

KUCH KHATTI MEETHI YAADEIN

STORIES OF LIFE'S
ORDINARY MOMENTS

SUJIT SENGUPTA



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Stories Matter
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To My Family

Prologue

Life is rarely made up of grand events. More often, it is shaped by small, ordinary moments that pass almost unnoticed at the time, only to return years later as memories—sometimes warm, sometimes bittersweet, sometimes tinged with pain, but often carrying a meaning we could not see when they first happened.

Kuch Khatti Meethi Yaadein is not a memoir. It is a collection of stories born from such moments—moments that have touched, amused, surprised or moved me. Some come from my own life; others have been shaped by memories shared by family and friends, or by stories of people whose lives left an impression on me.

What connects them is not where or when they happened, but what they made us feel.

There is childhood innocence, mother's love, family affection, match victory, stranded abroad, chance encounters, unexpected kindness, quiet struggles and the humour that somehow finds its way into even the most difficult situations. A delayed flight can become a lesson in compassion. A child's first earnings can reveal the beauty of innocence. A chaotic journey can become a cherished memory of enduring love. Even loss, though painful, can leave behind a story that stays with us.

These are not stories of extraordinary lives or dramatic events. They are glimpses of everyday life—noticed, remembered and, perhaps, understood a little better

with the passage of time. Because sometimes it is only in hindsight that we discover the real meaning of a moment.

Some memories are *khatti*. Some are *meethi*. And some are a little of both.

Together, they become the stories we carry with us—the moments that make us smile, make us pause, and remind us of who we were and how far we have travelled.

As you turn these pages, I hope you will find more than my memories. I hope they bring back some of your own—your *kuch khatti meethi yaadein*—the precious moments that have shaped your life and continue to live in your heart.

About the Author

A Journey of Learning and Leadership

I began my academic journey in 1961, topping my school in the Delhi Board Higher Secondary Examination, and earned a B.E from BITS, Pilani and an M.Tech. from the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay in 1969. I joined Philips India that same year as a management trainee and spent a total of nineteen years with the company, growing through leadership roles in service, sales, and marketing. Along the way, I managed multi state operations, strengthened dealer networks, and led key product initiatives.

Midway through my tenure, I took a two-year sabbatical to join Solidaire India, where I gained valuable experience in entrepreneurial decision-making, sales growth, and cash-flow management within a fast-moving consumer-electronics business.

I later held senior leadership roles at BPL Sanyo, National Panasonic, and Usha International. In 2006, I concluded a corporate career spanning more than three decades.

In 2007, I found a second calling in teaching, joining IILM Institute for Higher Education, New Delhi as Professor of Marketing. I integrated real-world

experience into the classroom and conducted management development programs for the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Confederation of Indian Industry, Daikin Air-conditioning India, Orient Electric, and numerous micro, small, and medium enterprises. Students often observed that learning from someone who had “lived through his case studies” brought theory vividly to life.

From corporate corridors to classrooms, my journey has been guided by a single principle: learning never ceases, and every experience—whether success or challenge—offers a lesson worth sharing.

I began writing during the Covid-19 lockdown. Since then, **Kuch Khatti Meethi Yaadein** has become my sixth published book.

My earlier five books are:

1. **Seize the Opportunity: Open the Champagne** (2018) – first edition & bestselling author.
2. **Are You Doing It Right?**
Customer Retention Is What Matters (2023)
3. **The Lost Art of Narration: What Life’s Experience Tells Us** (2024)
4. **Seize the Opportunity: Open the Champagne** (2025) – revised new edition.
5. **Stories of My Time** (2026)

The books are listed on Amazon.in.

Acknowledgments

Bringing out this sixth book has been a deeply reflective and rewarding journey. Each book has had a life of its own, and with each one I have learned that writing demands not only enthusiasm but also increasing reflection, discipline, and authenticity. Over the years, I have come to realise that writing is not merely about recording events but about preserving emotions, relationships, and the spirit of an era.

The immediate impetus for writing this book came from two memorable events. The first was a deeply moving encounter with a deaf and mute young girl at Bangalore Airport during my recent return journey to Kolkata. That unforgettable experience rekindled my desire to preserve these memories before they faded with time, reminding me that life's most enduring stories often emerge from its quietest moments. The second was the thoughtful encouragement of my former colleague, Prof. Anubhav Tiwari, whose suggestion for the title of this book gave it an identity that beautifully captures its spirit and purpose. Together, these two moments inspired me to bring this work to fruition.

I am deeply grateful to my sister, Jayashree Dasgupta; my cousins, Anuradha Deb and Supriyo Sengupta; my nonagenarian uncle, Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta; friends Debashis Paul and Punya Palit; former colleague from Philips India, Probir Mukherjee; and my college

acquaintances, whose recollections, anecdotes and memories have enriched these pages with authenticity and warmth. Although space did not permit me to include every story shared with me, each contribution has been deeply valued.

I thank my wife Sumita Sengupta for writing some parts of the last chapter and helping me to edit a few.

My sincere thanks also go to Ms. Maitrayee Majumdar for her graceful illustrations, which add warmth and visual charm to these recollections.

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1.

The Silent Conversation

By Sujit Sengupta

Our SpiceJet flight from Bengaluru to Kolkata was scheduled for 2:00 p.m. In Bangalore, distances are deceptive—what looks manageable on the map can easily become a two-and-a-half-hour commute. I had arranged for a cab at 10:00 a.m.

Half an hour before our scheduled departure from home, I received a message informing us that our flight had been delayed by an hour. Since Sumita and I were already ready, we decided there was no point in rushing to the airport. Instead, we left home a little later, planning to spend the extra time relaxing at the airport food court. We finally set off at 10:30 a.m.

By the time we reached the airport at 1:00 p.m., the gentleman at the counter casually informed us that the flight was further delayed and would now depart at 5:00 p.m. There was no explanation. No apology.

Since I had already checked in on my smartphone, I was not issued a boarding pass—only a small luggage tag, the sole proof of my journey. It was a commendable initiative, perhaps, to save paper and protect the

environment, though it was not particularly reassuring for a stranded passenger.



We were directed to a row of chairs some distance away, where, we were told, snack boxes would be distributed after another two and a half hours. The prospect of waiting endlessly for a mayonnaise sandwich held little appeal. Instead, we requested wheelchairs and asked the attendants to take us through security and leave us near one of the food outlets closer to our departure gate.

They wheeled us to a well-known South Indian café and left us there. We ordered dosas. The young men who had pushed our wheelchairs said they would return in an hour. I suggested that they could instead pick us up later from the waiting area outside the restaurant. They parked the wheelchairs alongside the restaurant and disappeared, little realizing that their absence would become permanent.

Inside the restaurant, a young woman served us. She had a speech disability and communicated through gestures and expressions. Yet there was such warmth in her face that words seemed unnecessary.

After we finished eating, we waited outside for the wheelchair attendants. Minutes stretched into a long wait. No one came.

Then the young woman stepped out of the restaurant. She looked around, immediately understood the situation, and, without the slightest hesitation, walked toward me. With gentle gestures, she offered to push my wheelchair herself.

Sumita chose to walk beside us.

What followed touched me deeply.

