you've been very quiet.

Chandi looks up very surprised that he has actually been singled out to say something so as to justify his presence in the circle.

C - Well, I don't really have a very considered opinion about all these things. I just feel that... you know when we are going in such a unit with a camera, with a recorder and all, and when people see that we're a shooting unit, that has a certain fascination for people. So when we meet them and talk to them, their reactions to us are quite different from...

S - aap yeh keh rahe hai ki dheere se janaa bageeya mein.... That's what your saying. Aahista aahista.

Chandi laughs, but continues in a very serious tone. His opinion had been clearly invoked, and he was going to use this opportunity to voice it fully.

C - No, main bol raha hoo ki the conclusions we're trying to draw from the reactions that we are getting, are not necessarily true. Because, on an everyday level, you know, when I go and interact with people, as one individual with another, then the reactions are very different. But then if I'm in a shooting unit and I go to somebody's house, over their natural hospitality, there'll be something more. There'll be much more enthusiasm. Perhaps they'll be much friendlier than they usually are. I'm not saying that they're down right unfriendly normally, but its not a very natural reaction. What I'm trying to say...

S - I see your point. All I'm saying is that if you take what you see as valid, I accept that in front of a camera a human being can become something else, but if I have 50 interviews and 25 at least, approximately, are genuine, then that's okay for me. Of course there might be a lot that is acting for the camera. This can absolutely happen. Performance for the camera - it can happen.

C - Not only performance for the camera, also certain kinds of behaviour towards the people who are involved in...

S - I understand. I accept it, I do.

C - Another thing I want to say, this is my personal observation. Most of the people that we have met, apart from a few of them, do not really think much about being an Indian, or about nation building or ... and so on. Most of them have given reactions which are very well known and which are every true also. Yes there is poverty, there is tremendous corruption, the politicians are only interested in their own welfare, all these things... Now this is something which has been there all along, and this is what most of the people have said, but I feel that most of them do not really think much beyond this general opinion.

Su - but isn't that the harsh truth?

C - Ya it is. I'm not saying that it's not true. What I'm saying is that most of the people go about the business of their daily living, you know, without giving a thought to...without thinking much beyond their daily affairs. And when things become difficult, it is always the politician or the administrator or the ruler in general, or the govt. you know, which is to blame.

SA - Going on day to day without really caring has 2 sides. 1 is, you've past caring and your just so callous and selfish and wrapped in your own progress and the other extreme is where you are so concerned about when your next day's meal, your next day's livelihood is coming from that you don't think. It's either those kids on the ghats not thinking, but also Sunita not thinking. But they're completely different...

C - ya of course they are.

A silence ensues.

SA - Can Jangle talk?

P - Our country is this you know, jai jawaan, jai kisaan. Near Hassan you remember that farmer, he has had no time at all in 35 years, "I have no time at all to speak to you," he said. Chalaatha jaa raha hai voh. (Parvez laughs)

SH - And his was an honest answer, no inhibitions.

S - That was an answer for me, Because he had hired those buffaloes. 'I have to plough the field otherwise I'll lose my time and your coming in the middle to talk to me, I can't my time will go.' Sahi aadmi tha. He was absolutely right. Anyway, come on let's move on ahead.

SA - Jangle saab...

JS - No I'm behind the camera.

3 hours. 3 hours of significant discussion, or 3 hours of pointless discussion? Have we all come out feeling more focussed and more prepared for the next 4 months or more confused and deluded? Well...only time will tell. Aage jayenge, aur dekhenge...

**OOTY
SA**

Bandipur-Madumalai. Twin tiger reserves. Wildlife sanctuaries. The sky has gone cloudy and the unit is enjoying this pleasant and leisurely drive through thick forestry. Sumit drives the camera car, eager to do a bit of game spotting. All we have seen so far are sporadic bunches of monkeys hanging off signposts or squatting on milestones. As the Karnataka State limit ends - Thank you for visiting Bandipur, Tamil Nadu tourism welcomes you - we find ourselves waiting at the check naka. KG goes about paying the toll. A peanut seller comes up to the green sumo. Camera is rolling. He insists on selling Saeed his wares, paper cones loaded with a handful of peanuts. "But I don't eat peanuts", says Saeed. The boy doesn't relent. "Oh its not for you, its for the monkeys" Accha, bandaron ke liye hai? Alright then. The boy smiles into camera and darts off as Saeed gestures to KG. The car begins to move and KG, a delightful nodding smile on his face grabs the peanuts as Saeed passes him by. "For the monkeys," shouts Saeed as the traffic slowly begins to move. Still nodding and smiling, KG proceeds to hand out the *puris* to the entire unit. Hungry hands come out of each window, we tear open the packets eager to munch on this mid-afternoon feast. Yes. Well, the jokes on us. But hadn't we come to terms with the fact that we were performing monkeys?

Still, hoping to spot wild animals crossing our path, Sumit lives in a Kipling imagined world, he deliberately slows the pace. He gets his 2 minutes of wild thrill when he spots an elephant through a clearing on the side of the road. Inertia rushes through the fleet as the cars come to a halt, much like lumbering elephants following the leader. Jangle does a quick lens change and zooms into the jungle. Yes, its an elephant alright. Rather frail, but my, huge tuskers. Something to trumpet home about...a wild elephant! But the excitement is momentary, although the image is taped for posterity. The poor tusker is chained, through the thicket now are visible 2 herdsman plodding along with the beast. Well, he ain't free, but at least he got teeth.

As Shai and I bare the woods for a quick pee, I stumble on some concrete. Following the plastered path as it winds in the overgrown grass, I step back and attempt to get the full picture. A double J, Dolby digital, ABBA style, 20 feet tall and wide. What is it? Probably an aerial marker! Ha ha ha. This is as much Veerappan territory as it is J Jayalitha's. Legends of the Tollywood jungles. One a sandalwood smuggler and the other a Sandal smuggler. Both thieves. Both icons. One robs the government and the other is the government. Oops, was. Anyway they both do it out of love for their people.

Tempo dynamics come into play. Mihir is itching to drive fast, he feels too trapped in the middle of the Sumos. Sumit, still on the wildlife trail revelling in the pleasing landscape, dodging potholes, jangle taking lush wide shots of the green as we travel. Soon, Mihir overtakes and we decide to meet up at the next town. The foliage begins to change in rapid succession. First deciduous forest, then as we ascend, tall bamboo jungle and then up and up, the air is scented with the light air of eucalyptus, slim Nilgiri trees spring out around. It's raining and as we ascend higher up, a moist chill begins to enter our bones. We stop for chai at a small town 50kms before Ooty. There is no sign of the green Sumo, Jennifer worries that they missed the turning and have found themselves deep in the jungle. KG makes an STD call and gets us reservations at hotel Charring Cross! The Tempo and one Sumo move on, KG stays behind to wait for the errant camera car.

Ooty. Uttacamund. Udthagamangalam. Honeymooning paradise. British hill-station. Tourist attraction of Tamil Nadu. We've all gotten a little wet, not entirely by accident. Give me the rains anytime and I'll get soaked to the skin and make up excuses for myself and my state quite by reflex. Hotel Charring cross is built on top and inside a shopping complex. The scents of essential oils, woods and foods hang thick the moist and chilly air. The errant crew hasn't arrived. Where are they? What's happened to them? As the production team busies themselves with dealings and check-ins, Shai, and I survey the shopping mall. Distinguishing between the smells, we follow the aroma of fresh breads and chocolate icings and find ourselves in the basement of...I can't believe it...Sweet Chariot. It's a branch of a hole in the wall confectionery in Bangalore; the diabolic rum tarts they dish out have gained notoriety with a segment of youth and students from Delhi to Bombay. We waste no time in getting high on the goodness of their sinful icing. I order a bunch of pastries for birthday dessert.

SH

The storm we encountered on the way here brought with it a sharp temperature drop. Hotel Charing Cross - in the middle of Ooty's shopping area - that's where we stop and that's where we get rooms. I walk into the lobby - ooh swanky I'm thinking 'hope the rooms are too.' Once checked in we're directed to our rooms. Out of the lobby, over a little bridge that connects to a building. The bridge is now flooded, water has flown into the connecting corridor into the main hotel building. I follow the guy, splash through the water and turn right on the same floor with the flooded corridor, walk a little further and there it is room 105. "What a Bloody Con". I step into my room. Wall to wall carpeting, pretty neat beds, very clean sparkling white bathroom but the smell. Jesus Christ!! Damp and musty as hell. The room had been closed for so long that the dampness had seeped into everything, the curtains, the bedcovers, the carpets, the cupboards, even the TV refuses to work - the tube is so damp.

A HOT SHOWER - the acid test for any hotel. If the shower's great, the hotel's great. A simple rule created by me and followed blindly by me. Of course if the hotel has no shower at all, then that's another story altogether. I step in and turn on the steel contraption above my head. Hotel Charing Cross' moment of truth. What can I say? HOT HOT HOT water just simply explodes out above me, every little pore competing with each other. Full marks boys. Appropriate recommendations shall go out. Hotel Charing Cross Room No 105 - the perfect shower. Sorry Shaina but you're in store for a half-hour wait.

At least the shower compensates for the bad weather, the crowded streets and how can I forget, the drive up here. Why the drive? Well...firstly we lost the camera car. Saeed and gang stopped to shoot something and told us to go ahead. We did and stopped at the main junction after Madhumalai to wait for them. They never showed up. We waited and waited but it was getting dark, so we just left a message with the chaiwalla that if he sees a Green Sumo go by, he should inform them that we're going ahead to Ooty Hotel Charing Cross. So we drove on. Secondly, we drove through Madhumalai forest and everybody had been promising us the sighting of wild animals - well at least wild elephants. I was so completely excited - my 1st game reserve. Madhumalai is a dense forest, with a narrow highway going through. For most of the drive our car was the only one going through. An eerie feeling, if you ask me. I was with my head stuck out of the window for most of the drive. My eyes peeled for something, some movement in the trees, some rustle in the bushes, maybe a wild elephant or even a tiger (the 1 freak one in Madhumalai, only for my eyes) or a deer or something... we drive and drive but nothing. Nothing moves in the trees or rustles in the bushes, or... all of a sudden....

"Look, Look" I scream. All heads turn right. And there it is - our wild animal in Madhumalai - a madly charging wild boar. It came out of the trees, charged to wards the road, saw the cars, turned around and ran back, banging into every tree that came in its way. We all burst out laughing. The poor thing looked so so idiotic; far from our notion of wild animals and their deadly aura. It was obviously petrified and disoriented and here we were laughing our heads off at the poor animal's fear. But it really was quite hilarious. Even as I think of it now, under my perfect shower, it brings a smile to my face. So much for our 'tryst with wildlife in Madhumalai'.

"Guess what. Saeed and all have just arrived. They're saying they saw a Tiger and managed to film it." Shaina yells from outside the bathroom.

"What are you saying? Are they bullshitting, or really?"

"I don't know? They seem pretty serious and Jangle seems really excited; he was able to get a shot. They're setting up the transfer in his room. I'm going to check it out. Come when you finish."

What crap!! Madhumalai only has wild elephants. And anyway it's not so easy to see Tigers. They don't come running up to cars on the highway (like poor dumb wild boars do). Thi story is definitely a whole load of bullshit. But...actually...hmmm... you never know.

Curiosity gets the better of me. I cut short my already 25 minute shower. Turn of the heat, and allow that 1 second of cold cold water to complete 'the perfect shower'. Dry up. Throw on my clothes and run out of the room towards Jangles'. Raju and Parvez are in the midst of setting up the transfer. Nearly everybody's there - Sumit, Hari, Chandi, Ravi, Barkat, Ayub, Mihir, Sawatbhai, Shaina, and Jennifer. Saeed's durbar is in order. With whiskey in 1 hand and cigarette in the other, he relates the story with great panache.

The story - as related to us by Saeed, Sumit, Jangle & Hari.

They were driving through Madhumalai looking (as were we all) for wild animals but couldn't really see anything apart from a couple of monkeys and a deer.

"But at least you saw that. We didn't see anything." I mumble sadly. My initial disbelief transforming into complete belief.

"Listen listen. I haven't even started the story." Sumit says. His eyes glowing.

Saeed continues with all seriousness.

They stopped to go to the loo, slap-bang in the middle of what they thought was a forest clearing. Sumit very casually steps out into the bushes and begins to empty his bladder. Suddenly he hears something in the bushes about 100 metres away. He looks in the direction of the sound. "Something's definitely behind that bush" he thinks. He zips up and walks stealthily back to the car. Saeed, meanwhile had also noticed the movement and had quietly indicated to Jangle to roll the camera. Just as Jangle panned the camera in the direction of the movement, it appeared. Alive, and in the flesh. Right before their eyes. A Tiger. It walked by them slowly. Jangle with trembling hands (he sheepishly admits) adjusted the aperture, focus and took what he felt was a beautiful shot, as India's most prized animal walked behind a row of dry bushes with his yellow fur gleaming through in the sunlight.

"WOW" Shaina and I say in wide-eyed unison. The room is filled with an expectant silent. The only audible sound is the soft whirr of the Beta recorder as it silently transfers Jangle's travelling shots of the cruise through the wild forests of Madhumalai. We wait patiently for that great shot. For that moment fate had so cruelly denied us. From outside the room, Ravi shouts "Aye Sumit. Accha hua ki you ran. God knows what would have happened if he caught you while you were peeing." Everyone starts laughing. "Arre chall chall. Who ran? I was not scared at all. I've been to Corbett." Sumit's quick, but pathetic defence. Man! These guys and their pangas. I wish they'd just grow up and give this bravado trip a break.

"And with my 2x zoom lens. Wah!! Kya shot mila. You'll see it now." Jangle says.

Hari pipes in "It was so silent. I could only hear the crickets and then suddenly this rustle of the Tiger behind the bush."

"Here it is...dekho dekho" Jangle shouts pointing to the monitor.

All heads turn to the monitor.

The Shot (or rather what really happened):

A travelling shot through the forest. Over the shoulder of Saeed seated in the passenger seat, we can see trees and forest rushing by. Saeed points out to something, and shouts into his lapel mike (the one hooked onto him while he's in the camera car for car interviews or any other 'gyan' he might want to impart) "Slow down Sumit. I think I see something." The car slows down. "Stop! Stop! Sumit."

From Saeed's window - an elephant emerges out of the trees. A wild elephant with tusks, ears and all. Another one follows. "Shhhh. Saeed says. Quiet. They're wild elephants."

A deathly silence ensues, as the elephants stroll out quietly. Everyone in the car holds their breath, careful not to make a sound.

And then... as the 3rd elephant strolls out, there is a creature beside it with something that looks like a stick. It slowly comes into focus. "Its' a man. A mahout!!!" Saeed shouts into the mike (much to Hari's chagrin). They stare at the elephants in horror. So much for the wild elephants of Madhumalai. All four in the car burst out laughing.

We do too.

"But where's the Tiger?" Shaina asks eagerly, voicing the concern of everyone in the room.

"Tiger? What Tiger?" Saeed says with a smirk on his face.

I stare at him shocked. "You mean you made this whole Tiger thing up?" I ask.

"Yaa...Madhumalai mein tiger kahan milte hain?" Jangle says laughing. "We were just fooling around. And you all believed us. "

"Suckers!" Sumit shouts, pointing to Shaina and me.

SA

Dinner is full of surprises. Jennifer has ordered Chinese, as a special treat. We wallop the stir fries, veggies sautéed in sugar sweetness, Indian Chinese at its very best. Sumit brings out the pastries complete with lit candles and complemented with a bigredbowed knife. I ceremoniously do the honours and we proceed to get more debauched, the sugar doing temporary wonders for our overwrought nerves.

As we lounge about and chat with Saeed, Sumit, still high on his sneak-outs and explorations asks Saeed if a few of us can go for a drive to the lake. Very high and in an euphoric mood, for it is still a few minutes to twelve and it is still my birthday, Saeed nods an affirmative. Wasting no time, we round up the interested parties. Chandi, Hari, Brown, Shymole, Sumit, Shai and myself.

We drive out to the Ooty lake, its been raining the sloping hills are covered with wet muck, more smells that combined with the cold chill invigorate our sapping energy. We park on a hill overlooking the lake. Here, Chandi, whose vocal talent has been extolled by many but has yet to be experienced, gives in to our badgering and eyes shut, loses himself to the fishing boats of Orissa. His voice, smooth and gentle warm like the river flow carries us to another coastland of India that I have longed to travel. A silent wave of applause, everyone is stunned by the depth and melody in his voice. Chandi smiles bashfully, takes a silent bow and adds his epitaph to our silent appreciation. I know I could have become a singer. I wanted to.

It has been fun hanging with the boys. Even though we all are perpetually in each others faces and have spent a fair bit of quality time chatting about things, professional protocol and food fights have prevented any sort of friendship or bonding that might have typically emerged on a unit such as ours. But these warm thoughts are short lived. While lounging back in our room 3 of us, Sumit, me and Shai, Sumit tells us how Shymole thought we tried to hit on him. Before the drive, the 2 of them had been hanging in our room. Shai and I freshly showered had been ready for bed. We were in our T-shirts, comfortably tucked under our blankets. When Sumit had rushed in with the news of the little outing, Shai had quite naturally swung off the bed commanding Shymole to turn his head. "I've got to slip on my tracks, look away". I don't know what I did, but Shymole claims I flashed my panty at him. "What was she thinking? Was she trying to seduce me? She's such a kid!" How fucked up is that. Shai and I scream and rant for a bit, pouring out all our bile. How naïve and stupid we are to think that an appreciation of world cinema sensitises you, makes you more human, less man. Shymole, Mr. Nice guy, confidential stranger, everyone's buddy was the twisted messed up guy that we had sussed him out to be in the first place. It was no point trying to get to know these men better. They had pre-conceived notions of us, notions that sprung from a stereotype mindset that were essentially male and provincial. Yes, I'm cutting a stereotype here too. But if we are to be seen as attitudinal disrespectful chicks, fast cock-teasing bitches from Bombay, then I can't help cast them into a very typical mould of sexist males who haven't had any real understanding despite their rigorous cinematic exposure that the esteemed FTII provides. *Hai Bhagwan*. Panty flashing for Shymole? *Toba Toba*.

Our woollens are taken out from the production trunk. I get out my jeans and Nike air trainers that soon become the envy of Sumit's eyes. Sumit is such a dapper dude. While we invariably show up at checkout looking like drowned un-bathed rats, Sumit always manages to look fresh, the creases of his denim sharp, T-shirt tucked in. Belt buckled. And he carries the least baggage. A neat haversack, which is pretty slick too, not like our torn and dysfunctional totes. Anyway, this weather change provides the unit with a new look. No bandanas, no batik kurtas and chappals. Jeans, sweat shirts and keds.

We head out to the famous Ooty Botanical gardens, teeming with tourists on summer holiday. The intermittent rain hasn't kept anyone indoors. Jangle spends a while taking in the ambience. I notice him patiently panning his camera around a little child in cute pastel clothing, focussing on his movements, following him as he enthral himself with the rolling motion of a big round powder pink balloon that after a lot of kick and play snowballs and runs him down. We take a quick walk around the park and stop to read a plaque that occupies prime position in the center. Its an oddly shaped structure, the marble pedestal has another cement block placed over it, jutting from where is a granite and gilt short and stocky letter 'T', written on which is some trivia about the garden. We would have not given this edifice a second glance had someone not told us that the structure used to be a 'J', for of course, the mighty J Jayalalitha. It once stood tall, but after her fall from power the erstwhile now CM, Karunanidhi had the bottom concretised to now extol the powers of a non-iconic government.

SH

A very wet, very cold, and very crowded Ooty - a typical early morning welcome to one of India's most typical hill stations. Surrounded by these typicality's we decide to focus our story about Ooty purely on understanding these typicality's. Who essentially is the Ooty tourist? What is their opinion on the use of a hill station being transformed into a very apparent abuse?

Ooty's Botanical gardens - the perfect place for our story. Teeming with tourists on summer holiday. The intermittent rain hasn't kept anyone indoors. As we stare in astonishment at J Jayalalitha's obvious narcissism, Sumit comes running up with news that he and Jennifer have met some very interesting people whom we should interview. I rush back to the interview spot with Sumit, and hand the sound cable bag (I carry so diligently) to Hari. As he begins to set up the cables, I fix the Sennheiser onto the rod (which I carry even more diligently).

