Ties between India and Sri Lanka have never been so strong!

India should remain concerned towards finding an acceptable solution to the Tamil question, India should remain concerned in getting the issue resolved “in a reasonable and amicable manner.”

Unless both countries work together to provide a just solution to the Tamil people in the north and east of the country, the efforts to rebuild the country could fail and hatred and mistrust between the communities of Sri Lanka would rise again.
ADAPTING TO CHANGING TIMES

Whilst writing this editorial a leading London newspaper group has announced they will stop publishing their regular print version from March this year, but have vowed to continue its online version. Many other major newspapers are likely to follow this trend, according to a BBC report. If major papers with hundreds of years’ publishing history, cannot sustain a presence in the traditional print market, how could one imagine a publication like Confluence could survive in the long term?

In the light of changes in technology, global trends and reader perceptions, we also have to change our direction while preserving our identity as a quality journal. A few readers and writers asked us recently if we could continue to publish the printed version for the benefit of those readers who wouldn’t otherwise be normally able to read online versions. At the same time others suggested to us that we make some changes to the format so they could print the magazine from any home printer. While thanking everyone for their suggestions, we are glad to say that starting from this issue Confluence is coming in a size and format which would enable anyone to print their favourite magazine from any printer in black and white or in full colour. In the meantime you can also read this magazine on your favourite digital reader from anywhere in the world as a pdf file.

Since the launch of our website about a year ago our readership has steadily increased and we have also received requests from readers and writers to include more varieties of articles. Considering their requests soon we will be redesigning our website and will communicate with you again at the appropriate time.

As many of our readers are aware, we always encourage new writers we think have the potential to write effectively. Hence, we are looking for good writers who can address a variety of subject areas which are of particular interest to South Asian readers around the world. Uniquely, our writers submit their articles on a purely voluntary basis.

We look forward to your continued feedback!
Tamil Nadu is cyclone-prone: fifty cyclones in the last century. Accepting the flooding of vulnerable areas during the northeast monsoon is a way of life for the hapless people. Monsoon 2015 broke a 100-year record and pounded the State, in particular Chennai and adjacent districts, ferociously. Pregnant cumulus clouds burst forth on November 30 and fifty centimeters of incessant rain for two days swelled the lakes to the brim. Huge releases of water (18000 and 29000 cusecs on November 16 and December 2 respectively) from Chengarambakkam lake submerged the stricken city. The government’s claim about alerting the people in advance is hotly contested.

Chennai Metropolitan (rest of the State, no less) is an avuracious octopus, amidst martyred waterbodies—silted lakes and rivers, encroached lake-beds, choked waterways, neglected estuaries and scandalous pollution—for about five decades. The greedy public, the greedy among the officialdom and grasping political apparatus must squarely share the blame for this slaughter of the lambs. Water found its own level with zero-tolerance to obstructions and trespassers. About a hundred low lying areas like Velacheri were submerged to the first floor level, starving the poor and rich alike. The next door neighbour was, for all practical purposes, in a different planet! One could not even beg for food, water and milk. Those in pricey upper floors took to the terraces, the poor running to the congested shelters. Only boats, hired at astronomical rates, could ply. Chennai was Venice-in-distress. Some tragedies are heart-rending. A mother watched with horror her twins in an airforce station! Those sheltering in the Parthasarathi temple were fed by Twinsof central assistance sought; cash relief of about fifty pounds sterling to each of the three million affected people in four northern districts; about 26,000 pounds sterling of central assistance sought; cash relief of about fifty pounds sterling to each of the three million affected people in four northern districts; announced.

Water finds its own level in the underground aquifers also. The good news is that it has risen so much that water can be fetched at elbow length even in shallow wells. I witnessed the emergence of a global network of Good Samaritans, at midnight—before the floods subsided enough to be spotted. I was not manifest; but, tireless fieldwork went unnoticed. Mr. Gagandeep Singh Bedi, Ms. Amudha and Ms. Gajalaxmi, all from the high profile Indian Administrative Service, covered the Tamil Nadu Disaster Management Authorities—State & District level—had not met even once over the years. The Space Agency warned of the deluge in time and the weather forecasts were worriesome. Yet, Disaster Management was conspicuous by absence. Government statistics: 470 people dead; nearly a lakh livestock perished; crops in over 3.83 lakh hectares were damaged; cash relief of about fifty pounds sterling to each of the three million affected people in four northern districts; announced.

The Seep, a Ford General Purpose Amphibious vehicle, deployed to drop Allied troops on Normandy Beach, was a star. It delivered food packets to the Kotthurpuram poor. Vinayak Shanker deserves a mention in the dispatches. He brought over his grandfather’s Seep to Chennai; Much of the food distribution to flood-affected colonies happened on his Seep. “At one point, the current was so strong that I swirled with the vehicle. I had to hook the vehicle to a building and then distribute the food packets...when I looked at how the people were stranded, my conscience did not let me stay idle...” he said. I owe this story to a The Hindu Exclusive.

My brother and I could, somehow, reach the distant Chennai Arising volunteer centre on 7 December 2015 with boxes of relief material and found the poor giving in plenty to the starving rich. Elders, housewives and schoolchildren worked together tirelessly; young motorcyclists roamed the streets to deliver ‘whatsapp’ gifts from all over the globe, to the needy in nearby terraces. Blue Cross, famed for animal care, rescued (Bless you, Mr. Dawn Williams!) men and animals and even snakes.

The Armed Forces did a splendid job, earning wholesome praise from all. A young lady in full term, rescued from a terrace, delivered twins in an airforce station! Those sheltering in the Parthasarathi temple were fed by Ms. Amudha and Ms. Gajalaxmi, all from the high profile Indian Administrative Service, covered themselves with glory by their ‘no nonsense’ approach to work. This free flow of the milk of human kindness brought the following lines of T.S. Eliot to my mind and I sang: ‘Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together But when I look ahead up the white road There is always another one walking beside you Gliding unawt in a brown mantle, hooded I do not know whether a man or a woman —But who is that on the other side of you?’


Srinivasan Soundararajan (Innamburan)is a Tamil scholar with degrees in Economics, Applied Sociology and Tamil Literature. He has long retired from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service in which he served as Additional Deputy Comptroller & Auditor General of India. He has also spent some years working in the UK as an Adviser for the Citizens’ Advice Bureau.
CORRUPTION figured large in my life and in my mind in 2015. In the Summer I found myself engaged with humanitarian aid convoys in the Horn of Africa which had been diverted and their loads sold off in local markets and in the Autumn a fleet of Ebola Ambulances paid for but never delivered to Sierra Leone. All in all it was hard to disagree when back in the U.K., I read in December that India’s Supreme Court described corruption as ‘a national economic terror.’ Shouldn’t there be a special, and especially ghastly circle of hell reserved for those who rip off the sick and the starving, the weak and the poor? Yes. But it did make me wonder if all corruption comes painted so starkly in black and white?

Of course every example of abuse of power is reprehensible. But I think it’s only really possible to take a zero tolerance approach when we can feel confident that all corruption is fuelled by greed and not need. A place where no police officer needs to seek ‘dash’ to pay for his child’s schooling, where no teacher needs to facilitate with cash her Mother’s admission to hospital; where no doctor has to ‘take out something small’ for traffic cops at unauthorised road blocks on their journey to work. But we all know that there are societies where, to quote an entirely accurate civil service pay campaign slogan from one country I worked in, ‘your take home pay won’t even take you home’. How do you tackle corruption when it isn’t just the avaricious few who screw the innocent many, but often where the many are taking whatever advantage they can of everyone else? Where the distinction between victims and perpetrators is profoundly blurred?

Now even raising this view risks serious condemnation: In 2012 the Housing Minister in Uttar Pradesh suggested to bureaucrats that they could steal a little if they performed their duties well. Whilst he hastily withdrew his remarks after a public outcry, not least because his party had fought elections on an anti-corruption platform, his comments attracted condemnation internationally. I do wonder if, by adopting a blanket condemnation of corruption, we are guilty of the same naivety (and doomed to the same failures) as demonstrated in both the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. Because corruption is how the crime is perpetrated, not what the crime is. And anyway, is all corruption the same? Are distinctions only about how much was stolen? Just as one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter so corruption can be in the eye of the beholder. Think of Schindler’s List. If you work in a state, a system or an organisation so evil, so morally corrupt, or just so rule-bound, over-bureaucratic and managerially atrophied that the only way to get anything done is to short-circuit the system. Breaking the rules to get the job done is a staple of many police dramas. There’s even a name for it: Noble Cause Corruption.