This young woman—a complete stranger who owed me absolutely nothing—slowly pushed my wheelchair all the way to the departure gate on the lower level. She navigated the crowds with patience and care, never once

showing irritation or hurry. There was something profoundly tender in the way she helped me, as though compassion came naturally to her.

She left us safely near the gate. Boarding was still an hour away. The official wheelchair attendants were nowhere to be seen.

After some time, to my surprise, she returned once again from the restaurant. It wasn't close by. Seeing that boarding had still not begun, she gestured for me to dial my number on her phone. When my phone rang, I understood what she meant: she wanted me to call her if I needed help again.

I was speechless.

Around us, tempers were rising. The flight was delayed yet another hour. Angry passengers surrounded the SpiceJet staff, demanding refunds and explanations. Their frustration was understandable. But I could never understand the point of shouting at employees who were themselves powerless, perhaps seventeenth or eighteenth in the airline hierarchy.

Somewhere amid all that chaos and irritation stood the memory of this quiet young woman, whose kindness shone brighter than the entire airport machinery around her.

Finally, around 6:00 p.m., boarding was announced. As if emerging from thin air, one of the wheelchair

attendants suddenly reappeared and escorted me toward the waiting bus and, eventually, to the aircraft.

Just before boarding the plane, my phone rang from an unknown number. Normally, I ignore such calls and later block them permanently. For reasons I still cannot explain, I answered this one.

It was the young woman's friend speaking on her behalf.

The young woman had asked her to call and check whether the wheelchair attendant had finally arrived and whether I still needed help.

For a moment, I could not speak.

A stranger—a young woman burdened with her own challenges in life—had carried such genuine concern for me that, even after returning to work, she continued worrying about whether I had safely reached the aircraft.

In more than half a century of flying, I have never encountered such pure kindness.

People often say that daughters feel a special tenderness toward their fathers. Perhaps, for a fleeting moment, she saw her father in me. Or perhaps compassion like hers simply sees humanity before everything else.

The flight eventually departed at 6:15 p.m. No snacks were served—not even for purchase. We finally reached Kolkata at 8:30 p.m.

The delay, the confusion, and the poor handling of passengers gradually faded from memory. What has remained with me is the quiet humanity of a young woman who expected nothing in return. Though she could not speak, her actions conveyed more warmth and concern than many words ever could. Even today, whenever I think of that long day at Bengaluru airport, it is her gentle smile and selfless kindness that I remember most.

(Bengaluru Airport, May 2026)

2.

The Sweet Innocence of Five Rupees

By Sujit Sengupta

There was once a little boy in Class 6. His father had just brought home a desktop computer—a prized possession in the days of screeching dial-up internet, floppy disks, and software such as WordStar and dBase. There was no Microsoft Word or Excel in sight, and computers had not yet made their way into school classrooms.

Like most curious children, he could not resist the mysterious machine. He spent hours pressing keys, clicking buttons, and figuring things out on his own. Nobody taught him; curiosity was his teacher.

His mother worked as a journalist for a women's magazine. She had only recently begun her career, and the deadlines were relentless. More often than not, she brought her work home—stacks of handwritten interview notes that had to be painstakingly typed into WordStar. After a full day at the office, it was slow and tedious work.

One day, looking at her young son, she said, “How about helping me with these interviews? I’ve already typed them

and saved them on a floppy disk. Could you run a spell check and give me the word count?"



They worked together for hours. His mother read through the interviews while the little boy carefully hunted and pecked at the keyboard, determined not to make a mistake. By the end of it, he felt like a true professional.

A day or two later, his mother received a cheque for ₹3,000 for another assignment she had completed. Curious, the boy asked, "Do you get paid for doing this kind of work?"

"Yes, I do," she replied.

After a moment's thought, he said, "Then I think I should be paid too—for all the help I've been giving you."

His mother smiled. "All right," she said. "I'll pay you."

The boy's eyes lit up. A paid job! He had absolutely no idea what people charged for typing and assisting, but that did not matter. He was thrilled simply to be trusted with such an important task.

When they were done, his mother smiled and asked, "So, how much should I pay you?"

The boy paused dramatically, as though negotiating a million-dollar business deal. After a few moments of serious thought, he declared, "Five rupees."

His mother could not help smiling. She handed him a crisp five-rupee note.

The little entrepreneur grabbed his earnings and sprinted to the colony market just behind their house. In his mind, five rupees could surely buy something wonderful.

About twenty minutes later, the front door opened.

Back came the little businessman—empty-handed.

His shoulders drooped. His eyes were watery. His grand investment plan had collapsed.

Between sniffles, he looked at his mother and said, "With five rupees... I couldn't even buy a packet of Uncle Chips."

His mother tried not to laugh, but her heart melted. The poor little fellow had worked so hard, proudly named his

price, and then discovered the cruel economics of the snack market.

Years later, that memory still brings a smile—not because of the five rupees, but because life's most precious memories are often born from the smallest moments. Long after the money has lost its value, the innocence behind it remains priceless.

(New Delhi, 1994}

3.

The Ancient Speed Champion Clock of Patna

By Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta

In our house in Patna, we had a clock. Not just any clock. A veteran. A freedom fighter. A survivor of time itself.

My father bought it at an auction the year I was born. So technically, we grew up together—except I aged normally, and it aged dramatically. It was made by an American company called Ansonia Clock Co. (now extinct—probably exhausted from making overenthusiastic clocks like ours).



By the time I was in Class Eight, the clock was at least twenty-five to thirty years old. Its machinery was strong, but its personality? Completely unstable. Some days it would crawl like a sleepy buffalo. Other days it would sprint as if it had Olympic trials. We constantly had to “adjust” it—which really meant begging it to behave.

Most days, we weren’t sure of the time. We just lived in emotional approximation.

Then came the incident.

It was summer. Morning school. Half-yearly exams. The exam started at 7 a.m.—a time clearly invented to torture students. We had to wake up before sunrise and run to school without even eating. (Who needs food when you have fear?)

One morning, I woke up, rubbed my eyes, and looked at the clock.

Seven o’clock!!!

My soul left my body.

The exam had started! Disaster! Ruin! Academic death!

I grabbed my bag and ran like a criminal fleeing the scene. I ran so fast that even the wind got tired. Reached school. Reached the classroom. Peeped inside.

All the boys were sitting and writing.

Finished. I am doomed.

The teacher—a stern Hindi teacher—was sitting there. The boys looked unfamiliar. Suspiciously unfamiliar. Like... not my classmates.

I stammered, “Sir... little late... clock broken...”

He looked at me and said, “The exam is almost over. What will you write now?”

My heart stopped.

But then he narrowed his eyes and asked, “Which class?”
“Class Seven, Sir.”

He blinked.

“Oh! That exam will be after this one. You’ve come too early. Sit outside for five minutes.”

Too early.

TOO EARLY.

My heroic, patriotic, over-enthusiastic clock had not betrayed me.

It had fast-forwarded me into the future.

I had sprinted across Patna... for no reason.

I realized the truth: our old clock wasn’t broken. It was ambitious.

And honestly? I still thanked it.

Because being early is embarrassing.

But being late to an exam?

That’s history.

(Patna, 1941-42)

4.

