

# ALMITRA PATEL

Poems



Almitra Patel (born 1936) is an Indian environmental policy advocate and anti-pollution activist. From the 1970s Almitra was also involved in civic and environmental issues, including saving the Gir Lions, being a tree warden, saving Ulsoor Lake, solid waste management, and building low cost homes. Almitra went on to become active in environmental policy advocacy. She is currently engaged in solid waste management issues in various think tanks and government panels.

In 1991, Almitra set out to find a solution for hygienic municipal solid waste management, and found that most of the 100 cities she and Capt JS Velu visited in 1994 and 1995 had nowhere to dump their waste except in the outskirts of the city or approach roads.

Almitra Patel's landmark 1996 Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court against the open dumping of municipal solid waste was instrumental in the drafting of the Municipal Solid Waste Management Rules 2000, effectively updated in 2016.

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# ALMITRA PATEL

## Poems

And so for you these pages bring  
The songs that India's backwoods sing  
To those who walk less-travelled paths  
And store the music in their hearts.



Almitra and Hoshang Patel



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# Travel



Photo courtesy - Ranga Bodavala

## *Little Brown Roads*

They're little brown roads on the map  
They're little brown roads on the ground  
That leave the busy beaten paths  
And wind through villages and woods  
To little-known and lovely spots  
Full of adventure, charm, surprise,  
Marvelous views to feast the eyes  
And ethnic food to feast the soul.

And so for you these pages bring  
The songs that India's backwoods sing  
To those who walk less-travelled paths  
And store the music in their hearts.

26.09.1992



## *Victoria Terminus*

Did you ever, on your way  
To the station, of a day  
Stop to look at all the carvings on the walls?

We did just that the other day  
When an hour-long delay  
In trains left us with nought to do at all.

We started at the portal,  
Admiring the immortal  
Marks of tender loving hands upon the stone.

Every figure showed a sense  
Of humour and intense  
Fascination with strange animals long gone:

Owls and eagles, griffins too,  
Scaly creatures peeping through  
Tangled creepers bearing fruit and flowers rare;

Pigeons, parrots, lyre-birds,  
Large and poisonous lizards,  
Bush-tailed mongoose eating cobras everywhere;

Glorious peacocks that, fan-tailed,  
Lacy-plumed and thickly scaled,  
Formed the grille above the windows, arching wide;

Squirrels playing among the leaves  
Richly carved below the eaves  
And on pillar capitals on every side,

Some, with large and lively eyes  
Nibbling nuts or, worldly-wise,  
Clutching acorns to their breasts in greedy glee;

Several pairs of turtle-doves  
Shyly whispering their loves  
Or preening their slim wings for all to see.

Every archway held surprise  
As, with wide and wondering eyes,  
We sought in vain identical designs.

Over several of the doors  
In their powerful muscled paws  
Sat shield-bearing rich-maned lions that almost spoke.

We saw many a lavish shield  
With, in every square and field,  
Unmistakable imperialistic signs:

Rampant lions reared with ease  
Galleons billowed in the breeze  
While howdah-laden elephants stood tame;

Harps with female forms that flew,  
Crowns and cross of Saint Andrew,  
"Honi soit qui mal y pense" and more of same.

But the one thing that impressed  
Us in the G.I.P.R. crest  
Was its proud defiant engine, belching smoke!

From numerous medallions  
Stared out, like regal stallions,  
Dalhousie, Dufferin, all the elect.

One face alone was absent  
Yet everywhere was present:  
That of Stevens, its inspired architect.

All kinds of fruit and flowers  
From foreign lands and ours  
He had carefully recorded, even trees:

Heavy-laden cashew plants,  
Kashmir maple, at a glance,  
And rigid daffodils along a frieze.

There even was a band  
Showing the headgear of our land:  
Fifteen proudly turbaned heads surveyed the court.

Ornamental weather-vanes  
Rows of brilliant stained-glass panes  
Every detail testified to careful thought.

But in vain did beauty cry  
To the million passers-by  
Hurrying past without a glance or smile or frown,

While all over poor Victoria -  
All hail! Regina gloria! -  
Our crows and pigeons showered their blessings down.

21.8.1961

## *Deccan Poems*

Tamarind land  
with gleams of neem  
in a wasted plain  
scrub-spotted  
stone-dotted,  
with isles of green lakshmi  
lavender plumes  
towering, waving  
chauri-wands  
over ripples of cane.

Tamarind land  
plateaus of sand  
gashed by the ruler-straight  
highways of rulers,  
trees obediently  
flanking the sides in  
two disciplined rows;  
the tarmac mirage  
patiently bears  
the plodding of cattle  
the plodding of carts.

Tamarind land  
stretching away  
to all the horizons  
baking and bare,  
more desolate still  
than the graves of the Moghuls  
still witnessing mutely  
the folly of battle.

Tamarind land  
dappled and brown

affronted now  
by ill-favoured progress:  
barracks of houses  
dreary facades  
irrelevant towers  
for water and oil  
institutional art  
and corporate towns  
grey, without life,  
lacking in music  
custom or culture,  
ignoring the villages  
vital and vibrant,  
their throbbing tradition  
swinging its way  
with white-bangled arms  
and voluminous skirts  
on tinkling feet  
through the dusty street.

Tamarind land  
where children play  
in the dark cotton clay,  
buffalo-wallows  
quench the eye  
and drongos festoon  
the haze-white sky  
with their dipping black flight,  
where water-wheels shriek  
at the burning day  
and mynas and crickets  
compete with the heat  
in the yellow acacia.

December 1970

## *Naldurg Fort*

Alone on the plain stands the proud fort of Naldurg  
with Moghul medallions and low pointed domes,  
Mussulman arches and bastions of stone.

High and spectacular, totally ruined  
lie the forts of Sahyadri, no stone upon stone.  
But half-preserved Naldurg recalls still, with dignity,  
glory and might now five centuries old.

Hoary with history, this stronghold Chalukyan  
fell prize to Allauddin, Bahmanis, Adil Shahs,  
Aurangzeb, Nizam – a pawn for them all.

It is full of surprises: embraced by the Bori  
(jewel-green river more precious than death)  
a gate on stone hinges wears studs of defiance;  
a granary here with its faceted vault  
is a starburst of sharp mathematical joy;  
beyond, many-terraced, a courtyard of dwellings  
(dogs loudly disputing the passage with me)  
and a new-whitewashed masjid, alone now remembered  
full five times a day by the faithful at prayer.

The wall's crenellations are magical touchstones:  
my thick Kolhapuris on stones in the path  
tell of vigilant guards;  
the warm smell of hay turns to attar of roses  
and the quick-stepping guide (pockets jingling with marbles)  
to a palanquin jogging to halls plaster-ceilinged  
in Persian rococo  
and peopled with dancers in transparent skirts.  
An elephant, fan-eared and loyal in stone  
guards pleasaunce-halls by the water's edge

where the king and queen, in each other's arms  
mirrored the river's seductive charms.

A steep ramp of stairs vaults a circular tower  
with its castrated cannon now facing the sunset.  
Below, massive-walled, the barrel-roofed armoury  
crouches in thickets of dwarf custard-apple  
rustled by squirrels and glossy black goats  
(did they see their pink carcasses  
hanging in archways approaching the fort?)

See the plan of the fortress how, steep and protective  
the curves of the river encircle the walls,  
spanned by a causeway enriddled with secret  
and wonderful rooms.

First comes the mill-room with deep central shaft  
and diminishing hexagons vaulting the gloom  
where even the waters must work for their king:  
Though dark and grotesque, this is no torture-chamber:  
those extrovert warriors vented their sadism  
out on the field.

Next a cool stair leads to bliss unimagined:  
a balconied chamber adjoining the falls  
with bulrushes crowning the maidenhair walls  
and a milky cascade refreshing the soul  
with the splash of its fall to the pool far below,  
secluded and green.

The river, enslaved both for war and for dalliance  
rose here in a fountain, a poem of skill.  
A thoughtful maze hides the toilet bays  
and the knee-high stairs, perhaps for escape  
stumble down to the pool.



Last, Lakdi Mahal with its massive wood sluice-gate  
intricate stonework, deep circular holes  
all plummeting down into cavernous space  
and inlets and outlets and arches and stairways  
all cleverly nested within the wide dam.

Across, in the oxbow, another small fort  
and a greybeard of Naldurg describing these wonders  
to his two companions. "You saw Panchkalyani?  
A five-alloyed cannon with gold and with silver  
that, wonder of wonders, turns green in the monsoon!  
No, not on the tower, that's the big Tope-e-Maidan  
to guard all the fortress:  
DHANANA – DHANANA – DHAN – DHAN – DHAN – DHAN !"   
The women are laughing, but I urge him on.

"There's a song of this fortress: Nul – nalikan – chi ..."  
He stops, short of breath.  
He feels the years flying; he tells, every day,  
the same glorious tales as he passes this way.  
Is anyone listening? Does anyone care?  
Who will remember, when he is not there?

December 1970



Photo courtesy - Partying\_Shot @flickr.com

## *Tiracol Fort*

High, bright and white, a glorious sight,  
Tiracol fort commands the heights  
Above the River Terekhol  
Northernmost creek and boundary  
Of Goa's old territory.  
Tiracol lies north of the creek,  
The northernmost extremity  
Of Goa, poised strategically  
For sea defence as well as land,  
Protecting, too, the ferryboats  
Plying till today from strand to strand  
Across the rushing tidal flow.  
Cars, too, must on the ferries go.

Tiracol is a microcosm  
Of Portuguese sovereignty  
From fifteen hundred ten AD  
Till nineteen hundred sixty-one  
When one dark night, quite suddenly,  
This 'liberated' colony  
Became a part of India as  
Its viceroy fled, pyjama-clad  
From the abrupt invading force.

The Viceroys often came to stay  
At Tiracol, a gem-like fort  
Still well preserved. Its high stone walls  
Enclose a church with high façade  
Nestling within a tiny yard  
Where tourists now can pray, or pay  
For eats at the outdoor café.



Ten rooms built deep within the walls  
Look sheerly down on basalt cliffs  
That swoop down to the pounding sea  
Around the bluff. Enchantingly  
Across the creek a wide beach sweeps  
To a diffuse infinity  
Of sea and sky, and sky and sea.  
A band of frond-green coco-palms  
Fringes the band of gleaming sand  
Where one can feel truly alone  
And one with Nature.

Many more  
Such lovely beaches line the shores  
Of Goa, where, over the years,  
A flood of tourists wanting more  
Than peace and lovely solitude  
Seeking modcons in Paradise  
Provoked a breed to fill their need  
For dwellings right upon the beach,  
Destroying what they came to see.  
Real-estate sharks with green-back hearts  
Built monstrous blocks under the palms,  
Not native huts with palm-brown thatch  
Whose shape and colours closely match  
Their dappled landscape.

Everywhere  
The five-star hotels gobble up  
The pristine beaches, keeping out  
The happy friendly fisher-folk  
Whose merit in a previous life  
Earned them rebirth on these fair shores.  
Encroaching to the water-line

'Development' excludes as well  
Those citizens who love to dwell  
on nature's beauty, robbing them  
and generations yet to come  
Of the right to the setting sun  
Without the sight of human blight.

A worse fate threatens Tiracol.  
This skyline-dominating jewel  
Is overshadowed now by cruel  
New monstrous concrete structures of  
A huge pig-iron plant upon  
Another ridge a mile away  
But in another State. No say  
Could Goa have to flatly stay  
Such devastating sacrilege,  
Destruction of our heritage,  
Pollution of these pristine heights.

Deforestation like a blight  
Spreads out in ripples from the site  
As contract workers fell the trees  
That sheltered wildlife from the breeze.  
And – greater moral tragedy –  
Locals fell their patrimony:  
"Let's cut our trees before THEY do".

Do we need such 'Development'?  
Can we not all a message send  
That such destructiveness must end?

1.1.93

## *Cauvery Road*

Come, take my hand and we will go  
On a tour of the South-lands. I will show  
You sights that will live in your memory,  
Of rivers and fields and greenery.

Wide and still flows the Cauvery,  
Serene in the loving, lazy embrace  
Of a waving frieze of coconut palms  
Stretching as far as the eye can see,

Their trunks a visual jal-tarang  
As we whiz by them one by one:  
A rampart of tall black silhouettes  
Defending the naked sky from view,  
O'ertopping the overweening pride  
Of the gopurams by the Cauvery's side  
Constructed in towering symmetry  
-- Vain human attempt to emulate  
Or subjugate the mountain scene –  
Rising stark from the level plain.  
Thiru'chengode, Truchira'palli...  
What a reverent musical litany!

Past them all flows the Cauvery,  
Holding together, like pearls on a string  
The scenes that hover and then take wing  
Of grasses trailing the water's edge,  
Attentive jewels of kingfisher blue  
Darting down as the fish glide through,  
Bee-eaters strung on a telegraph screen  
Over paddy-fields of billiard green,  
Acres of wild luxuriant thorn  
With haystacks for yellow counterpoint  
Against a sky of smoky blue.

The song of the road gets into you,  
Pounding and surging in blood and brain  
As you savour the thrill of travel again.  
(I wish I could hold your hand, just so,  
and transfer a hint of its magic to you!)

So many old friends revisited:  
The bullocks with horns of red and green,  
The neat round roofs of coconut thatch,  
The fresh sweet fragrance of jaggery mills  
And rivers of sand, incredibly wide.

Avenues of tamarind and neem  
--- Their shadows a carpet of black Spanish lace ---  
Tunnel the unsuspecting eye  
To a sudden breathtakingly beautiful glimpse  
Of images truer and older than time -----  
Enormous clay horses with watchful eyes  
That follow you as you turn and pass,  
Their vast limbs quickened to life by the sound  
(The rhythmic rolling staccato tattoo)  
Of cattle-hooves on the echoing tar.  
The thought of them lingers long after they're past.  
Who made them, and how? And where? And why?  
Are they meant to appease, or guard, or serve?  
Before them are tridents, and swings. Why swings?  
Ominous cock-feathers litter the ground.  
Does their blood, too, quicken the gods that sleep?  
Does Muniyappan ride forth at dead of night,  
Old guardian of the village folk,  
To supervise his orderly world  
Laid out in neat square patches of fields  
Bounded by ancient palmyra palms  
That started life when he was young?

By day he retreats to his sacred grove  
To escape the withering humid heat  
That shimmers all day over everything  
While he waits for another enchanted night.

Look where the rosy orange glow  
Of a field on fire mimics the hues  
Of the burning sun in the opposite West  
As it melts into the charcoal clouds  
And the yellow light of a thunderstorm.

The Cauvery here is a part of life,  
Deeply involved in the life on its banks  
Washing, and swimming and splashing, and ducks,  
And colourful clothing strung on the banks.