By pretending that all corruption requires the same response, we merely encourage those tasked with fighting it to focus their efforts on the easy targets. Also, and perhaps counter-intuitively, by making it something special we make it easier for those in power to avoid dealing where it really matters by externalising the problem. A colleague of mine once asked a chief of police what he did about allegations of corruption among his officers. “Nothing,” he replied without a hint of embarrassment. “Not any more. We now have an Anti-Corruption Commission to deal with all that.”

This is not an appeal to go easy on those who use their positions to cheat, steal and abuse. This is an argument for actually doing something intelligent about it. And that can only begin when we stop assuming processes and attitudes appropriate in societies with strong civil institutions, adequate social infrastructure, investigative journalism and ever fewer cash transactions are infinitely transferrable. Then we can begin to focus efforts on the more egregious levels and types of corruption, not simply regard all as equally serious. We do this with other crimes: we have no problem in principle distinguishing between murder and manslaughter, felonies and misdemeanours. Users and dealers. We should do this too with corruption.

This is not a new thought: In the early 1970s the Knapp Commission was established to investigate a New York Police Department riddled at all levels with corruption. What do you do when every cop is on the make? You draw a distinction between those the Commission termed Grass Eaters and Meat Eaters. The former are officers who accept gratuities and solicit low level payments because that’s just the way it works whilst the latter are those who actively and aggressively sought opportunities they could exploit for financial gain. The implications of this distinction are that the Grass Eaters will change their behaviour with the circumstances. The Meat Eaters are criminals who need to be dealt with appropriately. It’s not about position or amounts stolen. It’s about levels of culpability.

This sounds to me like the world I recognise. It also sounds to me like a sensible place to start actually doing something about it that might actually make a difference.

Dawood Ali McCallum is the author of three novels published in India and one (The Last Charge) published last year in the UK. His first story, The Lords of Alijah, is available to download free for a limited period at www.dawoodalimccallum.com.
Amidst the Himalayan Mountains, dotted with little hamlets connected to each other by narrow goat trails, lay the sleepy village of Kotgarh/Thanedar, home of my grandfather, Satyanand Stokes. At the height of 6300 ft above sea level stood this amazing village—snowbound in winter, quiet through most part of the year, buzzing with activity during the three summer months, when truckloads of apples were transported down the winding narrow Indo-Tibet Road to various parts of India for sale.

Known as the home of apples, it was here that my grandfather brought apple saplings from America in the beginning of the 20th century, thus pioneering apple cultivation in India. So quiet were these mountains that when a farmer’s wife sang a local (pahari) song while working in her fields, her musical notes would flow down the valleys and echo back at her, often followed by a response from afar, a voice unknown to her.

Now my anecdote goes back more than sixty years. One warm summer afternoon I remember accompanying my uncle Lal to a relative’s house in another village four miles away. We were a threesome—he, his horse and me. I was a little girl perhaps nine or maybe older! We trudged along a narrow rugged road interrupted only by little rivulets flowing down the snow-capped mountains.

For me, my uncle Lal seemed to possess all the knowledge of the world contained in Pandora’s box. Open the box and out would flow every breath of the Himalayan Mountains, its fragrance, its flora and fauna, its butterflies, the sounds of its birds, and above all my uncle’s lively jokes—so pleasing for a little girl! He was my hero!

What particularly caught my fancy during the walk, was the sound of a certain bird which said ‘co cooo cuk’, ‘aa aaa tut, or something like it’. My uncle told me its name in the local (pahari) dialect, but it didn’t make much sense to me, as I had no idea what it looked like.

Thereafter I happened to live in various parts of the Indian Subcontinent, stretching from the Himalayan Mountains with its pine forests, to the sun baked plains of India; from the peace and solitude of the hills to the noisy, chaotic, thickly populated cities with highrises kissing the sky at their 35th or 40th floors, but I never heard that bird again. And didn’t it matter either! I had totally forgotten about it.

Many years later my husband was posted to London, where I accompanied him. In the early hours of the morning I was woken up by a familiar sound, a voice I had heard before somewhere. That struck a chord and old memories came back! Was it the same bird? Strange! How amazing! How exciting! To hear it after those many years! It was a cold November morning. In spite of the cold I rushed out to the garden to see the bird. But, I could only hear it. I couldn’t see it! Alas it wasn’t there!

At first I would hear it occasionally. Then having moved house closer to the Epping Forest I heard it all the time—during my morning walks, daytime, evenings, from rooftops, among trees and even on top of TV aerials. But where was it? This bird is far too smart and it is difficult to guess which among the many birds in the sky it is! If one hears its monotonous cooing, and looks up to where the sound came from, it stops speaking.

One day as I walked my little grandson Krish, to his crèche, I heard a very feeble voice. It was the same voice I had heard so long ago when my uncle had walked me on that rugged road. At that time it sounded very loud. And it was the same I had been hearing in London so often and right now it was from the tree under which we stood.

“Krish” I said, “Here it is! I can hear it. We have got to find this bird today! Come along, help me look for it.” Both of us pleaded through the thick foliage. The sound was there but not the bird. With every leaf that moved, Krish would shout, “Come Dadi Come! (Paternal grandmother) Here it is!” He didn’t know what exactly I was looking for, but his curiosity was so sincere that I couldn’t help but pick him in my arms and kiss him.

By now we had become the best of friends looking for our one common target. At last, hidden among leaves and brown branches, I caught a glimpse of the bird. She sat there on her nest of brown twigs hiding from all human sight and other predators, perhaps laying eggs or else protecting them. I called out “Krish, here she is. I can see her.” He jumped onto my lap again and peering through the dense growth he finally detected her on her nest. He clapped his hands, danced with joy and jumped around in delight. While mine was an overwhelming joy—a life-long yearning fulfilled! I had discovered what I was looking for. But his was a joy so spontaneous, so overpowering, so intense that it was difficult for me to discern whose joy was more—his or mine!

But we now shared a secret. He would teasingly, with his little nose squeezed up, secretively say to me “Neest!” His brother Shaurya, too wanted to know the secret, but we kept it from him for a long time, until one day he followed us to the nest and discovered it for himself.

The bird however, turned out to be the Eurasian Collared Dove: well, there it was. ‘Much Ado about nothing’! Or I dare say “So much for so little!” Be that as it may, but the joy that this common bird gave to both of us was infinite, the only difference being that mine started in the heart of the Himalayas, with its sparse population of simple villagers, whereas Krish found his in the fashion capital of the world, epitome of cultural richness, a city whose population is forever bursting at its seams.

However, that moment of discovery will stay with us—bonding us, and a cherished memory forever.

Sheila Malhotra, art critic and an established artist is widely acclaimed for her very unique themes ‘the World through a Porthole’ and ‘Playing with the Millennia.’ Sheila is also a Road Safety campaigner in UK and India. In UK she is associated with the Road Safety Charity ‘Brake’.

OH FOR A BIRD!
by Sheila Malhotra
In addressing the United Nations, Noam Chomsky, the left-wing guru on global matters, lamented that “many of the world’s problems are so intractable that it’s hard to think of ways even to take steps toward mitigating them”.

While he highlighted the Israel-Palestine conflict as being one of these intractable thorns in our flesh, it has festered into a global pandemic of religious fanaticism that even today challenges the minds of great intellectuals and defies coherent analysis. Why would young people with all the possibility of life’s offerings want to ignite themselves for a cause that is so obtuse, where the enemy dissipates into a multi-headed monster of colonialism, of American imperialism, of Eurocentric racism, of cultural debauchery, of Muslim disunity and so on? The enemy keeps changing its face to appease the insatiable need for anarchy.

When young idealism is primed with narcissistic power there is a heightened sense of self-importance with little understanding of the problem and the end result is the anarchy that we are currently witnessing in the streets of Paris, London and more recently at the hotel in Mali. Earlier such examples of urban terror after 9/11 was followed by further attacks in Bombay, Bali, Beirut, Iran and Nigeria.

There is a pattern and if we care to plot and connect the dots we will find some global trends that may in fact be the beginning of the third world war. The features that emerge are quite different from preceding world wars where capitalism was pitted against the forces of communism where the two world forces of Russia and America were enemies with faces. Today the emerging characteristics are ostensibly the fight for religious omnipotence, political hegemony and ethnicity in a battle against moderate secularism and so called colonialism.

The renowned British philosopher Ted Honderich refers to ‘liberation terrorism’ as an inevitability when freedom and power are beyond the reach of people who believe that nothing else will get it for them. Under these circumstances he asserts that people have a moral right to terrorism and he justifies suicide bombing in the name of martyrdom.

But terrorism in practice, says Gary Silverman, Financial Times columnist, turns out to be inherently counterproductive as a political strategy as it unites people into a fraternity as the French would say against the perpetrators and are unsympathetic for their cause. Unhappily this has been the case in the Palestinian battle for the restoration of their homelands. And the fodder in all of this is misguided youth who are danger to themselves and others in the way in which they are wired.