The Little Explorer Who Found His Way Home

By Sujit Sengupta

Ishan had just mastered the art of walking. Only a few days earlier, every little outing had been a delightful family ritual. He would clasp his mother's hand with one tiny fist and his father's with the other, gleefully hopping over every puddle and swinging between them like a cheerful little pendulum. To him, every puddle was an adventure and every walk a celebration.



Soon his confidence grew. His steps became steadier, his curiosity greater, and his determination to explore stronger than ever.

One evening, his parents took him to the small colony grocery market just behind their house. It was only a short walk away and a familiar place. Inside the shop, Ishan faithfully held one of his parents' hands while they picked up vegetables, groceries, and other household essentials. Bright packets, colourful jars, and rows of chocolates kept catching his attention.

As every shopper knows, buying "just a few things" often takes longer than expected.

A few minutes passed.

Finally, with the shopping done, his parents reached for Ishan's hand.

It was not there.

They looked beside them.

No Ishan.

Perhaps he had wandered into the next aisle? They searched among the shelves stacked with biscuits, cereals, and soap.

Nothing.

Maybe he had slipped outside?

They rushed to the entrance.

Still nothing.

Within moments, amusement turned into anxiety. His parents searched every corner of the shop, peered behind the counters, and checked every aisle once again. They began asking fellow shoppers, "Have you seen a little boy wearing a blue T-shirt?"

Every answer was the same.

"No."

Now frightening thoughts raced through their minds. Had he toddled into another shop in search of his favourite candy? Had he innocently taken the hand of another customer, believing it was one of his parents'? Or had something far worse happened?

Panic replaced hope.

After searching every nearby shop and asking everyone they met, there was nowhere else to look. With heavy hearts and tear-filled eyes, they slowly walked back home, wondering what to do next. Should they inform the police? Alert the neighbours? How would they tell Ishan's grandmother, who was waiting for them at home?

By the time they reached the house, darkness had settled outside.

They rang the doorbell.

Grandmother opened the door with a puzzled smile.

"Why are you all so late?" she asked.

Before either parent could answer, a familiar sound caught their ears.

Tring... tring...

Round and round the drawing room rode little Ishan on his bright red tricycle, happily ringing its tiny bell, completely absorbed in his own world. Looking up, he beamed at his astonished parents as though nothing unusual had happened.

For a few moments, nobody spoke.

Then came the tears—this time, tears of overwhelming relief.

What had happened?

When Ishan had lost sight of his parents in the grocery shop, he had not panicked at all. With the confidence that only a fearless toddler can possess, he had simply turned around, recognised the familiar route, and toddled all the way home. Grandmother had welcomed her little adventurer, assuming his parents were only a few steps behind.

That evening became a treasured family story, retold countless times with laughter. Whenever Ishan heard it while growing up, everyone reminded him that, even before he could speak in complete sentences, he had already proved himself to be an independent little explorer—one who had found his way home all by himself while leaving his poor parents with enough excitement to last a lifetime.

(New Delhi, 1978)

5.

The Bride at Delhi Junction

By Sujit Sengupta

Fifty-three years ago, on this very day, Ajoy and Anjana were married—though, looking back, it is a miracle they ever made it to the mandap, the honeymoon, or even home again without requiring disaster relief assistance.

Ajoy was then a young management executive in a multinational company in Delhi. Three years earlier, he had proudly entered the management cadre, which in those days meant respect, responsibility, and absolutely no money left at the end of the month. His father had passed away two years before, leaving him with a mountain of family responsibilities—unmarried sisters, household expenses, and a mother who firmly believed that the solution to all problems was simple:

"First get married."

The family lived in its own respectable house in an upmarket neighbourhood of Delhi. Anjana, meanwhile, had just appeared for her B.A. English Honours examination. The results were not yet out, but everyone already agreed on two things: she was good-looking and

far too young to know what she was getting into. She lived in a suburban town about 30 kilometres from Kolkata and had barely stepped outside Bengal in her life.

The wedding itself began like a disaster film directed by the monsoon.

Ajoy arrived in Kolkata on the morning of the wedding with his sisters, cousins and friends. The overnight rain had left the city waterlogged, bringing traffic to a standstill. Even Howrah Station, usually teeming with activity, was struggling to cope with the chaos.

One brave brother-in-law of Ajoy somehow reached the station after what was probably half swimming and half praying. Ajoy and his entourage rolled up their trousers and waded heroically through knee-deep muddy water, carrying suitcases, umbrellas, and rapidly evaporating dignity. By the time they reached his sister's house in Park Circus, they looked less like a wedding party than flood survivors.

Fortunately, the rain stopped by evening. Unfortunately, Kolkata then remembered that it was late May.

The wedding proceeded solemnly under heat and humidity capable of frying papads without oil. Priests perspired spiritually. Relatives fanned themselves with invitation cards. Everyone survived.

After the ceremony, the following morning the newlyweds and their relatives boarded the Deluxe Express for Delhi, the grand predecessor of today's Rajdhani Express. Anjana guarded her jewelry-filled handbag with the seriousness of a Reserve Bank official transporting national reserves.

Delhi hosted a magnificent reception. Ajoy's office colleagues attended in large numbers and collectively presented Anjana with a Kashmiri shawl worth ₹800—a princely sum in 1973. Ajoy smiled proudly while mentally calculating that the shawl probably cost more than his monthly disposable income.

His salary was just enough to keep the household running, support the family, and occasionally permit him the luxury of worrying.

Savings? Those were mythical creatures.

Still, every newly married man dreams of a honeymoon, and Ajoy was no exception. He planned a trip to Simla. A retailer representing his company there had newly built a modest hotel and kindly agreed to reserve a room.

Ajoy booked first-class coupe tickets on the Kalka Mail from Delhi Junction. This was serious romance: one suitcase for seven days, one handbag full of personal items, and one husband carrying almost his entire financial future in his wallet.

For Anjana, the journey itself was an adventure. She had never travelled outside West Bengal before. In a couple of weeks, she would be twenty. She barely knew Hindi. Delhi itself felt foreign; Simla may as well have been Switzerland.

They reached Delhi Junction well in time and hired a coolie, who marched ahead with the authority of a field marshal. He deposited the luggage exactly where the first-class coach would arrive – coolies in India possess railway knowledge unavailable even to railway authorities.

The train had not yet arrived.

Ajoy casually announced,

“I’ll just check the reservation chart. Five minutes.”

Five minutes.

Those famous words that have misled wives for generations.

Anjana stood beside the luggage clutching her handbag while the coolie waited impatiently. Suddenly, with a loud whistle and enormous self-importance, the Kalka Mail rolled into the platform.

Still no Ajoy.

The first-class coach stopped directly in front of her.

Still no Ajoy.

Passengers climbed aboard. Vendors shouted. Porters sprinted around carrying impossible quantities of luggage. Steam hissed dramatically as though the

railway itself sensed tension.

Still no Ajoy.

Ten minutes passed.

Now poor Anjana's imagination began galloping faster than the train engine.

Had he boarded another compartment?

Had he lost his way?

Had Delhi swallowed him whole?

Was this how North Indian husbands behaved – wandering off casually while their new brides guarded their personal belongings like unpaid security officers? She spoke almost no Hindi, and had never travelled so far from home before. Every stranger suddenly looked suspicious.

What if someone stole the bag?

What if the train left?

What if she accidentally landed somewhere entirely different and spent the rest of her life explaining herself to confused railway officials?