But how do men live where the river is not?  
Let us go now to a land forgot  
By God and the river, without a thought.  
The starved land shows its stony ribs  
Like Bhiringi stretched on the burning sand,  
A pitiless sun o'er the pitiless land.  
The fields are carpeted in quartz  
The soil can scarcely be seen between  
Yet the rubble is lovingly, jealously ploughed  
For a harvest of aches and a mouthful of dust  
And fences of grim impregnable thorn  
Defend each man's right to his misery.  
A land forgot by the gods? Not quite,  
For mockery is their favourite sport.  
Remember the legend of Tantalus?  
Here they have planted both water and shade  
Both far out of reach, almost fifty feet up  
Atop the defiant palmyra palms

That flourish successfully everywhere;  
Surviving, with man, 'neath the burning sky,  
Even defeat is a victory.

Turning slowly Northward again,  
Rising out of the level plain  
From afar we see an apology  
For a mountain. Small diminutive hills  
Can inspire, in a landscape where nothing exceeds;  
Each graced with a temple that draws up the soul  
As man strives to climb close as he can to the gods.

Now the hills grow taller, and green, almost blue,  
Hiding the Mettur dam from view.  
Imprisoned and trapped in bay after bay  
The river still shows its wilful way  
In a whirlpool swirling above the spill.

Homeward bound, the signboards glisten  
With names that speak to those who listen . . .  
Kodumudi, Nagappatti, Krishnagiri;  
Sulagiri's worth a climb ---  
Note it down, we'll come some time.

Evening, and a golden sunset  
Shines in the reflecting paddies  
Through a new-grown veil of green,  
Sinking into velvet light  
Pierced with eyes that shine at night.

Silence, and the cool night air,  
Laden with a sylvan fragrance  
Seeps in through the open windows  
To encircle and bewitch us.



Night sounds struggle to come through,  
Croaking loudly in the pools.

See the Ballet of the Trees.  
Lit up by our travelling rays  
Turn by turn each tree displays  
Its graceful branches, shapely form,  
Each one vying for our praise  
In its own dramatic way.

Like the Star of Babylon  
Lovely Venus leads us on  
Till extinguished by the glow  
Of the city lights below.

Journey's end, the day is done,  
And the travel-music fades away.

26.07.1973



Photo courtesy - Tramp Traveller

## *Pulicat Lake*

"Pulicat Lake? Where's Pulicat?  
"Palavarkadu?" "I don't know."  
"It's where all the flamingos go  
Along with many water-birds  
In winter, to its shallow flats,  
Our second-largest salt lagoon  
Six hundred kilometers square  
That lies a short way north of here,  
Madras." No luck. We bought a map,  
Hired a taxi, pointed to  
Its beach location, fifty-two  
Kilometers north of Madras  
Via Ponneri, which was not  
Shown on our map, and so we took  
Gummidipoondi Road instead,  
The long way round, past rural scenes:

Paddy-fields gleaming jewel-green,  
Clumps of palmyra in between  
Neat grass-thatch huts with roofs held down  
By fibre ropes in neat designs  
Of diamonds and loops and squares.  
Braving the children's curious stares  
We had some lovely roadside tea  
Before we headed for the sea.

At Pulicat the road just ends.  
Across a wadeable warm strait  
The ferry-boatmen pole across  
The people living on the coast,  
Or, rather, sandbar, bounded by  
The shallows of the brackish lake  
And the beach where the high waves break  
In white and foaming crests that climb  
The steeply-sloping beach of sand.

Miraculous! There's water here  
That's potable! Right on the beach  
Are many tiny open wells  
Of concrete rings that just go down  
To twenty feet to tap the sweet  
Water that's trapped above the clay  
That was laid down in ancient days.

And look! In rows athwart the shore  
Are votive figures marching down  
Towards the sea. Five-six abreast  
The terra-cotta riders rest  
Horses and elephants, or stand  
In uniform, in honour of  
Kanniswamy, the local god,  
Protector of the fisher-folk  
Who yearly add another row  
Of whitewashed figures to the fore  
Of last year's sand-scoured panoply,  
Red-painted faces lasting till  
The second year. The rest fall down.

The four of us from Bangalore,  
Whooping with glee, jump in the sea  
To tumble in the crashing waves  
And eagerly go back for more.  
Time passes as we splash and play  
It's suddenly well past mid-day  
And lunch-time. No-one wants to go  
Back to the mainland for a bite.

As usual, foraging a meal,  
We smile and ask the ladies in  
Our broken Tamil at a hut:

Sappadu venu, Meena venu,  
With signs that show we'll pay for it.  
"Sorry, no fish." On this great beach,  
Astrewn with fishing boats that reach  
To the horizon, gliding by  
With plastic sails of blue and green,  
No fish??? We give a fifty-note  
Saying we'll take what she can make.

Suddenly there's a jabbering crowd.  
She thrusts the money at a man  
Who runs away and soon comes back  
With two huge fistfuls from the catch:  
Mackerel and some rosy fish  
That make a most delicious dish  
Crisp-fried in a masala crust  
And in the curry that we just  
Devour with a huge mound of rice

Then an hour's snooze. Eventually  
We rise to view the fishing-boats  
Lying above high-water-mark.  
A fisherman offers a ride.  
Acceptance makes him swell with pride  
As he gets ready for our trip.

These men do not go out in boats  
As we know them. These rafts or floats,  
These 'Katta-marams', lashed with cord  
Are made of five curved lengths of wood  
Twenty feet long, each a foot square  
Plus a short prow of three short lengths  
To breast the waves. The oars are planks  
Of light and narrow rough-hewn wood  
Gripped at the top and middle to

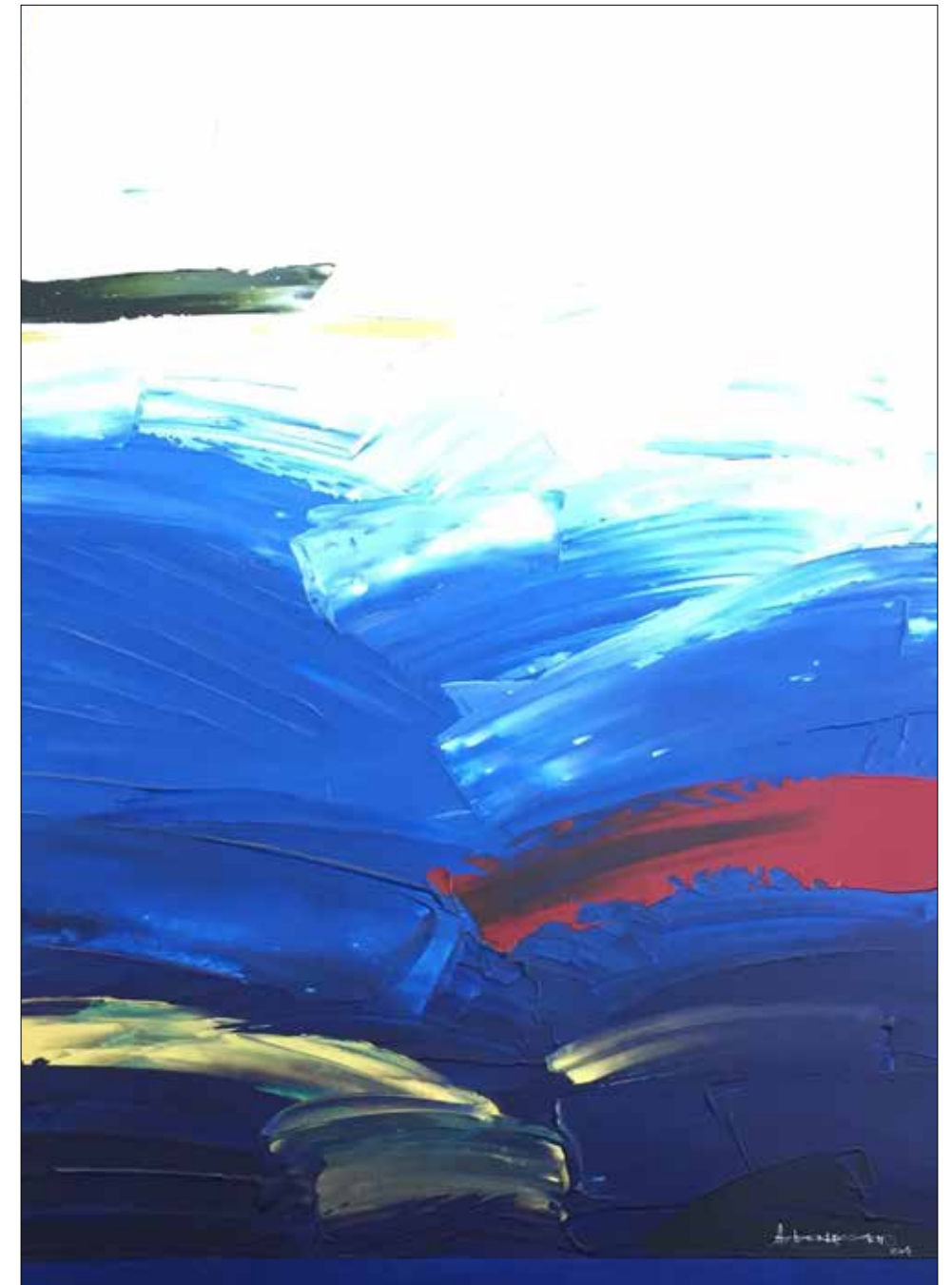
Paddle to left and right, or to  
Steer from the stern, manned by just three.

Two men ferry the timbers to  
The water-line. One at each end,  
They lash the logs in tandem, then  
Lash on the prow-beams. There you are!  
An instant 'boat' before your eyes,  
Five minutes. Then we're pushed to sea.

Its balance is astonishing.  
We move about, jump on and off.  
It's steady as a platform, and  
There's no bilgewater at our feet.  
The clear blue sea laps in and out  
Between the timbers, shallowly;  
The gently-curved midsection feels  
Secure, enfolding, underneath.  
Its primitive technology  
Has served them well for centuries,  
Notch-holes for masts, if there's a breeze,  
Or with an outboard motor now.

Returning smartly through the surf  
It's beached, the logs are whipped apart,  
Hauled up and parked. Now where's our craft?  
Walking back through the warm wet sand  
With sunset burnishing the land  
This magic day felt like a week.  
Like flamingos, we must return  
Next year to see the whole lagoon  
By the light of a silver moon.

24.8.1992



Artist: Azhagesan, 2004



## *Kudremukh*

A dozen strangers newly met,  
Invited for a two-day trek  
By Dr Venkatesh of SPARK,  
We drove from Bangalore all day  
To Forest Lodges at Samse,  
Feasted and joked till it grew dark,  
Laid all our eats out for display,  
Then loudly snored the night away  
Like lions fighting, or at bay.

We set off through the morning haze  
Into a vast confusing maze  
Of interlocking grassy downs  
Sholas cascading sharply down  
Steep narrow valleys. Logging roads  
Rose partway up past thatched abodes  
And ploughmen singing at their work  
Till grassy paths of gentle grade  
Led to the dark and welcome shade  
Of Lonely Tree, for our first look  
At the long cliffs of Kudremukh.  
Continuing along the vale  
Where four green sholas cross and meet  
We passed through paddy-fields to greet  
The centenarian of this dale.

Old Simon Lobo, small and sere,  
Vigorous still, and full of cheer  
Accompanied us up the hill  
Recounting with expressive wave  
How God the Father helped to save  
Him from a pair of fearless gaur  
That almost got him once before.

The bone-dry downs were all on fire  
Across the glade, and now, up higher  
Its rapidly advancing fronts  
Crackled and roared with pops and grunts.  
One member dropped out of the race.  
Two others sharply slowed their pace.  
Another writhed with painful gripes  
And woes of various other types.

All safely at the top at last  
We settled down to break our fast  
While Simon, hale and hearty still  
Strode swiftly, firmly down the hill.

Too tired to move, we lay and mused  
On this day's awe-inspiring views  
Of Kudremukh, whose soaring crest,  
The object of our eager quest,  
Offered us now a well-earned rest  
Below the inky silhouette  
Of branches soaring in a net  
To trap the white unwinking eyes  
Spangling the luminescent skies.

Cool twilight breezes crisply rose  
To chill us trekkers far below  
Huddled around a campfire's glow  
Exchanging loud and bawdy jokes  
And trying to dodge the fragrant smoke.

After a deep and dreamless sleep  
In three snug tents, we rose to peep  
At steep Jamalabad's grey cone  
(Locally called The Grinding Stone)

Greeted a group with eager kids  
Then cooled off in a magic glade  
Of waterfalls and dappled shade.

Returning by a different route  
Past old stone ruins, tall and mute  
We crossed the shola, dense and dark  
That Simon specially came to mark  
To a small clearing called Full Stop,  
Lay prone along the brink to see  
The virgin woodland canopy.  
Spread out in fifty shades of green:  
Magnificence too rarely seen.

Hoisting our burdens, none too soon  
We faced the golden downs at noon  
Eyeing the ragged crackling glow  
Of fires approaching from below  
Checked by the thin green Maginot  
Of valley sholas on its flanks  
For which we offered grateful thanks.

Denied the shola's streams and shade  
Hot and athirst our way we made  
Along the bare relentless ridge  
Devoid of flower, bird or midge  
Except one skilful Blackwinged Kite  
Immobile in its hovering flight.

We lost the path later that day  
Regained the ridge the painful way  
And prostrate, gasping, there we lay.  
With loaded packs and creaking backs  
Frequently stopping in our tracks

Gritted our teeth and plodded on  
And on and on and on and on...  
Until below the path at last  
A spring appeared to break our fast!

Spurning the straw-filled pool at first  
The city-slickers slaked their thirst  
To march once more in a fresh burst  
Of energy, fueled by some food  
While Sol near the horizon stood  
Speeding our stumbling, anxious pace  
As we pressed on to win the race.

We almost did ----- slithered and slid  
Down the steep slope to road and rest  
While B and V, two of the best,  
Jogged up the road to fetch a Jeep  
And Doc massaged us all to sleep.

A half-hour saw us back at base  
A joyful glow on every face  
Of pride and new self-confidence  
And gratitude to new-found friends  
Who helped each other to the end.

We parted with profound regret  
At ending this idyllic trek,  
Vowing to meet again, and stay  
In touch and trek again some day.  
While for my friends I froze in rhyme  
This wild and wondrous slice of time.

28.01.1985

## *Kaziranga National Park, Assam*

Through the tall grass the fog rolls in  
Hiding the spots they wallow in,  
Clay-coated rhino, unafraid.

Through the tall grass the hog-deer pass,  
Wending their way down narrow paths,  
Watching our passage, unafraid.