I'm designated a perfect position by Hari who has already begun to fret and fume as the ambient sound of children and people milling around will destroy his attempt (yet again) to achieve pristine and perfect sound. Written across his face is "Saeed doesn't care about good sound." Well, at this point Saeed doesn't seem to really care about anything besides taking a break from the chaos of his crew. He is sitting on a bench far away, attempting desperately to ignore us as we set up. Sumit is to handle today's shoot, and the 2 elderly couples he is to interview are one very dapper bright red sweated Admiral Mukherjee and his very elegantly attired wife and a tall, strapping, brown sweated Commodore Radhakrishnan and his very poised and attractive wife. All four are 'hailing' from Pune.

Admiral Mukherjee and his wife + Commodore Radhakrishnan and his wife

Tall hefty and elderly gentleman in brown sweater with dark glasses - I am Commodore Radhakrishnan, a retired naval officer. Then we moved to Delhi and we're are on a visit to these parts to escape the heat of...

Elderly gentleman in red sweater - I am Mukherjee, former naval person. As my name suggests I'm a Bengali but I've settled down in Pune, primarily because I've spent most of my time in Bombay and around. We both joined the navy around the same time and are friends now as long as your 50 years of independence. We've come here on a joint holiday. We've been here before as students in the Staff College at Wellington, and we thought it would be a good idea to come and see how this place has progressed, since we were here last in the early 60's.

Sumit - What differences do you find? Do you find the progress for the better or the worse?

Admiral Mukherjee - Radhakrishnan would you like to respond?

Commodore Radhakrishnan - I think people are much better dressed. I think there are more people going on holidays than there were in our younger days. The environment has been completely spoilt and I think it's a great tragedy. Uncontrolled or unplanned...without the proper permission. Concrete structures, which don't blend with the architecture or the general layer of the land, have been built, and now we're faced with the serious problem of environmental degradation and I don't know how long it is going to take before it can be corrected. From that point of view one is bitterly disappointed. I suppose part of the pressure is also due to the fast growing population, even though we were one of the 1st countries to have officially formulated a population policy. But as everything else in our country, not pursued like it adequately. Otherwise like everything else, I think, we are no where where we should have been, had we been serious about pursuing progress systematically without being diverted on extraneous issues.

SU - Why is it that we don't pursue progress with the passion that other countries do?

AM - If I may respond to that. I would 1st like to add on some of my observations revisiting Ooty and Coonoor after a few decades. My friend Commodore Radhakrishnan talked about the environment, ecology and the unplanned concretisation of such a lovely lovely tourist spot which we find rather depressing. Now tourism is important for the economy, but apart from the 3 star tourism, which we have here, we also should aim for 5 star tourism. These are the days of international competition. If we're going for globalisation, liberalisation, economic reform, we've got to be highly competitive. We've just come down from Dodabeta where there's tremendous scope. What we lack is ideas. What we lack is commitment. What we lack is discipline. Now you look at the lawn here. It still looks nice. Signposts say you're not supposed to be playing on the lawn, but you see how people are playing on the lawn. So these are the kinds of things, which we must pay attention to. I think the reason we're not doing this is perhaps the common criticism that we lack leadership in this country.

SU - Do you feel that in today's times people take self before country?

AM - I would not like to generalise on that. Yes there are people particularly at the politicians' level, bureaucrats' level, civilian bureaucrats' level, and the nouveau riche level where they put self before country and before everything else. But I wouldn't say that about the common people. They just don't get the opportunity to develop themselves. They're almost non-persons. Why? We're not managing our human resources the way we should be. I'm all for curbing our population and all that, but what we have, need not be totally negative. It can be made positive with the right kind of leadership, the right kind of ideas, commitment, dedication, discipline, opportunities for these people to develop. So I wouldn't say the entire India puts self before...I think you can say that about those powers that be, but I don't think you can say that about other people. Of course for the armed forces, which we've, both had the privilege of serving, there's' no question of putting self before, even service, let alone nation.

SU - You must have joined around 1948.

AM - Yes we joined around that time.

SU - So what made you take the decision to join the navy?

AM - A variety of reasons. In my case, I had a good gap between my college degree, and in my family there were naval connections so I joined the navy.

With all honesty I can say that at that age I was not so consciously driven to serve the country blah blah blah. No I don't think so. I just wanted to be a disciplined person I guess. I wanted to make both ends meet perhaps. And I saw that the armed forces outfit those days was quite different from the civilian crowd.

CR - Plus of course there was the attraction of spending 4-5 years in England
Everyone laughs.

AM - Those days there was no NDA, you see. So we used to be sent to the Royal Navy for our training.

SU - As youngsters were you very influenced by our freedom movement?

AM - Yes I was. I can't speak for Commodore Radhakrishnan. Maybe he would like to respond to that.

CR - I had my 1st shave at the midnight of 15th August.

SU - Do you recall that hour?

CR - Oh yes.

Mrs. Radhakrishnan - Nehru's 'tryst with destiny', made a tremendous influence on me.

AM - But we have miles to go.

SU - What were you doing at that time?

Mrs. Radhakrishnan - I was in school, and it really influenced me so much. A sense of idealism to bring the country forward from the old servitude, to the British, to our own, you know. We were an idealistic lot of young people. I would say that after a few years quite a few hopes have been belied. However, still I think we've done very well as a nation. And there's something about the Indian, which is, that we're so focused on the negative only because our aspirations were so high. Now we see only the negatives - critical, sometimes over critical and missing out some of our major achievements. I would say that 1 of the things that I feel, as a woman, is that the consciousness of giving equal status for women in society is an important feat we have achieved. SU - Do you have children?

AM - We have 1 son. He's a banker. He's abroad. An NRI.

Mrs. Radhakrishnan - We have a son and a daughter, Our son is abroad. Our daughter is here.

AM - You know, to go back to the focus of your documentary, we had a big riot in Calcutta, in 1947 I think it was. Mahatmaji was on fast there. And after he broke his fast, he eventually addressed a rally in South Calcutta where we lived, and I had the privilege of listening to him. He made the most profound impact on my mind, although I had then decided to join the navy - a violent service - but this non violent man had a profound impact on me and I really felt proud to be an Indian like him. So I think, at least as a student about to join the navy Mahatmaji had a better impact on me than the leader of the interim government Pandit Nehru.

SU - Do you feel that the people of India did not understand Nehru's vision?

Mrs. Radhakrishnan - I don't think so. I think that the educated people of those days really thought that lot of what he spoke about the future of the country was possible, and in retrospect, I think, quite a bit has been achieved. I'm not 1 of those to seek negativity. But a whole lot of trends, which are now coming up, are a little frightening in terms of what the future will hold. This lack of discipline, which Admiral Mukherjee mentioned, is a very significant thing. All countries that have progressed have been somewhat able to instil a kind of discipline for the national course, like Japan and so on. Somehow, we are not able to move get that sense of discipline. God knows why?

CR - I think 1 of his greatest contributions, which is scientific temper, is very important. In certain fields it has made us progress where the western countries would never have permitted us to make a start in those days...

Suddenly, the sun sneaks behind the clouds, the sky turns into a bluish grey and a drops of rain begin to fall. On Admiral Mukherjee. On Sumit. On Jangle. On Hari... A light drizzle commences. 3 manic seconds follow. Hari springs up towards the boom rod. Jangle (idiotically) puts his hand over the camera. Raju and Parvez look to the sky helplessly. I fix a tighter grip on the boom rod, adamant to not to be distracted me from my job of recording Commodore Radhakrishnan voice as he continues to speak despite the rain.

Noticing the pandemonium behind the camera, KG, Ravi and Barkat leave their designated crowd control posts and in their resourceful production crew way, whisk out a huge golf umbrella to cover the boom rod, a small umbrella for the camera and an even smaller umbrella for the boom rod. The rest of us proceed to deal with droplets of rain trickling down our faces. But the umbrellas have not made Hari a happy man. In fact he screws up his face further. His headphones are catching the droplets of rain falling on the umbrella. "Why does pristine sound elude me so?" he seems to be saying to himself. He looks threateningly at Sumit, as though demanding a quick wrap up to the interview. Sumit gets the message loud and clear. No on wants to be party to screwing up Hari's sound for there will be hell to pay.

SU - 1 last question. How did you feel in 1964 when Jawaharlal Nehru passed away?

Mrs. Radhakrishnan. - Yes. I felt very sad. I was in Delhi. I was part of the funeral procession, which went from India gate to the end. I think the people of India really mourned him genuinely. They really mourned him. There was something about him that was appealing to the newly independent Indian, you know. He symbolised something that they felt was good.

SU - Did you feel any loss of hope or did you feel that in your own way you could carry on the crusade?

Mrs. Radhakrishnan - No not really. He wasn't the only person in India, at all. We had many many stalwarts who we tended to forget because we got focused on the government, the Prime Ministership and so on. There were 100's of Indians who were very great and still are. We don't give enough recognition for achievers in our country. Only office holding people get attention from the media and others, you see. We as a people are great people, basically.

As though in affirmation of Mrs. Radhakrishnan's profundity the heavy clouds above us burst open. It begins to pour. Tents pitched for picnickers on the lawns of the botanical gardens become our shelters. Our endearing ex army couples rush in with us a little disappointed that their nostalgia trip has been sadly brought to an abrupt end. We huddle together with about 50 tourists/picnickers. As the rain beats down, some families continuing to frolic in the rain on the lawns alongside signposts saying, "Playing on these lawns is strictly prohibited". I cannot help but wonder whether we as a nation have lost something we had so prided ourselves on possessing throughout history. Our respect for the most fundamental concept of humanity, that of an inherent discipline of character seems to have quietly disappeared. As a result of which, we seem to have lead ourselves into the state of anarchy that we are in today. Where are our role models? Where are our leaders? Where is that one visionary, that one God, that one saviour whom we an innately Hindu nation are so patiently waiting for?

After a 20-minute downpour, we bravely venture out of our shelter with the umbrellas forced to do their protective job as best they can. For even the slightest drop of water on any piece of equipment can throw our 18-member crew into a state of paranoia. A wet cable here, a damp recorder head there could mean up to a 3-day wait until reinforcements come. Still, what we have here is a job to complete - our Ooty story must go on. With Saeed still insistent on staying in the background today, Sumit and I go looking for our bakras. We find them. They walk the bambaiya walk, and talk the bambaiya talk. The 'we are so superior' attitude written all over their well fed faces. Dr. Sanghvi is 'hailing' from Gujarat but has been settled in Bombay for the last 40 years. Come the summer holidays and he and his family take off to their favourite hill station or sea resort or... This year, Ooty was the destination jointly decided upon by his entire family. So along with his friend Mr. Gupta and his family, The Sanghvi family came to Ooty 6 days ago. And like all dutiful middle class tourists here, they too have come for a crash course in appreciating nature. A walk around the controlled environment of the Botanical gardens is a huge eye opener to people for whom ecology is unfortunately defined and understood by the number of trees grown on the street where you live.

Sumit and I conduct the interview while Saeed looks on from the bench behind.

Dr. Sanghvi with his wife and 4 kids and Mr. Gupta with his wife and 1 daughter.

SU - Dr. Sanghvi What do you look for when your choosing a holiday destination?

Dr. Sanghvi - Basically a scenic spot.

Mr. Gupta - Different cultures.

Mrs. Gupta - Wildlife sanctuaries

Mr.G. - We being a city people, we don't get all these things there. So we try to find it out in the interiors and try to find the extreme cultures. Different cultures in different places.

SH - So do you think India has a good mix of everything?

Mr. G - Oh yes beautiful.

SU - Do you feel that the tourist of today is different?

Dr. S - Yes. They are changing. It is much more developed here compared to what we have seen when we came here 13-14 years back. People are much more different than what we have experienced before. It's not the usual mentality that we have seen before. It's more like a city, like a bigger town like mentality.

Mr. G - Actually the government should take over all these tourist centres and develop it nicely. Yesterday we were just discussing about the guides. They should have good qualified guides in the tourist centres so that wherever any tourist comes they get a good quality guide to guide them along. Here we come across touts who just cheat you.

The Sanghvi's and the Gupta's are not the bambaiya types with attitude (the notion we love) that Sumit and I had identified them as. The camera makes them uneasy. Even their children seem shy and embarrassed in front of the camera. Where is that MTV generation? I quickly realise that my naïve analysis of the arrogance of the Bombayite will have to be discarded, for I forget that Bombay is an amalgam of various little pockets of people. Yes, there are distinct similarities of accent, language, attitude, but inherently every person on the island of Bombay is primarily a product of Gujarat, Punjab, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka... and this is what governs the choices he makes and the exposure he permits himself and his children. The Sanghvi and Gupta children are quite unlike the Bombay youth we encountered on the ghats of Lonavla on Day 1. Simply from their demeanour one can recognise that these children have obviously been to different schools and have been brought up with a different set of values from those of their counterparts on the ghats. Both are part of the enormous middle class of Bombay, and both are representative of 2 different worlds within this class.

Our interviewees seem restless. Other frolicking tourists stare at them as they stand lined up in execution order. Sumit attempts to steer the conversation away from the same old boring analysis of a growing tourist town towards something he feels is closer home. He invites Dr. Sanghvi into an analysis of the discussed to death issue - that of the role of media in Indian society today.

SU - Your children, as I'm sure most children nowadays are subjected to the invasion of the media and that I'm sure brings up aspirations in a way. Do you think your children when they grow up, will be willing to sacrifice their morals for, you know, the achievement of personal or materialistic goals? Or have you instilled such strong values in them?

DS - I see your point. In fact I don't have cable TV. I only have DD to make sure they don't waste their time seeing only those soap operas and things. I have devoted their time to computers and other more creative things.

SU - Why have you done that? What do you think is the influence of ...

DS - Well, because they'll do nothing, they'll just switch on the TV and lie on the bed and watch.

SU - What influence do you think this is having on children in India? You've taken a decision to have cable TV. A lot of people haven't.

DS - I know. He hasn't. See, I think they will become more free, maybe in the wrong way also. And secondly they won't devote their time for other activities at all like outdoor sports and other things to bring themselves up. No hobbies, no reading, nothing, which we used to do before.

SU - Do you rather read books or go and discuss Bold and beautiful or whatever comes on TV with your friends?

Son (says very sheepishly) - No read books.

A loud voice - because luckily he doesn't have cable. Correct?

Everyone laughs and turns in the direction of the voice. Saeed had been standing behind Sumit and listening to this conversation for some time now. Unable to keep himself away from the action and obviously terribly bored with watching tourists doing the holiday thing, he seems to have decided to get back into his position of control. Having waited for the opportune moment to enter the conversation, and having found it, he cracks a joke, indicates to Jangle and Hari that he is going to participate in the interview and casually enters frame.

S - So you think education has improved?

DS - yes. Certainly.

S - But people of the older generation say that there is a great decline in education etc?

Mrs. G (points to her young daughter) - No no. She's from a convent, where she's just finished her SSC. They are taught well there. She is more disciplined and well mannered. She knows how to talk to people, and knows her limitations.

Mr. G - moral values are always induced in the school, and the family also.

Mrs. G - she understands all that, so at least I don't have any problems. She's very understanding and there's nothing of that sort that they say that the modern ways have influenced today's children and that they have got spoiled or anything.

SH - You've just done your SSC? So what do you plan on doing now?

Mrs. G's daughter - well basically it depends on my result but I would like to go in for science or do any other competitive exam.

Mrs. G (with great pride) - She wants to work for her country she says.

SU - Yes? In what way?

Mrs. G - She wants to do the IAS examination. She feels that she should do something for the country.

S - Why? What do you think the country needs?

Mrs.G's daughter - Basically good leaders. Because the people are illiterate, they follow whatever the leaders say so leaders should be proper if the country has to progress.

S - But tell me we talked about education having improved, we've also talked about role of media, what kind of future do you see... what's your name?

Mrs.G's daughter - Sagorica

S - Sagorica, you say you want to work for their country. You've got a certain kind of anxiety, am I right? What kind of future do you see 25 years from now?

Sag - Right now I don't know. I hope there's a good future.

SU - But your willing to work towards that.

S - That's very nice.

SH - What do you think about your friends and people of your age. Are they very patriotic?

Sag - yes yes I think so.

S - What about you'll what kind of future do you'll see 25 years from now?

DS - very difficult to visualise the way things are going on.

Mr. G - Things are also much more competitive.

DS - Yes I think so in every field particularly with the multinationals coming in it's also more competitive an its also more better from the job point of view. If your good at your work then I think there is no problem. If you're not good then your in trouble.

S - That means, with the coming of the multinationals, efficiency has increased?

DS - Yes...unless you take our govt. jobs.

S - So tell me...you are saying with this liberalisation process, efficiency is very very important. Do you mean that the people who're in the multinationals are efficient and the rest that don't get in are not?

DS - No I never said that. The companies that are going to survive will have to be as good as the multinationals in their efficiency. So everybody working will be efficient. If you're not efficient it'll be difficult to continue.

Mr. G - I would say yes to that whatever you have said. Workings with the multinationals make people efficient and people working in the govt., are inefficient.

S - Why is that?

Mr. G - They are a protected lot. Once they get into the govt. service, they're not bothered about their jobs. They know their jobs are secure, and then they have their unions to fight for them. They don't work at all. They feel secure for their entire lifetime.

S - May I add to this, I see your point. There's a kind of security and there's no accountability.

Mr. G - yes.

S - But a large amount of people are not working in govt. and they work very hard. Do you think they're getting their due as hardworking citizens of this country? They're not all necessarily only in govt. as that's not the only source of employment?

Mr. G - That's an unfortunate thing. That is the reason why we're having brain drains from here. We have the best of intellectuals in our country but since they're not getting their dues as you rightly said, they're going away, they're shying away from our country. And the other countries are utilising them to the best of their ability.

S - Okay. Now we've completed 50 years of independence and that's the reason why we're all here. What did you think of our 1st PM Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru? What did you feel about him?

Mrs. G - Well.... Uh Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was okay, but I think I appreciate Lal Bahadur Shastri more. And I would rate him much higher than Pandit Nehru.

S - Why is that?

Mrs. G - because I think he has done a selfless service to our country whereas late Pandit Nehru has done a selfish service to the country.

S - How?

Mrs. G - In every way, because if you see, till Rajiv Gandhi it was his family property. They have considered India their own family property.

S - He didn't anticipate that. That was not his fault.

Mrs. G - That was not his fault but the way things moved later on. At this juncture, when we think back, we feel you know, they have been very selfish.

S - As a family division

Mrs. G - yes. Just like we had the Mughal period, we thought that this was the Nehru dynasty that was continuing. We now feel that maybe Subhash Chandra Bose would have been a better person, Lal Bahadur Shastri would have been a better person...

Mr. G - One Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda was there at that time as the railway Minister, I still remember him.

Mrs. G - There were so many good people...

Mr. G - very straightforward people...

Mrs. G - ...and they were never brought in the limelight just because of the Nehru family.

SU - In the 50 years of independence, what do you feel have been our achievements, and what have been our drawbacks?

Mr.G - There is no doubt that we have progressed but we could have progressed at a much higher rate had there been good leaders.

DS - and corruption...

Mr.G - corruption is the main thing. We have had the best of intellectuals in our country.

S - What about us? You are right. The politicians are our leaders. A lot of people have blamed them. But what about us, aren't we to blame the way we've elected our leaders, the way we've done it to ourselves?

Mr.G - Nahi. The ones, whom we vote for, they never come in. They are never elected. The politicians have kept the people illiterate for their own personal reasons. Because if everyone becomes literate they won't be there in their seats. They have purposely kept them illiterate and they have induced all these sections. Sections in the sense, backward classes, scheduled castes. If they really wanted to bring up these scheduled castes, they should have abolished the name scheduled caste only. They should have had only economically backward castes. They should have given them all the help regarding studies, whatever they wanted. Now whatever they are spending in the name of scheduled castes is going down the drain. They could have given them free education. They could have brought them to a level on par with the others. Abolish this scheduled caste name altogether. Do you think by cultivating these names we are marching ahead or we are.... Today everyone wants to become a scheduled caste person because the facilities that he's getting are too good. Are we marching ahead or are we going back?

DS - 80% of medical seats are for scheduled castes.

Mr.G - Instead of bringing them up to the level, we are dragging the others down. We are degrading them.