Meanwhile, the coolie was becoming increasingly distressed for reasons entirely related to his next customer.

“Madam, jaldi chaliye! Train jayega!”

But how could she board without her husband? For all she knew, she might spend the next several years travelling up and down North India searching for one absent-minded management executive with poor time

management.

Her eyes filled with tears. She stood frozen beside the luggage and her handbag — looking less like a honeymoon bride and more like someone accidentally abandoned by a touring theatre company.

And just when panic was about to declare complete victory...

Ajoy appeared.

Calmly.

Not running. Not worried. Not even slightly breathless. As though he had merely stepped out for a leisurely stroll in Connaught Place.

The relief that flooded Anjana at that moment could probably have generated hydroelectric power for half of North India. Meanwhile, Ajoy — blissfully unaware that his wife had mentally planned at least six emergency futures in the previous ten minutes — simply picked up the luggage and said:

“Come quickly, we’ll miss the train.”

Thus began their honeymoon.

They reached Simla the next morning. It was June, but Simla was deliciously cold. The expensive Kashmiri shawl finally justified its existence, especially during visits to Kufri, Fagu, and Naldehra.

The retailer’s shop was conveniently located on the Mall Road, ensuring that Ajoy combined honeymoon

romance with occasional professional networking. Meals were eaten in restaurants around the Mall, walks were taken in the cool evenings, and for one week they forgot salaries, responsibilities, and budgets.

Then came checkout day.

Reality returned.

Ajoy discovered he had almost no money left.

When the hotel bill arrived – ₹700, only slightly less than his monthly salary – Ajoy bravely requested the hotel owner to accept a post-dated cheque.

The retailer agreed.

Possibly out of friendship.

Possibly out of pity.

The couple boarded the bus back to Delhi with exactly ₹10 remaining in Ajoy's pocket. That amount had to cover snacks during the journey and auto fare home.

Then nature intervened once more.

A landslide blocked the road halfway down the hills.

Traffic froze completely. The bus stood motionless for hours.

Meanwhile, hunger arrived with full enthusiasm.

Anjana was starving.

Ajoy examined his financial empire and purchased one packet of chips and one bottle of Coca-Cola costing ₹1.

The two shared this royal banquet while sitting in a stranded bus wondering whether marriage always involved this much geological activity.

The five-and-a-half-hour journey finally stretched into nearly twelve exhausting hours. They reached Delhi around 9 p.m., tired, hungry, dusty, and gloriously broke.

There remained one final problem.

Ajoy had no money left for the auto fare home.

So the newly returned honeymoon couple arrived home and borrowed money from his mother to pay the auto driver.

Dinner was served.

The honeymoon ended.

And somehow, after floods, railway-platform panic, post-dated cheques, landslides, starvation-level budgeting, and complete financial collapse, the marriage survived beautifully for fifty-three years.

Which perhaps proves that lasting marriages are not built on luxury, but on surviving disasters together — preferably with humour, patience, and at least one shared packet of chips.

(New Delhi, 1973)

6.

When My PAN Became Someone Else's Landlord

By Sujit Sengupta

I came across a newspaper report that brought back a deeply unsettling personal experience. My PAN had been misused by a stranger to fabricate a landlord-tenant transaction and claim House Rent Allowance (HRA) in my name. What made the incident particularly disturbing was that I discovered it only when I happened to check my tax records.

The Times of India of April 26, 2025, reported that the Income Tax Department had begun investigating the growing misuse of Permanent Account Number (PAN) details in fraudulent HRA claims. The report noted that the revised Form 12BB requires more detailed disclosures to curb such fraud. It also highlighted how the department uses data analytics to detect discrepancies between HRA claims and the rental income reported by landlords. False claims can result in tax demands, interest, penalties and further investigation.

After spending more than five decades in the corporate and academic worlds, I believed I had earned a peaceful retirement. I never imagined that, at this stage of my life, my identity could be misused so easily in a tax fraud.

The first indication came when I reviewed my Annual Information Statement (AIS) for the financial years 2023–24 and 2024–25. There, staring back at me, was a startling entry: more than ₹3 lakh recorded as rental income supposedly paid to me.

According to the records, a woman—whom I shall call Ms. Gupta, an employee of a prominent business process management (BPM) company—had claimed House Rent Allowance (HRA) by declaring my Permanent Account Number (PAN) as that of her landlord.

Deeply distressed, I wrote to the senior management of the company. Even locating the appropriate email address proved to be a challenge. I appealed to its reputation as a globally respected organization and questioned how such a claim could have been accepted without even basic verification. Surely, verifying a rental agreement and confirming the identity of the landlord before accepting an employee's declaration should have been a minimum standard of due diligence.

The response from the firm's governance team was a masterclass in corporate detachment. They informed me that Ms. Gupta had submitted a self-declaration asserting the claim's authenticity and that the company had

processed it “in good faith.” To make matters worse, Ms. Gupta had since resigned and, though notified of my complaint, had not responded. With that, the company washed its hands of the matter, maintaining that all responsibility lay with its former employee.

I was trapped. Despite my denials, income was being officially reported against my name. As a retiree dependent on interest income, I faced a potential tax liability and penalties estimated at ₹2.5 lakh. At this stage of my life, the prospect of navigating legal proceedings felt like a monumental, energy-sapping burden

Feeling overwhelmed, I discussed the matter with my son, who immediately contacted one of his college batchmates, now a senior officer in the Indian Revenue Service. After patiently hearing my story, he confirmed what I had begun to suspect: I had become the victim of tax fraud, a problem that, he explained, was becoming increasingly common, particularly among senior citizens. Although the faceless assessment system offered little scope for direct interaction, he assured me that effective grievance-redressal mechanisms did exist. He advised me to file a police complaint, upload it to the Income Tax portal, and simultaneously lodge a grievance through the CPGRAMS portal. For the first time in months, I felt a glimmer of hope.

I followed his advice meticulously. The process was slow, and for weeks there appeared to be no progress. It was

only later that I learnt that my son's batchmate had quietly followed up on the matter, ensuring that my complaint received the attention it deserved. Eventually, the Income Tax Department initiated an inquiry, and the assessing officer in Ms. Gupta's jurisdiction was asked to verify the claim.

I later learnt that Ms. Gupta had been required to pay a substantial penalty for submitting a false HRA claim. Whatever temporary tax benefit she may have gained was undoubtedly outweighed by the financial consequences and the permanent mark left on her tax compliance record. I did not pursue the status of the police complaint any further, nor did I receive any subsequent communication from the police.

Looking back now, I realize that this episode, too, has become one of my *Khatti Meethi Yaadein*. The months of uncertainty, frustration, and helplessness were undoubtedly the *khatti* moments. The *meethi* moments lay in the kindness of those who guided me, the eventual triumph of truth over falsehood, and the quiet satisfaction of seeing justice prevail. Life has a remarkable way of transforming even its bitterest experiences into memories that leave behind not resentment but gratitude, wisdom, and a story worth telling.

..... (New Delhi 2025- 26)

7.

Rexy: A Bittersweet Goodbye

By Sujit Sengupta

It was in the small park near our house that I first noticed him. Among a litter of five tiny puppies, one little fellow waddled toward me with innocent eyes and a wagging tail, as though he had already chosen me. I picked him up, carried him home, and, without realizing it, brought home a new member of our family.