Like Akbar's army on the march,  
Thirteen elephants side by side,  
Swaying through ten-foot grass they go,  
With three clever young ones in tow,  
Cutting the tough grass with their toes  
As they make brave attempts to browse.

A grey dawn game of hide and seek,  
Mahouts traversing seas of reeds  
To find the swampy scoop of earth  
With maybe a rhino, maybe two.

Friendships through the years they've made,  
Elephants, rhino, unafraid.  
Through the swampy grass they wade  
Bearing tourists, all amazed...

December 2002



## *Ladakh Memories*

Land of contrasts, land of smiles  
Stony wastes and verdant isles  
Barren slopes for miles and miles;  
Snow-peaks reaching to the skies  
Seem close enough to touch, almost:  
Distances deceive the eyes.

We hiked from vale to vale, to see  
Nature in all her majesty  
Work vast geologic mysteries:  
Oceans upended mightily  
And steep uptilted sediments  
Of every texture, shade and hue  
Run up to saw-tooth ridges, where  
Ruptured by frost and torn by wind,  
The spires cascade in sheets of scree  
To form a basin like a sea  
Of sand and gravel. Boulders too  
Worn smooth and round in their descent  
Collect to form a jumbled maze  
Encircling every mountain base.

The air is pitilessly clear.  
Each ridge throws knife-edge shadows here  
A patchwork quilt of light and shade  
Changing all day. The shadows lead  
The upward eye from ridge to ridge  
Until against the deep blue sky  
The dazzling snowpeaks, clear and high,  
Stand sharp and white and crisp and bright.  
The contrast takes one's breath away!

The peaks are smoothly creamed with snow.  
Slowly, below, white fingers go



Along the ridges, in the folds,  
Feeding a strange anomaly:  
Despite the barren desert scene  
Of water there's no scarcity  
For those who, braving drought and cold,  
Have made this their unlikely home.  
They never pray for rainy days,  
For those would wash their homes away.

Crunching our way across the plain,  
Pausing to rest, again, again,  
Sinking in sand, our panting band  
Stops breathless at the sight we see:  
A sudden brilliant greenery!

Melting glaciers, melting snows  
Trickle down the stony slopes  
Icy-cold and sparking clean  
To feed these oases of green.

Here farmers train, with wondrous skills  
The waters down along the hills  
Into the scores of tiny rills  
That wind below the terraced walls  
Of neat-piled stones that guard the fields  
From goats and sheep and other ills.

Led by a long-handled hoe,  
To every plot the waters go  
In channels blocked by sod and stone.  
The women do this all alone,  
Sharing in perfect amity  
This ever-flowing cold bounty.

Small plots of greens, 'taters for sale,  
Alfalfa for the winter feed  
And barley, barley everywhere  
Greening in fields dense, lush and fair.

Barley is here both drink and food,  
A meal for every time and mood:  
Chhang, a benign fermented brew  
Whose grains are fed to livestock too;  
Washed and dried and roasted grain  
Goes to the flour-mill in the plain,  
Trickling between two grinding stones  
Turned day and night by channeled streams.

This tsampa flour is instant food,  
Ideal for travellers on the road,  
Mixed to a dough with butter-tea  
Or soups or stews or chapati.

Everywhere the waters flow  
Willows and tall poplars grow.  
These two alone can roof a home:  
Stout poplar rafters span the rooms  
Supporting close-laid willow-canes.  
On these a mass of brushwood gives  
A springy roof, artistic eaves.  
Walls are of bricks of sun-dried clay,  
Made by each farmer, day by day.

The houses here stand far apart.  
The farmers live in neat square homes.  
Red windows set in walls of white  
Let in abundant heat and light.  
Here every glass-walled summer-room

Has a view to make you swoon  
Onto strip-carpets rich and bright,  
Dragon-patterned to delight  
And keep the sleepers warm at night.

Kitchens are the liveliest.  
One wall lined with the lady's best  
Gleaming pots and carved brass spoons.  
Around a huge square metal stove  
With brass-bronze trim and filigree  
Stand matching cylinders for tea  
And heavy army jerry-cans  
For lugging water from the streams  
Or buried pipes that bring a flow  
Of clear spring water near the door.

Out in the yard the livestock sleep:  
Brown jersey cows and calves, and sheep  
Whose clean and soft uncarded wool  
Is hand-spun on a wooden spool  
For shawls and rugs and heavy gowns  
Of rich maroon and lambent browns.

Pashmina goats, short-legged and cute  
Are combed for their rare under-fleece,  
Then shorn to weave strong heavy sacks.  
The other bovids: dzomos, dzos,  
Oxen and huge impressive yaks  
Are driven in collective droves  
To drokhsas, upland pastures where  
They spend contented summers there.

Some herdsmen camping high with them  
Send down manure on donkey-back

For winter fuel. These bring back  
Firewood and food and other fare.

Pregnant and milking cows remain  
In every home down in the vale  
Where pairs of boys, each year by turn  
Are paid in grain to keep them out  
Of all the village farmers' fields.  
A farmer whose strayed beast is caught  
Is fined by boys who share the spoils.  
Only a huge black yak for stud,  
Purchased by all collectively,  
Is left alone to graze, quite free.

We ask to share a home at night,  
Touched by their smiling friendly warmth  
And leave next day regretfully  
To cross the barren wastes again  
Where grass-wisps grow five feet apart.  
Grazing here is quite an art.  
The ground's aswarm with ant-like life  
While lizards dart from rock to rock.

Footpaths thread the stony scree.  
Mané-walls, high and wide and long,  
Of ordered boulders, point the way,  
Roofed with pebbles, carved with prayers:  
Monuments to faith and care.

Chortens, built of mud or stone  
Lead the prayerful traveller home  
Walking always to their left.  
Some with pinnacles bereft  
Of 'sun-and-moon' or coloured frills,

Their snow-white silhouettes reflect  
The aspirations of the snows.

After the trek, we hop a truck,  
Riding its wind-swept cabin roof  
Past vast and memorable views  
Of ridge-top monasteries, cliffs  
And gorges cut in pebbly banks  
By the now-wild and untamed rush  
Of Indus, roiling t'ward the plains  
Swollen and brown with sand and silt.  
Here too brave humans show their grit:  
Frail ropeways cross the rushing river  
And wild pink roses mock its power.

Later we travel south to see  
At Hemis' famed monastery  
Padma-Sambhava's birthday fair.  
Each year, good conquers evil there  
As masked and gowned monks twirl and dance  
To offer him obeisance.  
From far and near, all gather here  
In rich brocaded finery  
To meet and eat and greet their kin  
And camp beneath the poplar trees.

Throughout Ladakh are signs of war  
That we try hard to just ignore:  
Shooting ranges, army camps  
With Indians here from everywhere  
And hubris all along the cliffs:  
Memorials to road accidents.  
The barbed wire here seems quite obscene,  
Blighting the mountains' majesty.

These Buddhists, peaceful, happy, free  
Accept the army willingly  
But, 'civilised' uncaringly,  
All-Urdu schools and Muslim rule  
Have bred communal enmity.  
Posters on every wall appear,  
To 'Free our Ladakh from Kashmir'.

We drove to Khardung La one day  
The whole world's highest motorway  
At eighteen hundred three eight three  
The hardest pass to keep snow-free.  
Bulldozers work here constantly  
Below slopes where brown marmots play  
And herds of ibex leap in flight.

Above hang crystal stalactites  
And snowbanks with a million spikes  
The shining glaciers creeping down  
Engulf the road each winter day.  
Our spirits, awed, uplifted, free  
Wonder at war's futility.  
How can men 'own' what none can tame,  
A universal legacy?

Now back in Leh, we fly away  
With plans to come another day.



## *Himalayan Diary: Valley of Flowers*

The rushing river whooshes by  
Our bus that climbs these Border Roads,  
An engineering marvel here  
In landscapes gashed by cliffs and falls  
And gorges carved by raging force  
And foaming torrents still at work  
Gouging the wet rocks deeper still,  
Their limestone tilted to the skies  
Or crashing down in sudden slides  
That block the roads, so promptly cleared  
By labourers that show no fear.

Govindghat is a staging-post  
Where horsemen bicker endlessly  
For turbaned pilgrims on the trail  
That leads to Sikhdom's holy grail,  
A visit to the Hemkund Sahib  
Gurdwara, least accessible,  
Remote, aloof, 'mid seven peaks  
Where a reluctant incarnate  
Agreed to be reborn a saint,  
The Sikhs' last guru, Gobind Singh.

Their fervor is astonishing,  
Their stamina incredible:  
These deskbound pilgrims, grandmothers,  
Determined women, babes in arms,  
Leave seasoned trekkers far behind  
As they surge up the cobbled trail  
On foot, on mules, in 'pitthoo' frames  
Of comfortable wickerwork  
Baskets strapped onto sturdy backs  
Of tiny hillmen from Nepal  
Who need this four-month spell to earn

Sustenance for their folks back home.  
Some pass us by in palanquins  
Borne by four men in synchrony  
With measured strides of stately grace.

Hill paddy on green terraces  
Frames Laxman Ganga's white cascades.  
The thirteen-kilometer climb  
Over rough stones that hurt the feet  
Of men and tired much-beaten beasts  
Is broken up at intervals  
By the crude tents of wayside stalls,  
A welcome break and good excuse  
To pause and catch our gasping breath.  
Amazingly, the path is clean,  
Fresh-swept all day by men with brooms,  
Blue dustbins all along the route,  
Returning mules laden with waste  
In high-piled sacks bound for the plains.

Defeated by the cobblestones  
We hitch a mule-ride to our rooms  
At Ghangaria, a four-month town  
Athwart a narrow cliff-bound pass  
Run by the families below –  
Just 85 – at Bhyndoor where  
They grow potatoes, then descend  
Still further to escape the snows  
While black bears enter shuttered homes  
To raid any left-over stores.  
Telephones just arrived this year.  
Satellite towers will follow soon  
To link this transient town next year  
With India and the distant world.



Expectantly, we trek to see  
Valley of Flowers, a paradise  
Lost in the mist and found by chance,  
Home to snow leopard, musk-deer, tahr.  
A path winds up through woods and rocks.  
Smooth soaring walls of tilted slabs  
And vast sheer overarching cliffs  
Echo the shrill insistent hiss  
Of grey cicadas fluting in  
The dark-green cedars soaring high  
Past sheer dark cliffs that frame a glimpse  
Of ever-new Himalayan views.

Nestled in ice and green moraines  
The Pushpavati thunders past  
Rows of striated tented peaks,  
Their narrow ledges rimmed with green  
Triangles of tenacious shrubs.  
Small flowers bloom along the path:  
Deep crimson potentilla blooms,  
Baby-blue cyanoglossum too,  
Some yellow cremanthodium spikes  
And beautiful thalictrum leaves  
And delicate devallia ferns,  
Five-starred anemones, bright white,  
A true taxonomist's delight,  
But fancy Latin names or no,  
A fascinating place to know.

8.8.2003



Photo courtesy - Himalayas Griffon website

## *The Caves*

Wagh Jai, the Tiger Goddess, is appeased  
Even today by coins thrown from the cabs  
Of lorries toiling up the steep ghat roads  
That follow still the ancient trading routes  
Littered with microliths. In ancient days,  
It was a sacrifice of blood she claimed  
To guarantee safe passage through the hills.

This was abhorrent to the Buddhists, who  
At every bloody crossroad, stayed to preach  
And teach a gentle kum-kum substitute  
For living sacrifices. In the rains  
They camped in rock-cut caves above these shrines,  
Exhorting all by holy word and deed  
To love and reverence all living beings.

Their rock-cut monasteries stand today  
Empty and silent, on now-barren hills,  
Marvels of skill and architecture still,  
Now home to wandering hikers like ourselves  
Who shelter overnight in these dark cells.

Awed by their stark and starlit mystery,  
Beneath the rock-ribbed barrel-roofs we feel  
A peace that lingers still, for all to feel.

13.10.1992

## *Unreserved Travel*

Monsoon weekend crush  
Rivers of families townward  
Squeezed in Indian trains  
Fatalistic folk  
Enduring every hardship  
Smile their way through life.

10.7.11

## *Konkan Highway*

Nostalgic joy assails me  
Red rocks, forest flame  
A hundred hikes remembered.

26.6.12

# Stories



Samvat Falls photo Ranga Bodavala

## *Co-Wives' Cliffs, India*

Above a rock-girt valley, stark and bare,  
The precipice was fanned by rising air.  
The two wives of the farmer far below  
Sat at the brink, combing each others' hair.

Glancing below, a scary thought was born.  
"What if she pushes me? I'd fall straight down,  
Splattered to death upon the river - bed.  
She's often wished me dead. If so, I'll tie  
My sari to her sari - end. That way,  
If I go, she goes with me. We'll both die  
Together."

In the baking heat, the air  
Shimmered and shivered, fracturing the view  
And sense and reason. To the other flew  
The wicked thought: "One push, one little push,  
And I'll be free at last, forever more".

The comb was still, the languid strokes were stilled,  
And it was done. One fell, the other too,  
Screaming and streaming in the rising wind.

Now they live on in fable, old wives' tales  
Of Samvat Falls, high in the Chiplun hills.

## *Goa: The Fisherman's Tale*

Child of the sand and sea and sun,  
Of six poor children the eldest one,  
Costancio Fernandes, when he was just eight  
Was launched, by a then-common twist of fate,  
On the most remarkable life I have known.

A well-to-do neighbour, a doctor from Goa  
Having a practice in Gujarat State  
Sought a boy from her home-town to help with the housework.  
Costancio Joao was chosen to go.

His impoverished parents, at once glad and sorry,  
Would miss their bright boy but were sure he would be  
Well-fed and well cared for, perhaps educated.  
Costancio left home with his dreams full of glory:  
Supporting his parents by sending home money.  
Alas, what transpired was a different story.

From sun-up to sun-down he scrubbed, fetched and carried;  
From morning to night he was scolded and harried  
With never a moment of childhood to spare ---  
No schooling, no playmates, no fun and no play  
And alas, at the end of each month's work, no pay.  
He was fined the first month just for spilling some milk,  
And fined in the next month for breaking a plate;  
Fined again the third month for neglecting the cat  
And fined every month-end for this or for that,  
All from his monthly two rupees' pay!

At long last, one month when paid half a rupee  
He decided to run home at last and be free.  
Travelling ticketless, boarding a train,  
Changing at Bombay, he reached home again  
Bright-eyed and undaunted, to start life anew,  
Deciding to live by old skills that he knew;

Bought, with his half-rupee, twine that he knotted  
Into a fine-meshed and kerchief-sized fishnet,  
Tied with a twig-frame; he strolled through the shallows  
Sweeping his hand-net beside him all day  
For a handful of fish that he then would parlay  
Into more twine, more fishnet, more fish and more pay.  
Years later we met him, a prosperous patriarch  
At ease in his huge tile-roofed home by the sea.