S - From what I gather you'll be middle class, upper middle class people, what do you feel about the poor in the country?

Mr. G - Their situation is very bad. That is what I'm saying, that they have to be brought up to the level on par with the others, and I think it can be done only with education. If you give them good education, things will definitely brighten up for everyone in the country. It is only the education that is lagging us behind. Nothing else. Other things will follow. If these leaders make a real conscious effort to give education to each and every person in India...

Mrs. G - Education is increasing...if you see...

Mr.G - but I think that's only in south.

S - The South of course. And Kerala. Thanks to Kerala everything goes up. Tell me something else. Education has gone up since 1947, but the point is what education has gone up. 1 is it to read and write and sign their name because you still have - like this young lady Sagorica went to a convent school. Most of us have. It gives us an advantage. Now are you suggesting a standardised education of a certain level for all? Is that what you're suggesting?

Mr.G - Education in the sense means understanding. They should be able to understand the situation.

S - Finally when I go for a job because I go to a certain kind of school I get my foot in whereas a chap who's gone to a different school he's left way behind and he's supposed to be educated? What exactly are you suggesting for the poor?

Mr.G - See the basic education - if he starts understanding, he can find his own way out. If he wants to go to a convent school or to a public school...

S - but, he can't afford it.

Mr.G - that basic understanding if you give the rest will follow. He'll find his own way out.

S - How do you think you as a citizen can make any difference, since we're constantly blaming the politicians.

Mr.G - I don't think we can make any difference. Frankly, with this set up, no people like us, no right minded people would want to go into this dirty politics.

S - So your leaving the field open because you don't want to enter into this...

Mr.G - I know that. I know that. Unless and until, now with this new Election Commission and all, good people might come in. Let's hope for the best.

S - Sagorica do you hope for the best?

Sag - yes.

S - Okay, Thank you

SA

Post lunch schedule has us heading to the Ooty Lake. Honeymooning weds paddle boats on the lake, families feast on the floss of pink candy, children scream, parents shout, laughter and sales-pitches rent the air, the entire lakeside bears a pastel aura, the light colours saturated in the overcast light.

Soap bubbles float in and out of frame reflecting the multi-coloured ambience of the lakeside. Jangle grabs the scene; the camera follows us mingling about taking in the milling crowds of middle class tourists, old street sweepers frozen in time and space and vendors. A young boy, his cheeks blushed candy pink, a flamboyant red silk shirt, black waistcoat and cowboy hat comes up to us. He waves his arms in the air, tucked between his fingers are long twirling moustaches and fake beards. He dons one himself and twitches it frantically to camera as he begins his sales pitch. Saeed is taken in by the boy's enterprise. What's your name, son? Mustafa. Are you a happy man? No happy. Only sales. Will you be happy with a sale? How much? 5 rupees. OK. I'll take one for myself, and one for my assistant. Before he knows it, the young boy sticks one up Saeed's nose and demonstrates his skill, muscles quivering slightly, his own appendage twitching madly. *Ek tumhare liye...* Saeed tries in vain to copy his style. He faces the camera and looks ridiculous, his long grey hair flapping in the wind, his wide black moustache refusing to budge. *Aur ek tumhare assistant ke liye...* where is he? Saeed looks around for Sumit, but Raju has already identified the assistant that needs the accessory. He calls out loudly for Shai.

Saeed is very moved by Mustafa's ingenuity. He decides to have Sumit interview him. We are all very charmed and impressed with his style and disarming spontaneity. I loop a beard onto my ears. I remember Ooty only for fake hair. When I had come to Ooty lake as a 12-year-old, I had forced my mother to buy me a moustache and beard set that I had worn for ages in various dodgy avatars of buccaneers and dakoos. I remember buying them from a middle-aged man. During the course of the interview, Mustafa tells Sumit that his father used to make and sell these toys. And now, since he was ill and aged, Mustafa had taken up his job. Well, he was doing a fabulous job of carrying on his father's legacy. We wished him the very best. On that happy note, we ventured into the water. Couples waved to us, Blissful hubbies grabbed hold of their shy wives and cuddled and kissed for camera. We even took a few interviews...

In the evening, we shoot the shopping complex. Ofcourse, this only to reflect on the kitsch in store. Our take on how tourism spoils the peace and tranquillity of the hills. We end our evening at a *bhajiya-papad* stall, where we are shot pigging out, the neon green giant chillies hanging from the shop glowing in the yellow lamp lights, the giant *papads* and chilli *bhajis* in the oversized deep fat fryer make for some nice footage, I think.

The unit has done their fair share of shopping. Barkat has bought lots of tea and Nilgiri oil. So have Hari and Jangle. Shai and I retreat to our room for our closed door indulgences, smokes and in turn long hot showers. Sumit shows us his steal for the day, a lined windcheater for 200 rupees. He and Shymole found a shop that has a variety of printed windcheaters. I rush out to the shop, but find the shutters down. I am a little disappointed. We were all supposed to carry rain gear with us, and of course I haven't bothered. Too bad the shop's shut. That night, we keep to ourselves. The bitter taste of last night's experience lingers on. I waste an hour and obscene gallons of water in the shower steaming my pores, enjoying every minute of this luxurious self-indulgent ablution that

Our departure has been delayed. We are now eating breakfast at Charring Cross. This is fortuitous, I run out to see if the rainwear shop is open. Yes. I buy myself a windcheater and run back just in time for departure. There has been some debate on our plan of action. On the way out of Ooty, north of Connoor are to be found the Kota people. The Kotas, like the Todas of Nilgiri form a set of tribes whose ancestry can be traced back to the ...and being warrior clans, they even fought out against the British. We do not know more about the Kotas of Tamil Nadu except that they are a land owning clan. Saeed doesn't seem to keen on going to meet them, but the younger of us manage to convince him. Just because this is not a classic story of disenfranchised tribal people, doesn't mean we should dismiss it. Why not go and speak to them, and find out? So, since their settlement is a little detour off our ever-changing route, we head out...

We leave the over-developed Udhangamangalam, and take the winding route past terraced tea estates, and Nilgiri forests to the little village of the Kotas. As we near the settlements, we see a flurry of colour in activity and stop on the road that looks down at a picture postcard of tea estates and tea pickers, neat rows of uniform tea bushes interspersed by women, their nimble hands working with fascinating monotony. We take the vista shots and Sumit goes down to interview the women. And it comes as a surprise to all of us, that the women are Tamil labour working on Kota land. (do we need the int. should we just give more facts)

Slow gentle panoramic pans flatten the hills and the floating mist and light falling rain. Shai and me run up a hill, settle down behind a bush, and roll a joint. Yes, this is work hour, we know, but shooting this vista is pointless. Beta kills beauty. We aren't needed for the time being we might as well enjoy the moment. And the depth of this breath taking scenery. Down on the road our camera crew has turned all attention to a little kid who proceeds to perform a little dance for them from a the tiered terrace below. He breaks into jerky break-dance moves singing a popular film tune: *Musta-Faa! Musta-Faa! Don't worry Musta-Faa!* The crew joins in the chant. We watch amused. Then Mihir and Ravi twist the words and carry on singing their own version of the song: *Jenni-Fer! Jenni-Fer! Don't worry Jenni-Fer!* These guys are really on the ball. The production crew has been a bundle of contradictions and nerves, constantly changing 'rules', flying off the handle, struggling to cope with the melees that we, the motley crew lay out with every meal. Jennifer has reached breaking point, and the butt of her frustration is often directed towards me. And Brown, poor brown. With all his defences crushed to the ground, he has been unable to cope with the weather change and lies at the back of the tempo on the spare mattress, enveloped by a sleeping bag, not doing too well at his battle with the flu. KG is the only one of the three who has been able to chill, and his job has, by far been the most taxing. He stays up late into the night doing accounts and has to get up long before all of us, to ensure that we wake up, get our bed tea and check out at the given time. He's tough, anal and obviously annoying (given his job), but never to a fault.

Its drizzling heavily now, I don my new windcheater to discover to my horror that Shymole bought an identical one. No! It speaks nothing of our tastes, just of the limited variety that came with the super discount. We park our vehicles and walk downhill to the cluster of pretty houses that rest in the lap of the most idyllic surroundings.

SH

The mountains or the sea? Choose, choose, choose... Sumit's voice rings in my ears as I gaze at the hills – their misty peaks reaching for the sky. I've been a sea person all my life - what with spending every vacation in Goa and all. I can't. I really can't decide. It's too hard a choice to make. Both are so spectacular, so calming and yet so awe-inspiring. I stare out the car window, lost in my world of choices, weighing pros and cons, good and bad. Outside, Shaina hovers. Stoned. Her camera in hand, trying desperately to take some decent production stills without disturbing the paranoid Hari. I can see him giving her a quick 'if I hear the click of the camera you're a dead woman' look. "Cut" someone yells. Shaina jumps on hearing her cue. A free bird, she springs into action and clicks and clicks and clicks. Hari looks on ever so quietly.

Suddenly, loud voices invade my quiet space. I look out to see the camera crew returning to their cars - pack up equipment after interview time. Shouting, Back slapping, LOUD LOUD LOUD. Why? Why? Why are we such a bloody loud bunch? Why can't we just talk normally instead of shouting each other's voices down all the time? We talk about noise pollution in Bombay and how we should stop blowing horns etc. Maybe we should first just turn the volume down on our voices first and understand the concept of silence. It's not horns or loud music or loud speakers or building constructions. It's us. It's always about us. "thum tho tehre pardesi, saath kya nibhaon ge" Oh God. The big lecherous bastard Parvez is approaching. I know his gross voice and besides, he's the only one who won't stop singing this insipid Altaf Raja song. Man, if I ever, ever get my hands on Altaf Raja, I'm going to lock him up in a black and yellow cab for a 100 years, where all he'll get to hear is the pirated sound of his own voice looped forever. The man will kill himself. Divine retribution for all the suffering inflicted upon me.

Parvez is walking up to the Sumo, camera in his hand. He looks up at me. I look away. Bastard! Yesterday, after the shoot, he was packing up, I went to ask him something and he bumped the camera into my breasts, and started giggling and with a slimy smile said "Oh, sorry" and took the opportunity to deliberately stare down at my breasts. I wanted to slap him, but I just gave him a dirty look and walked away. I can't bear to even see his face now as he makes his way to the camera car parked behind me. "thum tho tehre pardesi, saath kya nibhaon ge" he continues as I cringe. Suddenly he stops and starts some ridiculous punga with Ravi about hierarchy or something. "Haa haa you're the boss, nobody's above you... *lekin mere upar koi hain*, but someone is above me, you know." As he walks by, his voice gets deliberately louder. I can feel his eyes upon me. "Aur Shai ke neeche kaun hai?? Main hoo, main!!" He bursts out laughing. Ravi and the rest do too – obviously aware of what he's alluding to. I can't believe the fucker just said that. Bastard! Choothiya! Asshole! I can't take him anymore. I really can't.

The fucker's making allusions about me and him having sex, and everyone's laughing! What do I do? Should I get out and scream at him, should I tell Saeed, should I... should I... I don't know, I don't know what to do. He might turn around and make me look like a fool. Why do I feel so humiliated? Why are they all fucking laughing with him, at me? Oh God, why are my eyes beginning to well up. Why do I feel so fucked? I can feel my face get moist as tears slowly begin to stream down. I am angry, embarrassed, hurt, pissed off, confused. I cry and cry and cry...

Sumit comes to the car to pull out his map to figure out directions to Coimbatore, and Shaina comes with him to put her camera away. They're horrified to see me weeping, and ask what happened. I tell them the whole story, in-between heavy sobs. Sumit gets pissed off, and all set to tell Saeed, to take up the issue, to fuck Parvez's happiness. Shaina consoles me with don't worry he's a chooth, we'll sort it out, ignore him, don't let him bother you... But it slowly gets clear, very clear in my head. I will deal with Parvez my way. He wants to play sexual games with me? Fine. I'll play them. But I promise that I'll fuck with his mind so bad, he's going to have to beg for forgiveness. From this minute forth, Parvez is a piece of shit on the crew and he will be treated like one. I will ensure that everyone else begins to treat him like one too. No trying to be nice to the dickhead of a camera attendant anymore. He's going to have hell to pay - for in some insidious manner I will ensure that he gets his share of harassment. "Hell hath no fury than a 90's woman sexually harassed".

KOVAI SA

We have spent a long time in Kolimalai. Its not 2:30, way past lunch hour. We decide to head towards Coimbatore, now Kovai. No one expects treacherous ghats and traffic en-route. Its almost 4 and stomachs are rumbling in dissent. I can feel a violent storm brewing in the vacant innards of most crewmembers. I voice my feelings to Saeed, who agrees that we should stop at the nearest joint and indicates the same to Jennifer. Crossing the ghats might take forever and another food fight is not worth the delay. I keep a lookout for highway udipis. One passes, and another. I call out to Jennifer, excitedly..."look, there, we passed another one, shouldn't we stop?" But she ignores me and we continue to drive on. I stick my face to the fogging side window of the tempo traveller and make funny condensation shapes and get down to enjoying the weather. Suddenly we come to a halt, just off a hairpin curve. "What happened?" asks Jennifer. Saeed and Brown are dosing on their beds. "Tyre burst" says Mihir. Jennifer and I rush out of the car. And before I know it hurricane jenny hits out at me. "See, this is why I wanted to go on, anything can happen. We could have a break fail. You're so god damn stupid..." The other 3 vehicles have come to a halt, the gang in encircling us. I have no clue as to the cause of all this melodrama. What is all this about? Jennifer's voice, bitter and harsh rings in an out of my burning ears. My head feels hot and tears begin to boil in my eyes. I move away, to avoid embarrassment as I can feel a catharsis building up inside me. I rush out filmy-cally to the centre of the road and begin to howl. Jennifer follows me and the two of us continue our altercation. "But what did I say? Why on earth are you screaming at me? What did I do?" I get no answers, yet the diatribe continues. It has begun to rain and I feel flooded and helpless and ready to drown in my tears. Traffic rushes by in a blur and as cars honk out loudly, I come into my abused senses and run off the road, leaving Jennifer and her offensive in mid-air. The entire crew has been watching this. As I return to the car, still shaking, they come up and offer me support. Calming gestures and smug smirks surround me. I force myself to stop the crying, yet the embarrassment caused by our public display of melodrama does nothing to stop my outpourings. Shai takes me into the green Tata Sumo, where I slowly reach a calm. The Tempo tyre gets fixed and we are on the road again. I huddle in the front seat of the Sumo, still puzzled about what I had done wrong. Maybe the hunger got to Jennifer too. This was probably as much a catharsis for her, maybe more so and that's fine. But no matter how I try to justify her behaviour for her sake, it doesn't quite explain why she gunned for me in that manner without any overt provocation. I guess it's something I'll have to live with. I have known Saeed and Jennifer for the longest time, longer than anybody else in the unit has. It is probably this familiarity coupled with my young age that breeds an attitude that makes me punching bag for all their angst and any message that has to be not so subtly given to the crew will be done using me as a via-medium. It's not fair. But then nothing is in love and war.

As soon as we are off the ghats, we promptly stop for a tea-time lunch. Jennifer does not communicate with me and clearly there are two camps that get formed. I am sitting with the gang, Barkat, Ravi, Raju, Parvej, Ayub, Sawat, Chandi, Hari, Shai and Sumit while across the room, the diabolic production crew appears deep in conversation with Saeed and super stooge, *chugli-khor* Shymole. The crew tries to appear up beat, and Ravi and Barkat cannot resist directing good-natured jibes in my direction.

joke about and smile despite the half-finished storm inside me. I have lost my appetite yet (self-confessed hog that I am) cannot resist the temptation of sampling the interesting “*masala chutney idli*.” The waiter brings it over and just as he is about to place it on the table, trips. The idli dish goes for a flying toss and lands smack on my shoes. Everyone stifles laughter and I find myself hotting up again, as I become centre of attention. I run to the wash tap, my chutney-splattered white tops, now hideously fluffy orange. Sumit follows me and tries to offer solace and support. Why is he making such a scene? It's no big deal. I begin to laugh and to lighten the air joke and admonish him. “*Baccha*, its all your fault...you *maroad najar* on my shoes!” And yet another slap in my face. Sumit takes it as a personal affront. “But I didn't mean to, I genuinely was admiring them, it's not my fault, I promise!” He looks wounded and walks away. I drench my shoes under the tap, not making an effort to wash the stains. Fucking ugly shoes, I've never liked them. I've never had a thing for branded trainers. Never cared about them. But who's to explain that to Sumit who is probably more upset about the mishap than I am. Do I have to explain to him, that they mean nothing to me? That I would happily toss them off a cliff if given half the chance. That he should have noted the intonation in my voice. I was merely trying to be funny, not hurtful. I guess I will have to. Is something wrong with us, both me and Shai? Do we give off wrong signals to everyone around us? Are we so fucked up and so hard to comprehend? Fuck knows. O what a day.

We enter Coimbatore after dark. We have selected our hotel from the hotel guide and we find our way through small congested gullies to a surprisingly up market looking hotel in the middle of a gang of cinema houses. Hotel executive.... has a flashy lobby complete with lounge, reception and information and key-drop counters. Through the atrium runs a bubble lift its plexi-glass capsule offering an interesting perspective to things. Normally, We would have gone to town on this ascending space-bubble, we give it a miss. Still, hotel _____ is a comfort zone. A pleasant surprise. The clean beds, crisp sheets and large rooms and coolers are just what we need for security. Both Shai and I are emotionally fraught and hurt. I try to rest, but my volatile state doesn't keep me still. I feel suffocated and desperately need to clear the air. So I give Sumit my talk about voice intonation and crappy chutnified keds. My patience is running out on me, the last thing I need is bad breathe between Sumit and me. Slowly, he comes around; we hug and make up. Now to clear up the mess between Jennifer and myself. I go to her room. Jennifer shows no interest in even hearing me out, so I harass Saeed with my questions. I need to know what I said to bring on all that hateful scorn. It will help if you tell me what I did. But Saeed has no answers, he just tells me to forget what happened and to chill and stop crying. Well, whatever.

SH

A night in Coimbatore and we're out and on our way to Thrissur - our entry point into Kerala. I come down into the lobby lugging my daily paraphernalia of VCR, laptop handbag. I walk straight out, and into the tempo to seat the 2 pieces of equipment that control the lives of Shaina & Shai. I make sure they're well positioned, and lodged properly between their special towels on the upper baggage hold of the tempo. No harm must come to them. No rain water. No untoward jerks. Care. Absolute care. Phew!! That done, I go back to the lobby and sit down, waiting for everyone to trickle in.

Abhinav comes up to me with an odd look on his face. He smiles.

"I'm going back to Bombay tomorrow?"

"What do you mean? For what?"

"No. I got a call from my Dad there's some work in Bombay that I have to attend to, some important business matters. I spoke to Saeed and Jennifer and I've booked my ticket also. I'll stay here for a night, and leave tomorrow."

" Oh, okay. So when are you going to come back?"

"I don't know exactly when..." His voice trails off and he smiles sheepishly.

"You have to come back. Don't be silly. Attend to your work and join us later. You can do that can't you?"

"Yaa I'll try to work things out."

Abhinav's not going to return. I just know it. I'm not really surprised that this has happened. Sumit had warned us. Over the past few days, Shaina and I have really tried hanging with him, just to get him to chill out a bit, and he has. He's actually been very relaxed and not his old arrogant obnoxious self. Maybe he just needed someone to care and he'd found that in Sumit and now us. I actually thought he was feeling better. But strangely yesterday, I did notice that he was quiet aloof and kind of sad. I guess things must have got too too difficult for him to deal with. To have only 4-5 out of 18 people willing to give you a chance is not really a very positive sign.

He must have just finally cracked under pressure and decided that he couldn't deal with 5 months of struggling to be accepted. If he has a comfortable life in Bombay he can always go back to, why should he stay here and deal with all this crap?

As everybody slowly appears in the lobby, they're informed of this latest development and I watch their expressions alter. Everyone so far has been pretty shocked with this news and on one level, everyone is quite sad as well. I don't think anybody meant to hassle Abhinav so much that he'd actually leave. I guess all the guys thought it was all a part of being a crew and that fights would happen, things would get back to normal and then fights would happen again...and that's just how the cookie crumbles. But, on the other hand, Sumit, the conspiracy theorist, seemed quite convinced that some of the guys wanted Abhinav out. They were waiting for this to happen. But I'd never want to believe that people on this crew could actually be so wicked. Sumit, I'm sure feels awful now, because it's as though those guys have won and his friend, Abhinav has lost.