Neurologist Francis Jensen author of the Teenage Brain says that “when we think of ourselves as civilized, intelligent adults, we really have the frontal and prefrontal parts of the cortex to thank.” But “teens are not quite firing on all cylinders when it comes to the frontal lobes.” Thus, “we shouldn’t be surprised by the daily stories we hear and read about tragic mistakes.”

The frontal lobes are the seat of what’s sometimes called the brain’s executive function. They’re responsible for planning, for self-awareness, and for judgment. Optimally, they act as a check on impulses originating in other parts of the brain. But in the teen years, Jensen points out, the brain is still busy building links between its different regions. This is where parents should step in to be their teens’ frontal lobes until their brains are fully wired. And this is exactly what ISIS and the Jihadists know when they target youth to become suicide bombers. With their fiery temperaments they become human fodder in a battle of religious extremism and violence in the name of God.

Globally we are beginning to witness a surge of religious extremism among youth spurred by a wave of cultural fundamentalism. In SA, more than ever before on the streets, in shopping malls on university campuses and educational institutions, young people are donning symbols of religious markers that distinguishes them from others outside of their faith. This is a relatively new phenomenon. “ Beware!” warns a Hindu spiritual thinker against those who say that they are devout worshipers of this or that faith. They are dangerous he believes because they assume that truth lies in their section of the universe only.

I have always been inspired by this logic as I traverse so many domains of enlightenment in the course of my life. But youth are not searching for the truth, they are longing to be harnessed by peer pressure into movements in which they can find a purpose and religious fundamentalism offers such a haven.

In an interesting interview with Fareed Zakaria Rabbi Jonathan Sacks discusses the roots of religious violence and explores historic tensions between the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and recalls a time of secularist harmony. In his book entitled Not in God’s Name he rebukes those who kill in the name of God of life, wage war in the name of the God of peace, hate in the name of the God of love and practice cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

Through a close reading of key biblical texts Sacks then challenges those who claim that religion is intrinsically a cause of violence, and argues that theology must become a part of the solution if it is not to remain at the heart of the problem. He challenges Muslims, Jews and Christians (and I may add the BJP version of some Hindus): For the sake of humanity and the free world, the time has come for people all faiths and none to stand together and declare: Not in God’s name. Dr. Devi Rajab is a respected South African journalist and former Dean of Student Development at UKZN and the author of several books.
Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's book is a valuable work comprehensively researched, which digs deep into British colonial history to expose the cracks and errors in popular understanding of it. Alibhai-Brown brings to our notice the diversity that existed in Britain for centuries, as varied foreign influences were infused and absorbed into the native culture.

How many people know that a skeleton of an African male was dug up in 2011 in Stratford which is likely to be 1700 years old or that the Indians, Dadabhai Naoroji, Bhownagree and Shapurji Saklava were Members of Parliament in the late nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century? She draws our attention to the fact that a third of the British troops who perished in WW2 were Indian, which fact was not mentioned in the annals of history or represented at D-Day commemorations until very recently. ‘Forgetfulness seems odd for a nation which is obsessed with its past’. David Cameron said: ‘I was not born when Koh-i-Noor diamond nor Greeks their Elgin Marbles.

A thread of Islamic contribution to British history runs through the entire book depicting Muslim input in the fields of science, philosophy, architecture, food, music, art etc. For instance, did we know that the mince pies—which falls away today’s life? Well, I’m still a Downton virgin! His view may be summed up in Dr Samuel Johnson’s words: ‘We draw curtains to the weather outside and outsiders.’ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has researched colonial history thoroughly and exposes embarrassing details with great skill.

‘The English may be duplicitous’, she says but ‘they are remarkable too. The English unbbutton their tight coats and release their audacious intrepid selves and venture out to unexplored territories’. English arrogance and disdain is juxtaposed with their love of adventure and acceptance of alien cultures and concepts much more so than their European counterparts. But then ‘the tolerance of the English is like a silk scarf—which falls away easily’. According to the Runnymede Trust, ‘racism in British society still exists holding back Black and Asian people, it’s like a cance which slowly eats away at you.’

Mark Perryman rightly observes that “from Pop to Politics, cuisine to music, fashion to business, Black experience is now intimately woven into the fabric of English daily life”. I notice that Yasmin has taken care to give us a balanced view: as she observes that despite racism, there were Englishmen like Conan Doyle who took up the case of Mr. Dass to clear his name, as he was wrongly accused of killing horses. Not everything about a nation is evil. There are always exceptions.

Liaisons between Indians and the English were commonplace in India in the days of the East India Company and their mixed race children were bequeathed land and money. But then the Company passed laws to forbid mixed race relationships. Mixed race children were not to be given jobs. James Silk Buckingham criticised the East India Company’s wicked ways and he was expelled from the country.

I have mentioned above a few of the most interesting historic details which I find fascinating to read. This book should be a required reading for all those who are interested in British colonial history and who aspire to live in a cohesive and pluralistic society.

Chaand Chazelle is a writer and film-maker based in London. Her first feature Throw of A Dice was released in 2014.
O ne hundred and fifty children were at the heart of my two-week trip to India last autumn.

Travelling with a group of volunteers, I visited Amala Children’s Home in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu. The home was started in 1995 by Ln Dr. Jesudass Raja for a small handful of orphaned or abandoned boys. The numbers have grown steadily. Girls have been taken in, and Raja has set up (separately) a Primary School and later a High School which the Amala children attend alongside others from surrounding villages.

There is a lot going on.

The Home provides the basics—shelter, food, clothing, education—free of charge and irrespective of caste and creed. Ages range from 3-15 with a few of the most in need receiving further support. Many of the children are from the Scheduled Caste (Dalit or Untouchable).

“Most recently we took on two children aged 3 and 5,” Raja says. “Their mother had died and their father had gone off with another lady to live far away. In another case, a husband killed his wife. They are brought along by someone wanting to help. We say yes to all children and work things out from there. Without this they would be on the streets, begging and worse.” The children are a joy. They bubble over with enthusiasm and interest and are gracious to us and kind to each other. They put on dance shows for us that are the students, adding English action songs to their Tamil and English, and the teachers understand this enabled me to start Amala.” Finding the joie de vivre.

The Home is very good at fundraising,” Vanda says, “but I told Kim we also needed to understand what we support.” As a result, every my job. I tried not to reel. It was a chance to break out of my bureaucratic existence, and Vanda signed me up as one of the first-ever groups to work short-term with Amala children and staff in any way needed. So I embarked on my first ever trip to India. We landed at Chennai and spent a night in the chaos of the city, dodging death in tuk tuks and wandering through the gaudy night time beach stalls to gaze out across the darkened Bay of Bengal alongside hundreds of local people.

Then came a frenetic nine days volunteering. I got a lot of work, but much more was difficult—for the children, the staff, the wider society. And everywhere there was energy and an appetite for education and for life. The volunteers were from Wensleydale, with a few hangers-on including myself. We included teachers, a legal secretary, a building society worker, a retired nurse, a farmer, a beautician, a vet and a former international development worker. We spanned five decades: our youngest member, hairdresser Sarah, celebrated her 20th birthday while we were away.

Mostly we worked in pairs. With a Charity Operations Manager called Kate I taught primary school classes (having been a teacher in a previous existence). The state-set curriculum is onerous: complex, dry and completely dependent on learning by rote rather than through understanding and experience. Teaching is in Tamil and English, and the teachers understandably struggle with the difficulties of language. The classrooms are pitifully under-resourced. A blackboard, chalk, a few benches and tables and two textbooks each are as far as it goes.

There is not a lot you can achieve in so short a time. So we focused on phonics and pronunciation, supporting the teachers as well as the students, adding English action songs to
Amala is always grateful for donations, however small. You can make payments direct
to: HSBC Account number: 81102370. Sort code: 40-28-16. Account name: The
Amala Children’s Home. You can also donate via JustGiving: https://www.justgiving.
com/amalatrust/ or by cheque made out to ‘Amala Children’s Home’, posted to Amala
Children’s Home c/o Louise Porter, 8 Linden Gardens, Richmond, North Yorkshire
DL10 7BD. The Amala Trust is a registered Charity Number 1063194.

reinforce vocabulary and make learning fun. We picked up on just a few concepts from the
text books, to focus on understanding. For instance, because we had all brought with us
lots of resources from the UK, when a class of eight year olds was studying the fulcrum we
were able to share out a big box of wooden bricks and let every child explore leverage. The
diversity of our group meant my fellow volunteers ran a wide array of activities reflecting
different specialisms: Vanessa used her mathematics expertise. Catherine, Sarah, Rachael
and Kate ran beauty sessions. Tom did physics and cricket! And so on.