Regaling us trekkers with sea-food and story,  
Providing a feast but refusing our money,  
He told the most marvellous tales of past glory:  
His sixty-foot sailboat, employing a dozen,  
With one-mile-long fishnet, then costing a fortune,  
Huge Alladin-jars filled with salt and with pickle,  
The mountains of food cooked to feed all his people:  
The fishermen, salters and ice-men and cooks.

All went well till the advent of motorised trawlers.  
Encouraged by Government, greedy and lawless,  
They fished where they shouldn't, close inshore in shallows,  
Trawling the bottoms, destroying the catch  
And the lives and the livelihood of the old-timers,  
Traditional fishermen, pleading in vain  
For sustainable harvests from which all could gain.



Now the long boats lie silent in giant old barns  
 Nets piled high to the rafters, unused and unsold.  
 None want this lace that once harvested gold,  
 All sparkling with silvery slippery fins.....  
 Old-timers still suffer for other men's sins.  
 Brave Costancio recounts all of this with a smile,  
 His sad times and good at Arossim-parail.

But the trawlers in turn now lie beached in the breeze  
 As big ships from round the world fish off our seas.

1998

Dedicated to Costancio Joao Fernandes, b. 30.12.1925  
 Arossim Beach, P O Cansaulim, Goa 403712.



Gond artist: Manna Singh Vyam

## *Gandugali of Chitradurg*

He'd wake and walk abroad at night,  
 Young Thimappa Gandugali,  
 Across the massive battlements  
 Of rocky Chitradurga Fort  
 Sleepwalking from his modest home  
 Built in the shadow of the walls  
 Exploring secret underworlds  
 Of caves and stores and passages  
 Beneath the giant tumbled rocks  
 Of awesome Chitradurga Fort.  
 Dreaming himself the rebirth of  
 His brave betrayed fifth ancestor.

Fantastic tales surround the start  
 Of Madakari's dynasty.  
 In the late fifteenth century  
 A raffish Beda from the east  
 (A hunting, mountaineering tribe)  
 Ensconced atop this bouldered hill  
 With rocky wild breathtaking views  
 Set forth to levy tribute from  
 The many nearby villages  
 Loyal to Vijayanagar's king.

Incensed, that monarch sent his son  
 Prince Saluva Narasinga Raya  
 To militarily subdue  
 The hill-tribe upstart. Tables turned  
 And Kamageti Thimmanna  
 Soon showed the Prince his mettle, by  
 Kidnapping his most precious horse.  
 Alone, at night, he loosed its rope.  
 The sleeping stable-guard awoke  
 And carefully repegged the horse,

Driving the nail right through the hand  
Of Thimmanna, concealed in straw.

The awful pain soundless he bore,  
Waited to hear again a snore,  
Cut off his own hand to be free,  
Then turban-bound his bleeding stump  
Re-stole the horse and galloped off!

Discovering the pinioned hand  
And missing horse, word flew at once  
To Hampi, where the king, amazed,  
Declared that such defiant men  
Made better friends than enemies  
And straightaway awarded him  
In the year fifteen hundred eight  
The chiefship of surrounding lands:  
Holalkere, then Hiriya  
And Chitradurga and many more.

Thereafter, for two centuries,  
Followed twelve Nayak Palegars  
Till Hyder Ali crossed their path  
When Madakari failed to aid  
Hyder in the Maratha wars.

Hyder besieged his daunting fort.  
Its brooding crags and battlements,  
Its cunningly placed buttresses  
Atop those jumbled monster rocks,  
Resisted force. The siege would fail:  
Madakari's wise queen-mother  
Had planned for seven years of siege.  
So Hyder called for talks of peace.

Madakari could not refuse.  
With great unease, he planned the flight  
Of mother, son and family  
In case the need arose; set forth  
To be betrayed by his own men:  
Promised safe-conduct, he was slain.  
Though some say killed, others aver  
That he was Hyder's prisoner  
At far Srirangapatana.

His wife and his great mother died  
By Sati, in a self-lit pyre.  
Leaving intact the seven-tiered walls  
And treasure of the Nayakas  
The heir-apparent, twelve years old,  
Escaped then by a secret route  
Seven kilometers in length  
Below, between, around the rocks  
With weapons, idols, jewelry  
And precious family archives.

Four lonely generations passed.  
Hunted for years by Britishers,  
The fugitives dwelt in the woods  
For many years. Unlettered sons  
At last returned to their home town  
Where one became school-teacher and  
Fathered the brave sleep-walking son  
Thimmappa Nayak Gandugali.

The hidden treasure-trove has lain  
Untouched for ten-score years or more  
For fear of death by snake-bite for  
The one who dared to open them.

Young Gandugali taught himself  
To read archaic Kannada,  
Deciphered all the secret ways,  
Identified the gaps and caves  
In rocks that held the secrets still;  
Deciphered all the cryptic clues  
Of sun, moon, stars carved on the route  
Within the jumbled maze of rocks,  
Discovered all the antidotes  
For pois'nous vapours that hung still  
Over the treasure, learned to tame  
The snakes and scorpions there released  
By loyal retainers who'd feared  
Intrigue, to deter plunderers.

A normal naughty boy by day,  
His sight at night was doubly-bright.  
Walking alone beneath the stars  
He seemed to know, instinctively,  
Where armoury or granary,  
Dungeon or fabled treasury,  
Lay, just as the old books described.  
Before the young boy's wondering eyes  
Lay swords and shields, spears, arrows, bows,  
Enough to fill some cartloads now,  
Plus jars of coins and other wealth.

Sparingly, from this boundless hoard,  
The boy retrieved a coin or two  
To trade for sweets or kites until,  
Reproved by the authorities,  
His upright father banished him  
From Chitradurg. Two decades passed  
While India became free at last.

Returning home a wiser man  
Aflame with patriotic pride  
In his ancestral history,  
He piece by piece assembled in  
His humble home a museum  
That brings to life those bygone days,  
Their infinite variety  
Of simple implements of war  
And everyday domestic use  
Plus jewels, icons, manuscripts,  
On palm-leaf, of the magic arts  
And healing herbs, and much much more.

This cornucopia of delight  
Was lit, the day we visited,  
By sunbeams slanting dimly through  
His roof of broken country tiles.

A museum-site is all he asks,  
To build, quite at his own expense,  
A museum for these artefacts  
With one condition: full control  
Of what it holds, to safely store  
All that he has retrieved, and more.  
His one condition – full control ---  
The Government refuses to  
Concede, claiming full ownership.

After official plunder of  
The confiscated troves of yore  
At Hyderabad, Kashmir, Jaipur  
By independent India,  
Gandugali would rather let  
The treasure-trove of Chitradurg

Lie undiscovered, till perchance  
A more enlightened age revokes  
Our unrewarding Treasures Act.

Meanwhile lovers of history  
Still flock to Gandugali's door  
To hear him tell spell-binding tales  
Of fact and fiction and folk-lore,  
Of ancient wars and feats of skill  
Like those of Vanki Obavva  
Who single-handedly despatched,  
Using her wooden pestle-staff,  
Enemy soldiers creeping through  
A secret passage in the walls.

He tells how the tenth Palegar  
Fought one-to-one on elephants.  
He tells of how Chikkanna Nayak  
Lifted the siege of Harihar:  
While camp musicians played one night  
To lights tied to cow-horns and trees  
To simulate an active camp,  
The army crept around with ease  
And stormed the city from the west!

He shows us where the French had built  
Near the main gate, a great stone mill  
For gunpowder, lying intact still.  
He's seen a cave of skeletons  
Bear witness to a sad event  
Where many prisoners died of smoke  
From fires set during an attack.  
How sad that so much history  
In his prodigious memory

Will overnight be blotted out  
One day, lost to posterity.

Some say he is a charlatan:  
If so, a brave and learned one.  
No-one else knows, no-one else cares  
For Chitradurga's ancient tales  
As raffish Gandugali does.

When a bus tore his arm away  
He smiled through all his awful pain.  
Remembered his great ancestor  
Who'd lost a hand yet won to rule  
And felt he'd soon see better days.

26.09.1992



Almitra and Thimmanna Nayak Gandugali 2004 at Madakari Antiquities Museum  
Photo courtesy - Madakari Antiquities Museum



## *The Tribals*

It was our first Environmental March  
To save the fast eroding Western Ghats.  
This simple village woman left her home  
To walk with others from the big city  
And tell them all her pitiful story.

She recollected her old village home  
Deep in the valley, girt with greenery,  
From jamun, neem and a big mango tree,  
Till all of them were ousted by a dam.  
(Development for whom? At whose expense?)

Resettled on the slope, a great expanse  
Of water spread below them. It was free  
For the rich farmers who, below the dam,  
Grew richer still. The sugar factory  
Some miles away, had laid a six-inch pipe  
To 'bring the area jobs, prosperity',

But none, alas, for these Adivasi,  
These tribals, settled high upon the hill  
Who much against their will were forced to till  
These rocky slopes and watch scarce topsoil go  
With every rain into the lake below,  
Scrabbling a meagre living from the ground,  
Chastised by learned urbanites who'd sound  
Dire warnings of erosion, famine, drought.

Forget the crops. What every human needs  
Is water, just to stay alive. It seems  
These displaced oustees, living on the brink  
Of bare subsistence, had no drop to drink  
On this bare hillside. Gazing every day

On sheets of water, there was oft a day  
When they went hungry, as they could not cook  
Without the water needed for their food.

They'd scoop from shallow puddles in the stones.  
When that dried up, then hunger filled their homes  
Unless they made the four-mile downhill trek  
To fill pots at the lake and climb back up,  
Except the old, infirm, or those with babes  
Dependent on what kindly neighbours gave.

In vain they begged the sugar factory  
Whose six-inch pipe went past their colony  
To fix them just one tiny water-tap.  
"I'll tell you all a funny incident.  
When some of us were on high mischief bent.  
Our muddy spring was dry; we planned to steal  
Some water from a nearby village pool.

We waited for a dark and moonless night,  
Took earthen pitchers and crept in the dark  
Along a long and slippery stone path  
To their small water-hole. We spent two hours  
Scooping with tiny tins, filling our pots.

Returning home with our ill-gotten gains  
One slipped and fell, and brought down all the rest,  
Breaking our pitchers, spilling all our loot  
Back home with nought to show for our night's work.

We laughed! We laughed for days! Oh,  
how we laughed!!”  
Said she, as tears of laughter filled her eyes  
Again, telling the tale. My eyes burned too,  
With shame at my uncaring selfishness:  
I had just had a long luxurious bath.  
They could have lived a month on what I’d used!

Five years have passed. No bureaucrat has yet  
Spared them a drop of water from the pipe  
Gurgling below them to the factory,  
Or made the least provision from the lake  
For those whose lives were ruined by others’ greed.  
(Would you leave hearth and home for others’ needs?)

if they MUST be displaced, should they not get  
First choice, below the dam, of benefits?

13.10.1992



Lambani art: Kalyansing S Hajeri at Tonashyal, Pin-586121

## *Roots*

It was a journey to the recent past  
A sentimental journey of the soul  
This visit to my great-grand-father’s home,  
A burning wish for over thirty years  
To seek my roots and pay my homage to  
The founder of a fine upstanding line.

Mora-Suvali. Like a talisman  
This name was all I had, to find the place.  
Then, when I married, to my great surprise  
My husband’s people really knew the place!  
Somewhere in Gujarat, not far from them,  
But over such bad roads, I was forbid  
To go there, lest I lose the precious life  
That was to be my first-born little one.

Now, in retirement, both Hoshang and I  
Revisited his great big family  
In Surat, Dumas, Madhi, Arajan,  
Where someone knew a man who knew the way.

We went by car; from Surat nineteen miles  
That took more than an hour: the road’s still bad,  
But not the way that once it must have been.  
The road forks to Hazira. Offshore gas  
Has spawned kilometers of industry:  
Cement and fertilizer, petrochem  
And other monster projects line the road  
Cratered with potholes from the monster trucks  
That rumbled by all day. Mercifully,  
Not many were perhaps made refugees  
As industry consumed this sparse salt land  
Of tidal marsh and coarsely tussocked grass,  
No villages in sight for miles and miles.

After Hazira turnoff, straight ahead  
Four miles away we see a long low dune  
That is Suvali. To our left and right  
Lie marshlands threaded with clear passages  
Where tidal waters glint towards a line  
Of silver sea that parts the earth and sky.  
Cut off by rains, in great-grandfather's time  
Only a bullock-cart could cross these swamps  
For four long monsoon months. In my mind's eye  
I see the medical emergency  
That could provoke this hazardous journey.  
Today a raised road slashes through the marsh  
Often submerged in flood-tides, pot-holed still.

There's a left fork marked Mora. Just ahead  
Lies my Suvali. As we first approach  
We see a fire-temple that once housed  
Twenty-two mobeds, the Zoroastrian priests  
Supported by the all-Zoroastrian homes  
(Barring the cobbler and the barber then)  
Of that thriving Parsi community.

They must have been like wild west pioneers  
To come to these inhospitable dunes  
Far from all hamlets, settle there and build  
A life of culture and prosperity.  
"Reti-na-rela", said my uncle's wife,  
"Rivers of sand", to which she would return  
For three-four days each year, like many more  
Whose ancestors migrated to Bombay  
But stayed in touch.

We visited the home  
Where they would stay with friends, a gracious place  
With huge wide raised veranda, ten feet deep,  
The steep eaves roofed with wheel-turned 'country tiles'  
And flooring of grey-black and gleaming stone  
Worn smooth by laid-back friends and visitors  
Taking the evening air, sharing a tot  
Of toddy, a fermented palm-tree-sap,  
Vitamin-rich and fragrant, but now banned  
In India's only Prohibition state  
Awash in liquor and hypocrisy.

I stooped to greet in tearful reverence  
Ancestral soil, an ultra-fine black sand  
In low dunes fully covered now in thorns  
Of useless prosopis, ubiquitous  
Escape-plant called 'Velayati babool',  
'English acacia', introduced by those  
Outguessing nature's own environment  
Hoping to do good. Nowhere could we see  
The fertile fields supporting pumpkin vines  
And vegetable plots of every kind  
That once supported this community.

Its sandy lanes would never turn to slush.  
We followed one upto the highest point  
To see the sea a mile or more away.  
Perhaps it was not then so far away,  
Spawning these sand-dunes. We must come again  
At leisure, with our children, to explore  
And hike the two-day length of sandbar here,  
Camping along the beach. Now, turning back

We visited an aging gentleman  
Retired from Bombay, staying here perforce,  
To eke out insufficient pension funds  
Like the remaining four-five families  
Of aging Parsis who still tend the fire  
In the old fire-temple, now Dadgah,  
Which cannot now afford a single priest  
To tend the fire full-time, chanting our prayers  
Five times to mark the changing hours of day.