Abhinav's departure is really quite unsettling for everyone, because he was our main guy. 2 days before we left for the trip he took us for our tetanus injections. He made sure we all took our malaria pills every week. He tried to get us into decent hotels. He tried his best to ensure that we ate 'good' food. But, he was the butt of everyone's jokes, and that's why he's off. Sombre farewells follow, with much encouragement to return. Abhinav smiles courageously, holding back the tears. For the 1st time since Day 1, I actually felt incredibly sad, not only for Abhinav but for myself too. The family that started out was losing one of its members and we only had ourselves and our intolerance to blame.

Bags loaded. Hotel payments made. By whom? Jennifer. Okay so what's the equation with the production team now? I guess what's going to happen is Jennifer's going to oversee everything and for all practical purposes KG will be Production Manager and Ravi will be Asst. production Manager. That issue was not such a problem at all.

All set to leave, we get into our cars. This seat juggling has been crazy - every few days we all get shuffled around for some reason or the other. I guess Saeed's (very unsuccessful) way of destroying all the cliques. Shaina and I get into our new home - the white Sumo with Ayub Mohammed. Just the 3 of us. Under normal circumstance, I guess Abhinav would have been thrown in with us. Everybody accounted for we set off. Our cars manoeuvring through the crowded little gullies of Coimbatore on our way to Thrissur. But first, Saeed's decided to visit Laxmi Machine Works - India's first (and check) only indigenous manufacturer of machines for mills. Jennifer felt that perhaps instead we should have visited Tirupur, the biggest centre for handlooms and textiles not far from Coimbatore. Anyway, to LMW, we head.

Suddenly, the cars stop. Sumit comes running out of the green Sumo. And Shaina and I watch him running from car to car. He comes to us - "Is Chandi here?" No we both reply. "Where is he? I think we've left him in the hotel. He's in none of the cars." Sumit looks really worried. Shaina and I burst out laughing. Sumit gives an annoyed look and walks on..."Don't worry. Send a car to get him." Shaina shouts out to him. He looks around with a disgusted look "What do you think I'm going to do?" I guess we were a little insensitive to Sumit's loss - 2 friends in 1 day! Cause for anyone to lose their sense of humour.

Fortunately we weren't too far. We stop. 1 car turns around and goes back for Chandi. They return 15 minutes later with Chandi in the front seat - wide smile plastered on his face. As it turns out, Mr. Chandidas Mishra came down to the lobby very early (one of those rare occasions), so he decided to go back up to his room and take a nap. He mentioned this to somebody and said he'd be down in 20 minutes. Well, he fell into a deep morning slumber and woke up well after we'd left. He ran down to the lobby to find everyone gone. Of course Chandi in his very cool and calm way states "I wasn't worried. I knew someone would realise and come back for me." Very convenient. He happily does what he wants, and ends up causing us the grief. He's a space cadet.

Laxmi Machine works one of independent India's first machine making factories and the first factory I've ever been to in my life. The warehouse is in fact, a million dinosaur steps back into the Jurassic age, where lines and lines of mammoth sized creatures (or machines if you'd like to call them that) with a life of their own roar away. From what I'm given to understand, these machines, build other machines for export to various factories all over the world. So, Laxmi Machine Works builds machines. The 'cacophony' (Hari's word for any disturbing sound) of each machine competing with the other, as it makes parts of another machine, is really thrilling. I ask Hari if he needs my help with the mikes.

He gives his head a violent shake - the long hair flying from side to side. Is that a Yes or No? I ask him again. Once again the same desi head shake ('Yes' for 'No' - I figure) and he stares back in Saeed's direction, disgusted that he (or more so his precious ears) are being subjected to such absolute torture. He seems really pissed of, so I decide to just hover around, give some moral support.

Over the 'cacophony', Saeed decides to interview the manager - much to Hari's horror. I'm thrown into action. Pull out the bag with the mikes. Pull out the cables. Mike Saeed. Mike the manager. No we shouldn't mike both. We can use the boom. But then we'll get the noise of the machines. Hari's all agitated and succeeds in turn, to agitate me. Saeed attempts to calm him down. After much debate, a decision is taken, all the mikes are put wherever they have to and I'm left hanging around, mike bag in hand and back to square one, with nothing to do. Why does he always behave like this with me? Even in Sringeri, he needed somebody to wear the lapel mike and quietly take a walk in the temple to get some ambient sounds. I was standing right next to him doing nothing. I offered to go but he, once again, gave me the 'Yes' 'No' head shake and promptly turned around and miked Sumit. Apparently he asked for an Asst. sound recordist, but I guess when a female Asst. sound recordist was brought on the scene, he was thrown into a complete tizzy. He always tries to act like he doesn't need to have me around, and will try his best not to use me for the job that I've been hired. But the truth is he does need me. Particularly at times like this where interviews just happen suddenly. Hari's a complete perfectionist, and maybe he thinks I'm terribly inefficient, and his expectations are just too hard to match up to. I guess I'll just have to keep trying hard to prove myself by doing what I've been doing all this while. Hover around him and just be there. When the opportunity arises to prove myself, I will.

The factory is slowly beginning to make me sick. Round and round, up and down, side to side, in and out, loud roars reverberating in my ears...it's all too much. I can't take it. I go outside to get some fresh air and drink some water. The heat is now scorching. I'm feeling so dehydrated and no matter how much water I drink I still feel completely dehydrated. Jangle suddenly appears out too. "It's too hot. Chand's taken over" he says and grabs a bottle of water. Slowly the rest of the crew begins to trickle out. It's 10am and the heat has already sapped everyone's energy. Jennifer immediately brings out the packet of 'Electral' and after adding some to the water, she forces all of us to rehydrate ourselves with it. We take a break of 15 minutes and then Saeed announces that we have to head to the other side of the factory, and shoot there. After an initial shrug, suddenly everybody jumps up all charged to work. Not the boost from Electral or sudden conscientiousness but the sight of the Air conditioned interiors of the other side beckon.

As the cool R&D department air condition chills us out, Jangle decides to experiment with his skate board shot, once again. Along the corridors outside. Sumit, Shaina & I along with this R&D woman are made to walk around feigning interest in laboratories, notices, plaques on the wall... As we're doing our bit of modelling to prop up the shot, Sumit whispers something to Shaina and she in turn whispers to me "It's Parvez's birthday. Ravi just told him and he's really pissed off that nobody's wished him." "Oh shit. How sad. Let's wish him."

Later, we hang around waiting for Saeed to return from saying his Thank You's to all the corporate types, in one of the R&D laboratories. Sumit, very sweetly, write 'happy Birthday Parvez' on the board and Shaina and I begin to sing for him. Initially surprised, everyone joins in and Parvez seems really touched. As everybody goes up to wish him, I do too. With a smile on my face, I put my hand out. He squeezes it hard and gives me his gross lecherous smile once again. My smile disappears instantly. I yank my hand back and walk away angry as hell with myself for trying to behave normally with this very sick man. I'm bursting with anger. "That's it. I'm going to kill him. I hate him. It's his bloody birthday. Why can't he just be decent when somebody else is trying to be decent with him?" I explain what happened to Shaina; she tries to calm me down. "You should really tell Saeed" she says. "Why? I'll deal with the fucker myself. I can totally deal with him."

After a quick lunch at the factory canteen - good canteen dal chawal, sabji, papad, achar - we set off towards Thrissur - the cultural capital of Kerala.

KALAMANDALAM SA

We drive on in silence toward Kerala. We stop at dusk at the state border to shoot our entry to Kerala. I need vent from the deathly silence and my solitary confinement at the back of in the tempo and I beg Saeed to let me join Shai and Sumit in the Sumo. Come 7:20 sharp, give or take a few minutes, Saeed's body clock sets of an alarm indicating to his brain that it is drink time.

We have grown accustomed to drinking and driving for we never each any destination before sun down (another 'rule' made and broken by Saeed with impunity) and I have occasionally shared a whiskey with Saeed and Shymole in the jail that the tempo has become for me. Now, free from my solitary confinement we partake in Jangle's rum, Shai, and I. Close to 9:00 we find ourselves in Thrissur where we are to spend the night. We camp in the ornate lobby of hotel Luciya Palace. (Either there is a chain of Luciyas in Kerala, or it seems to be a favourite name for hotels, like Sri Krishna in Karnataka. I remember the Luciya Trivandrum had been host to the Indian delegates at the IFFI'97-, in January. The foreign delegates were put up in the beautiful Kovalam, of course. It had taken us ages to find the hotel, until some friendly and well-informed gentleman had told us to pronounce it as lu-chee-ya.) Well, save for the lobby that looks like some *ghissa-pitta* nawabs house, the rooms are like dormitories. Shai and I have light soup, bear silent and tired witnesses to yet another food fight and retreat to our room to log and slog.

8th May

Well rested, we head out in search for the Kalamandalam. Jennifer seems really impressed that even a paan-walla can direct us to the Kalamandalam. Well, Thrissur is cultural capital of Kerala, but that besides, it *is* an important landmark in the town, why wouldn't they know? I continue to ruminate on her conversation, which of course, I am excluded from "...catch a paan-walla in Bombay being able to tell you where the NCPA is!" True, true. But then, you will have to know the city better and ask instead for the New Oberoi hotel, directly opposite of which, in the heart of Bombay's financial district is the National Centre for Performing Arts. It's in the Kerala air. It's in the romanticised notion that we have about India's most literate state, the first state in the world to elect a communist government. The state where decorum, multi-culture and unspeakable natural beauty combine to create an utopian ideal of what India could be and in a sense is, if given good governance, land reforms and literacy.

We go upstairs to secure permission to shoot. The long corridors are teeming with people, young women standing in a long queue, parents and relatives sitting on benches fanning themselves, killing time and anxiety. We are told that it's interview time, the Kalamandalam will select only a handful of these artists for their rigorous 4 -year course in mohiniattam, keralas once-dying dance form that saw new interest and rapid revival largely due to the founding of the kalamandalam in While most of the applicants are Indian, one can't escape noticing a petite Japanese girl and a tall European wait about nervously, alone and without familial support. Yes, the kalamandalam attracts artists from all over the world. (some juice) We get our permission granted and make our way to the grand Koothambalam, where traditionally, within these temple complexes the grand epics, the geet-govinda and other stories were performed. In the courtyard stands a tall obelisk, a foreboding and warning sign that automatically commands a presence over you, bringing to the fore all inadequacies of the poor appreciation we have of our rich and glorious story-telling traditions. It makes me feel very ignorant. The façade of the Koothambalam is austere, yet the dark carved wood and seeming eastern Japanese influence create an all-together exotic cinematic and theatrical aura around the structure. The very scale of the architecture belittles you, humbles you; its outward looking wings testament to the universality of the timeless theatre that plays out inside. The entrance is tiny by comparison. A tiny door beckons you into the mighty temple space. Instinctively my steps get heavy; I shrink to nothingness as I step inside the awesome interiors of the theatre. For a moment, I believe that a kathakali or kootiyattam performance will come to life in front of my eyes, that the drums will begin to roll...so caught up have I been with a recent and as yet unfinished desire to experience an all-night-full-length kathakali performance. But that dream lasts just that long, a moment. For now our crew galvanises their assets and talents for our own performance. Mr. Balasubramaniun, one of the oldest residents of the kalamandalam is made to rehearse his *nav-rasas* as Jangle locks his frame and Barkat examines the rope ladders and rudimentary rafters and rigs on the ceiling of the stage. Every conceivable light bulb is pulled out from our production trunk and Barkat, Ravi and KG play circus on the rafters as they bounce lights and shadows over the patiently waiting Mr. John. Jangle rehearses his part, complicated moves with his camera, a slow zoom in from a long shot of the entire auditorium to a close up of Mr. John yards away, perched awkwardly on a chair performing the *nav-rasas* in a loop. This manoeuvre required skill and some practice, exposure and focus changes all well co-ordinated to flow effortlessly, naturally. So, after much rehearsal we are ready to take, the camera moves well practised, the lights ready to shine. But the fine art is never really perfect, is it? Not even in documentary filming where one should be recording things as seen, in the moment, in truth. Unlike the glorious tradition of live performance where rehearsal and rigorous training to perfection invests all of the artist's energy and talent in a single moment, recording makes us complacent.

In the given context, this frame of reference, I find myself hating the video camera, abhorring the very aesthetic and grammar of the medium. Why aren't we just shooting the architecture, the awesome yet austere interiors of the performance space? Why is Mr. Balasubramaniam replaying the nav-rasas, emotion after emotion endlessly for us? Each universal emotion, he plays out, hasya, mirth and laughter, karuna, pain and sorrow, raudra, anger, vira, valour and heroism, bhaya, fear, bibhatsa, disgust, shanta, peace and the final rasa, srngara, love and pleasure from which all other emotions emerge. This universal basis of the Indian performing art form reduced to mechanical machinations. We'll take the elaborate shot, then a mid shot, then a close up and perhaps match-cut them, as our opening sequence to beautiful beautiful Kerala. And perhaps, our fellow viewers will be envious that our crew visited the esteemed kalamandalam, and witnessed the much-touted performances. I guess I'm just pissed off, that our travels are so fly by night. That instead of watching an all-night Kathakali performance, we see ourselves lighting up the stage with baby's and spots. I wonder what the artist himself feels about all this. Has he become used to film crews and truncated performances? Am I, ironically the idiotic cynical romantic?

Performance finished, after 13 encores, we make our way to adjacent administrative building where in the green room, we are to interview Mr. Balasubramaniam & Mr. John. In the long, tube-light lit room, hanging on rope lines that stretch from end to end is an assortment of costumes, masks and accessories, essential to the actor and the make-up of the avatar he portrays. Now, it's the direction departments chance to be innovative. Shai, Sumit and I open the property trunks and pull more extensions, fantastic skirts, stiff bakram lining, demonic costumes, masks, cymbals, ghungroos and flamboyant hair-do's and string them along the rope, very content with playing set decorator, creating our own richly coloured and textured backdrop for the interview. Frame set, the bold colours carefully balanced out in the backdrop, we roll and Saeed begins his interview in English. Strangely, none of us pay attention. We're still examining the costumes, amazed at the unwieldy weight that the performer has to don before he can come to life with an almost inhuman agility, energy and stylised emotion.

I am sent of with the production crew to find a lunch place. We settle on Hotel Volga. (only in Kerala Kerala will we find restaurants with such appellations, Tashkent being another favourite) Jennifer is now acknowledging my presence, monosyllables, nods and work-related queries are occasionally directed towards me.. I look longingly at the menu, still, I'll be damned than to open my mouth with regards to food. And instead of a decent rice plate, I am longing for a special deluxe Rs. 15/- thali; we order individual portions of wannabe Hyderabadi biriyani and tomato gravy. By the time the rest of the unit arrives, I am through with this excuse of a meal, my eyes are pouring chilli paste tears, a peg of oil roughly massages my innards. With much courage, I softly ask KG if I am allowed a portion of dahi. I just have to have some, if I have to neutralise my mind and body to the various upheavals caused in the name of food. As I spoon the lumps in the watery dahi and pour it into a glass to drink, I notice the entire crew simply devouring the biriyani, adding liberal doses of the lethal tomato gravy and paying no attention to my offer of... "a little dahi to help you digest." Ah, well. Give them the grease and spices of life; give me some dahi and lots of water, and on occasion some authentic local food and we'll all live happily.

Trichur bears a saffron cast, incongruous to our very notion of Kerala. Orange buntings and flags flap about in the late afternoon heat. We pass a park in the centre of the city, and come to understand that there is a big BJP rally in Trichur. Ting! Our minds are alert. It would be interesting to shoot the rally and interview the people of Trichur who have come to witness the campaigning. How strong is the BJP influence in North Kerala? Are the seeds being sown, or is the harvest ready for reaping? Strangely, this presence stains the romance of the finely painted perfection of Kerala, and inherently, a naivety on my part chooses to undermine the influence of the saffron brigade.

Our journey so far, has been marked with a classic case of bad timing! For we missed the annual Rath Yatra in Hampi and have just missed the Pooram festival in Trichur. Now, as luck would have it, we find out that the BJP rally had taken place the day before, so any hope of gauging the political pulse of the people had to be abandoned.

We spend the entire evening in Jangle's air-conditioned room viewing the footage. Shai and I are doing well with our in-tandem work method. Since, we have to all gather together to watch the footage, we have decided to do a rough log as we transfer. This, far from being frame accurate might be off a couple of seconds, given our quick reflexes and ability to watch continuously the fast moving TCR code. While one of us does the paper logging, the other keys in her rough paper entries into the laptop. We take turns paper logging and typing.

This method is the fastest we have found; it enables us to watch the footage with the crew, discuss the shoot for its worth and do half our work. We still have to view the transferred VHS tapes and accurately register the codes, a task that is time consuming and very mundane and painstaking. We have quiet a literal backlog, given the earlier hitched we had with the VCR. Yet, we are doing pretty well, it gets tiring though, as sometimes we stay up well into the night building up our rew-stillframe-tab-enter momentum.

Kodungalur.

9th May

Early morning. We leave bright and early and make our way to a tiny coastal town called Kodungalur. Here, as Jennifer and Saeed would have us believe is a small nondescript mosque that is said to have existed in India since the 7th century. This little startling bit of trivia has been one of Jennifer's pet illustrations with regard to India's composite culture and in particular with regard to the importance of the Caravalli coast as an important trading region between Africa, the middle-east and Ancient India. In my 20 months association with them, I have often heard of this little town, and now lucky me, I am here, in Kerala, for the second time in less than 5 months on a rushed and perhaps incomplete road journey through my country. Yes, this might sound like a complaint but its more like a brag. I am so fucking fortunate to be given this opportunity to see my country. And no matter how we bitch and scream, and no matter how many ethical and moral issues we raise, or food fights we have, or how limited an understanding of what is or should be Indianness we are to arrive at, I know that all that this travel is going to be an overwhelming experience, its full impact I might understand at a later stage in life.

We have breakfast in a small tea stall in Kodungalur; the site of jars full of fresh iddi-appams delights me and sends me down memory lane. I settle down next to Hari and we continue our bonding over south Indian food. I tell him of my recent exploits with Kerala. I had come in January to attend the International Film Festival in Trivandrum after which I had spent 3 blissful days at Kovalam, then taken a train to Cochin where, after meeting up with some friends, we had sailed west in the wonderful MV Tipu Sultan to a tiny island in the Lakshadweep sea. So fresh and unspoilt are my memories of that holiday. Minicoy, the southernmost of the Lakshadweep islands, merely 60 miles north of Maldives, where the few thousand villagers spoke Mahl, the Maldivian language and not Malayali as is spoken on the other islands. 5 kms in length and 500 metres in width surrounded in the distance by a barrier reef, beyond which the breaking waves indicated the fury and depth of the wide-open sea. It had been the month of Ramzan, and the all-Muslim population of the island had been most gracious to us. We had been invited to partake in the *iftaar*, fast breaking every evening and the good will and generosity of the people of Minicoy is a memory I carry with me as we burrow our way through the Indian mainland. Unfortunately, despite my persuasion, our unit wouldn't be able to share this experience. We are time bound and land bound. And Saeed has decided that we will only have time to sail to the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and given the historical, strategic and current importance of those Islands, it is probably a more momentous stop than Lakshadweep where, in truth good administration and slow build up of infrastructure coupled with the fact that almost the entire young male population, born seafarers, join the merchant navy and bring home small spoils and an overall comfortable standard of living. I saw no angst, no mess in their comfortable existence and being an island with no tourism infrastructure, the ecology and fauna of the undersea world unspoilt, the people seemed very content in what to me was the most beautiful place I have visited to date.

After about a dozen iddi-appams, I have done the production account justice after starving at Volga, the men-folk go to seek permission to shoot the mosque. We hang outside disappointed. We have all completely forgotten that women aren't allowed inside mosques, and for that matter, neither are non-Muslims. Well, the latter is easier to disguise than the former, so Saeed, Barkat, Raju, Ayub1 & Ayub2 enter by virtue of their religion, while Chandi, Hari and Jangle, *thet Brahmins* cover their heads and pass off as Arif, Salim and Hussain.