We all made time for the staff, to help them
feel supported and to hand over resources they
might find useful, and we all spent playtime
with the children as well as class time. One
day I sat on the school bus as it dropped chil-
dren off at the more distant villages at the end
of the school day. This was very moving: the
rural poverty, the absence of infrastructure, the
dryness of the land going through a prolonged
drought, and also the faces of the loving mothers
and fathers waiting at the bus stop to welcome
their children home from school. Every volun-
teer who went on the school bus came back
with a transformed frame of reference.

Returning home, how are we changed? I think
all of us value what we have, more highly—
electricity, water and so much more. Nell, a
ruminant nutritionist, gained a new respect
for teachers and education. Alice, a job coach,
was thrilled to see her children travelling. Tom, just
completing his Masters in emergency planning,
affirmed his commitment to working in devel-
oping countries. Kate hopes to focus on children
overseas. And I agreed with Planning Assistant
Rachael that it has made me more aware of the
freedom I have as a woman living in England.

Our trip ended with a memorable train jour-
ney to Kerala and a few days on the coast and in
the hills before flying back from Kochi. There is
so much I cannot yet put into words. I hope to
visit India again. And if you fancy a good Curry
and Quiz Fundraising Night, Wensleydale is the
place to go!

Postscript
About a fortnight after we left Amala, a cyclone
hit Cuddalore causing severe damage. Fortu-
nately, Amala was not in the worst hit areas,
but it suffered heavy water damage to buildings
and fences, and the orphanage and school were
without power for a week. There was no drink-
ing water, and the children all slept in the dining
room to get away from the damp. The orphanage
is now struggling to get things back to normal.
Underlying the problems caused by floods and
high winds is the much longer term problem of
drought. Bore holes are dug far deeper now that
a few years ago, and water is increasingly hard to
find. ‘Last November we had rain, only after 12
months we are having good rain,’ Rajah wrote
in the latest newsletter. ‘Rain is more important
than the damage it gives.’

For more information on Amala:
https://sites.google.com/site/amalatrustorg/

To contact Ruth:
http://www.tandem-uk.co.uk/contact.htm

Ruth Wilson lives in Yorkshire, and has
previously worked in London and South
America. She has worked exten-
sively in the UK with refugees
and on other social issues. She is
currently a Policy Officer with
Health Education England.
When I think of Deepti Mukund Navile, I think of a kaleidoscope with its many dazzling colors. In a kaleidoscope the shapes, and colors reflect, and make many new patterns, Deepti dazzles the world with her multi faceted, ever evolving talents as a dancer, artist, educator, and a social reformer.

If I call “*Hasta*” as a nomenclature for Deepti’s arts, I will not be wrong! Nandikeshvara in *Abhinay Darpan* (The Mirror of Gestures) said that the dancers express the meaning of the songs through hand gestures. Different hand *mudras* convey different messages. In Deepti’s dances and arts, the *mudras* play a significant role. I first met Deepti at an art exhibit, organized by the Upakar Charity Foundation. Deepti’s stall was called *Hasta*—The Creative Hand, where she exhibited hand painted terracotta figurines, wicker and wood pieces. I was curious to know why she called her stall *Hasta*. She explained that *Hasta* means “the hand.” Later, I came to know that Deepti is also an accomplished Indian classical dancer where *Hasta Mudras* (hand gestures) convey the whole story or feelings. Her *Ramnavmi* exhibits, a passel of *hasta* arts—flower loaded barges, the details of the villages, men, women, children, deities—all are like pages from a storybook, the stories from a global perspective.

I invited Deepti and her students as guest speakers in my Art Integrated Curriculum Class, which I taught for Towson University. Deepti and her students, clad in dazzling *Bharatnatyam* uniform and jewelry, enraptured the whole class with their performances—a moment of awe—silence—only the rustles of the dancers movements, and the rhythmic dance bells (*Ghunguroos*) broke the stillness of the place. The students watched spellbound, speechless, the electrifying movements of Deepti Mukund and her two students! Deepti, like a story teller, speaking only in the language of mudras went on telling the story of Radha’s love for Krishna—her expressions, gestures speaking all of different emotions—passion, gratification, exultation, envy, fears. She, later, included the students in an interactive session of *mudras*, expressing themselves only through their hand gestures. Students loved this presentation, and learned a new language.

**Deepti’s Journey from East to West:**
“Dance is my passion, and I have been danc-
lades for being an accomplished dancer and nattuvanar.

In 1992, she got married to Uday Navile, and moved to USA. She brought to USA her zest for dance. In 1994, she founded the Natyabhoomi School of Dance. Later on, her sister, Shruthi also joined Natyabhoomi as an Associate Director of the school—together they embarked on this journey to bring in new awareness of classical Indian and folk style dances in this country. In 2005 Deepti presented at the International Federation for Theater Research Conference at the University of Maryland. For a short sojourn (2007–2010) she taught at Bharatiya Vidyaj Bhawan, Bangalore, India. She moved back to the Washington DC area in 2010.

Performances:
Natyabhoomi School of Dance presents quite a few performances a year. She has Indians and Americans of different ages as her students. She has performed in some of the prestigious theaters in the Washington DC area. Deepti acknowledges proudly that her choreographed dance performance on Surya, the Sun God, was the first time ever any Indian dance was performed at the Strathmore Music Center.

Deepti along with her sister Shruthi founded IDEA (Indian Dance Educators Association), an organization dedicated to promoting Indian classical dance as an integral part of Indo/American culture. They took the audience at the Barns at Wolf Trap in this enchanting and captivating visual journey, featuring six popular Indian classical dance styles—Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniattam and Manipuri, making them familiar with the traditions and cultures of different regions of India. They commented that dance is a way of engaging the Indian Diaspora in the United States as well as educating the community at large on the richness of Indian dance traditions. Deepti commented, “The story telling aspect of the dance form really attracts audience of all backgrounds.”

Deepti is well versed in Sanskrit language. She choreographed many of Kalidas’s plays e.g. Meghdoot, and Kamar Sambhavam into her dance performances. Deepti and her sister, Shruthi also bring forth social issues, and awareness before the public. In a ninety-minute performance, as a part of the “Girl Child Project,” they collaborated with Sandra Atkins of Light Switch Dance Theatre, and took the audience on an emotional hike by bringing in the issue of pandemic violence against women and girl child all over the world. The dance ended on a positive note, “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world!”

Conclusion:
Deepti’s contribution to the society does not end with her arts, she is also involved with various charitable organizations, and her dance performances help to raise money and awareness of the work of these charities.

Deepti’s entrepreneurship is amazing. Armen Van Buren said that I loved dance, therefore, I created what I loved, however, Deepti Mukund’s love of dance does not stop only with bringing in Indian dance and art to the American society, but it is forever evolving, integrating, and merging into the mainstream of Western arts and culture. Deepti along with her sister are revolutionizing Indian dance—a paradigm shift is in foresight with added vocabulary to Hasta Mudras, and many new colors and patterns added to kaleidoscope. “Yato bhava stato rasa”—all eyes are on you Deepti Mukund!

You can see more of Deepti Mukund’s works by visiting www.dance-dc.com

Meenakshi Mohan earned her doctoral degree from Chicago in Educational Administration with a focus on Early Childhood. She has taught Early Childhood Educators for over two decades. She has done extensive research in Motivational Learning and Art Integrated Curriculum. She recently published two books: Tamam Shud, a collection of poems by Kshitij Mohan, and a children’s book, The Gift.
When my older sister and I were at a girls' convent school in Bombay in the fifties of the 20th century, one of the most important parts of our lives was Radio Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then called). Radio Ceylon came to us loud and clear from Colombo. It played Western pop, mostly American and it was what we listened to at breakfast and a couple of evenings. On Monday evening we listened without fail to the Hit Parade and my sister and I were allowed by our mother to have our supper in front of the radio in the sitting room so that we did not miss a beat. We swooned over the voices of Sinatra, Dean Martin and good old Bing and definitely Perry Como. Even my mother who sang classical Carnatic music was carried away by Dean Martin’s *That’s Amore* and *Volare*. Good old Satchmo made us laugh with his scratchy voice but we didn’t then appreciate his virtuosity with the trumpet. Nat King Cole’s rendition of *Unforgettable* was definitely unforgettable but somehow he didn’t make us weak at the knees as Sinatra did. That timbre in Frank’s voice had sex appeal in buckets. That station must have sent in well over a hundred votes because I won by a huge margin. She did have a great many cousins! The teachers looked on benignly.