This was the home my grandpa Hormusji  
Left for the throbbing commerce of Bombay  
To seek his fortune on another shore,  
Another Mora, opposite Bombay.  
He laboured in an old distillery  
Producing fragrant liquers made from rose  
And orange peels and flowers of mahuwa  
Till in the 1920s they were closed  
Like all the other small and private stills  
By British rulers to support their own  
New Government Nasik Distillery.

His eldest, Dhunjisha, dropped out of school,  
Eldest of eight, to educate the rest,  
The last one young enough to be his son.  
They became lawyers, brokers, architects.  
The second, Nadersha, made it in style;  
He started Monginis, rage of the town:  
The finest cakes, the first all-women band,  
His son an art-collector with the best.

My pop Pheroze, with nephew Rustomji  
Were lifelong partners in Swadeshi firms  
To make emergent India strong and free  
And self-sufficient in so many fields:  
Floor tiles, asbestos, plastics, printed tins  
And, with Czech friends, abrasive grinding wheels  
That helped the British win the Second War  
And now moves India forward like the rest.

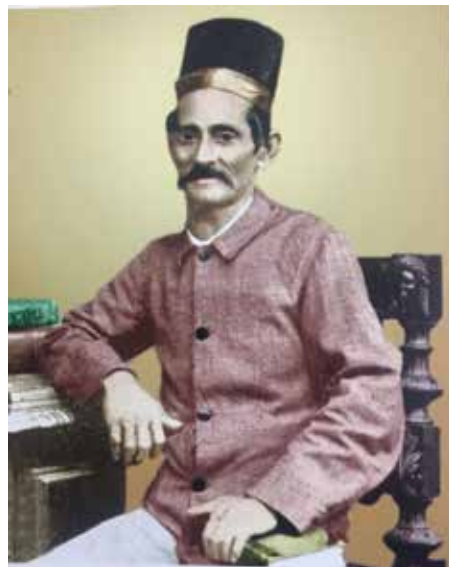
Dhunjisha built the house where I was born,  
A fine stone building fronting on the sea  
To gather there three generations more  
Living together as one family  
In semi-independent amity  
Till all the old ones died, mid-century.  
He wed when he was seven; she was five.  
Their earliest journeys back to Suvali  
Were five-day trips in covered bullock-carts,  
Moving by night, resting by day with friends,  
Their first halt at Kalyan, an hour today  
By rail from Bombay. Every year they went.

I should not mourn those first adventurers  
Who left their fields for wider canvases  
And built great ships and steel plants, industry  
Of every kind, the leaders in the field  
Renowned for hard work and integrity,  
Kindness, uprightness and great charity.



Prosperous in our cities, what I mourn  
 Is a forgotten lifestyle, full of grace,  
 And graciousness, rural serenity.  
 It seemed that in Suvali I could see  
 The last faint traces of a way of life  
 That will be soon extinct. Already we  
 Number just half of what we used to be  
 Some forty years ago, just in Gujarat.  
 The old grow old, and older, and die out.  
 Many old homes are locked, and falling down.  
 The young no more return to be renewed  
 And to relax, unwind, and feel once more  
 The healing magic of a sunset hour.

August 1992



Paternal grandparents Hormusji and Dosibai Sidhwa



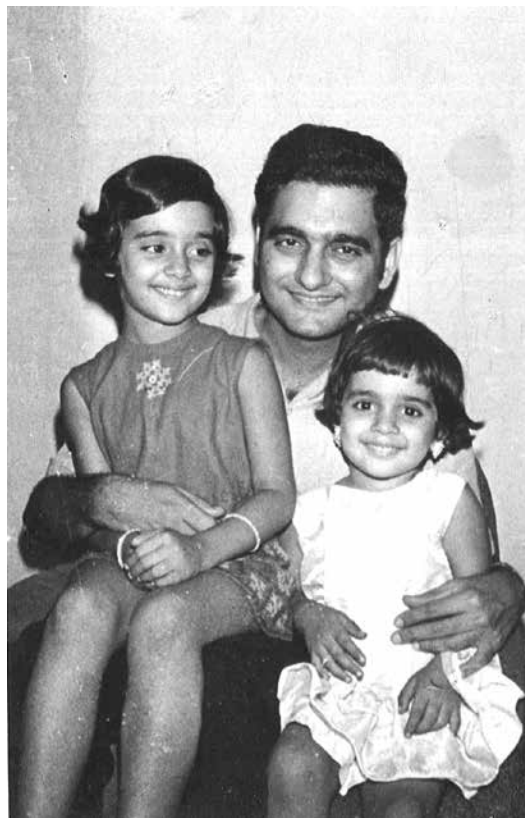
From left to right: Pheroze H Sidhwa and nephew Rustom D Sidhwa.  
 Co-founders of Bharat Tiles & Marble, Grindwell Ltd and many more swadeshi firms



Almitra's maternal grandma Hirabai Vacha (2nd from left) in Berlin with daughters  
 From left to right: Freny, eldest Shirin/Silla, Tehmi (Almitra's mother) and youngest, Mary



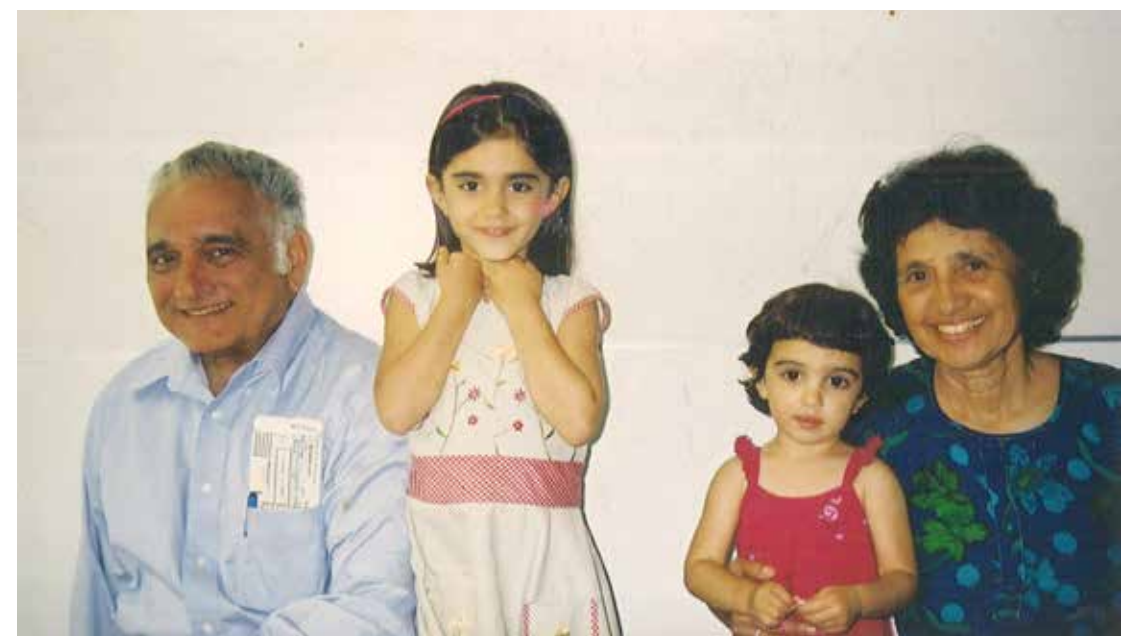
From right to left: Almitra, parents Tehmi and Pheroze Sidhwa, sister Dilnavaz, daughters Simonil and Aviva



Hoshang Patel with daughters Aviva and Simonil



Almitra on right with father Pheroze, sister Dilnavaz and mother Tehmi



Hoshang and Almitra with grand-daughters Sanaa and Zarine Kakalia



## *Dumas, 1940*

Hoshang, an only urban child,  
Lived night and day for holidays  
At Dumas, his ancestral place.  
The very day that school was out  
They'd pack a mound of baggage for  
The five-hour train to Surat town  
With heaps of food that village folk  
Considered a delicacy,  
Like bread and cake, and cake and bread.

He dreaded going through Surat town  
Devoid of sewers; all the drains  
Flowed past the townspeople's front doors  
So all their toilets too were there  
Displaying in the open drains  
What they'd consumed the day before.

The people there were wonderful.  
His whole extended family,  
Warm-hearted, loving, generous, kind,  
Were there to greet the travellers  
And take them home to feast and chat  
Before his cousin Dali took  
Them in his personal taxi  
To Dumas, the ancestral home  
Of the Patels, a Parsi clan  
Settled close to the shallow sea.

Twentyone siblings there were born.  
Eighteen survived, prospered and thrived  
In business and professions like  
The country doctor, Hoshang's dad.  
Family planning, much desired,

Was not as now. Folk remedies  
Most often did not do the trick.

Yet none were hungry, none were poor.  
They grew enough to eat, and more,  
Dumas was then a no-tax State  
So surpluses could be retained  
And shared contentment sweetened all.

In time the children grew, and left.  
For college, marriage, jobs in towns,  
Leaving the eldest brother and  
His brisk and birdlike loving wife  
To manage all ancestral land.

Yet back to this spiritual home  
A haven treasured all the year  
They all returned, with children too,  
And with grandchildren, for a week  
To outdoor loos and wood-smoke food  
On string-beds ranged under the stars  
To reminisce, converse, and laugh.

They'd rise at dawn, go to the groves  
Of toddy-palms, and breakfast there  
On fresh-tapped sap and crisp fried fish  
(Mud-skipper wriggling, speared on sticks)  
And cast away big-city cares,  
Stress blew away like thistledown  
Upon the breeze beneath the trees.

Oh that each urban family  
Could clasp within its memory  
Such rustic green tranquillity  
To help preserve its sanity.



Parsi 'gara'  
Photo courtesy - Ashdeen Lilaowala



# People



## *My Dreams*

My dreams! My Technicolor dreams!!  
Oh, how I love my wild wild dreams!  
I wake each morning with regret  
At leaving my enchanted set,  
Improbable or comic stars  
And convoluted garish plots.

My endless creativity,  
Incredible imagining,  
Leaves me in breathless awe each day.  
Try to interpret them? No way!!

Long years ago, with helpful pride,  
Hoshang bought me a dreamer's guide  
That would interpret and spell out  
What all those symbols were about.  
Zwupf! Thloop! my dreams got sucked away  
By an indignant other-me.  
Nary a dream for many a day  
Until months later, I forgot  
What the interpretations meant  
And slowly dreams re-tiptoed out  
As my affronted secret Id  
Forgave my prying conscious mind  
For such intrusive trespassing  
And let my dear dream life begin.

Each morning now I wait to share  
With Hoshang my last night's bright fare,  
Pitying ever, when I wake  
His meager, starved and barren fate  
Of lost and unremembered dreams  
Missing out half of life's bright scenes.

20.09.2003



## *Toby Hodd, Gir 1968*

He came with wife Patricia,  
From England, all the way,  
To study what the lion's prey  
Consumed, and what, along the way,  
They did to their own habitat.

He found that in our monsoon lands  
The vegetation grows in spurts:  
Almost all in four monsoon months,  
Just ten percent rest of the year.

'Exclosures' told a striking tale.  
His small fenced plots kept grazers out  
And as, each week, he clipped and weighed  
Small samples from his various plots,  
Protected grass grew six feet tall  
(The grazed plots almost not at all).

As hooves compressed the soft wet clay,  
Run-off increased. Porosity  
Was six times higher within the wire-  
Fenced plot where, like a sponge, the soil  
Absorbed the rain and saved it for  
Release during the rest of year.

And palatable grass increased  
Since all were able to set seed  
Without being grazed before their prime,  
While shrubs and saplings grew as well,  
Without being trampled into Hell.

Toby proposed a strict regime  
For grazing in rotation, slopes  
For which most people had lost hope.

"During four growing monsoon months  
keep all the goats and cattle out,  
As well as humans lopping plants"  
"Thereafter, in the winter months  
Restrain the animals, but take  
As much as you can possibly  
Cut and remove, for summer feed,  
Harvest the grass, but spare the trees.

"Then, in the four worst summer months  
Let cattle graze what man has left  
While foragers may prune at will  
The shrubs and plantlets, leaving just  
Their topmost shoots for next year's growth".

A simple, sure-fire remedy  
For India's constant tragedy  
Of over-grazed, eroded slopes:  
A simple message, full of hope.



KTB Hodd and wife Patricia after their wedding





From 1969 to 1971, Almitra was honorary Project Officer for the Gir Ecological Research project, jointly run by the Bombay Natural History Society and Smithsonian Institution.

Paul Joslin studied the endangered Asiatic lions. Stephen Berwick studied their wild prey animals, the large herbivores. His wife Marianne Berwick studied the Maldharis, forest-dwelling shifting-habitation shepherds breeding local Gir cattle.

KTB 'Toby' Hodd studied the impact of grazing by both wild herbivores and cattle through grazing-protected Enclosures. Wife Patricia Hodd helped him publish a book on Grasses of Western India.

Robert Grubh studied vultures which competed with lions for their killed prey. Sanat Chavan from Gujarat Forest Dept. wrote a guidebook on Gir and was eventually its Principal Chief Conservator of Forests.

Nikhil 'Nata' Mashru was a popular local field assistant for all.



Asiatic lions at Gir



Almitra, Sanat Chavan, Paul Joslin and Nikhil Mashru at BNHS Centenary 1983



Steve Berwick.  
Page 72-73 photo credits: Paul Joslin.



Almitra at Toby Hodd's enclosure of grazing-protected tall grasses, 1971



Almitra with Marianne Berwick who studied Maldharis



Almitra at Gir, 1969

## *Geoffrey Leonard Hill*

He came from far Australia, with his golden beard and smile.  
We called him Zoroaster. He was with us for a while  
Until the snows near Mukar Beh snuffed out his bright young life.

The thought of him refreshes still the rest of us who know  
How rare it is to find a man so talented and bold  
And strong and brave, adventurous, and humorous as well.  
The way that he enriched our lives these lines can scarcely tell.

He wandered, via the Far East, into India for a spell.  
He practised architecture, learning languages as well.  
He moved in with Ashok to learn the art of Indian food,  
To appreciate our music and to learn its various moods.

He fell in with a motley band of hikers from Bombay.  
Our hills were dear to him as well, and friendship came to stay  
As, with us, he survived the thirst and losing of our way  
And sleeping in the villages, drinking the nights away,  
And marching to the music of a new day in the hills  
And swimming in the waterfalls and in the silver rills  
That sprang anew with each monsoon in every emerald vale.