We hang around the gate. Save for a plaque that gives us some information of the historical site, the building itself is new, very new and not at all different from the many modern day kitschy concrete and paint mosques we see everywhere. We are told that this new façade was recently built and that within the interior lies the prayer room that is indeed 13 centuries old. It boggles the mind to know that the second oldest mosque in the world and indeed the oldest in Asia lies in our country, virtually unsung in a tiny town in Kerala. Again, I am reminded of my education, my major, being history.

I remember taking note of the beginning chapter in my medieval India textbook: "India on the eve of Muslim invasion AD 1047". In our north-centric reading of history at university level, we are never told of such important facts. History is so truncated, fragmented, dated. So we learn simple truths like Islam came to us along with Invasions from the Northwest Frontier Province and that Christianity came along with the battle of Plassey and East India Company. Yes, these are important landmarks, but why is the south so neglected? Shouldn't such a monument be testament of our great heritage, our diversity and to the richness of trade and commerce that linked the subcontinent to the world not just through the Silk-Route, but also through sea-routes ages and ages ago long before Vasco-Da-Gama's discovery of Goa?

Saeed wants to take interviews around the town. Just opposite the mosque is a vegetable seller, his variety of bananas far surpassing anything I have ever seen so far. Big ones small ones green yellow red purple, I engage Hari back into our culinary conversation. He gets talking and rolls out a litany of banana names and keeps me enthralled with the intricacies that make the ordinary kela a delicacy in Kerala. Saeed asks Sumit to interview the vegetable seller. (?????)

Next to the Vegetable seller is a quaint, simple house. My bladder is ready to explode, so I knock on the gate and gesture to the young woman inside. She welcomes me to her house and takes me to the backyard where, nestled and hidden under palm fronds is a neat clean toilet. I relieve myself, as Kuchinod watches bemused. We head back to the front of the house, where our unit intrigued by the photographs that grace the walls of their porch. Old-yellowed posters of Marx, Engels and Lenin, interspersed with fading prints of their local counterparts E.M.S Namboodiripad, A. K Gopalan and Achutan Menon. Kuchinod introduces us to the rest of her family, her mother and her sister-in law. We ask if we can interview them, and they seem willing. We set up our shot in the front yard, the camera tilts down from the photographs of the Comrades to the 3 women, their stunning faces framed by their scarves. Saeed asks the women if they are Muslim. "Then why do you have photos of Marx, Engels and Lenin?" Kuchinod tells us that her two brothers are in the Marxist party. Her elder brother is the secretary for a coolie labour union. "Oh," says Saeed. "Communist leaders. You don't feel bad?" Feel Bad? It took me no more than a few seconds to figure out Saeed's chain of thought. Devout Muslims vs. Atheistic Marxists. He wanted an explanation for the prevalence of Marxism in Kerala, a land that was so immersed in religion and cultural tradition. How did the two go hand in hand? How did communist ideology complement deep-rooted god-fearing beliefs? These were questions in Saeed's mind. And he attempted to find out from these women. "Do you *maan* them, these communist leaders?" Saeed points to the photographs on the wall. "No. We don't *maan* them but the men in our family do. It has nothing to do with religion. There is coolie labour. Loading Unloading. And, you have to be part of a union to work. If there is any *mushkil*, then the union will help. Nothing else." Well, Saeed had his simple answer. Necessity. No real romance. He tried to gently probe into this nexus, extract from them an idealistic comment. But they had said it all. Necessity was the mother of India, romantic ideology took a back seat or armchair, driven or ruminated on by feel-good utopian doctrines not grass root politics and tangible results.

We said goodbye to Rukiya, Ramnatod and Kuchinod and headed 3 kms west, to the bank of the river. Kodungalur was called Craganore in the earlier days and it is here, barely a couple of kilometres from the Cheraman Mosque, on a little historical port bank, the Mar Thoma Shrine. Mar Thoma is none other than St. Thomas, yes the very doubting Thomas, one of Jesus' 12 apostles. He is said to have come sailing to the Kodungalur shore in 52 AD, soon after Jesus' death. Why, I will continue to lament, why don't we tell this to our children, why aren't we proud of these facts that make our land what it is. It's not that we are living in the present and that this Indianness we are in search of is one uniform tangible essence. That it will never be, given our varied past. But it is this distorted and out of context very past that we turn to, to rabble rouse and stir dormant sentiments. Why can't we turn to our pasts with a broader understanding of history and civilisation? An understanding of people and culture, rather than one of conquests and kingdoms. This is such a naïve and foolhardy wish. It's a Utopia many of us share. It's to do with our all-too-beautiful understanding of what we would wish to be our Indianness. One main thread that we are wont to believe runs through the heartland of every Indian. Or rather, 'the common man.' That of tolerance, brethren, immense heart, love, generosity and resilience. It is perhaps a myth. But a beautiful one. And nothing has shattered it for me. As yet.

We are sitting by the river. Chinese fishing nets and coconut palms dot our view on either side of the river. A boat is ready to set sail. Rather, motor away. A priest walks up the jetty and on to the boat. He blesses the boat and walks around sprinkling holy water on the hull and hold and yes most importantly, the engine. I flit in and out of idylls, one in front of me, the other in my mind.

The crew has moved to the other jetty, where on the banks of the river is a petrol pump, Hindustan Petroleum has waterway franchises all over Kerala. I make my way to the jetty. Jangle is filming two boats come up to the jetty. At a lazy pace, they tut-tut their way up to the jetty. Then, the approach changes. Both boats veer to the right, come dangerously close to each other and then head away from the jetty, to the extreme right of the embankment. The engine of the first boat cuts abruptly and the engine of the second boat chokes and sputters and both boats bob and sway with the currents. There is uproar between the fishermen on both boats. Enlisting Hari's help, Saeed asks the fishermen what seemed to be the problem. As both boats, Aradhana and Rehmat had approached the jetty; one of them had not paid attention to the net-iquette, or safe distance guidelines. Result. The nets of both the boats had got entangled. Now the fishermen of the respective boats jumped into the water and dived down to assess the damage. They remained underwater for what seemed like an overly prolonged period. Finally, one popped his head out, then the other. What was the damage? Fortunately, Aradhana's propeller wasn't damaged, though the net had been ripped in places. "Repair will cost about Rs. 500/-" said Aradhana's fisherman. "But whose fault was it?" The fisherman popped their heads out of the water and laughed embarrassed. "These things happen all the time. They're accidents. We can't blame anybody." He picked up a knife from the boat and dived underwater again. The other fisherman did the same. Again they disappeared for minutes, came up every now and then to catch their breaths and deposit the torn shards of blue net on the boat. One of the fishermen cut his foot and casually lifted it out of the water to reveal a long gash. He casually rubbed a bit of spit onto it and was gone again. Mohammed Hassan, the other diver came up for air and then began choking and gasping. A conversation ensued and wild laughter broke out between the men on the boats and the locals gathered around. Mohammed Hassan stifled his laughs and he blinked unbelievably, still coughing out the water. What was so funny? "Oh, nothing. I just swallowed a fish down there?" More laughter followed. Then the divers went down again to finish off their work. When the nets were separated, both parties shook hands and parted ways. Aradhana and Rahmat. Off again for some further trysts with their entangled destinies.

We turn our attention to another fishing boat that has returned from the days sail and is refuelling by the jetty. As the motor roared and the diesel filled, Saeed got chatting with the fishermen who were hanging out on the jetty, smoking beedis, drinking chai and gobbling down banana fritters. "How far out did you go today?" asks Saeed. Hamza, an impish looking fellow, middle-aged, his eyes full of adventure lust answers us in broken Hindi. "That depends on the rpm. I never know how far we go, it's all in a days work." He called out to the engine driver malayalam. "Oye, how far did we go today? 50 kms? Well today has been a bad day, we only earned Rs. 4200/-. Real poor catch." More glasses of tea appeared from the stall on the jetty. "Oh. What's a good catch then?" asked Saeed with a hint of challenge in his voice. "This is definitely *kamti*. On a good day we earn upto 2 lakhs." He said this with complete nonchalance, but everyone stared back with incredulity. "What rubbish! That's too much. You're joking right?" Hamza seems to take this as an affront. "Aye, jhoot nahin bolta. Mein Musalmaan hoon. Sacchi. Day before yesterday, we caught some big, huge prawns. One lakh worth!" Still in disbelief, the unit murmurs to each other. Hamza cuts in. "*Hindi thoda thoda janta hoon*. I can understand what you're saying. But they are huge fish, export quality. One kilo sells for Rs. 100 plus. For every 100 RS worth of fish we get Rs 40 commission, that is after cutting diesel cost." "Do you own this boat?" "Naa, I'm just the fisher man. I don't work too long on one boat. If the seth doesn't like my work, I leave it. This boat doesn't have a cold storage. So, we can't sail for long." "What time will you sail out, tomorrow?" "Oh, anytime, asked him how much they normally earned. "Oh, four, three, two, one, twelve, fifteen depends...What is that you say? Oh yes, I have 2 sons, both doing their B.A. Them? Fish? Naa, they'll never do this work. They're too soft." His mates call out to him, teasing him for hogging the camera. The boat is tanked up, the chai paani over. They bid us farewell, laughing all the while, exchanging jokes that we are not privy too and set sail once again in the direction of the dipping sun.

Fishermen. I've always wondered what makes them so chilled out and prepared to face any calamity with a smile and a ready joke, see the upside even when they are submerged in deep waters. For them, the high seas and angry rivers are their water of life, a seafarer lives at the mercy of the tumultuous fury of Mother Nature and life's lessons are quickly learnt. I have long harboured this admiration and love at first sight for the bare chested, lungi clad fishermen. Nothing fazes them, nothing ever seems to rock the boat too much. They embody an existential yet water tight whatever today and tomorrow may bring for them attitude that helps them cope with the times and tides of their lives. And I find this very distinct from the karmic fatalism that so drives or rather reverses us Indians. This is day to day hard work; some days bring results, other days, dark muddy waters. We leave the camaraderie of the fishermen and find our way towards Cochin.

**KOCHI
SH**

4pm, Kochi beckons. We have to take a ferry across from _____ to _____, and then drive on for another 4 hours to get to Fort Kochi. We get there, and Jangle and the rest of the guys jump out terribly excited with the prospect of another ferry, which accommodates vehicles. The camera is immediately set up at the jetty amidst crowds and cars as Jangle tries desperately to capture that magic, that charm, which makes a ferry ride such an incredibly unique experience. In the past few years the ferry rides I have taken to get on and off my Divar island have been innumerable. What amazes me is that every moment of every crossing that I make is special. The coconut trees, the Mandovi River, St. Augustine's tower staring down at me, and few serene moments, give coming home a whole new meaning. My Divar. I miss my ferry. I miss my parents terribly. We have a half-hour wait before we get on to the ferry; maybe I'll give them a call.

I rush to the STD booth by the ferry. These little communication thingies are all over the place. Every little town you drive through, a million of these yellow and black thingies jump out at you - more conspicuous than the number of people on the streets. In a country with a population of a billion I'd say that says a lot for progress in telecommunications. The line's free. I walk in and dial 0832-280056 "all lines in this route are busy, kindly try after sometime". Disconnect. Dial the other number 0832-280987 "all lines in this route are busy, kindly try after sometime". I try again "all lines in this route are busy, kindly try after sometime" Bitch!! I'm going to kill the bitch. I re-redial and re-re-redial, but this irritant woman will never stop - "all lines in this route are busy, kindly try after sometime". Fine. The bitch wins, for what she's trying to tell me is not "kindly try after some time", but more like "fuck off and try next year". Since I'm here and terribly homesick, let me call somebody else then - just to chat. It's been so long since I've spoken to any of my friends in Bombay. I dial Zoya's place. The phone rings. Her brother answers. "Oh Zoya left for New York 2 weeks ago, she's gone for the 3 month film course at NYU. Ruchi's also gone. She's doing a 3 month film course at USC." What? When I was in Bombay this film course thing was just an idea they both had. And now they're gone? But I keep forgetting that I've already been away for a month - a lot happens in a month. So whom do I call? Ashim's in New York too. How bizarre! My 3 and a half close friends are in the U.S.A. and here I am in Thrissur and Kodungalur and Coimbatore and Ooty and Mysore and Srirangapatna and Mosalehosahalli and.... Why do I feel like they are on more familiar territory than I am? With no one to call and no way to get in touch with the parents, I'm suddenly feeling terribly alone. Like a foreigner in a strange country forced to camp with a bunch of strangers.

A half-hour later, our cars drive onto the ferry. We're squeezed - no place to move. This doesn't bother Jangle - ferry rides seem to give him a high. Really wired and excitable, he jumps up above the cabin and asks for the camera to be passed to him. Naturally, recorder and sound have to follow. So Hari, Raju and Parvez climb up as well. Jangle rolls camera madly. Top angle of people and cars squeezed into a ferry. We cruise along quietly as a warm evening breeze blows body odour and strange truck smells away, making the squeeze on the ferry more bearable. Suddenly, someone points across to another ferry going by. As though on queue, all the very many squeezed heads turn to look as well. The camera pans right. And there it is. Large, grey, imposing and gentle, an elephant crossing the river just as we are. "Hey look an elephant!" everyone yells at various points of making their own sighting, in various languages. We stare in amazement. Quietly and elegantly, the elephant stands among a sea of heads with his mahout somewhere in the crowd (we're presuming). I shout out to Jangle "See? And you were surprised about cars being on a ferry?"

After a 15 minute ferry ride (a far cry from the Divar 3minute one) and a beautiful sunset we decide to pack up for the day and concentrate on getting to Fort Kochi before it gets too dark. The map is pulled out, direction determined, - and we set out. Through winding Kerala streets with grove over grove of coconut trees lining our route, we finally reach Ernakulum as late as 8pm. The town of Ernakulum is a bustling, crowded, congested little place causing one to even forget that this is the state Kerala - the state once labelled God's own country. Cochin or Kochi is the name given to an ensemble of towns, villages, and districts, Fort Cochin, Mattancherry, Ernakulam, Edapally, Vytilla, to name a few were merged in 1967 to form the largest and most important city in Kerala. Cochin is the commercial capital of Kerala - an identity the city of Ernakulum wears extremely well. Shaina had earlier mentioned to Saeed that on her recent holiday in Kerala, she lived in Fort Kochi, which unlike Ernakulum, takes one back into the comfort zone of the exotic Kerala we all choose to know. So we do exactly that, and head straight for the comfort zone. But where is Fort Kochi? How far is it from here? How do we get there? And when we do get there, will we get reservations for 18 in 1 place at this late hour?

We soon realise that making our way to Fort Cochin, which is apparently "only half an hour away" as Shaina keeps promising, is not a very easy task. We have to first get out of this damn crowded city of Ernakulum.

At every junction, we stop and ask men, women children. Most people speak English, (Hindi's a No No) but giving (or rather pointing out) directions and answering questions in an interview are 2 separate things. It would be really foolish and naïve of us to expect every single person in the entire state of Kerala to speak superb English, purely because the state has the highest literacy level in the country. We can't possibly fall prey to that most ridiculous notion (perpetuated by the many clueless and snotty youth of south Bombay) that the English language is the only 'true' measure of literacy.

Naturally, our sound recordist Hari M, who has been beaming since we stepped foot onto his soil, will now become the bakra. He shall be our very own translator/ interpreter. An extremely difficult job, considering that the content and flow of an interview depends heavily upon the interpreter who is expected not merely to translate words verbatim but to comprehend the attitude, emotion and intonation of the interviewee within the format of a camera interview. Between attempting to monitor levels and check the direction of the boom while the same voices echo in his headphones, Hari's job is not going to be any easier. But that's not what he's worried about, I'm sure, because 'Mr. Perennially Self Conscious' Hari's only real paranoia is that he will be in frame. Of course he's also concerned about the perfect sound and all that, which he is always so careful to record but being on camera could lead him close to a nervous breakdown. We can't have our sound recordist having a nervous breakdown, now can we?

It's been more than an hour already. What were you saying Shaina? Half an hour is it? It's 9pm and we have no clue where we are. Driving in the can be that much more disorienting. We drive on and on and on. Saeed sits in Sumo, drink in 1 hand, cigarette in the other, his temper slowly rising. We reach a cantonment area. Shaina recognises it. Thank God. We're close. Jennifer quickly pulls out the Lonely Planet. We decide to stay at Seagull Hotel - the only decent place within our Rs450 -Rs500 per night budget. So to Hotel Seagull it is.

My stomach begins to rumble. I need to eat some decent khana. Lunch was so so... south Indian. Eating the 'real' Kerala food is... well... a novelty and therefore interesting, but not tremendously exciting, for me. Shaina, on the other hand, has been in her element. Stuffing her face with anything and everything sold on the road - from large idlis to mini idlis, to gun powder, to dosais (pronounced doshaai, I discover), to appams, to... she just hasn't stopped eating since we entered Kerala, and we only got in yesterday. My only small pleasure of being in Kerala has come through the copious amounts of filter coffee I've been consuming. Even that morning wake up and trudge to the door is worth it, for what awaits me on the other side.

9:30 and after driving around street after empty street in this cantonment area we've reached Hotel Seagull. But they don't have room for us all. Some of us will have to stay in the hotel (a way more low-grade one) down the road. So, the obvious division is made. Saeed, Jennifer, Hari, Jangle Chandi, Sumit Shyamol, Shaina and I are to stay in Hotel Seagull while the rest Barkat, Ravi, KG, the 3 drivers, and the camera attendants are packed off to the crappy place. A huge argument ensues as Sumit decides that this division is disgusting and classist. Shaina and I join in too. The 3 of us will go and stay in with these guys and let the camera attendants come here since they need a safe place for the camera. Saeed look sat us in disgust for creating such a big issue out of night, He walks away leaving Sumit to do what he wants, but 1 thing he makes clear. Shaina and Shai will not go there. We will always be the protected ones, for whom getting into arguments like this is pointless, as beyond a show of support we can do nothing else, we are not allowed to do anything else. At the end of the day our destiny has already been charted by Saeed, by Jennifer, by our parents who've made them responsible for their babies, by our age and most importantly by our sex. So Sumit does the 'noble' thing and goes with the guys and Shaina and I stay at Hotel Seagull.

10th May 10am

Located at the mouth of the Periyar River in a protected lagoon that opens into the Arabian Sea, Cochin is a conduit for trade in and out of the South Indian mainland. It has been that way for centuries. From the Phoenicians to the Arabs, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans and Persians spices and silk, teak and rosewood were all traded across the open waters of the Arabian Sea.

The Jew Town with its rapidly dwindling Jewish community in terms of their relationship with India since independence is the focus of Saeed's story of Cochin. So we're off to Jew Town. And besides, ever since we got to Cochin, and once Shaina got over her trauma of leading us on a wild goose chase to Fort Cochin, she began shrieking her head off saying "The synagogue, The synagogue. It's beautiful. You have to see it." So if not for Saeed's story, for Shaina we must go.

Two waves of Jewish immigration converged on Cochin in the early decades of the 16th century. Firstly, Jews who came from Cranganore, the original Jewish settlement on the Malabar Coast, after its destruction by the Portuguese about 1524, and secondly Jews and New Christians, from Spain and Portugal. Under the Portuguese rule (1502-1663), the Jews of Cochin could not have survived had it not been for the protection and liberty afforded them by the Raja of Cochin. He welcomed the new Jewish immigrants, allotted them land to build their homes and synagogues - and granted them religious and cultural autonomy. Later, from 1663-1795, the Dutch rule not only broke the community's isolation from the rest of the Jewish world, but also brought them unparalleled prosperity. A class of Jewish merchants, bankers, leaders in diplomacy, negotiators, and interpreters emerged. In fact, some of Cochin's earliest spice traders were Jewish merchants. The community has ever since, maintained close contacts with the Amsterdam Jews, who used to provide them with books and learning and who published and printed their writings in Amsterdam.

We drive up to the little quarter of Jew Town and park our Sumos by the sea, lined with Cochin's most intriguing Chinese fishing nets. These huge contraptions that are hung from cantilevered wooden poles and counterbalanced with rocks jut out conspicuously into the water. As we enter Jew town, at first, everyone goes their separate ways. Jangle and the main camera crew head straight to the Jewish cemetery - a very awkward first glimpse of this quaint little town. Shaina, Jennifer and I wonder around, losing ourselves in the architecture, the colours, the smells, the aromas, the everything...Jew town is wonderfully charming. For not only is Jew town the home of Cochin's Jewish community, but it is also the spice hub of South India and where the Indian pepper exchange is based.