W e were blown away by the new singer Katerina Valente singing *The Breeze and I* and *Malaguena* in the mid-fifties. This was something different and we thought she was fantastic. Sarah Vaughan, Jo Stafford and Peggy Lee and of course Ella all of whom were American sang the most wonderful songs written by famous American songwriters which I continue to sing today. ‘Happy go Lucky’ Greg was the compere on the Breakfast programme and we loved his voice and jocular talk. He sounded pretty much like our very British Terry Wogan on BBC Radio 2! I think Greg was British but the station played American music. There was also a Voice of America station that broadcast from somewhere in the East late in the evening. I still remember the wonderful deep voice of the compere, Willis Conover and that great signature tune of Ellington’s *Take the A Train*. That station must have sown the seeds of my love of jazz. Bombay (Mumbai) loved jazz in the fifties and early sixties. Our coffee bars and restaurants would feature a piano trio playing the latest hits and hold jam sessions on Sunday afternoon. In those days, ‘Prohibition’ reigned supreme and no alcohol was served at these venues.

Although India had been a British colony, as were Robert Taylor, Errol Flynn, Stewart Granger, Rita Hayworth, Liz Taylor and so many others. In fact although India had been a British colony and most of us read novels by British authors the influence of Hollywood films was strong. There was the wonderful Metro cinema famous for its luxurious carpets, seating and airconditioning, that screened the latest American films. Our feet sank into the deep-pile carpeted corridor whose walls were lined with huge photographs of all the Hollywood idols. Even my mother swooned over Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*. It was his laconic smile and raised eyebrow that did the trick. Cary Grant was a close runner-up. Going to the cinema was an occasion as they were so plush. We dressed up to go there.

The Metro cinema had a talent contest once a month on Saturday mornings. A couple of our friends (two South Indian sisters) who had amazing voices and style won on one of these Saturdays. One of them had a voice so exactly like Jo Stafford, there seemed to be no difference and she won hands down. I sang a Les Paul and Mary Ford number with the Spanish title of *Vaya Con Dios*, for the unmissable Sunday evening talent which was recorded in a Bombay studio and then broadcast later from Colombo. One of my friends must have sent in well over a hundred votes because I won by a huge margin. She did have a great many cousins! The result was announced the following Sunday and next day in school I was besieged by girls from different classes wanting to congratulate me. The teachers looked on benignly.

Happy, Innocent Days, never here again.

Malathy Sitaram was the first Asian teacher of English in Wiltshire schools. She was the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace and also the first magistrate in the country to be appointed to serve on the new Sentencing Guidelines Committee under the Chairmanship of the Lord Chief Justice from 2004 to 2010.
Sapling (naane paudhe ki tarah)

The girl is like the sapling
Pulled up from one garden
Planted in another.
A shock is inevitable
Of a different breeze, environs, and the tending hand...
Yet the roots cling to the soil, forcefully.
In the new land,
Flowers blossom and emit fragrance by compulsion,
For an unquestioned heritage commands
Even the young sapling.

Blossoms (Khilna jaanta hoo)

As a flower I know just how to bloom,
To smile amidst the thorns,
When crushed in the palm of your hand
I will smear your fate lines with fragrance.
This life is akin to a cactus twig
But I know that a bloom can balance there too.

Cactus

Like cactus is the expanse of my soul
Memories hurt sharply from all sides
But the thought that you exist
Is enough for the cactus flower to bloom.
These days, the big issue here is intolerance. We’re all aware of the sensitive religious sentiments prevalent, and the subsequent violence that’s literally destroying our planet. Some believe this stems from our inability to tolerate smaller things—hue and cry is often raised over every issue. For instance, a few months ago, bar performers were barred from earning their livelihood by dancing. This could have been settled quietly, but people took to the streets. Finally, the Supreme Court stepped in observing that dance is a respectable profession and women cannot be prevented from performing in bars. Another issue: a liquor ban in the near future was announced by the Bihar Chief Minister late last year. The money, he said, would be used for education and women’s empowerment. On the surface it sounded logical, but people rightly started questioning the government’s right to control their lives—alas, not by debate, but agitation. The methods used in today’s world are far from non-violent. Everyone here seems to have forgotten Gandhi’s ways!

Even celebrity statements get substantial media attention. When well-known film star, Aamir Khan, mentioned in an interview that his wife had spoken about moving out of the country as she feared for her kids, it was all over the media in minutes. People, especially on social sites, began calling him a traitor! Perhaps, it’s time for us to realize the strength of silence. To learn solving things peacefully within, rather than voicing opinions outside all the time.

The drastic change in climatic conditions here received a lot of attention due to the Chennai floods. Last winter, I happened to be in the region and I have never seen such a roaring sea! Many small villages in the area were evacuated. Luckily, I was stationed at Auroville, a relatively safe town built by the followers of Sri Aurobindo, mystic and poet. It’s a very eco-friendly environment and there are many lessons to be learnt about living in harmony with nature. Moreover, creativity is at its height in every field. I visited the handmade paper workshop and the creations were truly inspiring. It occurred to me that, despite the adverse conditions all around, art and beauty truly helped calm the mind and soul. While most cultural events in Chennai were cancelled, such as the Prakriti Festival, back in Mumbai they were in full swing. One of the most-anticipated, musical events in the city’s cultural calendar, Ruhaniyat, was hugely appreciated. The Turkish Sufi performer, Latif Bolat, was there and it was tremendous to learn that his music was taken from the great mystic poets like Yunus Emre and Niyazi Misri.

In fact, Sufi philosophy is flourishing all over the country. And, why not? The Sufis are great integrators and draw from both Islamic and Vedantic traditions. The play, Parindon Ki Mehfil, (based on a 12th century Persian poem, Mantq-at-Tayr by Fariduddin Attar) was staged recently, directed by Heeba Shah. The story documents a perilous journey undertaken by a collection of birds, as they attempt to uncover the ultimate Truth and meet their true king. Sufi literature is replete with such symbolism, and those who understand it, have a lot to gain. Early this year, the Bhendi Bazaar Urdu Festival also celebrated Sufism. The program included storytelling, based on letters of Jan Nisar Akhtar to his wife—these have provided the lyrics for many Bollywood songs.

The Somaiya Centre for Lifelong Learning has also been promoting sufi dances and poetry. A programme on Shah Abdul Latif, the icon 16th century poet, was the focus of their recent program. The film, So Heddan, So Hoddan by Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar (of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences) was screened at the occasion. It portrays the life and music of folk singers of the Kutch, who sing in Sindhi and local dialects. Kutch has now become a major tourist destination due to the Raan Utsav, a cultural feast set in the white sands of this desert. The great Rann glows in the full moon and is being called India’s Wild West. The barren sands have been transformed into an oasis. The bad news is that they may
be starting speed racing with high-powered specially designed cars and bikes—that’s sure to destroy the serenity and disturb the life of animals such as camels.

A few weeks ago, I participated at a seminar at the Institute of Sindhology, Adipur. After the partition of India (in 1947), Sindhis lost their homeland and many set up base in Kutch when they crossed the border from Pakistan. As Sindhis did not get their own state in India, they migrated to different areas and their language and their culture is almost completely lost. Now, there’s a serious attempting to revive it. A ‘Learn Sindhi’ App has just been launched to help youngsters master the language. Groups like, Writ- ers on Sindhi Culture, have also started online to connect researchers and writers from over the world.

In Mumbai, a new museum has come up. The Piramal Museum of Art promises to showcase rarely-exhibited works, and state-of-the-art displays from all over the country. Student fellowships and an art management courses have already been organised. Residency has been set up for mid-career artists—a rarity here. 2015 marked an exceptional year for art. Amrita Sher-Gil’s portraits sold for over $2.5 million at auctions! Works by Francis Newton Souza and Vasudeo S. Gaitonde also broke their previous records.

Many worthwhile books were published end of last year. India’s most prolific mythologist, Devdutt Patnaik, demystified the Bhagavad Gita for contemporary readers. Chapters are presented via themes and verses, juxtaposed with Vedic, Upanishadic and Buddhist stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. Another book that created waves was The Unquiet Land by well-known TV journalist Barkha Dutt. It is an impassioned account of the burning issues affecting India. Keki Daruwalla, the prolific poet and novelist, launched his new novel, Ancestral Stories. The coming year promises to be full of literary festivals—I just hope authors get enough time to write!

Wishing all my readers the very best for 2016.