We named him Remy.

I never knew what breed he belonged to. He was probably just another stray puppy born on the streets of Delhi. Yet anyone who saw him would pause for a second look. His handsome features and proud stance often gave the impression that he came from an impressive pedigree. To us, however, he was simply Remy.

From the very beginning, he showered every member of the family with affection. He loved being patted, cuddled, and fussed over. We fed him milk when he was young, and as he grew, his meals included nonvegetarian food, which he relished with great enthusiasm. We believed we were giving him the best we could.

But Remy had a mind of his own.

I tried patiently to train him. "Remy, come!" I would call repeatedly. He never seemed interested. Commands meant nothing to him. Sit, stay, fetch—none of them worked. Friends offered advice and even tried their hand at training him, but Remy remained gloriously indifferent. He answered only to his own instincts.

Whenever we untied him, he would make a beeline for the dustbin. No matter how well we had fed him, he would rummage through garbage as though he had not eaten for days. After satisfying his curiosity, he would come inside, leaving muddy paw prints and a trail of dirt behind him. Bathing him became part of my daily routine. Every morning, I would scrub him clean, only to watch him repeat the same adventure the next day.

As he grew older, his stubbornness became more difficult to manage. He developed the habit of guarding his food fiercely. If anyone, including me, disturbed him while he was eating, he would growl and even try to bite. For everyone's safety, we kept him restrained with a collar and chain most of the time. It was never how we had imagined raising a pet, but we felt we had little choice.

Our household helper, Doodh Nath, looked after many of Remy's daily needs. Every morning, he would tie Remy to the lamp post just behind our house, where there was open space. Later, before the day became too hot, he

would bring him inside. It had become a routine we scarcely thought about.

Then came a Sunday in June.

Delhi's summer was at its unforgiving worst. The afternoon sun seemed to set the earth ablaze. That morning, I had left home to play a cricket match at school. Like every other day, Rexy had been tied outside.

It was around 3:00 p.m. when I returned.

As always, my eyes instinctively searched for Rexy.

He was not there.

"Doodh Nath, where's Rexy?" I asked.

The colour drained from his face. He struck his forehead with his fist and cried, "Oh God! I left him outside!"

He ran.

I followed.

There was Rexy, still chained to the pole under the blazing sun. His tongue hung out as he struggled for breath, and his body trembled with exhaustion. The water bowl beside him was empty. In the rush of the morning, Doodh Nath had simply forgotten to fill it.

We untied him at once and carried him inside. We gave him water, cooled him down, and tried to revive him as best we could. But it was too late. The hours he had spent

exposed to the scorching sun without water had taken a terrible toll. Rexy was suffering from severe heatstroke.

Within minutes, his breathing became weaker. We watched helplessly as he slipped away.

Rexy had survived being abandoned, but not the heat, the thirst and the neglect of that morning. His death left us devastated—and with a painful realisation of how quickly an innocent animal can suffer when left helpless in the sun.

..... (New Delhi, 1958)

8.

Kuch Khatti Meethi Yaadein: Smiles Along the Silk Road

By Sujit Sengupta

Some journeys are remembered for the places visited. Ours will always be remembered for the people we met, the confusion we navigated, the laughter we shared, and a suitcase that briefly achieved independence.

Twenty-two fellow travelers set out on a seven-night, eight-day adventure through Uzbekistan. History, architecture, and culture awaited us—but so did cold mornings, heavy luggage, and a few "Wait, did that really happen?" moments. Each city offered a distinct perspective, where architectural grandeur, intricate artistry, and deeply rooted cultural traditions blended with remarkable culinary craftsmanship, revealing a civilization that values both heritage and harmony.

And then there was Ms. Rita—our indomitable tour organiser, navigator, problem-solver, and occasional miracle worker. Escorting a spirited band of travellers across Uzbekistan would have been demanding under

the best of circumstances. Rita chose to do it with one leg imprisoned in plaster.

She had fractured it just before the tour began. Lesser mortals might have postponed the trip or surrendered to self-pity. Rita simply adjusted her stride and carried on.

Each evening, the rest of us collapsed into our hotel rooms, massaging weary feet and comparing blisters as though they were medals of honour. Rita, meanwhile, seemed immune to fatigue. She was always a step ahead—making sure the luggage had arrived, smoothing over the inevitable travel hiccups, answering the same questions for the fifth time with undiminished patience, and somehow remaining cheerful throughout. Watching her navigate crowded bazaars, uneven pavements, and endless airport terminals on what was effectively one and a half legs was both humbling and faintly unbelievable.

A Journey Worth Repeating

By the journey's end, we had explored the magnificent monuments of Samarkand and wandered through the ancient streets of Bukhara, discovering at every turn a history that stretched back centuries. Uzbekistan had revealed far more than we had expected, and there was still so much more to see and experience. Given another opportunity, I would gladly make the journey again.

Yet the memory that stayed with us most vividly was not only of Uzbekistan's architectural splendour and extraordinary history, but of Rita—moving steadily ahead

in her plaster cast, reminding us that true resilience is revealed not in words, but in the quiet determination to keep moving forward.

Here are a few glimpses from that unforgettable journey.

Tashkent: Frost, Monuments, and Wine

We arrived in Tashkent to crisp air and clear skies—the kind of cold that made even simple movements deliberate. The streets were dusted with snow from the previous night, perhaps the last snowfall of the season, lending the city a fleeting, magical freshness. Modern yet deeply rooted in history, Tashkent offered a quiet introduction to the journey ahead. Early on, it became evident that this experience would not be defined solely by monuments but also by the moments in between—the laughter, the small inconveniences, and the shared rhythm of travel.

Our first stop was the Monument of Courage, commemorating the devastating 1966 earthquake. Solemn and moving, it reminded us of Tashkent's resilience in the face of both nature and history's occasional bad moods. Next, we visited the Lal Bahadur Shastri statue, honoring India's former prime minister and the Tashkent Agreement of 1966. A quick photo opportunity later, we realized this was one of those “history and selfies” moments unique to Tashkent.

The Romanov Palace impressed with its regal elegance, while the Alisher Navoi Opera and Ballet Theatre

showcased ornate grandeur, rivaling any European stage. For a lighter thrill, we admired the dizzyingly tall Tashkent TV Tower, whose height tested even the hardiest tourist's nerves. Lunch at the Kibray Wine Estate restored our warmth and energy—proof that history is best enjoyed with good food and pleasant company.

Bukhara: Fortresses, Domes, and Strategic Rest

Bukhara felt less like a destination and more like a living museum that had simply never closed. Walking into the Ark Fortress, we realized that size truly mattered—it was practically a city within a city. Nearby, the serene Bolo-Khauz Mosque offered a quiet pause for reflection—or a strategic rest for tired legs.

The Ismail Samani Mausoleum dazzled with its intricate brickwork, while the Chashma-Ayub Mausoleum added layers of miraculous lore. The Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa Palace reminded us that even emirs appreciated comfort centuries before the advent of modern luxury hotels.