Pungent smells of cumin, turmeric, ginger and cardamom drift through the narrow streets, past brightly painted spice warehouses and come right up to excite my immensely powerful sense of smell. On flat, earthen rooftops open to the sky, carpets of black peppercorns lay drying in the searing South Indian sun. Downstairs, in darkened warehouses cooled by breezes labourers sifted the precious pepper, pouring the best into huge gunnysacks marked "Export." Wandering in and out of warehouses and shops, Shaina and I arrive at the pepper exchange and watch with tremendous intrigue as prices are changed on the board outside. Sumit comes running up to us. "Guess what? We forgot. Today's the Sabbath. Nobody will speak to us and we're not even allowed into the synagogue." He turns to look at Shaina as her face falls. "What? Oh ya. How could we be so stupid?" We rush to Saeed's side. But he's not phased. He's sure that someone will speak to us and about the synagogue well...pointing behind us he says "...atleast we've seen the outside." I look around, and behold magnificent white-walled 16th century "Paradesi" Synagogue. Shutting my eyes I attempt to imagine the interior that Shaina had so vividly described - Golden chandeliers holding oil-burning lamps hang from the ceiling, a raised brass and wooden pulpit faces the curtained tabernacle, hundreds of hand-painted blue and white Chinese porcelain tiles cover the floor. Beautiful. The nth reason for me to return to Kerala.

Unfortunately, in the Jew town itself we do not meet any Jews who are willing to speak to us on a Sabbath. But in our interactions and conversation with non-Jews hovering in the area we gather some interesting facts about the Jews of Cochin, and their Indian influences. They were supposedly divided into three groups "White Jews", "Black Jews" and "Meshuchrarim" (or Freedmen). The White Jews (called "Paradesi", foreigners) are a mixture of Jewish exiles from Cranganore and (later) Spain, Aleppo, Holland and Germany. The Black Jews have separate synagogues from the whites. And, the third group, the Meshuchrarim, were emancipated slaves and their offspring were attached to either of the two communities but had no rights (until 1932) to sit in the synagogue or be called to assist in services. Influenced by the Indian caste system, the three groups do not intermarry.

But this community is dying, and there is no way of reviving it. In 1948, most of the 2,500 Jews that lived in Cochin emigrated to Eretz Israel leaving less than a 100 here. Ever since, their numbers have been steadily declining. Emigration in the 20th century has reduced this once-thriving community into less than two dozen elderly men and women. Soon the story will end and the land will pass to the Indian government. In an attempt to save some semblance of their heritage, the older generation here is attempting to set up trusts to manage the sacred and historical Jewish sites, once they're gone.

Jew Town may soon cease to exist. With this sad thought, Shaina and I decide to get our little piece of memorabilia to remind us that we were here. We buy post cards of Cochin, and rush into the post office. The post master smiles at us, he knows why we're here, for he heard us inquire about the Star of David sign at the entrance. We give him the postcards and with a smile, he promptly stamps it. Shaina and I now have 2 postcards of Cochin with the Star of David stamped on them - waiting to go nowhere. Just our little memory of a dying town.

BACKWATERS SA

11th May

It's a pity the crew couldn't see the synagogue. I remember being particularly enchanted by the fine hand painted floor tiles brought from Canton in the 18th century. We now headed toward Allepuzha, commonly known as Alleppey until recently. As we headed through the crowded out of Ernakulam, we passed many political rallies, the red flags of the communist party visible end on end. Every now and then we heard fiery oratory blaring out of loud speakers, makeshift podiums graced the crowded city streets. A recent court ruling had curtailed the preponderance of morchas and political rallies and now parties had to adhere to timings. Rallies were only permitted in the evenings and on weekends. In Kerala, it is difficult to tell the difference between village and city. Trivandrum and Cochin appear more developed and urban, but otherwise Kerala State bears a certain monotonous uniformity of houses existing cheek by jowl, sprawling endlessly dotted with coconut trees. Kerala has the highest density of population and given that it is such a small strip of land, seems to be getting more and more congested by the day, yet development and infrastructure is sorely lacking, despite Kerala being touted as the tourist destination for the nineties. It was close to dusk when we entered the outskirts of Alleppey. Hotel Prince, of the north Indian hotel variety seemed large enough to accommodate the crew, but a quick reception call by our production crew dubbed it as 'beyond our budget'. So once again, we found ourselves searching endlessly for a night halt. I told the crew that it had been tough for us, 4 tourists to find accommodation in Alleppey and we had spent the night in a musty government lodge that hadn't seen a boarder in centuries. The highlight of my stay, though had been Annapurna, a south Indian fast food joint across the road from the jetty. We had had our breakfast, lunch and dinner there and I remember running up a ridiculous bill of Rs 350/- after pigging out insanely on the softest idlis and most delicious thalis ever. "Tomorrow, we have to eat breakfast at Annapurna, please." I had gone on like a stuck record. So pleased had I been with the Annapurna vibe that we had taken a photograph of ourselves and the staff and posted it, only a few months ago to Elsie Fernandes, the gracious woman who ran the joint. Now after endless searching, about half a dozen stops and half-baked hotels and endless further helpful directions, Saeed, a naughty grin on his face kept telling me, "wait till you see where we're staying tonight."

Well, our 'hotel' for the night turned out to be this dodgy, un-kept lodge and board above Hotel Annapurna. At least, I had a great meal, never mind the sleepless night we spent battling the mosquitoes. Next morning, we fixed a boat ride through Vembanad lake. Dear Elsie Fernandes had quit Annapurna, but the staff were gracious as before and packed us hundreds of fluffy moist idlis for breakfast, which we were to eat, while on our blissful tour of the backwaters. My idli fetish had prompted Jennifer to write a little ditty in my honour: *1-2-3-4. Oh my, shaina. How many more? She likes those it'sy witsy teeny weeny chutney splattered soft round idlis....*

Venice of the East, is what Kerala is often called because of its bountiful backwaters and tiny canals. I remember taking the waterway bus. For a one-way fare of Rs. 7/-, we had from cruised from Kottayam to Alleppey, taking in the stunning beauty of the backwaters and observing the life of the water people. We had sunned ourselves on the roof of the boat, revelling in the exotica of the waters while the local people had occupied the seats down below with the same dreary mundane look of a commuter on a Bombay local train. The bus had made several stops, sometimes on the banks of thin strips of land, tiny levered bridges, tied to coconut trees went up and down, at times creating jetties, otherwise bridging the land on either side. school children, working men and women, priests, farmers, toddy tappers, fishermen, priests, all waited patiently and had come aboard or alighted at frequent stops. I remember finding this the idyll. Imagine having your own little river island. A tiny strip of land, with some ducks, some paddy fields, a snake boat and a door to door bus service. And swaying coconut palms bending their long trunks towards each other, more magical arches that we had passed through. At a tiny village stop, two men had come aboard lugging a huge trunk along. It turned out to be the much-touted mobile cinema that Kerala state is so famous for.

They were going to alight at a village before Kottayam and continue their screenings for the day. Kerala's cinema history is unique, much like all of its history and past. In the late seventies or somewhere around then, some like minded individuals led by the ultra leftist FTII filmmaker John Abraham formed the Odessa Film Corporation and funds for films were collected on the streets. Regional cinema here is very big and critically acclaimed and given the high literacy rate, there seem to be enough takers to appreciate and enable the coexistence of the parallel, the mainstream and the pornographic genre of films. Everything I had internalised about Kerala on that journey, only a few months ago had been very romantic. I had come in search of the idyll; and from the Film Festival to the Cultural Confluence, from the beaches to the backwaters, from the tea estates to the forest reserves, from the Melt In Your Mouth and Gobble and Go for Yet Another Appams to the Silent Valley Idukki Special Gold Ganja, I had realised the romance and beauty of this wonderful wonderful exotic strip of land that had postcarded for me an existing Utopia.

Now, at my behest, we had hired a boat, a motor driven steering launch captained by Bashir with whom we had cracked an easy bargain. He was to take us through Vembanad lake, passing through villages and settlements and dock us at the Kottayam jetty, where our drivers would meet us with the vehicles that had just left Alleppey. I gorged down half a dozen of prime idli-sambhar and settled myself on top of the boat. It was early morning and there wasn't much traffic. Now and then we passed waterway buses and groups of foreign tourists out on cruises. The backwaters were waking up, men and children were bathing, women were washing clothes and utensils at the front of their houses. We passed a group of labourers, who were dredging the mineral rich silt from the bottom of the lake. It was hard work; they would dive down, fill their buckets with wet soil and deposit it onto their boat. Surface. We cut our engine and drifted gently to their side and began chatting with them. Sushil was the youngest worker. We asked him if had finished his education. He told us that he had failed his 10th standard examination and had lost the desire to matriculate. We asked him, what he thought of independence and he gave us his viewpoint which, even so early in our travels we had digested with a gulp of Indian earth. "Those who have the money are independent. But those who don't have the money, they are dependent on others." Sushil was a youth who for the moment seemed if not content, resigned to his state. But it got me thinking of a till recently unknown fact. We had thought that Kerala had to some extent fulfilled one more golden tenet of our constitution. Equal Opportunity For All. But paradoxically, the state had the highest suicide rate among young men, and most families that were well off had at least one family member working in the Gulf. Kerala's land reforms and idealistic distribution of land, had rendered individual farming very uneconomical and despite government co-operatives, the one big successful trickle down effect of liberalisation had captured the spirit of its youth. Aspirations sky rising while employment was stagnating was the reason behind the large number of suicide deaths. Well, well. Things are not always what they seem. Yet, in the larger scheme, the broader map of India, Kerala's basic progress in terms of basic literacy and primary health was unmatched.

Not content with drifting with the tide, we cranked the engine and steered our route into the interiors of the backwaters. We all took a go at the steering, a cheap thrill that I decided to partake in and soon the crew followed. Of course, if I could do it, so could everyone else. It was obviously the easiest thing to do. Suddenly, a flock of ducks, hundreds maybe, their cacophonous squawking stirring Parvez and Barkat from their early morning snooze flapped off a tiny island and glided into the water, causing Sumit at the wheel to start and panic. Bashir manoeuvred the boat clear from their path and the ducks fell into formation, one long triangular pattern headed by a single duck. We turned our attention to the strip of land, from where the seemingly endless stream of ducklings was emerging. A herdsman was whistling and shooing them into the lake. Again, we cut the engine. We stepped onto the island, where to my surprise the land was marshy and not very solid at all. Saeed interviewed Baiju, a simple smiling youth, who reared and sold ducks for a living. He lived on the strip of land, which apart from the preponderance of hordes of ducks provided the bare minimum, a plot of land, some coconut palms and electric poles that touched base on terra firma before the wires took to the air and struck down on another mass of land. What was Baiju's one wish for the future? He seemed content about his life, but lacked the company of a loved one. "I want to find myself a nice, simple loving wife and get married." We wished Baiju the best for the future. We watched him get on to his boat and guide the ducks in the direction of Alleppey where he was going to sell them. As we steered on, we saw many such formations, following lone boatmen to their final fatal destinations. Jangle perched himself on the stern of the boat and continued to take ambient shots of activity on the lake. Dozens of tiny sail boats passed us by, an old woman, passed us by, rowing her boat with rapid circular movements of her arm, her back ruler straight, her muscles rippling through her tight sari blouse. She must have been over seventy years of age, yet the strength and energy she employed belied her age by at least 50 years. Shai and I sunned ourselves on the hot tin roof of the boat.

Both of us had on Chinese fishing hats, that Shai and Chandi had bought in Cochin. We were sharing the walkman, each had a ear phone in one ear and soon we found ourselves singing Peter Gabriels 80's all time love classic 'in your eyes'. Soon, Saeed ordered the camera on us. Undeterred we continued singing, louder and louder, stopping only towards the end, Youssou N' dour's vocal talents we were no match for. Then Jangle went down and took shots of the sleeping unit.

It was late morning now. We passed a couple of licensed toddy bars and I longed to indulge in some fresh toddy, but content myself with memories of my previous trip. We had toured the canals for hours in search of toddy, that day being Gandhi's death anniversary, national dry day, it hadn't been an easy task, but under the table enterprising black marketers had provided us with some prime palm toddy that had made our day. Unfortunately, this time round, we hadn't come as tourists. And this was a regular working day and like many other days, it was hard to separate the work from the enjoyment. We passed yet another idyllic house on yet another piece of land. An entire family was sitting out on the porch, and we called out to them and asked if we could interview them. Bashir tied the boat to a tree on the island and we jumped across. I had borrowed Shai's camera for the day since the crew camera had practically stopped functioning and my camera had been loaded with transparencies. As I hopped across to the land, her lens cap came off and I watched in horror as it fell into the water and slowly sank into the muddy depths. Shai was already setting up the boom rod, so I avoided telling her immediately and sheepishly tried to act as if nothing had happened.

An old man was sitting on the porch reading the newspaper, bare-chested, his mundu tied loosely around his waist. There were two young men, Girish and Ashok, in their late twenties both in mauve bush shirts and pastel chequered mundus. We asked if there were others in the family. The mother appeared from the fields behind and then at the doorway of the house appeared the daughter. Suddenly the film crew fell silent. All eyes fixed on the figure framed in the doorway. Suma, for that was the ravishing beauty's name, was the most stunning looking woman I have ever seen. Her shiny black skin glowed in the naked light of the sun; her full lips and deep-set eyes were accentuated by the arch of her eyebrows and her long jet-black hair pulled back in a severe bun. I could sense that Suma's beauty, and her perfect by chance positioning by the door had made Jangle's day. He was a sucker for a pretty face. The father was a retired farmer and Girish worked at a coir factory and Ashok was a tailor. Both worked in Alleppey and took the daily boat service to work. They stayed in touch with the 'mainland'. The mother and Suma worked in the paddy fields. They didn't have much land of their own and they worked on other people's farms. Yet, they said, they had enough to survive and stay happy. But, there were small comforts that the mainland could provide that the backwaters could not. "A solid road. We are so dependent of the waterways; it is more comfortable in the mainland because they have road transportation. Also, we have no electricity. No safe drinking water. And very little means of other income here, besides fishing and agriculture. So we are dependent on the mainland for other means of employment. And for that we have to commute." For Ashok, the mainland definitely proved to be the Promised Land. "But isn't there a peace of life over here. That you can't find in the mainland?" Asks Saeed, asserting on behalf of all of us that we would not mind giving up our city lives to live in paradise. But Ashok, is quick to point out the deceptive nature of the blissful backwaters. "It looks very beautiful, but it has problems. Real problems. It might look very idyllic for tourists but there is nothing here. There isn't even a hospital" Here Saeed decides to interject. He explains to the family that Kerala State has the highest Human Development Index and that Kerala as a state was far better off than the rest of India. I wondered what point he was trying to make. A tone of aggression was apparent, and he kept asking them if this is what they thought of the State of Kerala, what did they think of the rest of the country, the world? Did they keep in touch? Had they done anything to better themselves, via the government? Suma broke her silence and decided to answer for them. "The question was directed towards Suma, who boldly articulated what she felt. Hari translated and told us that she read the papers and listened to the radio. But they have their own problems to sort out. And right now, they are complaining about the current hardships they face. Not the rest of the country. "Political parties come here with so many promises and once they are in power, they forget the people who voted for them. And while we realise that we have a lot going for us in comparison to the rest of the country, even primary health care is still pretty inadequate." Here the interview went off on a tangent of 50 years of independence and democracy and whether democracy was working, whether people got results from the government. A lot of time and effort was lost in translation, and Hari, defeated in his effort of translating and sound recording gave up, and in much agitation told us, "They are saying the same thing again and again. They definitely want change. Electricity and drinking water. There are hardships here. The mainland has comforts." Saeed asks the family what they thought of the tourists who frequent the backwaters? The father answers. "Tourists come and make this area polluted, They do lot of damage to the space. Our source of life is this water that they come and pollute.

The Indian tourists pollute the water and the foreign tourists pollute our culture. We are totally against this tourism.” Finally, I asked Suma what her hope for the future was. Without much forethought, for she seemed very clear in what she wanted, she put all further debates to rest. “I want to move to a different place and lead a good life. I want to get a better place, a place on land.”

We thanked them for their time and set sail once again. Suma's last words stayed with us. She wants to get out. Out of the backwaters and onto the mainland. How naïve we have been to presume that one could be content on a little strip of land. It was clear now, that the backwaters of Kerala were not just namesake backwaters. Obviously the inhabitants if mostly Hindu were of low-caste. They represented the lowest end of the Kerala community, people who had very little choice than to inhabit these marshlands and survive the tide. And tourism didn't seem to helping these people one bit. Save for the boat operators and the proprietors of the luxurious five-star snake boats, any direct gains that the local population might gain from it seemed invisible or minimal. I don't know why Saeed kept pressing the issue of Kerala's high HDI. It didn't matter, did it? We are travelling the entire country, meeting a spectrum of people; questions about their daily life and problems shouldn't be seen in the grand scheme of India. That kind of analysis as said a hundreds times before was for the likes of us, who have set sail on this journey in search for hell I get more and more confused, the more and more I see.

The sun is on us now, and most of the crew retires to the lower deck for the shelter of the shade. Shai and I continue to roost on the roof, which such an amazing vista around us, why would we miss it for a nap. I can hear Sumit in chatter with Saeed down below. It sounds like he's pleading, and there is a hint of *masti* in his voice, though what exactly he is trying to extract from Saeed, I am unable to decipher. Suddenly, his voice rises about the din of the engine. “Yes? You mean we can. Really?” That's all I heard. That's all I needed to hear. I jumped up, poked my head down the stairway, “We can swim!” and before I knew what I was doing, I had jumped off the top of the boat. A split second of panic had followed as I was caught in the undercurrents and swept into the wake of the boat. By the time I surfaced, the boat had moved up way ahead. Bashir had cut the engine and was standing on the deck, gesturing wildly and screaming at me. I muscled up all my strength and swam towards the boat, despite the currents. Now the entire unit was screaming. “What are you saying guys? I can't hear? What is Bashir saying?” I could see Jennifer looking angry as hell and Sumit looking jealous as hell. Hari obliged me with the translation. “He is telling you to swim fast. There are crocodiles in the water.” Okay. Okay. I'm coming. Relax.” Trying to be casual, I quickly swam towards the boat, using every bit of strength that my body could muster. Finally, after I felt that I could breathe no more, my hand touched the edge of the boat and I looked up to see Bashir fishing me out of the water. A round of applause went out for me. The boys in the crew seemed very impressed by my impetuous fall. Now Sumit, Mr. Justice For All demanded that everyone be allowed to swim. Saeed, seemed a little angry with this turn of events. “Fine, do what you'll want. I'll just shoot you'll and use the footage.” That same threat again. But we had become immune to it and were past caring about the camera. Bashir, who at first vehemently opposed the plan finally relented, and said that he would take us to a safe place, nearer to land. The wide open lake was dangerous. I think Bashir was just being a grump. Surely what I did could not have been dangerous? Strong undertows maybe, but crocodiles? Bashir lulled the boat in a small canal and soon everyone, with the exception of Saeed, Hari, Jangle and Jennifer were frolicking in the water. This was Trasi beach all over again, though this little muddy alcove wasn't exactly paradise. I was glad I had my bit of real scare and fun. Yet, the sheer joy of swimming coupled with the high that comes with defiance became a bonding factor again. And, strangely, the camera on us made us make even more noise; everyone wanted to show Saeed that they were having a good time and that they couldn't care about the footage. Our five minutes of freedom were timed out. We got back onto the boat, brown and muddy and sat up on the roof to dry off. Saeed instructed Bashir to head straight towards Kottayam jetty. He turned the boat around and charged forth will full throttle. But no sooner had we left the canal than an all-too-familiar realisation dawned on us. A quick head count revealed one missing airhead. Chandi! Our day-tripper had disappeared once again. We turned back and found him standing on the edge of the island, a goofy grin on his face, his knee length shorts clinging to his skinny legs, his wide Chinese hat on his head, making him look like a lone ranger of dubious origin. “Chandi Chandi Chandi. What's wrong with you?” chorused everyone in unison. He got aboard and then in true Chandi style, proceeded to give us a long drawn out well-analysed explanation totally discounting giving any credence to the fact that he is a total space cadet. “No, you see, just as soon as we finished the swim, all you people were taking an exceptionally long time to get out of the water. Now, at that time, after the swim, I felt the urge to piddle. So instead of getting back onto the boat, I went onto the land, and then I decided to look for a tree... “

*Where oh where has our Chandidas gone
Where oh where can he be
With his hair cut short and his shorts cut long
Oh where oh where can he be*
Another one of Jennifer's little ditties.