Once Geoff and three 'Leftovers' left by car to travel South.  
We crossed the Deccan plateau in enormous sweeping arcs.  
Geoff loved the unfenced landscape and the monuments we saw  
Of many ancient dynasties, and nature in the raw.  
In nineteen-sixtyseven, unprotected, unlike now,  
We slept on Maha-bali-puram's ancient temple plinths  
And beside the starlit road to Kemmangundi's painted cliffs  
Where Geoff showed us before twilight how to camp, and cook with twigs.

With his guitar he'd pass the hours at night, and teach us songs  
Of waltzing with Matilda and The Pub that had No Beer  
As, sipping our 'Napoleon', we would gather round to hear

Of fatal Aussie spiders, and the proper way to shear  
A sheep or toss a bale of hay in farmer tournaments.  
Who could foresee the tragedy of subsequent events?

He had been to the Himalaya, where his climbing was excelled  
By compassion for a team-mate in an avalanche, who fell  
And was soon evacuated by a brave untiring Geoff  
Who carried him to safety, then returned to climb the peak.

He took his music seriously. At Shanti Niketan  
He signed up for a term but left to walk the snows again  
With a Sherpa and 'Bone-Breaker' and Suresh Kumar, who came  
From our hiking group at Bombay for a trek to Mukar Beh.  
They set out from Manali on an often-travelled route  
That had many times been traversed by the Mountain Institute.

They camped, like those before them, just below a mountain ridge  
Where a cornice, formed with suddenness that no-one ever guessed,  
Fell on Suresh and the Sherpa and on Geoff, within their tent.  
When they didn't rejoin 'Bone', who'd fallen sick and had returned,  
They were found a few days later, in their sleeping-bags, interred.

Now his spirit roams the whole world, with his smile and golden beard.

27.10.1992





## *The Patterned Floor: Eidetic Memory*

It was a floor of deep-red octagons,  
Green squares, ochre lozenges, black and white  
Triangles nestled in the space between,  
A tapestry of "carpet-pattern" tiles  
Cool, smooth and polished, laid upon the floor  
Of bedrooms in the house where I was born,  
Built for the clan in nineteen twenty-eight.

These tiles were special, meant to imitate  
Italian tiles of tessellated clay  
And doubly special, since they all were made  
By my dear father and his nephew-friend  
Pheroze and Rustom Sidhwa, years ago,  
Fired by Swadeshi fervour, to replace  
Imports, and let the country take her place  
With pride and local self-sufficiency.

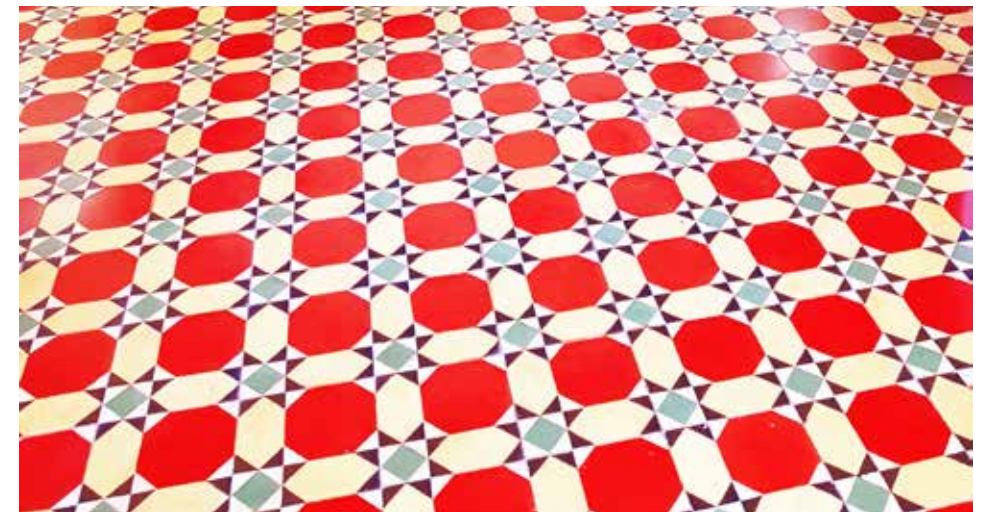
Their glowing colours mesmerised the eyes  
As I, a cradled infant, stood to stare,  
Holding the railings, at the patterned floor.  
What deep and lasting, bright imagery  
Burned itself into my young memory!

Five decades later, when I come to stay  
In my old home, the patterns leap at me  
In wonderful eidetic clarity  
As I drop off to sleep. Not 'negatives',  
Colour-reversed like after-images  
Of lights and brightness. No, there comes to me  
Unbidden, and in perfect symmetry,  
A faithful copy of that magic floor.  
Its pattern is so complex: if I try

To consciously remember how it looks  
Or draw it, or I try to visualise  
Its looks, the image disappears at once,  
Coming again, unbidden, as I sleep.  
I cannot will it. Lying hopefully,  
The pattern creeps back quite unconsciously.  
Vanishing at a hint of conscious thought,  
It slips back as I fall asleep, or wake.

This mystifying eidetic memory  
Lasts several nights after I've gone away.  
The image flits across my sleepy lids  
Like a nostalgic fragrance in the breeze  
Enfolding me in childhood memories.

13.10.1992



## *Lines from Harihar*

Today I feel, at last, that I am home.  
Outside the dust-storm howls, and lightning-forks  
Shatter the twilight of this peaceful town,  
Flashing above dark-beaded clumps of thorn,  
Thickets of babul-trees, ghostly and frail.

So was it when I lived, so long ago,  
My dim-remembered schooldays there in Barnes,  
A proud stone fortress in a barren waste  
Of bare denuded hillocks, reaching out  
All unimpeded to the distant hills  
Etched ruggedly against the evening sky,  
Inviting yet inviolate, till now  
In riper years I tread them, one and all,  
My spirit leaping up with each ascent,  
Eyes scanning yet another peak to climb  
In fierce fulfilment of the undying call  
Of Nature's awful wilderness.

It seems  
That I was born this way, since I recall,  
Passionate lover of my solitude  
And of communion with all growing things:  
The lizards clicking loudly on the wall,  
The toad, unmoving, near the lighted door  
Flicking his tongue at termites flying by,  
Pale fluttering auguries of coming rain;  
The glow-worms on the rain-trees, startling black  
Against the towering clouds that gleam blue-white  
In the unearthly light before a storm,  
All speak to me as to their kin.

I see  
Brown whirlwinds leaping up to hurl at me  
The poor eroded soil they will not spare,  
Scarce suffering a raindrop to come down  
And meet my eager, upturned, thirsting face.  
Oh that I were a peacock, prancing now  
With feathers all aspread to greet the rain,  
Stamping with eager feet to spur the clouds  
That rise and blow, too slowly, from the West,  
Releasing but one tantalising drop,  
Another, and then passing cruelly on,  
Whispering tidings of the storm to come  
Another time, not now, my eager heart  
Awaiting unfulfilled the promised rain.

These are the childhood storms that I recall  
With joyful memories, as I tell my child  
That storms today aren't what they used to be.  
Today, far from the coast, I understand  
That they belong to this rain-shadow zone  
Beyond the ghats, forever doomed to hear  
The empty thunder growling loud and long,  
The fierce unnatural brightness of the sky  
Pierced with long forks of blue exquisite light  
That reach from cloud to cloud across the sky  
Revealing the "sand devils" as they rise  
And whirl and swirl and sting and fling themselves  
At every straining bush and branch they find,  
Shredding earth's meagre covering, to reveal  
The grass-roots clinging stubbornly exposed  
Where once the ravished forest waved above.

A fond nostalgic sadness fills me now  
 As I recall, with love, my schooldays there,  
 Cowering in awe of our dear Mr Coles,  
 An august figure, unimpeachable,  
 Severe, met with weak knees and drying mouth.  
 Yet only yesterday, in an old church  
 As I sat listening to the organ sing  
 A Bach cantata, I remembered well  
 Our morning services at Barnes, where he  
 Dressed all in flowing black, with billowing sleeves,  
 And all God's sternness in his pale white face  
 Would preach unyielding strictness, firm yet kind.  
 And suddenly I loved that fierce old man  
 With such a flood of tears ! If I'd had wings  
 I would have flown to him and told him all,  
 How much he meant to me, both then and now,  
 Although I dared not say so at the time  
 And did not fully realise it then.  
 Goodbye, dear Mr Coles! Perhaps you are  
 Now far away across the world, "back Home",  
 But till I die you will belong to Barnes,  
 And Barnes to you. God bless you, and goodbye.

15.3.1969



Barnes High School gatehouse

## *Rosemary*

Alas, my heart bleeds for poor Rosemary,  
 Victim of fire and senseless violence,  
 Her husband's punching-bag, sink for his rage  
 Frustration, spite, jealousy and revenge,  
 And all the other ills that can assail  
 An immoral amoral bootlegger.

Nagratna was her name when she was born,  
 A sweet and quiet Hindu girl who lived  
 With her long-widowed mother near our farm.  
 In the same village lived rough Anthony  
 Son of a rowdy bootleg family  
 Whose 'Wild West' lawlessness has terrorised  
 The whole small hamlet.  
 Wed at the Registrar's, she changed her name  
 To Rosemary, in ten years bore him three  
 Bright little kids and lived quite happily.  
 Until this year, murdered quite senselessly...  
 Gagged, bound and beaten, drenched with kerosene  
 And set alight before her weeping kids.

I drove her, moaning, to the hospital  
 Was one of her five bedside witnesses  
 At a panchnama, vowing just deserts.  
 I testified in court, the doc did not.  
 Her family turned hostile witnesses,  
 Leaving me feeling helpless with despair  
 And filled with guilt for unkept promises.

Antony laughs with new wife number four.  
 Why do we, a blasé society,  
 Not speak up for our suffering Rosemarys?

24.9.1992



## *Inspiration*

Who has inspired me the most?  
A square but living 'paperweight'  
A man who had no arms or legs  
Displayed here in a circus once.

What character was in his face!  
Strong, brown and smiling, confident.  
The curtained stall that hid him screamed  
Sensationally 'Come and See  
The Miracle Man'. It was he.

Rolling with ease upon the floor  
Using his mouth he threw a ball  
Then caught one thrown across the hall.  
He drew and painted as we watched.  
He demonstrated how he ate,  
Removed and wore his shirt again,  
Then, at the end, his finest feat:

Upon the floor the manager  
Placed before him a bottle cork  
With sewing-needle stuck upright  
And gave the man a reel of thread.  
With wondrous skill, using his mouth,  
The brave man lifted up the end  
And thrust the thread repeatedly  
Towards the needle; all were still,  
Urging him on with bated breath  
Till finally, triumphantly,  
He lifted high for all to see  
The needle, threaded perfectly!

What strength, determination, guts  
To overcome such handicaps,  
Practice forever and again  
To learn such skills with toil and pain  
And disappointments, yet prevail!

Across the decades, still I see  
How he faced life courageously,  
Supporting self and family.  
If I had had my purse with me  
I would have showered him with notes  
To tell him what he meant to me.

I pity those who, blessed with life,  
Continuously moan and groan  
About a bruise or aching bone  
And pray the Lord may one day give  
Them also wisdom how to live.



## *Abbi Falls, Sangameshwarpet*

That was the day  
That God held him safe  
In His sheltering palm.  
Through the waterfall flying  
He fell, death-defying.

We went for a swim.  
He was too near the rim  
Of the silky-smooth current  
That fell in a torrent  
And foamed at the foot  
Of the powerful falls.

As he trod water, watching  
A raw youngster crossing  
The pool to a sandbar,  
His attention had wandered.  
He suddenly floundered  
And sucked by the current  
Was hurled through the waterfall  
Narrowly missing  
A rock at its centre.

Raghavan surfaced  
Perfectly unscathed  
Some distance downstream  
And hurried to tell us  
All's well, do not worry.  
To our mutual amazement  
No-one had noticed  
Him vanish so swiftly!  
"What did you think as you  
Crashed through the cataract?  
"I hoped nothing would happen  
To spoil all your fun"

As we all, quite oblivious,  
Lay basked in the sun.

The mind flashes back  
With a sharp stab of pain  
To a similar frolicking  
Watery scene  
Where an innocent youngster  
Just paddling in water  
Beside a wide sandbar  
Simply stepped off a shelf  
And was never more seen  
Alive, bright with laughter.

Running far downstream  
I sat by the narrows  
Awaiting his body.  
A rarely-seen otter  
At play in the water  
Made death  
seem a mockery,  
Life a reality,  
Leaping and gleaming in  
Silent tranquillity.

Thoughts return vividly  
Chest tightened icily  
Back to that similar  
Glittering scene:

Why was Raghavan saved?  
Why was Gattu let go?  
A question whose answer  
No mortal can know.

01.01.92

## *Ode to a Tree Frog (Rhacophorus Maculatus)*

Gumtoes is my pride and joy  
My frog-prince and my heart's delight  
My leaping acrobatic toy  
My entertainment every night.

When neatly folded like a fan  
He's uniformly yellow-tan  
Until, outstretched one fateful night,  
I glimpsed his wildly spotted tights !  
'Twas love at first astonished sight.

Although at first he seemed so plain  
Life's never been the same again.  
Just gently tickle, prod or tease:  
Beauty unfolds behind his knees  
Where he is polka-dotted brown  
With fancy leggings like a clown.

Asleep atop the beams all day  
At dusk he soon descends to prey  
On roaches, ants and other things  
That evening in the country brings....  
Insects attracted by the light  
That mate and perish overnight.

My bathroom is his paradise  
Which he surveys with golden eyes.  
In dizzying leaps and daring dives  
He bounds from roof to walls to floor  
Then freezes, small and immobile,  
A blot upon the snow-white tile  
Thinking himself invisible  
(A sight that's truly risible)  
or dangles, loose, relaxed and cool  
in his own private swimming-pool.

He spent the monsoon months away  
Perhaps a-courting every day  
Until last month, too cold to leap  
He came in for his winter sleep.

He's taken up his favourite stand  
Chin resting on one folded hand,  
Quite plump now and, believe or no,  
The bones upon his shoulders throw  
A shadow like a Cupid's Bow!

I gave him a big welcome kiss  
(Cold but not wet or slimy yet).  
He got a fright he won't forget  
but did not turn into a Prince  
Nor I into a frog, alas!

I fondly watch my froggy-knight  
Immobile in his dreamless sleep,  
Awaiting his first springtime leap  
My one and only glistening joy  
My charming pop-eyed golden boy.

1984



Photo: Almitra

## *Aviva's Country Wedding 1991*

"We plan next month to wed" she said,  
My lovely daughter from the woods  
Of Coorg, where she is studying figs,  
And Tarun, tall and strapping friend  
From college days in Bangalore  
And USA, where day by day  
They grew from friends to something  
more.