Anju Makhija is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet, translator and playwright based in Mumbai. She has written /edited books related to partition, sufi poetry, women’s verse and Indo-English plays. Her articles and columns have appeared in several publications including Indian Express, Pioneer, Independent and Mid-Day. anjumakhija17@gmail.com

A MOMENT IN LIFE

by Meenakshi Mohan

Cesare Parese said, “We do not remember days, we remember moments!” In my paintings, I like to capture those pleasant moments that are meaningful. They are like pages of an album, and with the turn of each page, a story, a moment becomes alive, giving us peace, and solace! Rose Kennedy said, “Life isn’t a matter of milestones, but of moments.” A few of such moments are encapsulated in my paintings:

Room With a View (14X18, oil on canvas with palette knife)
My daughter on the deck of a waterfront loggia, a few good books while savoring the beauty of Lake Como.

A Moment in Life (24X30, oil on canvas with palette knife)
Time flows, but a moment was captured in this father and son bonding time—on a Caribbean trip, my son and grandson.

After the Rains (38X32, oil on canvas with palette knife)
Best friends and cliques—ten to twelve-year-olds—what fun on a soppy, muddy afternoon on a log, looking over a barn.

Dr Meenakshi Mohan is an educator, freelance writer, art critic, book reviewer, children’s writer and a painter. Most of her paintings are in private collections. See more at www.meenakshimohan.com

Room With A View

After the Rains

A Moment in Time
I first met Dr Raychaudhuri as a final year historian at Oxford in the mid-1970s, having chosen the exciting and newly-instituted Special Subject ‘Civil Disobedience & Constitutional Experiment in India 1919-1931’ against the background of the Further Subject ‘Imperialism & Nationalism mid-19th C to Indo-Pakistan Independence 1947’. He taught both, the documents thereof (Transfer of Power ed P Moon & N Mansergh etc) having been just released after the 25-year block.

This was my first exposure, beyond my upbringing entirely outside Pakistan, by my Pakistani diplomat parents, to formally being taught my own country’s history by a Professor from the subcontinent. Suffice it to say that soon I felt as engaged and comfortable in his study in the Raychaudhuri home near his college St Antony’s where I would also visit my father’s old friend the distinguished Japanologist Dr Richard Storry, as I had delving into mediaeval English and early modern European annals during tutorials in my own college St Hilda’s and in Christ Church nearby.

An acknowledged authority on his subject area, his most recent book, about his native Bengal, was widely acclaimed on publication in 2012-13, and he was quite amused by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Shaikh Hasina’s entreaty to ‘return to your homeland!’ He was one of that rare breed who, for all their gravitas, wear their erudition easily. One of his most endearing comments recalled by me decades later is how some specific (mandatory and not too riveting) topic could be lectured on in one’s (or rather the audience’s) sleep!

Other than our stimulating studies, almost every weekend there would be a meeting of minds and a melding of cultures, mostly but not exclusively South Asian, at the Raychaudhuri home; the all-embracing ambience enhanced by the equally interesting cuisine prepared, with dexterity and devotion, by the subtly charming Mrs Hashi Raychaudhuri. Fish was of course a staple in the household, though always presented differently. The most exotic of the myriad of dazzling dishes displayed before us was perhaps the ‘Zarda’ (sweet, saffron-flavoured rice) made from flour. We found it fascinating that Hashi Ji’s sister was married to Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, and wondered if she were as beautiful as our Mrs R!

Their home was completed by their brilliant daughter Sukanya, an Edinburgh graduate, now married with a family of her own, but always a devoted daughter, who livened up every gathering there, big or small, with her sparkling personality. She was for us a beloved bridge between ourselves and her respected parents whenever the need to explain our juvenile priorities in this crucial academic year arose—such as my being lured out to lunch whilst supposedly studying only to find Dr. R present in the same restaurant!

Prof Raychaudhuri’s lectures, classes (to which I once took Aung San Suu Kyi and Prof Michael Aris, much to their appreciation), and tutorials made these most complex of subjects—South Asia’s struggle for nationalism vs the last stand of the British Empire—seem simple. He brought the best out of us in our essays, and never discouraged the least studious of students, encouraging and inspiring them. On one occasion he introduced us over dinner to the also eminent, elfin-like author Nirad C Chaudhary.

The arts were encouraged and enjoyed likewise. We would, in the ‘entourage’ of Dr R (as I still with affection and admiration refer to him) and Hashi Ji, attend performances of classical dance—Bharatnatyam, which Dr R said he found ‘more intellectually rewarding’ than other dance forms such as Kathak, my informal rendition of which the family did appreciate one afternoon in their home.

Of his many proteges, several have followed in his footsteps to become stars in their own firmaments: whether in academia like Dr Gyan Pandey, or in politics like Dr Gauhar Rizvi, right-hand man to Shaikh Hasina in Dacca.

Dr R always fostered healthy debate in his studies and among his students. He would fairly put forward for example the Pakistani as well as Indian arguments and interpretations of events and policies relating to the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League in the Freedom Movement and the post-Independence era.

My last visit to the warmth and welcome of the Raychaudhuri home in September 2012 after many years—when I just missed Sukanya visiting from Tokyo—took me tumbling back Harry Potter-style to the 1970s and 1980s. They were both as graceful as ever, though aged, and Dr R told me of his forthcoming book while Hashi Ji plied me with fragrant tea and just-baked spice cake.

Rehana Hyder is from Pakistan. She was born in London and educated at Oxford. Coming from a diplomatic family she has travelled to and lived in many countries, and is now based in Islamabad.

“OF HIS MANY PROTEGES, SEVERAL HAVE FOLLOWED IN HIS FOOTSTEPS TO BECOME STARS IN THEIR OWN FIRMAMENTS: WHETHER IN ACADEMIA, OR IN POLITICS…”
It was back in 2011 when I scaled the highest volcano in Europe and learned of the young girl from Romania who had just completed the 7 Volcano circuits, which includes climbing the highest volcano in each continent. A few conversations with her motivated me to extend my capabilities by attempting uncharted territory. Barely five or six people in the world have achieved this marvellous feat. Last year while on a climbing camp in a remote area of Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh hosted by the Mountaineering Federation of India, I met a few Iranians and got to know about the beautiful peak of Damavand in Iran, standing tall at a staggering height of 18,600 feet, and felt it was calling out to me.

Getting the Iranian visa was an easy task; an invitation letter, a few medical tests and you get your visa stamped. Iran, unlike the world media portrays it to be, is a beautiful land with the most hospitable people I have met in all my travels. My flight landed at Imam Khomeini Airport at midnight. My Iranian friend and his wife had travelled about 300km to receive me and my companion. It took us a long time to get past immigration because of the endless queue. Finally, having got past, I saw my friends waiting outside, calm and patient as ever. Whilst waiting we noticed that all Iranian women had to cover their heads with a scarf and wear full length clothes. We had expected a conservative culture. But I was a little confused as to how to greet my friend’s wife. Should I just smile or attempt a hand shake? But in fact she made the move, extending her hand and giving me a warm handshake. But in fact she made the move, extending her hand and giving me a warm handshake. But in fact she made the move, extending her hand and giving me a warm handshake?

After the summit, joining team mates in bad weather

But we were young and impatient to test ourselves. The place where we camped was a family outing spot. Imagine camping at Janpath, with India Gate in the background and families bringing their tents and portable stoves, cooking, playing cards, singing and having fun. Tehran seemed oddly similar to Delhi, just like home.

The next morning we woke up as early as 5 a.m. After putting on our head-lights and all the climbing gear in place, we set off to scale this peak at 5 a.m. It was cold outside and our water started to freeze. We had to walk over frozen snow which made us slip and fall every ten steps. But as soon as the sun came up, our bodies warmed up and an adrenaline rush came along with it. The sun kissed the peak and we could calculate how far we were from the top. At 9 o’clock or so my friend’s wife started to feel weak and wanted to turn around; altitude can hit anyone anytime. Her climbing partner graciously volunteered to take her down safely; not everyone compromises their summit bid for another person.

At 11 a.m., my friend and I reached the summit ridge and could see the crater belching sulphurous gases. All this while I had believed that clouds covered the summit line but now I could see up close how furiously the sulphur was enveloping the entire peak. Sulphur is so strong that it can make you feel nauseous and dizzy, and I felt sleepy and exhausted. My body had given up long ago but my mind had kept me going. Usually it takes about half an hour to the summit but my mind had kept me going. Usually it takes about half an hour to the summit from where I was but it took us up to an hour and a half. Once I got so close to the crater that my friend had to shout at the top of his voice to move east as I could not see anything beyond 2m because of the sulphur cloud around me that impaired visibility.

Finally around 12.30pm we made it to the top! We surprised ourselves as we had achieved this in little more than a day and there was no sign of altitude sickness, only fatigue. We unfurled the tricolour, congratulated almost everyone at the summit and after which we collected our climbing permits and started our hike.