We were approaching Kottayam now, and gradually, the islands got bigger, the houses looked richer and belonging to the Syrian Christian community. I was sitting on the deck writing out postcards to friends, describing for them the intense beauty of the backwaters and the intense truths that weren't visible when I visited earlier as a glazed-eye tourist. We passed an island school, trade union offices and even an office for the Democratic Youth Federation of India. Soon we passed a post office, a lone building on a 20 sq. foot plot of land. I requested Bashir to stop the boat and ran out and mailed my Star of David postcards from the Kanjaram Post Office. I ran out of the boat and popped my postcards into the post box. And in a flash, I was back on the boat. But the camera hadn't rolled. My sudden burst of enthusiasm was rendered as a photo opportunity and Bashir had to dock the boat again and I was made to run out and put some more postcards into the box. Re-take time. I did as I was told, and flustered, so as to make the shot look natural, I dumped whatever I could find into the post box. Un-addressed cards that will never reach my friends. Richly worded with insightful trivia about beautiful Kerala, stamped at Matancherry, posted at Kanjaram, they will just be memories. Wonderful memories.

KOTTAYAM SH

12th May

Kottayam, previously a part of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore and today an important commercial centre of Kerala is 'home' to a large percentage of the Syrian Christian community in India. Who are the Syrian Christians really? A dumb question much like the even dumber "Who are the East Indians really?" That answer I know – original inhabitants of the island of Bombay who were converted to Catholicism. But the Syrian Christians? Well, we're here now – in the depths of Syrian Christian land and our luck is finally looking up, for today is the 300th year anniversary of the oldest Syrian Christian church in Kottayam. A perfect opportunity to meet with all of Kottayam's goldie oldies as they come out in droves to pay their respect to the church that must obviously have been their guiding light for generations now.

As a group of young and old make their way up to church I accost them (as unfortunately our documentary style perpetually demands) and they agree (as fortunately most do – 5 minutes of fame is too tempting a proposition I presume). We have a chat with this group about Syrian Christians and their origin... the only part of interest to me. Of course then the interview went on into India and the 50 years of Independence, and my ears began to buzz once again. It's strange at the very mention of "50 years of India's independence" my ears begin to go berserk instantly. I can't take it anymore - the same boring questions are asked, and the same boring answers follow. We need to do some serious rethinking on the questions...have to get more analytical, more focussed... but then haven't I been saying that from Day 1?

Anyway, the name 'syrian' we're informed was derived from Cyrus the king of Persia (559-529 B.C.) who conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and liberated the Jews by permitting them to return to Judea. His name is also mentioned by the prophet Isaiah, connected with Christ. The name 'Syrian' is equivalent to the term 'Christian' which was applied to the disciples in Antioch for the first time, because those converted Jews believed that Cyrus, their liberator from captivity in 538 B.C. resembled Christ the liberator of captive mankind. So they used to repeat Christ's name connected with his name for pride and honour, as their forefathers did upon their return to Judea. When this news arrived to the gentile elements in Antioch they called them 'Syrians' or 'Christians'. From that time onwards 'Syrian' prevailed first among the Christians of Syria and afterwards among the Christians of Mesopotamia, Persia, India and the Far East, through the work of the Syrian Apostles and preachers. Until the present days the Christians who speak Syriac, are called in this sense 'Suroye' or 'Suraye' or 'Curyaye' whereas the name 'Christian' prevailed among the western Christians. In essence this is the history of the term Syrian Christians – finally finally the origin of this faith is clear to me. But when and how did they come to India? And what about conversions? When did that happen?

One old man takes centre stage and goes on to tell us that all the Catholics in Kerala are mainly divided into Latin Catholics and Syrian Catholics. Latin Catholics are mainly those who were converted by the Portuguese and other Europeans. Syrian Catholics are those who claim ancestry/conversion from the time of St. Thomas or through the syrian church which existed before the arrival of Europeans in Kerala and are also grouped in the broader class of Syrian Christians which include Marthomites, Jacobites, etc. etc. Most of the Latin Catholics, however, are in the coastal areas of Cochin, Alleppy, Quilon etc.

The conversation continued for 2 hours. But having received the info necessary to comfort my burning ears, I leave the interview site and walk up to the church. It is sundown now, and the priest comes in to light the candles on the altar. This church is simply magical. Stark and simple with a lit diya suspended from the roof at the center, and an altar almost making me gasp at the diversity and magnificence of Indian Christian art, for it's antique statues and paintings are truly venerable. Here is a church I would be absolutely comfortable with spending hours in.

We head into Kottayam town. Our destination – the KTDC hotel. We drive past coconut trees and banana trees and what are these other plantations here I wonder as I look out of the window. Then it hits me – rubber, rubber. Kottayam has hectares and hectares of rubber plantations. Rubber is the major cash crop in here. Apparently, 1.07 lakh hectares are used for rubber plantations, the largest area under Rubber cultivation in Kerala. And its production is still going up gradually. Kottayam also houses the headquarters of the Indian Rubber Board.

Slap bang in the middle of Kottayam town and towering over a temple, on this KTDC is a spotlessly clean hotel, with large bedrooms and a wonderfully courteous staff. But Shaina and I cannot enjoy the room – we have to work, work, work tonight. So much to do. The backlog of logging is getting crazier and crazier with every minute of shooting we do sending shivers down our spines. The mere thought of yet another minute of logging added to the 15 hours we already have left makes us want to burn the camera, wish it ill, stop it from working... But no. We go on and on and on. And Shaina and I must continue. We must do our job. Transfer + view + log at the end of every single bloody day, well into the night. So tonight too we both must burn the midnight oil and the backlog demands that we work all of tomorrow too. We excuse ourselves from the next day's shoot – a rubber plantation Saeed decides - and get down to work, work, work

KOVALAM SH

13th May

I feel so sad that all I really got to see of Kottayam was the top angle of a temple, a few rubber plantations, a crowded little town and the KTDC. But then, this depression kicks in almost every single day for me. We haven't stayed put in 1 place (except for Goa) for more than a day and a half. The speed at which we're travelling forward is manic. How can we ever get to really experience any place -even partially. Superficial – that's the appropriate word here. Our experiences with places are so superficial. But a schedule binds us, a documentary film binds us, a fragmented style binds us. Anyway, one can't have everything can one?

We're headed to Kovalam where Hari's brother-in-law has already booked us into a Hotel. Hari's standing on his head. He's going home. His family lives in Trivandrum – an hour away from Kovalam. We drive through Kerala's millions of coconut groves and I stay mesmerised with the idea that there actually is a place in this country whose coastal magic could match upto and in fact supersede that of Goa. We live and learn, I guess. Kerala Kerala Kerala - the entire country has so much to learn from this state. It's simply unreal. We stop at a cashew factory on the way out. Saeed wants to check it out. Jangle gets to work, but just when he begins to shoot, it begins to pour. In fact, we get caught in a storm. We wait a while and let it clear, but we can't wait forever for we're losing time, Saeed says. Why do we always seem to be losing time? It's strange because I feel we're always too much ahead of time? So we leave and Saeed decides that once the rain stops we will stop at the next cashew factory we encounter on the way. We drive on for another half an hour. The rain stops. Another cashew factory appears. We turn in. Sumit runs out to get permission to shoot. As usual everyone slowly trickles out of their respective cars – for those legs need to breathe with all that travel. No we can't shoot, we're told Sumit arrives with the bad news. Fine. It's not meant to be. "No more stops" Saeed decides.

We all pile back into our cars and take off. Suddenly 20 minutes after driving off, KG's car begins to signal madly to stop. We stop and the signal is sent ahead to the other cars. He comes running out. "Where's Chandi?" he yells and pops his head in and out of the cars. Chandi is nowhere to be found. The idiot has disappeared yet again. He must have been left behind at the last cashew factory – we hope. We wait on the road for KG to return as he takes off in 1 car to find Chandi. meanwhile the rest of us spends a good 15 minutes bitching Chandi out – a space cadet, on his own trip, so irresponsible, how can he do this twice in 2 days, this is the 4th time he's done this, how can he expect us to keep running after him...Saeed too is not very amused this time. The Sumo appears with Chandi's head bobbing with the bumps in the front seat. As the car comes to a slow halt, he flashes his hugely adorable smile. We all burst out laughing. All is forgotten, for Kovalam's sand and sea beckons.

8pm and we're finally in Kovalam. Shaina and I hold our breath wondering what kind of Hotel Hari's brother-in-law must have set up. We beach bummers don't really care much about décor and hygiene now since we're here in Kovalam. All we really need and want is to live by the beach and see the sea for just this 1 last time, this 1 last day that we will spend by the coast, before we head back into the depths of whence we came. We reach the beach road and take a left inland and away from the beach. Shaina and I exchange a look. So much for our desires and exotic notions of living by the beach. When will we realise that this documentary we're working on requires serious roughing out. For if one doesn't rough it out, one is not dedicated enough. To what? I'd really like to know. Will somebody out there please tell me? To what? We drive on. Shaina and I look glum as ever, having slipped into an instant sulk. And there it is - Kadolaram it's called. A huge board outside welcomes us in. My face falls. Shaina looks zapped. The place is simply beautiful. We step out into perfectly landscaped gardens with low lights showing us the way to our rooms. Through coconut trees, hammocks, and sprawling gardens we head to our room. Suddenly Shaina and I hear a shout from the other side. We drop our bags. And run towards the voice. It's Sumit standing at the foot of a swimming pool with a huge smile across his face. "It's ours. There's no one else in this hotel, except for us. We've booked up the place. This is our private pool. Party Time." TOTALLY I'm thinking. By then shrieks begin to envelope the hotel grounds as Ravi pops in and out of hammocks, Barkat enters his rooms to see a Television, and others just shriek with the excitement of just simply being here. Shaina and I head to our room. It's clean with a lovely tropical hotel décor, cane furniture, cane beds, spotlessly clean bathroom, and a balcony. A balcony that looks out onto the swimming pool and beyond – we see it and scream – THE SEA. 2 incredibly happy people we are. We drop our bags, change out of our filthy clothes and gear ourselves for the wet salwar kameez look. We're off for a night swim.

At dinner, Saeed announces that tomorrow is our day off. Our 2nd day off since the start of this trip. But Saeed's notion of a day off is a little skewed in my opinion. For it means light work for about 5 hours of the day, and then the freedom to do whatever you wanted. 24 hours of holiday, I think is something he finds very difficult to stomach...And tomorrow is to be one of those same skewed off days. We can wake up late, but by 11am we must all (all being just 6 people; the rest of the guys get to do other fixing equipment and cars type things) be in Jangle's room to view footage. Shaina is take a rickshaw into Trivandrum town to give the photographs for developing and do a million other chores written out neatly on a list given to her by Jennifer. Shaina doesn't mind at all. She loves Trivandrum, loves Kovalam, loves Kerala – she was here in fact just a few months ago for the film festival. Well... atleast we have the latter part of the day to hang out and swim... Saeed's not so skewed after all.

15th May

We're on our way to Kanyakumari – the southernmost tip of India – after spending a blissful day and a half (more more dear God how I wish for more) at Kadolaram. Yesterday really was quite chilled out. We all spent most of the day in the pool and in the evening Shaina, Sumit and I took off to the beach and hung out in the sea till we had to head back for dinner. A dangerous sea this Kovalam beach has, but we poor deprived beach bummers were not going to let this opportunity slip. And now, 8am, and we're headed for a working breakfast. Apparently. Yesterday while we were hanging out on the beach, Jennifer went for a walk and met a really interesting man who owns a shack on the beach called 'The Sands of Dee'. So enamoured by this character she'd encountered, Jennifer insists that we meet him and interview him.

Ram Mohammed Joseph Rafi is his name he tells us over omelettes and bread at his shack. A reformed drug addict and now proud owner of 'The Sands of Dee' this guy is really quite a mad man.

In the most perfect English with the most flowery language, RMJR keeps us enthralled with stories of his life, his conversion from 1 religion to another and thus his name and his final realisation that all religions preach one thing. He is thus a man of the world, he proclaims - belonging to none, yet belonging to all. Strange how all these beach shack owners, be it Goa or Kovalam have this wonderful ability to tell such wonderfully fantastic stories. Such wondrous things happen only to them. They travel all over the world, do all sorts of drugs, meet famous people and just basically live a charmed life. I think they just cook up the stories of their own lives through all that they hear from other tourists they meet right here. He talks and talks and talks – 3 hours of footage we spend on him for his charismatic style and his enthusiasm to talk and tell prevents Saeed from yelling that one wonderful word - “Cut” -music to my ears when I’m at the boom, which I have been for the last 3 hours.

As we interview RMJR, we notice a number of fishermen on the beach hauling their catch in. At a distance, we can see others chucking home made bombs into the sea. “They do that to blast the fish out of the sea. Like that they get more Sometimes they catch like that only.” I stare horrified at the boats in the distance doing exactly that. They’ve been at it now from before we got here - 5am we’re told. Finding an excuse to finally end the interview, Saeed tells RMJR that he wants to shoot he catch finally coming in. “Cut” he finally says. Phew!! Jangle’s a happy man, so is Hari and so am I. We walk out onto the beach and begin to shoot the fisherman – about 30 on each side pulling in, what we figure, is a huge net and obviously a huge catch.

They pull and pull and pull...

20 minutes, another 20 minutes... and finally it’s out of the water.

They haul it in excitedly. We stand around excitedly.

They untangle the net. Slowly at first and then faster and faster and faster...their excitement getting the better of them, their exhausted limbs demanding a reward. The net finally opens....

30 small flipping fish. That’s it. 4am to 11am – 7 hours spent hauling in 30 fish to be distributed between 80 fishermen. All eyes remain peeled over the net in disbelief. Loud abuse is hurled at the sky as most of the fishermen simply turn around and walk away. Why? Why? Why? A few fish are pulled out and a very pathetic distribution begins.

And Jangles’ shot it all. And we have fabulous footage. What? What? I shake my head vigorously, forcing my thoughts into the foreground. This documentary is fucking with my head big time. I don’t know how to think, or what to think anymore. Someone else’s plight is a great story! Is this what documentary filmmaking is about? I could rationalise it by saying this is a wonderful story to tell, and if **we** don’t tell it, no one will. I could rationalise it by saying people will see this and realise, or understand, or empathise, and a difference will be made. But what point is all this rationalisation, when after a month of production, I am almost certain that there is no remote chance of this documentary film ever bringing about any kind of serious awareness on any real issue. If this travelogue casual structure with the same questions being asked is boring me, how can I ever expect television viewer’s to be interested, let alone do something about what they see? A scrambled brain, an exhausted body and a swiftly dwindling faith in the significance of this film. Dear God, how will I ever make it through, for there are miles and months to go before I sleep. I’ll just have to do what I do best. SWITCH OFF. I pause for a second. Shut my eyes. Push these thoughts back and out of my head. Open my eyes again, and dive back into reality where Saeed, Ravi, Barkat and the rest of the guys attempt to console a deeply saddened lot of fishermen. With the spare XLR cable in hand, I hover around Hari who hovers around Jangle whose berserk handheld-giri over the net unfortunately serves as no consolation for the 30 deeply saddened lot of gasping fish. Jennifer hurriedly fills her notebook with details of how many fishermen, how many fish, how many hours, how many... and Shaina clicks away attempting to create poignant production stills. After 20 Beta minutes of dejected fishermen talking to Saeed, talking to the boys, talking to each other, Saeed calls it a wrap. Fond farewells to fishermen only just met follow. Jennifer pulls out some money from her bag, and distributes it among those fishermen who had demanded it as a price for the photography and others who had requested it as compensation for the loss of their daily income.

Good deeds. Good footage. A good documentary? My head buzzes, but I walk away quietly.

I’m selected shooting car driver for today. Just one of those rare breaks for Sumit, and for me, I guess. An hour’s drive to Trivandrum for a typical mallu meal with Hari’s family, and then on to Kanyakumari - the Sangam of the Sagars - and the selected destination for a reflective end to our ‘tryst’ with the Konkan in episode # 3. A couple of hours later, weathering heavy rain, strong sea winds and endless back seat driving by Saeed, we arrive at Hari’s house to a warm welcome by his parents, brother, sister, nephew and other members of the family. All of whom, Saeed soon discovers, are teachers and professors in Trivandrum.

A quick decision to interview them throws our already rumbling stomachs into further trauma as lunch is naturally delayed yet again. Equipment begins to make its ugly appearance, and Hari's home is slowly transformed from homely lunch party to hideous studio set. Furniture is moved. Cables are unwound. Lights are set up. Interviewees are positioned, as Ravi (with a wicked smirk in my direction) balances the boom rod precariously over my head. I look across helplessly as Chandu (the ex-sound recordist) puts the headphones on and takes over the sound recording as instructed by Hari. Shaina gives me a consolatory pat on the back. Still, Hari does not trust me. Why? Am I really that bad at this oh - so - technical job? I think not. This job is not that hard and not that humongously technical for me for I've prided myself on the many hours I've spent staring into hard drives and fixing cables and Dat recorders and just generally being a perpetual tinkerer with all things technical. What could Hari's issue be with me then? How will I ever know? Hmm... anyway... for now I shall revel in Hari's embarrassment as he translates (from Malayalam) his father's stories of the boy Hari and the adult Hari. About his fears for a son living far away in Bombay. About his apprehensions with the 'unorthodox', 'unconventional', and 'non-academic' profession his son has chosen. And most importantly the key concern "when will he marry?" This wonderfully endearing couple charm us all out of 'boring question' zone into that of family stories, histories, traditions. "My father used to smoke a lot of cigarettes, then 1 day he just stopped and then he told us just because I've stopped, please don't feel that you can't start. You're free to do what you want. Today, not even one of us smokes. Hari's father looks on with joy at his son's deep admiration of him. But Hari's mother's only big worry is that he must find a girl, and marry soon, and we are all to help in her endeavour. Behind that full beard and long hair, I can see the reluctant bridegroom turning various shades of red.

A colourful Thali is placed before me. I begin to eat. The rasam. The appams. The Aviyal. I can actually taste the love and affection in all that I eat. Fortunately, no tears seem to have filled the pots in this my Like Water for Chocolate kitchen. We eat and eat and eat and shoot it all.

KANYAKUMARI SA

Early, a hot summer morning at the tip of India. Pilgrims and tourists take a dip at the Sangam of the Sagars. The sea is rough, the high waves hindering the frolic, leaving many an unwieldy person stranded on the slipping sands, calling for help. An anxious relative rushes to lift up a very old and very fat lady who sinks deeper and deeper in to the earth, her wet sari clinging on to her soft flesh, struggling to contain her writhing voluminous mass. What first looked like delight soon changed to drowning despair. Each time, she struggled to get her bearings in the shifting sand, the seventh wave of the 3 oceans combined crashed in on her, leaving her and her sari flapping in helpless abandon. I watched the spectacles; families, lots of them; making castles, digging love messages into the sand, taking photographs, immersing marigolds and clay lamps in the oceans, and trying to swim, despite their tangle of clothing and holy threads. The sunrise in the east is novel, my first facing the eastern seacoast of India. Tiny fishing boats dip and surface the waves, tossing in the pre monsoon tumult of the Bay of Bengal. The Vivekananda Rock Memorial stands tall and ugly, yet a solid and stoic reminder of the staying afloat in rough weather resilience of India.

Standing on the eastern ridge of the tip are 3 young men. Having captured the sun as it emerged from the clouded horizon with their hotshot aim and shoot plastic boxes; they retreated to the quadrangle, where they sat in quiet contemplation. We got chatting with them; Rajiv Gupta, Krishan Varma and Sanjeev Gupta, all of whom were graduating doctors from Haryana, on a personal visit to the 'Ayurvedic Shalla', in Kaotical, Kerala, a 'unique institute, that pioneered new research' in the ancient science of living and healing. Having finished a short study course, they had been travelling the southern peninsula for the past two weeks. What did they think of being at the Southernmost Tip of India? Rajiv's eyes gleamed through his thick-rimmed spectacles, "We saw the Bay of Bengal for the first time in Rameshwaram, the Arabian Sea in Calicut, but yesterday, we saw the Hind Maha Sagar, the Indian Ocean here, and the 3 great seas meeting together. It was really charming!"