"We'll wed in casual style" said they  
In their new casual US way.  
He is a Catholic, she Parsi:  
"There'll be no fancy ceremony.  
Fetch, in his car, the Registrar  
To his folks' farm, three miles away,  
Sign, and be married." "As you say."  
"And have the wedding-feast next day.

We'll have it at the Club, because  
Although I'd love it at the farm  
It's too much hassle." "Not at all"  
Almitra said, "it's been my dream  
To share a bite beneath the trees  
As at your Navjotes, when your aunt  
Mota Fui cooked a feast with ease  
For ninety, who remember still  
The glorious savour of her meal.

"Well, all we need's the ring" she said.  
"We need no wedding cards at all.  
Our few close friends we can just call  
Over the phone." "I doubt we can,  
We must write to the Patel clan,  
A hundred strong, all far away,

In courtesy, to bless the day."  
"Twenty guests each." We never knew  
Till we tried bravely to short-list,  
How many dear, close friends we had  
Whose presence would be sorely missed.  
Three hundred at the very least.  
Next week the invitations came  
For an informal --- oops! Reprint!

So many friends offered to help  
With furniture hire, drinks and lights.  
Friend Chitra Bali's food assured  
All guests a tasty festive board.

Next they tracked down the Registrar.  
After being passed from hand to hand.  
And proving local residence,  
A bureaucratic bellyful  
Provoked fine tantrums, when at last  
The creep agreed to post the banns:  
Their sweet friend Suji, quite by chance  
Had warned them of a month's delay  
And no work done on Saturday.  
With luck, they'd meet their wedding date.

A flawed blood-test gave all a scare  
Till a full retest cleared the air.  
This sudden grave adversity  
Bonded the pair more forcefully.  
Their test of strength assured us all  
The marriage could stand lots of shocks.

Hoshang, Almitra, Winnie, Bill,  
The Parents of the bride and groom

Approached each other warily,  
First got acquainted cautiously  
Then hit it off quite famously  
With laid-back informality.

The wedding sari? "Simple white  
That can make do for funerals too."  
Horrors! How different from dear Ma  
Who loved all things bright, beautiful,  
Artistic, and had lovingly  
Crafted a dream in sequined lace  
For her new daughter's wedding-day.

"The keynote is austerity.  
No ostentatious finery."  
No dowry asked, nor given. Winnie  
Voiced one request, half-fearfully:  
"Persuade her to wear gold!" and then  
Gave her a chain, half-furtively.

Discussing what the rest would wear,  
Admiring Ma's fine jewellery,  
Vive, slipping into festive mode,  
Diffidently agreed to wear  
Her mother's lovely wedding wear  
So other guests could dress up too.

Mutti arrived a week early.  
Sister Dilly and family,  
Mary from Cal, a favourite aunt,  
Close cousins Silloo and Mehru,  
Dinoo, Phiroze. Old hiking friends:  
Sophie and Koth, Ashok and clan.

From Dharwad Simi's guardians came:  
Arya and the Tavargeres.  
Twenty five dear ones filled our home  
With laughing bustling noisy life  
That made the wedding come alive.

We re-invented ritual  
To suit this mixed informal pair,  
Planting, eighth morn, a banyan tree  
For "Dr Ficus", fig-lady,  
In pot with artist Arya's art  
Rather than Parsi mango-branch.

At home, Tarun was teased full sore  
After the ritual coconut-milk,  
Smeared with tomatoes, eggs and all;  
Mischievous planned for the bridal pair:  
Alarms set to go off each hour,  
Crumbs in their bed, and much much more.

That evening was the wedding-hour.  
But panic really struck at noon.  
Where was the wedding-sari, now?  
Forgotten at the tailor's? Store?  
We phoned the in-laws who, bemused,  
Realised what disorganised  
Mother-in-law their son now had.  
Aviva, comforting, not sad,  
Made light of it, while Mutti, calm  
And sensible, helped us to find  
The sari where it should have been,  
As always, kept "most carefully"!



To Nanthur Farm, three miles away  
We went, to the Machados' place  
For signing our first-born away.  
Bill led us round to meet his clan.  
We shook a few hands formally  
Till Al, in unaccustomed heels,  
Went full toss on their velvet lawn,  
Feet in the air, to break the ice!

Tarun had fetched the Registrar.  
Nine signatures apiece there were,  
Judge Sam, an uncle, witnessing  
With suitable solemnity.  
Tarun and Aviva shared a kiss  
After a mutual garlanding,  
Opened champagne, and cut the cake,  
Turned on the music, led the way  
To a grand home-made Mangalore meal  
Of sannas, pork, fish-curry, rice.

And now the pair were wed, we said,  
Until the country Registrar  
Announced that their certificate  
Would only bear next Monday's date,  
Eleventh Nov. Vive was quite pleased;  
Mutti, her grandma's, birthday date!  
With invitations for the ninth,  
They'd have three 'anniversaries'.

The ninth felt like the real Big Day.  
All prayed for rain to keep away.  
Sweet Suji came with mounds of flowers.  
With Simi's help, all afternoon,

Her flower arrangements made one swoon!  
Later, all else in readiness,  
Some guests to shop at Chickpet went  
And to fetch giant blocks of ice.

Raju, our trusty Manager,  
Had worked away, month and a day  
Between unseasonal cyclones  
To level and roll flat the grounds,  
Chicken-sheds whitewashed, just in case,  
And bunting bought to dress them up.

Now with farm boys he strung up wires,  
Arranged the chairs and tables, made  
From braided coconut leaves a gate  
And garlands from its plaited fronds,  
Spent hours arranging all the lights,  
Counted the plates, received soft drinks  
And generally left us free  
To dress up in our finery  
At sunset, when--- Calamity! ---

All lights went off throughout the town,  
Leaving bride and ten guests to dress  
By one emergency tube-light,  
Some hemlines one foot off the floor,  
Wedding shoes missing in the dark...  
Fun and excitement filled the air.  
Almitra'd bathed and washed her hair  
To set it with a dryer – alas!  
The power failure left her there  
Her usual frizzly woggly self.

It rained in town, but spared our farm.  
Hoshang stood frantic at the gate:  
The ice was quite an hour late  
And all the guests were streaming in  
Waiting for cocktails to begin!

Almitra could not greet the guests.  
Always a flame-and candle freak,  
She spent a half-hour in the house  
Truffling for lights to fight the dark  
And bottles to stick candles in  
While Sam drove off to fetch some more.  
Arya artistically adorned  
A giant anthill near the bar  
With clay lamps in the crevices:  
Traditional yet pagan touch.

Guests sat around by candle-light  
Thinking it all intentional.  
One generator-floodlamp lit  
Chitra's fine home-cooked buffet spread  
Till half-way through the meal, at last  
The lights came on and suddenly  
Shone off the lacy canopies  
Of all the giant back-lit trees.

Tarun set up his hi-fi set;  
Classical music first, and then  
Foot-stomping tunes for foot-loose teens  
To dance till one beneath the trees,  
And then an hour-long walk along  
The road to a ghost-haunted barn.

At two, all finally retired,  
Aviv and Tarun on the roof:  
Our top-most terrace. Sweetly then  
They both stayed on an extra day  
To wave their many guests away  
Before, on Monday, heading off  
In bug-red van to honeymoon  
A week in Coonoor and Munnar  
And start a new life 'neath the stars.

November 1991



## *Simonil's Country Wedding 1995*

Who shall it be? This one or that?  
That one or this? They're both so nice!  
At last our daughter Simonil  
Spoke from the heart and chose a date,  
A Saturday, four weeks away,  
Too soon for his folks, not for us  
Because by this time we were pros.  
It would be easy, since they chose  
A wedding at our Bangalore farm  
Instead of Bombay, where he's from,  
Till Sohrab came to Bangalore  
Computering, eight years ago.

Simi worked fifty miles away  
At Titan's plant for jewelry,  
Scarcely available to make  
Decisions for the big event.  
We left them just the wedding card  
And wedding list and rings and clothes,  
Easily managing the rest.

As invitations trickled out  
We booked twenty five seats by train  
For relatives to join the fun  
At a week-long reunion  
Traditional for the Patels.

Sohrab's a Parsi, so this was  
A first, tradition-bound, for us  
With ceremonies starting from  
Feb first, until the wedding fourth.  
Relatives gave expert advice  
On how and what and where and when.  
We would be sleeping forty-two

Guests for a week, and joyfully  
Began to plan where they would be.  
The terrace could sleep thirty, so  
We hired the mattresses and sheets,  
Striped rugs, gay awnings overhead.  
Our multi-mattress beds and floor  
Would take care of a dozen more.

For bathrooms there'd be quite a queue  
So we rebuilt an ancient loo  
Outdoors beside the house, plus two  
Brick-and-mud-plastered bathing-rooms.  
Our farm's old plumber laid the pipes  
And our electrician the lights  
Including all the fairy-lights  
And floodlights for the trees that night.  
An awning on the other side  
Was outdoor kitchen, as we hired  
Two huge gas-rings and borrowed two  
Monstrous big pots to feed the crew.  
We knew the loving Patel clan  
Would pitch right in and lend a hand  
Despite three farm wives working for  
Our Philomene as kitchen crew.

Arrangements for the main event  
Were easy too: a buffet-tent,  
Tables and chairs scattered about  
For six hundred or thereabout.  
Our dear friend Chitra stood prepared  
To cook a Parsi wedding-spread  
Of leaf-wrapped chutney-fish (or cheese)  
Chicken-and-gravy, lamb pulau  
Salad and fruit-salad dessert

And of course lagan-nu-custard,  
A sweet dish she had never seen.  
A Parsi friend cooked up a batch  
For Chitra's cooks to taste and match.  
Hoshang drew up the lists of drinks  
For Shankz, abstemious, once again  
To buy and man the bar and pour:  
Heroic service, all night long.

We booked bouquets, garlands and leis,  
Tailored some clothes, the wedding-  
blouse, (Simi too broke tradition, and  
Just like Aviva, would be wed  
wearing her mother's wedding lace),  
Went to the priest --at his request--  
To personally ask him to  
Perform the ceremonies at  
Our poultry farm, beneath the trees  
On the wide open space we'd saved  
For just this hoped-for wedding day.

Sohrab brought us the wedding-lamp  
From his grandmother's wedding day  
A wide-wick dream in brass and glass  
Lovingly polished by a guest.  
The side-table was improvised  
From a veined slab of deep-green stone.

But still no chairs! No wedding-chairs!  
The two did not get round to shop  
For them, and when they did, could not  
Approve of any, or agree  
On what they'd like their suite to be.  
We threatened then to marry them

On an unusual granite bench  
With seat and back all in one piece  
That we'd installed there recently,  
Except that it faced North, not East,  
And could not be moved easily.  
Guests came from Bombay, Nasik and  
Surat and Madhi and beyond:  
Two from Dharwar, two from Kashmir,  
And three more from Secunderabad.  
They came with various thoughtful gifts  
Of special foods and ethnic treats  
Like bhakhras, poris, theplas, sweets,  
Muramba, wedding-pickles, eats  
Of every flavor, shape and hue.  
On the train, they'd been eating too,  
Right from the start, all through  
the day,  
Amazing fellow-passengers  
Who wrote in jest, outside their coach,  
"The kha-kha bogie". What reproach!

Next day, fraternities began.  
Five ladies from the bride-groom's side  
Arrived with clothes to deck the bride,  
Borne in a huge tray, shoulder-high.  
Almitra met them at the door  
In ritual greeting,: waved an egg  
Over them all for seven times  
Then smashed it near their feet,  
to ward  
Off any evil being or thought.

Meanwhile, where were the wedding-chairs?  
At the last moment, Sohrab bought

Two standard knock-down dining-chairs  
 And with screw-driver, set them up  
 Two hours before the wedding-time!  
 Our Parsi weddings, post-sunset  
 Are short and quick, less than an hour,  
 So all can dive in and devour  
 Both drink and food, the main event,  
 And then, post-dinner, dance away  
 Till the start of another day.

The wedding-guests packed up and left,  
 A bustling laughing happy throng,  
 While Simi-Sohrab packed their stuff,  
 Slung on their backpacks, waved goodbye  
 And headed for their honeymoon:  
 Three weeks of scenic trekking in  
 Arunachal, Assam, Bhutan,  
 Foreshadowing a lifetime love  
 Of the outdoors and passing on  
 That joy to generations more.



## *Mutti*

"Sing and dance for me when I'm dead,  
 As Hindoos do. No tears." she said  
 As she turned ninety, ninety-one,  
 Radiant as ever, like the sun  
 For her admiring family,  
 Relations, friends – a spreading tree  
 Of persons bonded by the grace  
 Of Mutti's ever-smiling face,  
 Her wisdom, calm, serenity  
 And genuine caring sympathy.  
 A kindly heart, a listening ear,  
 Frank, wise advice for far and near.  
 She wiped our tears, allayed our fears  
 And lived life fully, day by day,  
 With model punctuality,  
 Inspiring all who came her way.

Babies were her great favourites  
 And she would eagerly await  
 News of her great-grand-children's ways.  
 We'll miss her sprightly intellect,  
 Her interest in everything  
 And everyone, keen and alert,  
 News-items clipped to match our needs:  
 On Narmada, Sam, forestry,  
 Waste-management, miscellany...  
 An inspiration to us all  
 On how to live life, walking tall  
 Though she was barely four foot nine  
 And weighed less than a child of ten.

Born in Berlin, the fourth of five  
 Children of Parsi geniuses,



Malnourishment in World War One  
Stunted her growth, but not her mind.  
A ball of German energy,  
Her visits to our Bangalore farm  
Left us exhausted as we watched:  
She'd fix a toaster, oil a hinge,  
Start on a massive sewing binge.  
When that ran out, she'd paint a door  
Repair a stool, or wax the floor...

Her failing eyesight put an end  
To her capacity to mend  
But will-power drove her till the last:

After a punctual morning walk  
She'd go to office every day:  
A Swaraj venture, Bharat Tiles  
Started by Rustam and Pheroze  
In 'twenty-two. Its fortunes rose  
On quality, integrity,  
Then foundered when, during the war  
Cement was rationed, forcing them  
To start afresh with grinding-wheels.  
Mutti was there to share the woe.  
When Pop died, three decades ago  
Leaving the business faltering  
Mutti with foresight, wits and will  
Made sure that it continues still.

That was not all. As of today,  
Thirty-five hundred village kids  
Now profit from the low-cost school  
She started fifty years ago

To help nine children pass exams  
In far Deolali, where we lived  
For many years till fifty-one.