It was a mild 3-4 hour walk with 20-30 degree slopes on a well-beaten path to the high camp at 4200m. The high camp is a scenic spot; one can gaze over all of the Alborz range. Inside the shelter hut, we met a few Polish and British climbers, but most climbers were Iranians. It didn’t take us more than a few minutes to mingle and share our stories. There was so much energy in that hut that evening. From sharing food to sharing the floor, it was as if we had known each other for years.

The weather report informed us that it would be clear till the next afternoon, and we had to hurry. After putting on our head-lights and all the climbing gear in place, we set off to scale this peak at 5 a.m. It was cold outside and our water started to freeze. We had to walk over frozen snow which made us slip and fall every ten steps. But as soon as the sun came up, our bodies warmed up and an adrenaline rush came along with it. The sun kissed the peak and we could calculate how far we were from the top. At 9 o’clock or so my friend’s wife started to feel weak and wanted to turn around; altitude can hit anyone anytime. Her climbing partner graciously volunteered to take her down safely; not everyone compromises their summit bid for another person.

At 11 a.m., my friend and I reached the summit ridge and could see the crater belching sulphurous gases. All this while I had believed that clouds covered the summit line but now I could see up close how furiously the sulphur was enveloping the entire peak. Sulphur is so strong that it can make you feel nauseous and dizzy, and I felt sleepy and exhausted. My body had given up long ago but my mind had kept me going. Usually it takes about half an hour to the summit from where I was but it took us up to an hour and a half. Once I got so close to the crater that my friend had to shout at the top of his voice to move east as I could not see anything beyond 2m because of the sulphur cloud around me that impaired visibility.

Finally around 12.30pm we made it to the top! We surprised ourselves as we had achieved this in little more than a day and there was no sign of altitude sickness, only fatigue. We unfurled the tricolour, congratulated almost everyone at the summit and...
started to descend. The weather was turning bad and we were already within the clouds coming from the valley. What should have taken about 3 hours took us nearly 5 hours. One wrong step and we would have plunged down the valley. We arrived safely, reaching our camp at 6 pm in the evening. It was snowing and the winds had picked up, and we were very glad to be back safe before bad weather set in.

There were celebrations all around regardless of who had made it to the summit. It was a grand evening.

With lavish food, music and drinks, we shared stories and experiences. I was beginning to recognize the intricacies of Iranian culture: the external one of traditional practice and correctness, and the more personal one of permitted freedoms. This refers to food, drink, clothing and social practice. The distinction between public and private space is strictly maintained. The codes are strict in the outer world, but relaxed in interchange with friends and family. Iranian women, it seems, can live the way women do in other countries in some spheres. I realized that Iran has been portrayed negatively. I felt perfectly safe. Strangers made an effort to help me as best they could.

The beauty of Iran lies in the way it changes your preconceptions when you explore it from the inside. What you learn is unexpected and surprising. No amount of Lonely Planet and other guide books can ever capture the magic of this underestimated nation. Even though Iran is not recognized as one of the many must-see destinations on Earth, I believe that Iran has the potential to surpass the hottest travel spots of the world. Iran is a big country which astonishes the visitor with its people’s hospitality, its natural beauty and cultural diversity. It makes you realize exactly why you love to travel. This country is opening up and I would urge you to visit it.

Graduate of the University of Delhi, Akash Jindal featured in the Limca Book of Records when he was 18 as the youngest ever to climb Mt. Elbrus, the highest peak of Europe. He continues to follow his passion for mountaineering and adventure sports in various places in the world.

AN EMISSARY OF GOODWILL

MRS. IRANGANI GUNATILLAKE—THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF CEYLON

by Agnes Thambynayagam

“Bitten by the pageant bug, Irangani Gunatillake was thrust into being a goodwill ambassador of her country during the dawn of post independent island nation of Ceylon”

A few days ago I had the opportunity to read an article written by Mr. S Skandakumar, currently High Commissioner for Sri Lanka in Australia for The Island and The Sunday Times entitled “The way we were...”, a reflection of the true nature, character and the spirit of the Sri Lankan people. The article inspired me to narrate this little story about an inspiring Sri Lankan woman—a story that must be told:

Irangani was born on 27 September 1937 in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to a Ceylonese diplomat Felix Sirimanne and Beatrice Weerasinghe, the daughter of Reverend Weerasinghe of Trinity College, Kandy. Irangani’s father, Felix Sirimanne worked as the private secretary to Sir Arthur Ranasinghi, Ambassador to Rome and many other countries. Felix Sirimanne’s mother was of Scottish decent who married the elder Sirimanne in Scotland and settled in Sri Lanka in the late Nineteenth century. Irangani’s Scottish grandmother ran a Maternity Nursing Home in McCarthy Road (now Wijerama Mawatha) in Colombo in the early twentieth century.

To read a full version of this article, visit http://www.slguardian.org/2016/01/irangani-sirimanne-the-beauty-queen/
Shelley claimed that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. He was right. Poets write poems not because poetry will make them rich but because they are passionate about what they believe in. And they have a love of language so that they can invest words, metaphors and images with meanings and colours that excite the imagination. Every poem is a rai upon the inarticulate, wrote Eliot.

I have just heard that the Hindi-Avadhī poet Rama Shankar Yadav whose takhallus, nom de plume, was Vidrohi ('The Rebel') has died at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. The man was a firebrand and the students adored him. He was never a professor at JNU because he never completed his PhD. He refused to write his thesis. But then poets are poets, not men of prose. I therefore dedicate this last Book Page of 2015 to the memory of Vidrohi. And I will focus on a few poetry books and talk about some poets with whom I have had some connection.

My friend Som Parkash Ranchan who died last year was born like me in Lahore in the same year. Partition and the loss of the family home in that great city decimated the Ranchans and thus SPR (his friends called him 'Larry') had to fight his way up on his own. He (his friends called him 'Larry') had mated the Ranchans and thus SPR family hailed from Goa, had won the Hawthornden Prize with his first book. An Oxford man, Dom like his father Frank, was a successful journalist and editor but he focused on poetry. Few remember that he was one of the first to interview the Dalai Lama soon after the Tibetan leader's dramatic escape from Lhasa. However, what people do remember is that Leela Naidu (world famous for her beauty) was his wife. I have met educated men who could not quote a single line that Byron wrote and yet knew that the poet was a great lover.

During Narendra Modi's tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat hundreds of Muslims were killed. Moraes rushed to Ahmedabad to report on the carnage. Ranchan was disgusted with what was happening in his country and wrote the fierce poem which is reproduced here. His daughter Renee Ranchan is also a poet and I am happy to introduce her work to you. Her collection Untwine the Wind (Konark, New Delhi. ISBN 978-81-220-0789-3) is not only a joy to read but a joy to handle. The book in fact is itself a work of art. The drawings are a delight and give the sensitive verses a unique dimension. Book production in India now ranks with the very best.

Yogesh Patel is a polymath. But he is essentially a poet who actively promotes other poets from the South Asian diaspora. His latest publication Word Masala Award Winners 2015 (Skylark Publications, London and New York. ISBN 978-0-9560840-3-3) is an anthology representing the work of Debjani Chatterjee, Daljit Nagra, Meena Alexander, Saleem Peeradina, Shanta Acharya, Usha Akella, Usha Kishore, Sweta Vikram and me. Patel’s poem The Poor People of Paris (about the recent Paris massacre) should be sent to the President of France. And his collected poems Bottled Ganges must be read by all who like poetry.

In December 2014 an army school in Peshawar was attacked by terrorists and many innocents were slaughtered. Ejaz Rahim, one of the leading English language poets of Pakistan, has published Carnage in December (Dost Publications, Islamabad. ISBN 978-969-496-502-4) and I was deeply moved by his poems. He touches the innermost feelings that are a part of our common humanity.

In one poem he addresses me as ‘Guru’. I am embarrassed. To echo my Guru (Thomas Stearns Eliot) I must write:

No! I am no Guru, nor was meant to be.
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or too ....
Almost, at times, the Fool.

Our god damned politicos
Cling on to power
And rip apart the body politic.

Turn community against community
Caste against caste
Religion against religion
Sect against sect.

From time to time churches are torched,
Nuns raped,
Believers hacked, dismembered,
Mercilessly.

Pregnant women in Gujarat
Their stomachs knifed, writhed,
Died in spasms.

Our saffron brigade carried out
The genocide with impunity.
Yet they chant vaingloriously
The Glory that is India.

We pat ourselves
For being democratic and civilized.
Lethal in venality
Our politicians fiddle like Nero
While the country is ablaze.
Meanwhile their bank balances swell
Stashed in Swiss crypts
While their boozed hitmen
Carry out mayhem.

They promise the Taj
To the slumdogs they despise.