This is the first time the boys had left their land-locked heartland of Northern India and for them the beautiful South had been a journey of discovery. The sea and its taken for granted beauty, had elicited genuine delight and wonderment, and yes, a charming response, the type which I was unable to feel, for I had envisioned the end of India to really be a tip, a little pointing outcrop, like seen from a map, the sheer scale of the vast land and ocean skewed and dwarfed in my mind. Known through my childhood as Cape Comorin, and then in latter years as Kanya Kumari, I had always imagined the tip to be a tip, standing on which looking Southwards, I could see Ceylon, later Sri Lanka, the land of Ravan, that Hanuman had set afire and looking Northward, the peninsula would open before my wide-eyes, and the heartland of my India, Hindustan Hamara, would sprawl for miles on end, coast to coast, till finally it would join other lands; the Great Himalayas, the Great desserts and

the Great Seas, patrolling this magic land. It had been, yes, a charming and mythical vision of my land, that only yesterday, I had realised had remained latent and untouched by travel and exposure, and had surprised me, for this is what I had yearned to see. But there had been no 3 distinct colours, like we'd been promised in our childhood, the ocean, had seemed one, with a collective anger and fury that had looked like it had threatened to swallow the land. The Tip of the India had been an anti-climax of sorts for me, and bereft of romance, I had decided to enjoy and imbibe popular urban-day kitsch, the one complacently growing aesthetic that coloured every must see destination in the vast land.

Save for a tiny stone-pillared quadrangle, where we sat to interview our 3 friends, there was nothing pleasing about the tip. Portly pujaris performed prayers for the dear departed dead, shivering mothers and children took shelter from the winds and wrung their vestments off the water from the 3 oceans. Little boys sold neatly packaged shells and corals, and Vivekananda Rock Memorabilia, and from the Pajama stripped temple complex, bells and chants competed with the roar of the seas and the screams of people struggling to take the Big Dip. We asked our North Indian friends what they thought of the south. "It's full of differences", said Krishan. For one, Ayurveda has a place in the minds of the South Indians that one doesn't find in the North. "Here, even in small hotels and dhabhas, you are served hot drinking water with food. Medicated ginger water that helps clean the system. It's in their psychology, they believe in the healing of Ayurveda, and are willing to be patient with the medication. In the North, people need immediate results, they want to get well soon." What then had made them study Ayurveda? They were honest to admit that they had chosen the path out of default. They had all wanted to be doctors, Sanjeev said he had been pretty clear of the fact that he wanted to serve the country. "It was either the fauj or medicine. Desh ki seva," Krishnan had always had the 'tamanna' to be a doctor and Rajiv being the only son, unable to leave his parents and take up jobs else where, had seen medicine as the right career path. However, it was the unavailability of seats for the MBBS course that had compelled them to study Ayurveda instead.

They had come to learn from the south before setting up their Ayurvedic practice in the north. And while lauding the progress of science and medicine in the country since independence, Rajiv felt that the Ayurvedic field had made virtually no progress, in fact had sadly faced a decline. "The govt. gives no facilities. They spend about Rs. 5 lakhs on an MBBS, but nothing is spent on an Ayurveda student. Only recently, some importance has been given to research in this field such as here in Kerala." He said grudgingly. What else had they learnt while in the South? "Here the people are stuck to their culture, unlike in the North, where we are more concerned with following a western culture have no grounding in our cultural traditions." Said Rajiv. Sanjeev was quick to add that it was important to imbibe new technology from the West. "We can gain what we have to from the west but we can't lose our culture. Our ancient Vedas have a lot of good in them. If we are given access to new technologies in the medical field, for diagnosis and then are able to treat them by Ayurveda, we could really say we were making progress. We had one leader who thought of the future. Rajiv Gandhi. We haven't had a leader like him. He was young. His thinking was different. Now, the computers we have today, they are all thanks to him. No one thought of these things. He had a technical mind"

They shared the common belief that for progress as a nation we needed stability that coalition politics would not provide. What did they feel when they saw corruption all around them? "That Bharat is not gareeb." Said Sanjeev and laughed at the irony. "When 40 kgs of gold and 500kgs of silver are recovered from one political leader, we know that our country is not poor. It has been made poor. Our netas have done it. What is she going to do with 40 kgs of gold? She has spent 70 crores of Sate money on her sons wedding?" He referred, of course to the silver screen glittered and full metal jacket tainted J Jayalalitha, current ex-Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, whose involuntary disclosure of wealth by way of raids had affirmed for the nation, the scamming and scheming nature of our iconic leaders, and levitated her, weight and baggage included to the likes of Imelda Marcos, her collection of Kanjeevarum Saris, jewels and shoes displaying for a starving people, the vulgar wealth that lay behind her dark and formidable bullet proof cloak.

"Despite the wide spread corruption, we need some stability. Today one government, tomorrow another. Earlier, we never had mid term polls, most parties finished their term, maybe went on to govern for a decade. Now we have too many regional parties contending. We should have 2-3 large parties, like the Congress and the BJP." Rajiv obviously felt that a stable government, notwithstanding corruption was the need of the day. But our country, so diverse, so multi-cultured, what could be common between the regions? "Yes, we are so diverse. Right here, from the language and dress of the people, we can determine if they come from Gujarat, Kerala or Bengal. And we can truly feel that from Kashmir to Kanya kumari, bharat ek hi hai. We can feel it over here. But I wonder if I would feel that if I went to Kashmir. There, perhaps, Pakistan...." An embarrassing silence had ensued, and Sanjeev had left his thought mid sentenced. Rajiv had appeared a little embarrassed. "If there is one thing that can unite this country, it is one language. Not like, 'I'm Tamil, so I'll only speak my language.' Everyone should know Hindi.

We need some language of communication. In the South, we've met a number of people, who know their regional language, and speak English. We ask them to speak with us in Hindi, and even if they can speak it, they reply in English. Now, instead, if they could give preference to Hindi, we feel the unity will grow. It is a tragedy that we don't have a unifying language. Hindi is the language of Hindustan, hence, it should apply to all. We can only hope towards this future. Up to 10th standard, Hindi should be made a compulsory subject. And it should be implemented nation-wide by the state governments. The South had so many languages, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, it would be easier for them to learn one language rather than us learning 4-5 languages to communicate with them." But what would happen to our diversity, if this were to be considered an ideal? What would happen to our many languages and many art forms, Hindustan was only 50 years old, but our civilisation with distinct cultures was ancient. Surely diversity wasn't our worst enemy? And why should the language of the North be thwarted on the South? "That's not what we are saying." Sanjeev was quick to defend his hard stand. "We have to retain the regional cultures and unite. Along with the regional languages, there must be Hindi too so they can communicate with us. Unekta main ekta tab he honghi. The seven colours of the rainbow together make a brilliant white. There has to be a Rashtra Bhasha. What is the meaning of the word, if half the people don't speak the National Language? And with regard to the regional cultures, I'll say again, the north might be forgetting their culture, but the south is certainly not forgetting theirs. We are all westernising in the north. But here culture, their sanskriti is being retained. Here, we wear knickers and walk about, but people look at us. We wear clothes like this there, but here they even go to work in their lungis. In fact, except for this language problem, the people here are much better than the North Indians. Because our culture, our sabhvyata; Katakhal, Bharat Natyam is here only."

How much could we fault our 3 peers from North India? If we took the North Indian stereotype, that they themselves had confirmed, then they were far from that notion. Soft-spoken, with quite dignity, they seemed more concerned about the loss of Indian culture in our scramble to appropriate the western and the otherworldly. They wanted to strike that balance, between the East and the West, between the Tip and the Top, between the Old and the New; the Nehruvian ideal of 'Indianness', retaining what was good throwing out what was bad, maintaining Unity in Diversity. And while I acknowledged, that not really having one national language was somewhat of a 'tragedy', I knew that making Hindi a compulsion would result in perhaps a greater tragedy. Could I detect, in their poetic, well-articulated Hindi words, a hint of Hindutva rhetoric, that utopian ideal of Hindustan, which mirrored the sentiments of many moderate minded middle-class North Indians? I hoped I was wrong.

We left the young doctors in further contemplation and proceeded eastwards into the heartland of Tamil Nadu, acknowledging fully well, that language was indeed going to be a barrier for communication. In our unit, there was diversity; In Karnataka, Raju, our camera attendant had been enlisted as translator, but save for the Siddhis and the farmer who had no time for us our interviews had been conducted in English. In Kerala, Hari had meticulously translated every word and nuance for us, even as he controlled the pitch and modulation of the voices. Now, as we rushed past fields, dotted with giant windmills, coconut palms and banana plants, their fans swaying together in the wind, and as we chased the Kanya Kumari train as it chugged northwards, the dimension of the vast land, that was invisible to me from the tip, became glaring. Tamil, Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu, Kashmir, more and more. Tribal languages, thousands of dialects, new linguistic states, secessionism, insurgency, rivers to be shared less and less. Pluralistic India was of manifold proportion, multiplying like crazy, raised to the power of, divided by. Coefficient inefficient. Lowest common denominator, poverty, against the Highest common factor, corruption. Inversely proportionate. Remainders, indivisible. Fractions; proper and improper. Negative and Positive. Too many variables. The value of x, numerous, the value of n = x. There ever be one solution to this empirical equation.

MADURAI SA

It was just past sundown when we drove into Madurai. The unplanned city looked forlorn and ugly and strangely devoid of faces. It seemed like a ghost town, not of an ancient kingdom, but from an urban nightmare so monstrous that it's citizens had woken up and fled mid sleep. We found a dark and dim hotel and stripped down for the hot night. Madurai had fallen on our map, not for its ancient temples, or it's history, but by virtue of a little slip of paper, money for this course of our journey was to be collected at the Sate Bank of India, Madurai branch.

So next morning, while Saeed and Jennifer went to the Bank, we decided to cash in on the Meenakshi Temple. Since this was a director-less shoot, most of the unit stayed indoors, the sweltering may heat rendering them lethargic.

Shai volunteered to miss the shoot and work on the logging, a task for once she readily took up. "Anything. Anything is better than to go back to that temple." Shai has revulsion for butter and ghee in their solid forms; their sight and smell bring food up to her throat. That's a common feeling, though. I feel the same with milk. But Shai, not normally prone to wild allegations, claims that the genesis for this phobia lies within the sanctum sanctorum of the Meenakshi temple complex. As a young teenager, she was witness to a ritual where devotees had to hurl ghee lumps or butter balls, as Shai has drolly christened them, with force and fervour at the idol of the deity, the barrage of dart balls melting and dripping down the body of the goddess, the volley continuing till each devotee in the line had venerated the statue with their zealous ostentation of passion. Never since, has Shai been able to consume butter, her story has churned my idli-sambhar and hijacked its smooth digestion. I have visualised the site and want nothing to do with it. Ghee, doodh and rituals, whether in single doses or in combination, I cannot stomach.

We pass the urban squalor of the new city and follow the soaring gopuramas, of the Meenakshi temple visible every now and then towering high over the city, rising above the gloom and imposing on it, multicoloured splendour. With each new turn, a long and narrow lane opens up; a splendid gate and tower beckons, but the lanes are shut to traffic or are too narrow for our vehicles. We find ourselves hopelessly lost in the labyrinth; the four towers playing illusive bait, each one looking like the other coming up behind us to the east, in front of us in the north. Finally, we abandoned our vehicles on the main road and proceeded by cycle rickshaw down a long narrow lane, at the end of which, the main entrance, the south tower beckoned us. The city was coming to life, the claustrophobia of the narrow lanes, with hundreds of shops existing cheek-by-jowl; flower sellers stringing endless garlands of Jasmine flowers, slowly escalating as a procession made its way down another side street, joining the aarti outside the south gate and then moving on to the another towers. The colours were dazzling, a young boy walked up and down the street flashing an array on sunglasses on his chest, each mercury-tinted disc, reflecting the 50 metre tower, animals and gods on a multicoloured tiered wedding cake and the clear blue sky in a juxtaposition of crazy angles. This is one of the most famous temples in India, undoubtedly, one of our largest; not for nothing does it attract so many visitors, for even if the sanctum and rituals and darshans are off your list, the sheer scale and vastness of the temple complex, is definitely worth a dekho. Over 350 years old, the towers are freshly painted, old vegetable dyes replaced with gaudy colours that to my mind come beautifully together a baroque feel of chaos amidst devotion.

As our crew shot the temple complex, I explored the back lanes of this ancient city centre. Across from the temple, within the complex was a beautiful hall, its pillared walls, 985 in all, thick pillars lion heads on each post, mustard stone. Cloth merchants, tailors, flower sellers, utensil vendors and carpenters hold business from the tiny respites of space between pillar and pillar. I wandered through the textile area, where I gave in to my latent shopping urges and lost myself in the weaves and prints of exquisite cottons, textiles that Tirupur and Madurai were famous for. After looking through the variety, I settled in on one store where the gracious seller told me in English that his friend under the adjacent pillars would happily stitch my clothes and have them ready within the hour. Excited I made my final selection. It was then that Kannan, for that was the shop owner's name, requested me to purchase some of the selected prints from the previous shop. "You saw them there first. It's only fair that you buy from him." I was taken aback. Here, where every shop had the same folds on display, instead of a competitive price-cutting, the hallmark of street shopping, where mark ups and bargaining lead to purchase of the cheapest, this seller was talking about rectitude? "We have a fixed price and a fixed policy. If you buy from me, then you have to stitch from my partner, If you buy from him, then his colleague will stitch. This way everybody earns well." If this was his selling, then I was sold. Offering his newspaper to his competition, Kannan began cutting and folding my cloth. He asked me if I had had a pleasant stay in his city of Madurai. "I just heard that curfew has been imposed again on the city. This morning, at 8'o'clock, there was some more violence. Shots were fired." What was he talking about? We had driven into Madurai, blinkers on, not giving further thought to the deserted streets the night before. It struck me as ironic, that while we were on this mega-tour of the country, crossing states after cursory glances and superficial delving into general issues, we were unaware of internal strifes in the states. Kannan told me that all the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, had in the past 2 weeks seen a number of communal riots and some small towns had been under curfew for days. It was tragic, he said, that Hindu's were being pitted against Hindus. This morning the police had had to fire shots to curb down another skirmish between the Thevars and the Dalits. Kannan appeared visibly upset with these disturbances. "This shouldn't be happening. Human against Human. God has made us one. We shouldn't differentiate on caste."

I watched Kannan explain the style of my Sarong to Khan Saheb, his master tailor as I waited for the camera crew to return. To my delight, Saeed appeared on the scene, having finished the bank work. I asked him if we could interview Kannan. We set up shop between Khan Saheb and his sewing machine and Kannans textile stall. Saeed asked him what he thought of the future. "We don't need hate in the future."

Here itself we have 700 different castes, It's impossible to think that there is fighting between Hindu and Hindu, to say, our caste is better than yours. To break a statue or a temple. We need good co-operation. Not just between Hindus and Muslims but between all brothers. I really hope this won't continue for more than 10 years. I estimate this hate will last for 10 years. If we humans have a sixth sense then we should use it. And think first of the economic problems. But when these things threaten us, our economy won't grow, it will come down. You know in the last 10 days, in a district 120 kms. outside of Madurai, no body worked because of similar caste problem. Everything was shut down for days. They don't have money for food, the ones who get involved have nothing to gain. But a few people fuel these problems. Someone should understand that this is not what we need in the future. I think we can progress like America. We have to an extent. There has been a lot of development. We have a lot of big cities, you know. Like Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Madras. Good salaries. Good education. We have second place in the world in computer software. But at the same time, like in Bombay a few years ago, we had lots of caste problems, communal problems. But we don't want that. We have a lot of children, you know. We don't want to kill human by humans. They are different. We are different. We don't want. We need a mind change for the future. Then we will be able to celebrate a good century. Sure In the next 100 years, for the future generation we will need education and opportunity to reach all. Only 33-35% of our people have adequate education. If it can go down, then we can build something for the future. We have to do good things for the people. Not like today. Not like 10 days ago. Not like a few years ago, in Bombay. This is not a good message for the future. For our Children's generation"

What a beautiful man, I thought. Was he married? "Not married. Because I'm looking for the right person for a wife. Usually parents arrange the marriage. But they want a small house. Inside a circle. I don't want that. I want no children from me. Instead, I want to adopt children. We have a lot of children in this country. I have a friend who has adopted 40 children and run a school. I want to adopt one or two, but my parents will not understand. No one gives cooperation. I'm 27, in 5 months I'll be 28. I'm waiting for the right person who likes my policy. I like to meet people. I don't want to be in an inside house. So I would want someone who likes a free life and likes to travel. I'd love to travel round India. See the north of India, improve my Hindi. I haven't seen the North as yet, but I want to. I want to meet village people in interiors of India. Go to Rajasthan, Haryana, Bihar, things aren't very well there."

So despite all the problems, did he feel that India was one country? "Definitely, my friend. Of course we are one people. In 1965, we fought against the Hindi language, nowadays many people need Hindi to speak for small business. So why do we make such a difference, between Hindi and Tamil. They should make an effort, we'll make an effort. If you meet foreigners. They might be from one country, maybe England. They speak more than one language. Maybe French, Maybe Italian. All Germans speak more than one language. Now our own country is so vast, over 20 different languages, we too should learn them. We have to share our minds. Me and Khan Saheb always discuss things. He too has faith in the future. Today in parliament they passed the 33% reservation for women bill. We both thought that it was a good thing. A progressive step. Female is just the same like male. Why do we make a difference and keep them in the house? We have to send them out." He referred to me as his sister and told Saeed that it felt good to see women traveling the country, working and living together with men. Khan Saheb had finished stitching my skirt, and it was time to leave. We thanked Kannan and Khan Saheb and wished them well. "I speak few English, but it's getting better. Have a wonderful travel."

Kannan. Friend and brother to the world. The kind of person who pushes the faith back into your soul, even as hate and cynicism deviate its' course. He seemed almost saintly, and yet he was no more than ordinary. A shopkeeper selling his wares, living in harmony with his competitors and colleagues, yet possessing a world view and a sensibility that stunned my mind, stirred my soul. And yes, travel was a wonderful thing. From his little nook in the temple complex of Madurai, Kannan saw the world. He met tourists and spoke to them, he read papers and discussed issues global in measure. And his lofty ideals, he believed in. History hadn't tainted his soul, but strengthened it. And in my complaining soul, my petty heart, I found a place for Kannan's words and dreamed that we could herald in the millennium with a 100 years of peace.

We drove out of Madurai district amidst Naka *Bandis*. Every brown and white Pajama striped Temple complex and every bust of Dr. Ambedkar was cordoned by the police, who if Kannan was to be believed for once had acted with exemplary restraint and quelled mobs of over 500 people. And, not surprisingly the caste wars had been instigated by warring political parties, few people who would gain from stirring caste sentiments. Over the past weeks in Sivakasi, Kamarajar, Vaigai and Madurai district, buses had stopped plying, bandhs had been observed, even petrol pumps had remained shut and rail services had been disrupted. And through all the discord, the AIADMK had slung dirt on the DMK, accusing the nearly one year old Karunanidhi government of breaking down law on order, which in turn had held the mighty J Jayalalitha responsible for inciting anger in the Thevar Peravai.

And early this morning, violence had rocked Madurai city again, as mobs had run riot in protest against the damage to a statue of Dr. Ambedkar. Petrol bombs had been thrown on the police, stones had been pelted at vehicles and *rasta-rokos* had been staged. Now, all seemed quiet, and we made quick progress as we zipped through the deserted roads, stopping every now and then at police pickets. "Doordarshan!" We said, each time we were stopped. We were allowed to go, take to the streets, when people had to remain indoors. At night we reached Pudukottai, where, under guarantee that we would vacate our rooms before 5:am the next morning, the Doordarshan crew spent the night. An important MLA and his entourage had booked the entire hotel for the next day. We followed orders, kept our word and headed eastwards, to the French quarter of Pondicherry.