She ran its management alone  
Attending to the smallest tasks,  
Her joy, her passion, her delight.  
She revelled in her age and charm,  
Used it to speed up and disarm  
All bureaucratic obstacles  
In order to advance her cause.

How glad we are that she could see,  
Early this year, the Jubilee  
Building that was her constant dream  
And find, at last, advisers who  
Will carry on her awesome task.

With failing eyesight, walking slowed,  
And almost deaf, she never showed  
Her multiple infirmity.  
She faced with equanimity  
Her imminent mortality,  
Planning for life till ninety-three.  
Her passing, too, was orderly.  
With her last sister Freny gone  
Two months ago, she could pass on  
Without regret, remorse or fear.  
She died with boots on. Let us cheer  
A life so full, so rich, so rare.  
May we live like her, is our prayer.

September 2000



Rajani X Desai, Mutti and Almitra





Photo credit: Mahesh Srinivas

## *Silhouettes*

They were far-sighted, great and gracious souls  
Who planted up an avenue of trees  
Arching in tunnels of a shady green  
Over the highways that we use today.

Sturdy old banyans, tamarind and neem,  
Trees that could last a century or more.  
Not for those souls the quickie gold mohur  
That only they, and not their kids, would see.  
How many of us leave a legacy  
Unselfishly, just for posterity?

Driving at night, a brilliant filigree  
Shines in the headlights. One by one, each tree  
Is lighted up, its stately majesty  
Uncluttered by its neighbours. In the dark,  
Each giant silhouette looms bold and stark  
Against the darkness, as I gratefully  
Give thanks to those who planted them for me.

So now I, too, plant for posterity,  
Seeing, in my mind's eye, each full-grown tree.

1997



## *Osho Garden, Pune*

Oh, show me the beautiful garden of Osho!  
Oh, show me the loveliest glade in the land!

Though once it was just a small foul-smelling nalla  
Of sewer-rich water that wound through the sand,  
It has now been transformed by a magical hand  
And a Japanese vision of balance and beauty  
A loyal disciple's perception of duty  
To Osho, to Nature, to God and the land.

The trees are just everyday old Indian species  
But placed with such care, pruned and shaped with such art  
That each plant is a masterpiece, standing apart  
As a gardeners' masterful gift of his craft.

The smooth rounded banks are now clothed in rich verdure  
And tussocks of grasses strategically placed  
Tease the eye into peeping across at the water  
That limpidly flows over rocks in the bed,  
Flows gurgling through crevices, sighs under bridges  
And whispers through tall reeds that border the banks.

Large rocks in the riverbed make little waterfalls.  
Right in the centre a rippled-filled pool  
Reflects in its faceted, multihued crescents  
An exquisite greenery, silent and cool.  
A well thought-out turbulence, meant to aerate  
And abate the pollution in natural ways.

Many small creatures, now, deem this a Paradise:  
Here a black crab posing close by the pool  
And there, at eye level, the nest of a bird.  
Everywhere, delicate sounds can be heard  
And the peace and serenity gently enfold  
The hurrying visitor, soothe him and hold  
Him in thrall to this wonderful, magical scene  
As he praises Creation that such things can be.

October 13, 1992



Photo courtesy - punetourism.co.in

## *Toddy Palms*

Phoenix Sylvestris! Gentle lovely name,  
Sweet as the toddy that has brought you fame.  
What do you find in Andhra that you love?  
The acid soil? The barren skies above?  
I see here your enormous families,  
Small, medium, large, with infants in between,  
Infants that are so difficult to grow  
Where humans wish them to: stubborn they are.

They neither die nor grow, biding their time.  
But I have seen your groves beside the sea,  
Salt, humid and as different as can be  
From Andhra, and you grow beside a stream  
In barren laterite. Has God decreed  
That you shall grow where humans have most need  
Of shelter, shade and joyful sustenance?

Many deny their nature even in this:  
Forbid your bounty and condemn your blood.  
Phoenix Sylvestris, rough and scraggly tree,  
Your wild untidy hair is sweetest still, to me.

9.12.70





## *The Hillside Fires*

The night's crisp edges crackle in the glow  
Of golden lines of fire that race and flow  
Up and around the hill-slopes day and night,  
Set by nomadic shepherds to urge forth  
New-flushed green grass, but killing, at one go,  
The whole wet season's growth of trees and shrubs.

October 13, 1992

## *Garbage*

The twilight frogs are silent.  
Stray dogs, smoking waste...  
Oh, pity my poisoned land.

September 2001

## *Pigs*

This fattened pig went to market,  
This pregnant sow was kept home,  
Five hundred pigs are left all over town  
To feed on the garbage and roam.

## *Kanpur's Health Officers*

They have no desks  
They have few chairs  
Paan-stains adorn the office stairs.  
Because there are no lights at all  
Within the public toilet-hall  
There's pee along the outside wall.

Ward offices are even worse.  
Loose lime is heaped below the desk.  
Cupboards are blocked with tools and poles.  
They cannot open, nor can close;  
Only the mice that build their nests  
In Registers of Births and Deaths  
Can thrive in such a dreadful place.

If this is what 'Safai' Naiks see  
And tolerate, in their own space,  
How can 'Safai' find a place  
In Kanpur's drive to change its face?

May 2001

## *In Memoriam: Capt J S Velu - 2002*

A man of great and wild extremes  
Impossible, unlikely dreams  
Of cleaning all of India's towns  
Of solid waste from roads and drains  
Within a year, or three, or ten.  
Increasing bipolarity  
Fueled his creativity,  
Carrying before him those like me  
Who shared his dreams for India, free  
Of filth and dirt and poverty.

We met in Bangalore, where I  
Was trying to cope with piles of waste  
Dumped randomly in every place  
A truck could find, leaving no space  
Unsoiled in our green rural fields  
And scenic peri-urban roads.

While I sought ways out of this maze  
Through composting ("back to the land  
The nutrients taken from it") and  
Recycling wastes in many ways,  
Velu had come to show the way  
Exnora followed in Chennai  
With door-to-door collection schemes  
Replacing overflowing bins,  
Solving the problem by recourse  
To separating waste at source:  
Keeping unmixed "wet" kitchen waste  
And "dry" recyclables for those  
Whose livelihoods as scavengers  
Of urban trash helped them to feed  
Poor migrant families in need

Of honest incomes far from home  
Where unemployment was the norm.

With Velu's start, Almitra's end  
We forged a message we could send  
To every municipality:  
Cradle-to-grave waste management.

In '94 the Surat plague  
Was triggered by the floods that came  
From waste-choked drains and rain-filled holes  
That forced rats out to human homes.  
Velu said "India sits atop  
A time-bomb that we cannot stop  
If we spend six months or a year  
In every city where we hope  
To demonstrate Exnora's role  
In keeping waste off urban roads.  
We need a Clean India Campaign  
Starting right now. We'll hit the trail  
By road, driving to thirty towns  
In thirty days, Delhi and back  
Via Surat, where we'll stop to help  
With good waste-management advice."

We set off in a high-roof van  
Marketing Hope, a circus troupe.  
"Clean Up and Flourish", banners read,  
"Pile Up and Perish" was his ad.  
We shared and learned, carrying ahead  
Each good example on our route,  
Draping our van with souvenirs  
Of every NGO we met  
Like SEWA, working for our cause.

Town welcomes brought tears to our eyes:  
 "Where have you been all this long while?  
 We crave solutions" was their plea.  
 "Bad news in print is all we see,  
 Photos of overflowing bins  
 And finger-pointing rivalry.  
 Stay back now, please, show us the way,  
 Or come back soon another day."  
 Next year saw Velu back again  
 Leading a second long campaign  
 From Kashmir to Cape Comorin  
 Four months, eleven thousand miles,  
 Much praise but nothing really changed...

Exhausting every remedy,  
 Supreme Court help we had to seek  
 To formulate a policy  
 And road-map for a clean city.  
 Thanks to their help, a Committee  
 Spelt out details for all to see  
 How good, effective management  
 Of cities could soon replicate  
 The miracle of Surat, where  
 The well-beloved S R Rao  
 Transformed it from the filthiest  
 City to India's cleanest yet.  
 The Court went further, asking for  
 Solid Waste Rules for all to know  
 Quite clearly the right way to go.  
 Manic-depressive Velu, now

Freed from his demons, barely saw  
 His country's feet set on the road  
 To freedom from demonic filth.  
 Before we pity or condemn  
 Minds unlike ours, perceived as flawed,  
 Let us give thanks for crazy men  
 Like Captain Velu. Now, farewell,  
 Rest in well-deserved peace. Amen.

08.01.2004



Santhanam and Capt Velu with Tehmi Sidhwa  
 (Almitra's mother)



From left to right: Santhanam, Almitra and Capt Velu far right, on  
 their Clean India Campaign 1994

## *Moon Moth*

One night the gods were kind to me; they sent  
Riding the moonbeams, pure, inviolate,  
A luna moth, white, vast and wonderful,  
Lit with an inner glow of palest green,  
Its body plump, a quivering, a cloud  
Of softest whitest down. Freely it came  
To grace my old dilapidated house  
Old, but not closed to sun and wind and rain  
And messengers like these.

Long did I look,  
And lovingly, although my clouded eyes  
That had forgotten how in younger days  
They had looked full in beauty's blinding face,  
Now could not quite believe their vision true.

Moth, yearningly I stretched my arms to thee  
And my cupped palms were filled with crystal joy,  
Sharp, clear, between my fingers running through  
Tingling my body with the thrill of you  
So fair, so unbelievable, so good.

You waited on the wall, not long enough  
To be quite real, but just enough to leave  
The memory of your magic clear with me.  
And yet not clear: oft and again I've tried  
To force recall of what seems now a dream.  
The image lingers, with a discontent  
Knowledge without the tingle, incomplete.  
The picture, not the meaning, stays with me.

Freely you came, and just as freely left  
With blessings, and my wordless thanks for being.  
I love the world more, knowing you exist;  
Love myself more, knowing I can still respond,  
Though briefly, with such leaping child-like joy.  
My heart is not a fossil yet. I know  
That when we meet again, you can again  
Light up my being. So I smile, and wait.

18.10.1970



Luna moth. Photo credit: thespruce.com



## *On Presenting a Paper*

Public speaking is an art  
That can set you worlds apart  
From the mumbling boring drone  
Who reads on for himself alone.

So, novice or experienced man  
Do the very best you can.  
Follow these few easy tips  
Have them at your fingertips  
And you'll soon be quite a "pro"  
Guaranteed to steal the show.

First, decide what you will say  
In an interesting way.  
(If you've nothing new to say,  
wait until another day!)  
Organise your random thoughts  
Then try to write a crisp report.  
Start by writing first the body.  
Head and tail will follow shortly.

Introduce your subject well.  
Tell us what you're going to sell –  
Product, process or idea –  
Lest you keep us guessing here.  
Give us next a quick preview  
So we're all in there with you.  
Most important, please be brief  
Lest your main point comes to grief.

You must organise your speech  
If you really want to teach.  
Once a train of thought is gone  
It's not easily re-won.

Connect your thoughts for all to see:  
"I will tell you one, two, three..."  
State your first point. When it's done,  
lead into the second one  
in a smooth connected way.  
Lead up into topic three  
Without doing it jerkily.  
Recap what you have to say  
As to point four you lead the way.

You've been asked to do the thinking  
So don't leave your audience blinking.  
Mention only what's important  
Concentrate it for the moment,  
Simplify, and clarify.  
If we need to know the rest  
Lists of references are best.

At the end, please summarise  
What you've said, to emphasize  
Conclusions, what you recommend,  
As on a happy note, you end.

Like an actor on a stage  
Who must rehearse at any age,  
Repeatedly, for each new show,  
You must practice all you know.  
Why be shy? It's done by all  
Who speak to captivate a hall.

Getting that first sentence out  
Needs a well-rehearsed work-out:  
Three rehearsals for a start,  
Spoken loud in bath or park.

Eliminate that nervous stammer.  
Cultivate a polished manner.

Speak into a tape at night  
Then replay it to improve.  
Time yourself to get it right  
Till you're really in the groove.  
It's amazing how you'll feel  
Self-confident and full of zeal.

Time your topics one by one  
So you know which ones to prune  
Lest you be cut off too soon.  
Try improvements many ways  
Remember that perfection pays.

On the big day, in the hall  
Look relaxed and smile. Stand tall.  
Never read out what you've done.  
Speak as you would one-to-one.  
With simple words and short crisp  
phrases,  
Illustrated in some cases.  
Use a card with brief points jotted  
That will keep your talk well-plotted.

Chin up, chest out, speak up, speak out!  
Use lungs and diaphragm to throw  
A clear voice to the farthest row,  
Not high and strained, but loud and low.

Avoid a fixed and glassy stare.  
Your eyes must wander here and there.  
Look near and far, then left and right

Including all within your sight  
As if you speak to them alone.

Speaking to a chart or wall,  
You will not be heard at all,  
Point in silence, with a stick  
Then turn back to the mike and speak.

Darkness puts a crowd to sleep.  
If you must project a slide  
By the rules you must abide :  
Typing simply will not do!!  
It's not large enough to view.  
If it can't be read by all  
Better not "project" at all.

Lines a millimeter thick  
Are legible and grasped real quick.  
Lettering centimeter-high  
Will spare your viewers many a sigh.  
If a slide you must produce.  
Photograph this, then reduce.

Number all slides in one corner  
So they can be shown in order  
And, in case they're dropped in fright,  
They can still be viewed aright  
Not replaced all in a jumble,  
Back-to-front, or all a-tumble.  
Hand them in well in advance.  
Don't make the organisers dance!

Illustrations must be lively,  
Commentaries crisp and timely.  
Spare us all a mess of data!  
Give us predigested matter.  
Only six words at a time  
Gets the message out just fine.  
Break it up in little bits  
Then reduce it till it fits  
Into just six words per slide.  
Remember, no pains must be spared.  
For knowledge gained that must be shared.

If by chance the power should fail  
In mid-sentence, do not quail  
Or stand silent. Just speak on  
Loudly, till the lights come on.

Obedience to the clock's a must !  
Your moderator must be just  
And give each speaker his due share  
Of time, so discipline's admired  
And punctual speakers much desired.  
You will lose all sympathy  
If you speak on endlessly.  
Better by far your speech abort.  
Obey the gavel. Cut it short.

If a session you must chair  
Please be firm and brisk and fair.  
Use a bell, and use it well:  
Ring it once to give fair warning  
That the time to close is dawning.  
Ring it twice to stop them stalling.  
Then be punctual, fair and firm:  
Don't let them speak out of turn.  
Stop them with a loud Thank-You,  
Recap with a brief review,  
And leave some time for questions too.

So off you go. You'll speak real well  
And cast a memorable spell!

April 1987