Old City highlights included the Lyabi-Khauz Ensemble; the scholarly Ulugh Beg Madrasa and the ornate Abdulaziz Khan Madrasa; the towering Kalyan Minaret, flanked by the Kalyan Mosque and the Mir-i-Arab Madrasa; and the whimsical Chor Minor Madrasa. At the Magoki-Attori Mosque, a sunken structure of pre-Islamic origin, we glimpsed the city's layered past. The bustling trade domes tempted us with textiles, spices,

and craftsmanship. By day's end, legs were exhausted but hearts were full, and camera memory cards were nearly maxed out.

Samarkand: Squares, Domes, Stargazing, and Markets

Samarkand commanded admiration. We began at the Ulugh Beg Observatory, imagining scholars mapping the stars centuries ago with extraordinary precision. The Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum, the resting place of Amir Timur, left us breathless beneath its luminous blue dome, and the Imam al-Bukhari Mosque offered a quiet, contemplative pause.

At the heart of the city lies Registan Square, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Standing there, one becomes part of a carefully composed architectural dialogue: to the left rises the Ulugh Beg Madrasah, a symbol of intellectual pursuit; to the right, the Sher-Dor Madrasah, immediately recognizable by its lion-bearing façade; and at the center, the Tilya-Kori Mosque, whose gilded interior dome radiates opulence and spiritual grandeur.

We concluded our exploration of Samarkand at the serene Bibi-Khanyim Mosque and then wandered through the bustling Siab Bazaar, where textiles, spices, and crafts offered a colorful and sensory finale to our Silk Road journey.

Throughout the trip, it became clear that the experience lived as much in shared moments as in historic landmarks. We walked through centuries, admired

remarkable architecture, sampled local cuisine, and navigated occasional logistical challenges with good humor.

In the end, Bukhara felt like a wise, tea-loving grandparent, rich with stories and patience. Samarkand was the brilliant showpiece—confident, intricate, and impossible to ignore. Tashkent served as a calm and measured beginning. Together, they formed a journey that balanced history with humanity, and grandeur with intimacy.

We left with cameras full of memories, lighter wallets, tired legs, and no regrets—proof that along the Silk Road, history and humor coexist effortlessly, especially when someone remembers the luggage.

In the following pages are day-to-day captures from the vignettes of my diary—a delightful collection of misadventures, belly laughs, dramatic moments, and priceless memories. The adventure and fun begin here, as ordinary days unfold into stories that will have us smiling, laughing, and perhaps even laughing at ourselves for years to come.

Day Zero: The Great Delhi Transfer & The Centaur Confusion – A Perfectly Chaotic Beginning

Every international trip begins with excitement, careful planning... and a gloriously confused WhatsApp group. Our journey from Kolkata to Tashkent via Delhi proudly upheld this ancient tradition.

After a thoroughly enjoyable three-day stay in Delhi, my wife Sumita and I packed our bags for the next leg of our journey—an overnight stay at the Centaur Hotel before our flight to Tashkent from Terminal 3.

The morning, however, began on what can only be described as a slightly volcanic note. The taxi sent by the local operator arrived looking perfectly confident but tragically undersized—rather like a brave ant attempting to relocate an elephant. It simply could not accommodate our two suitcases. After a brief but emotionally charged argument with the laws of physics, we conceded defeat.

We retreated to my doctor friend's clinic and summoned our old, reliable savior—the legendary taxi stand in Kailash Colony before we moved to Kolkata. Their vehicle, unlike its predecessor, firmly believed in luggage rights. This upgrade cost us a modest ₹2000, during which we also made a civilized detour via Habitat Centre

for snacks and a visit to South Extension Market to replace Sumita's nearly retired foot guards.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Delhi, the WhatsApp group had already begun its morning raga of confusion.

Subha opened the innings:

"Who is staying in Centaur tonight?"

A roll call followed. Paramita, Devasis, Tilottama—yes. Subha proudly announced she was already in "Room 3" (which later matured into Room 3019).

By evening, Subha had landed in Delhi and entered what can only be described as a live-action geography quiz:

"Reached Delhi."

"Took a cab."

"They say Centaur is in Terminal 2."

"Is it the same hotel?"

"Tomorrow do I need a cab to go to Terminal 3 at 5 am?"

"I messaged Rita (our tour organizer). No reply."

At this point, the group quietly realized that Subha was navigating Delhi airport entirely via WhatsApp and optimism.

Tilottama, already checked in, attempted clarity: "Centaur is near Terminal 3... but we need a cab to go to Terminal 3."

So, the hotel was near Terminal 3—but emotionally, not physically.

Eventually, harmony prevailed:

Tilottama: Room 3018

Subha: Room 3019

A mini-Kolkata colony had officially formed in the corridor. Naturally, the next critical decision followed: “Dinner at 8?”

Back at Centaur, nostalgia hit me hard. I had last stayed here in the 80s and 90s, and to my amazement, some of the staff looked exactly the same. Either they have discovered eternal youth... or they simply never checked out.

We had also been told that the hotel sits conveniently atop Terminal 3, allowing passengers to glide gracefully to check-in. Reality, however, had a different sense of humor. That privilege belongs to Holiday Inn Express, where rooms cost ₹20,000–₹30,000 and you are politely evicted after 24 hours—luxury with a stopwatch.

Dinner at Centaur was... authentically Centaur. Enough said.

We set our alarm for 3:45 a.m., hoping for a few hours of rest. Instead, we were honored by a surprise inspection from a cockroach who entered with the confidence of a senior hotel auditor. Had he arrived earlier, sleep would have been purely theoretical.

At 5:20 a.m., the WhatsApp group exploded again—this time at Terminal 3:

“Rita is not picking up.”

“I’m waiting near Counter L.”

“She answered but I couldn’t hear anything.”

“Some people already went through security!”

“Are we supposed to check in luggage together?”

At this stage, twenty travelers were scattered across the airport like participants in a reality show titled *Find Your Group Before Boarding Closes*.

Then came the most beautiful message of the morning from Rahul:

“Please come to Counter L.”

Paramita responded instantly:

“We are in L.”

And just like that—order emerged from chaos. Luggage was checked in, people were located, and the slightly sleepy but triumphant group finally boarded the flight.

We now sit comfortably in a Boeing 767, on our way to Tashkent—having survived taxis, geography, nostalgia, WhatsApp confusion, and one very confident cockroach.

If this was just the beginning, the rest of the trip clearly had great comedic potential.

Day One: Frozen Fingers, Missing Gloves, and the Great Toilet Quest

We landed in Tashkent, where the mornings were cold enough to make gloves essential and fingers entirely uncooperative. Breathing itself felt like a small adventure. The air was crisp, the skies clear, and the city—modern yet deeply layered with history—welcomed us with quiet dignity.

Naturally, the first thing we did as seasoned travelers was collecting our bags and try to remember where we were supposed to go next.

Eventually, we were guided toward a waiting bus. Some of us moved along the long airport corridor in wheelchairs like a slow but determined convoy. Halfway there, my assistant calmly asked me to get off the wheelchair and walk.

Why? No one knows.

Perhaps there was a rule.

Perhaps the chair had union regulations.

Perhaps he felt I needed exercise.

So, we walked the rest of the way.

Outside, the cold did not greet us politely—it slapped us across the face and demanded to know why we had left home. The bus attempted to compensate by transforming itself into a moving sauna.

Our guide enthusiastically narrated the history of Uzbekistan while we nodded politely, our minds floating somewhere between jet lag and curiosity about lunch.