(From Som Parkash Ranchan’s powerful work India that is Bharat)
I want to start from the premise that most of us live in a post-religious society. In fact this is not so. My enquiries revealed that although the world’s intellectual elite may profess to be a secular group, the vast majority of individuals on earth today profess to belong to one or other religion, or faith.

Ignoring for a moment the huge number of Muslims in the world, some of whom are militant and fundamentalist, European Enlightenment values, and secularism, may not have penetrated into the heartlands of even the most industrialized and powerful nation on earth, the USA. While creationism is still taught in mainstream schools there, Darwin’s theory of evolution is often found among rare taboo subjects in many schools.

Globalization highlights cultural relativism, and moral schemes contend against a multiplicity of religiously founded moral codes among the world’s nation states. The ecumenical movement in the form of, for example, the World Council of Churches, seeks to build a consensus for a global ethic. The aim is not to create a global ideology or a single unified religion. The aim is purely to set down guidelines that everyone from whatever background could freely subscribe to. [Parliament of World Religions 1893, 1993 (Chicago) and 1999 (Cape Town)].

In antiquity, philosophy encompassed all knowledge. Knowledge was acquired through language via the trivium of Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric. Subsequently, religion took over as the final arbiter of knowledge as well as right and wrong. Islamic civilization is one from whatever background could freely subscribe to. [Parliament of World Religions 1893, 1993 (Chicago) and 1999 (Cape Town)].

Globalization highlights cultural relativism, and moral schemes contend against a multiplicity of religiously founded moral codes among the world’s nation states. The ecumenical movement in the form of, for example, the World Council of Churches, seeks to build a consensus for a global ethic. The aim is not to create a global ideology or a single unified religion. The aim is purely to set down guidelines that everyone from whatever background could freely subscribe to. [Parliament of World Religions 1893, 1993 (Chicago) and 1999 (Cape Town)].

In antiquity, philosophy encompassed all knowledge. Knowledge was acquired through language via the trivium of Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric. Subsequently, religion took over as the final arbiter of knowledge as well as right and wrong. Islamic civilization is one from whatever background could freely subscribe to. [Parliament of World Religions 1893, 1993 (Chicago) and 1999 (Cape Town)].

Globalization highlights cultural relativism, and moral schemes contend against a multiplicity of religiously founded moral codes among the world’s nation states. The ecumenical movement in the form of, for example, the World Council of Churches, seeks to build a consensus for a global ethic. The aim is not to create a global ideology or a single unified religion. The aim is purely to set down guidelines that everyone from whatever background could freely subscribe to. [Parliament of World Religions 1893, 1993 (Chicago) and 1999 (Cape Town)].
Khali (meaning 'open spaces') is the name of an extraordinary small estate in the far north of India. There are many reasons for falling for a holiday place but Khali had more and more for us.

It all started way back with my wife and I being invited by some dear friends to join a private trek to the Himalayas in the autumn of 2007. We had both developed a love for India; I, through living in Madhya Pradesh for three years in the 1960s, and my wife from the moment of her first visit in 2002, when she took to India like a duck to water.

The trek was called the ‘Nanda Devi’ trek —because, if all went well, we were going to see Nanda Devi. This called for some research and after reading some wonderful books about the famous mountain—the highest in India at 7816 metres, the ‘seat of the Gods’, and one of the many sources of the Ganges—we became more than fascinated. We also read the accounts by Tilman and Shipton of the story of steeply-sided hills which rise up to a high mountain giants.

The wreck of the two words —we were more entracing and dramatic tales of life and death. I was fascinated by the two words. Also, we read the accounts by Tilman and Shipton of the Sanctuary and of finding a way into it in 1936 by Tilman and Odell.* The story continued with peculiar twists—an American CIA mission losing a nuclear device and many more entrancing and dramatic tales of life and death. I was fascinated by the two words.

The trek was everything we could have wished for, in every way, and most importantly we actually saw Nanda Devi. It entirely lived up to all our expectations and a desire to see it again started to form in our minds. The next occasion was a holiday in 2010 which took us and the same two friends to Bengal for about ten days, and we wondered what else to do, as a ten-day holiday in India was nothing like enough. The Indian travel company ‘Village Ways’ had caught our eye, and a week’s walking and staying in Himalayan villages, mostly within sight of our Nanda Devi, was more than tempting. We flew to Delhi from Kolkata and took an overnight train north to the railhead at Kathgodam, and endured a three and a half hour jeep ride up and up and round and round and found ourselves at the starting point of our walk at a place called Khali Estate. It was inside the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kumaon, Uttarakhand and was almost due south of Nanda Devi by some 65 kms.

The reason for the choice of site for the estate was clear once we saw the ground situation. This area of Kumaon is a jumble of steeply-sided hills which rise up to a high ridge running mostly east to west for some fifteen kms. The ridge is at an altitude of 1800 to 2400m. On a broad saddle at the southern end of the ridge is a Lt. Col. Patterson had bought 27 acres in 1862 and built a small house. The view to the north of a panorama of the major Himalayan high peaks is astounding and was the sole reason for buying the estate. To the west the Badrinath range of mountains provides a block of white wall, to be followed by a backdrop of the highest and tallest of the famous summits as one looks around the horizon. The complete sequence is too long to list but the two stalwarts are Trisul and Nanda Devi. The most distant is Kame: about 130 km away, but just visible on a clear day due to its height: 7756 m, and the second-highest in India. It is positioned to the NNW and close to the Tibetan border. Eastward, the string of peaks continues until the Panchachulli range is the easternmost of this extraordinary string of mountain giants.

The story of Khali grew on us although we had only spent three nights there. Nanda Devi was visible out of our bedroom window and that alone was a reason to come again.

The walks were fun and everything about the village including the lifestyle, houses and the hospitality was superb, and we returned to New Delhi and from there to home feeling very happy.

We went to Rajasthan for another holiday in 2013, but in spite of having another glorious holiday, we were left hankering after the mountains again so we (the same foursome as before) planned a west to east jaunt across the Himalayan foothills in the autumn of 2015. We started in Amritsar, then to McLeod Ganj and Shimla, and finally five nights at Khali Estate to see Nanda Devi again. All was wonderful, and this time we met the owner, Mr M D Pande who told us of the history of Khali Estate.

The more we heard the more our eyes opened. Khali had been owned by a series of remarkable British officials, who had developed it, and in 1935 it became a cradle of the new India. It had been bought by the Congress party. Jawaharlal Nehru lived there and the greats of the Congress party had all been there at different times. One’s imagination runs away with what they must have talked about, and how wonderful it must have been when the miracle came about and they found themselves in power in 1947. The estate was then sold to Navnit Parekh in 1959 and has since been developed as a tourist resort which can take up to forty guests. It is now owned by Mr. Ghandhyam Pande.

For anyone with a romantic mind and a love of mountains and of India do visit and maybe take a holiday there. The websites are www.khaliestate.com and www.villageways.com

* Nanda Devi—Exploration and Ascent by Eric Shipton and H W Tilman was published in 1999 as a compilation of three books.

** The Sanctuary is a major part of the Nanda Devi story. It is a natural bowl surrounded by massive peaks joined by an impassable wall of vertical ice cliffs. In the centre of this bowl stands Nanda Devi, and thus any attempt on the mountain had to be preceded by entry into the Sanctuary. This had proved impossible until 1934, when Tilman and Shipton achieved an entry and heralded an attempt two years later on the peak itself.

Born in England, John Talbot did his National Service with the Royal Navy in the fifties. He is a trained paper maker, worked in India from ‘64 to ‘67 as part of team building and starting a Security Paper Mill in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. Currently, he lives in Wiltshire and travels frequently to India, a country he loves.
.....make your event that little more special!

SPECIALISTS IN PURE VEGETARIAN FOOD
STARTERS, MAIN COURSES, DESSERTS (MITHAI) &
CATTERING FOR ANY OCCASION

Whether it’s a Celebration, a Gift to Someone Special, or just a Royal Treat for yourself...

ORDER ON LINE FOR NEXT DAY DELIVERY ANYWHERE IN THE UK!*  POOJA SWEETS & SAVOURIES

TOOTING BRANCH
168-170 UPPER TOOTING ROAD, LONDON, SW17 7ER
E: info@poojasweets.com
T: 020 8672 4523
F: 020 8767 5229

KINGSBURY BRANCH
487 KINGSBURY ROAD
LONDON, NW9 9ED
E: kingsbury@poojasweets.com
T: 020 8206 2206
F: 020 8621 5748

CARDIFF BRANCH
3 ALBANY ROAD, ROATH, CARDIFF, CF24 3LH
E: cardiff@poojasweets.com
T: 029 2021 4987
F: 029 2021 4987

*We also do international deliveries. Contact us for details.