Lunch, we were told, would feature Uzbek Pilaf (or *plov*) is a traditional rice dish from Uzbekistan and is one of the most iconic foods in Central Asia.

Excellent



Then came a curious announcement:

“Those observing Karva Chauth must skip.” This puzzled everyone. It was neither the season nor the occasion. Eventually, we realized he probably meant “vegetarian.” Somehow, *Karva Chauth* had become the international translation for dietary preference.



Pilaf Ingredients

The Plov was delicious. I chose not to investigate the vegetarian plate too closely.



Cooking Underway

Later, we checked into our hotel—The Elements—a name that seemed entirely appropriate, given that we had already encountered ice, fire (the bus heater), and confusion.

Dinner introduced Karva Chauth once again. Vegetarians bravely confronted a mountain of salads and tomatoes, while the rest of us dealt with kebabs in a more committed fashion.

Then came the classic announcement:

“Slight change of plans.”

Breakfast the next morning would be at 7:30 a.m., followed by a city tour involving extensive walking—in freezing weather.

Day Two: The Tashkent Chill: Of Cold Hands, Long Walks, and Better Decisions

At 7:30 a.m., a message arrived: “Please come down for breakfast.”

It sounded less like an invitation and more like a final boarding call.

By 8:45 a.m., a few of us were still negotiating with toast and jet lag. Outside, at -6°C , fresh snow made it clear that Tashkent took winter very seriously.



Monument of Courage

Somewhere downstairs, the guide was waiting. The bus was likely warming itself into another sauna. Our simple breakfast had quietly evolved into a small international incident.

Our official Tashkent city tour began shortly thereafter—cold, dark, and far too optimistic. The sort of optimism usually displayed by people who have not yet looked out the window.

Our first stop was the Monument of Courage, commemorating the devastating 1966 earthquake that flattened much of the city and left hundreds of thousands homeless. Solemn and deeply moving, it reminded us that Tashkent has survived not only the forces of nature but also the unpredictable moods of history.

It was very moving.

Very solemn.

Also very freezing.

Standing there in the biting cold, we attempted to absorb both the significance of the site and the limited circulation in our fingers. Reflection, we discovered, is considerably more difficult when one is freezing.

Naturally, I had left my gloves and woolen cap safely enjoying room service back at the hotel, probably reclining on the radiator and discussing my poor planning.

I hurried back to the coach.

“Hurried,” in this case, is one of those words used mainly for moral encouragement. I cannot actually run. What I can do is vibrate briskly in the general direction of warmth, like a slightly distressed kettle.

My hands froze instantly. The stair railings were steel, which, in winter, feel like highly polished icicles thoughtfully installed by municipal sadists.

By the time I reached the bus, I looked less like a tourist and more like Tashkent’s newest public sculpture: *Man Regretting His Life Choices*, 2026.



Shastri Statue

Our next stop was the statue of Lal Bahadur Shastri, honoring India's former prime minister, who signed the Tashkent Agreement in 1966. The moment carried a quiet sense of connection—history bridging nations in a way that felt both distant and immediate.

We marveled at diplomacy, legacy, and the remarkable ability of stone to appear perpetually composed, regardless of temperature. A quick round of photographs followed—one of those rare “history meets selfie” moments where solemnity and smartphone angles coexist peacefully.

The tour continued to a winery in the Kibray district.

I expected elegant wine tasting and serious discussions about “notes” and “aromas.”

Instead, we had lunch.

Just lunch.

Visiting a winery and skipping the wine felt rather like going to a swimming pool and being issued a towel and a firm handshake.



Lunch at Winery

Then came the city walk—announced confidently as “only 1.8 kilometers,” which, in tour-leader language, roughly translates to “long enough for regret to set in.”

During the expedition, one of our fellow travellers, Nupur, tripped and fell. She was visibly shaken but, thankfully, not hurt, and the timely availability of a tube of Moov ointment—courtesy of a well-prepared colleague—soon restored both mobility and morale.

At this point, the group naturally divided itself into two categories: the brave and the sensible.

The brave continued exploring the residence of Grand Duke Nicholas Konstantinovich of Russia, the Alisher

Navoi Opera and Ballet Theatre, the Tashkent TV Tower, and other notable landmarks.

The sensible—namely Nupur, Subha, and I—chose retreat.

My legs had, by then, formally submitted their resignation and were no longer accepting assignments.

Day one, it seemed, was a day of revelations.

As the three of us headed back toward the hotel with Anwar (our guide), the remaining members carried on—some in search of hot coffee, others guided primarily by curiosity and momentum. Farid (also our guide) knew where the bus was. Rahul (our fellow travellers) was assisting the group. Everything appeared under control.

This illusion did not last long.

Trouble began when Rahul decided to locate a restroom. He followed Farid's directions, while the rest of the group drifted in multiple directions—some toward the main road, others toward roadside kiosks displaying irresistible trinkets.

Rahul soon discovered a “Pay & Use” facility.

There was just one small problem: he had no local currency.

Displaying remarkable efficiency, he sprinted back, obtained some Uzbek Som from Ruma (now elevated to the esteemed status of *Ruma Aunty*), and set off again.

Meanwhile, the group had regrouped near the main road—only to develop fresh disagreements.

Some members firmly refused to walk any further and demanded that the bus be summoned immediately, preferably to their exact location. Others expressed a keen interest in exploring one of Tashkent’s proudest features—the Metro, renowned for its artistic stations. A few simply stood there, absorbing the chaos as a cultural experience.

Farid, by now, was beginning to lose the calm composure expected of a tour guide.

In the midst of all this, Rahul vanished.

At the same time, another member developed an urgent and persistent interest in locating a restroom, repeatedly asking anyone within earshot, “*Wahan pe toilet hai kya?*”—particularly about the Metro station, which had suddenly become less about art and more about facilities.

The situation had now officially evolved into what can only be described as *The Quest for the Toilet*.

Amid mounting confusion, Farid called the bus driver, and a strategic decision was made: the bus would circle the area until Rahul was located.

Fortunately, Rahul was spotted during the first round—standing exactly where one would expect a stranded traveler to be: without roaming, without local currency, and without a shared language.

Rescue was swift. Order, eventually, was restored.

Meanwhile, we—the early retreat party—had already secured a taxi and returned to the hotel, where warmth and seating arrangements welcomed us without conditions.

The rest of the group continued their exploration, including the Tashkent Metro—Central Asia’s first underground railway and, more importantly, a reliably warm environment.

At dinner that evening, the tour leader cheerfully announced, “Tomorrow we leave for Bukhara. Pack warm clothes.”

Everyone nodded calmly.

As for me, I made a solemn travel resolution.

Tomorrow, I am carrying gloves.

And the woolen cap.

Possibly two of each.

Day Three: Red Ribbons, Bullet Trains, and the Blessing of a Single Room

From Tashkent, our next destination was Bukhara. The previous evening's instructions had been delivered with admirable clarity:

“Leave your luggage outside your door before breakfast. Breakfast at 6:00. We leave for the station at 6:45. Good night.”

Simple instructions. Complex execution.

We had been advised to carry just one suitcase—sufficient for four nights—tied with a red ribbon, and to leave the other suitcase outside the room door. Those abandoned bags would remain safely stored until we returned to Tashkent before flying home to Kolkata via Delhi.

Breakfast the next morning revealed the usual diversity of travel behavior. Some devoured a full meal as if preparing for a Himalayan trek. Others politely toasted a slice of bread. A few quietly packed fruits and sandwiches for the train, clearly distrustful of railway catering.

At the station, we inspected the luggage adorned with the famous red ribbons.

And then the drama unfolded.

Two bags were missing.

They belonged to Ruma and Uma—a pairing whose names were similar enough to confuse humans, luggage handlers, and possibly even the ribbons themselves.

Frantic phone calls followed to the hotel. Eventually, through a video call that resembled an international crime investigation, the missing bags were located, peacefully resting in the hotel locker room.

The solution: send them by taxi to Bukhara.

Meanwhile, their owners prepared mentally for several days of fashion minimalism and creative reuse of clothing.

We boarded the famous Afrosiyob high-speed train for the 600-kilometer journey from Tashkent to Bukhara via Samarkand and Navoiy. The train can reach speeds of 250 km/h.

However, my rebellious L2-L3 spine insisted that the ride felt more like a bullock cart that had recently discovered turbo mode.

Fortunately, I had managed to secure a wheelchair. Fareed pushed me through security at impressive speed while proudly informing the guards, “He is Bubo.”

Curious, I asked what that meant.

“Grandpa,” he replied with a smile.

Wonderful. International travel had officially upgraded me to *Bubo*. Back home, the equivalent title would be *budda*, delivered with considerably less ceremony.

Behind me sat two Chinese gentlemen chatting in Mandarin. I understood nothing except their laughter, which revealed several gold-capped teeth flashing proudly. They disembarked at Navoiy, where four locals greeted them warmly.

Navoiy, we were informed, is a major mining hub dominated by the Navoi Mining and Metallurgical Company—one of the largest gold producers in the world. Perhaps our Chinese friends had arrived seeking gold... or the more fashionable treasure these days—uranium.



Navoiy Train Station

On reaching Bukhara, we were taken for lunch and later driven to our hotel, the charming Hotel Malika.

Our guide announced enthusiastically, “After checking in, those interested may join a walking tour.”

My back immediately vetoed this proposal.

With Rahul’s support, I attempted a short walk until, like divine intervention, a wheelchair appeared—arranged by Ruma. By then, Ruma had also recovered her missing suitcase. I silently thanked that little travel mishap; perhaps the delay had brought her back just in time to rescue me. Back in the room, I rested while Sumita took a long nap. I entertained myself by scrolling through YouTube until Malika kindly helped me reconnect to the internet.

By sunset, the walking tour group returned to the lobby, giggling happily. Judging from their bags and expressions, the excursion had evolved from a walking tour into a shopping expedition.

Later, I asked Priya how she had enjoyed the outing and what treasures she had acquired.

She laughed and told me her story.

In Tashkent, she had been sharing a room with a fellow traveler who had an unusual nighttime hobby. Around midnight, the roommate would switch on the television and play Bollywood songs—loudly—sometimes until one o’clock in the morning.

When Priya politely requested that the volume be reduced, the roommate offered an honest reply: “I don’t know how to reduce the volume.”

Technology, it seems, can be particularly complicated at night.

Fortunately, at Hotel Malika, Priya was granted a single room. For her, it felt less like a hotel allocation and more like a spiritual retreat for sleep recovery.

When I asked if she had bought anything during the tour, her answer was wonderfully philosophical:

“Kyaa loon? Ley ley ke cupboard bhar jaata hai.”
(What should I buy? The cupboard is already full.)

The most sensible remark of the entire journey.

Dinner was simple at the restaurant next door. Rahul continued helping me navigate steps and buses like a devoted son.

Back at the hotel, the nightly gossip session began, ending in loud laughter when Rita read out my day’s travelogue.

Then, late in the evening, the heroic taxi from Tashkent finally arrived, carrying the long-lost suitcases of Ruma and Uma—like prodigal children returning home.

Rahul and Rita’s brother, Tuhin, even drove around the city late at night, admiring Bukhara illuminated in lights. By all accounts, the night view was magnificent.

But for me, the highlights of the day were already unforgettable: missing suitcases, philosophical shopping wisdom, Chinese gold teeth, uranium mines, a bullet train behaving like a bullock cart, my promotion to *Bubo*, and Priya's discovery that the greatest luxury in travel is sometimes simply... a quiet room and a good night's sleep.

Day Four: Very Serious (Not Really) Day in Bukhara

Our grand adventure in Bukhara began beside a peaceful old pond that looked so calm and wise it probably knew every secret the city had accumulated over the centuries. The ancient trees around it seemed equally philosophical. I attempted to look thoughtful as well, though most of my energy went into watching the others take photographs and debate whose sunglasses looked most “historically appropriate.”

From there, the group marched enthusiastically through a series of ancient and impressive buildings. I listened attentively while someone whispered that one of them was among the oldest in Central Asia. Naturally, I nodded in a scholarly manner while privately wondering just how old “very old” actually meant.

At the covered market area, we bravely entered the timeless sport of bargaining. The shopkeepers, clearly veterans of this game, displayed remarkable patience while members of our group negotiated with the intensity of international trade delegates. After ten minutes of careful discussion, someone proudly saved the equivalent of half a dollar, which we celebrated like triumphant merchants of the Silk Road.

The architectural wonders continued—magnificent courtyards, dazzling tiles, elegant arches, and buildings

that have clearly been standing long enough to see several empires come and go. We spent five minutes admiring the craftsmanship and twenty minutes trying to take the perfect photograph in which nobody blinked.

At one particularly impressive monument towering above the skyline, even the most talkative member of our group fell silent. This remarkable event lasted for almost eight seconds, which is widely believed to be a personal record.

One smaller but exquisitely designed building fascinated everyone. Its brick patterns changed with the sunlight, creating shapes that inspired lively debate. Some insisted the design resembled a woven basket; others claimed it looked like a chessboard; while one imaginative observer declared that it looked exactly like a waffle—an observation that instantly made the entire group hungry.

Another grand structure reminded us that the rulers of old Bukhara once lived in considerable style. Standing there, we tried to imagine royal life several centuries ago, until someone sensibly asked where the palace Wi-Fi might have been located.

Nearby, graceful wooden columns reflected perfectly in a pool of water, producing such a beautiful mirror image that it inspired approximately forty-seven more photographs—possibly forty-eight.

Later, we saw a charming building topped with bright domes that looked less like a serious educational

institution and more like a friendly cartoon castle. No one seemed disappointed by this.

We also visited a place famous for its sacred spring. Legend claims the water appeared after a prophetic strike to the ground. We tasted it with great respect and then immediately began debating whether the flavor contained hints of minerals, ancient history, or extremely experienced plumbing.



Bukhara Glamour

Eventually, we wandered through the old city streets. Some members explored quiet corners; others purchased souvenirs with renewed bargaining enthusiasm; and a

few brave souls undertook the noble quest of locating the best plate of plov in town.



Solo Catwalk

Later that evening, we found ourselves unexpectedly upgraded to front-row guests at a dazzling fashion show, where the finest silks of Bukhara took center stage—gracefully modeled by elegant Uzbek beauties. Between the shimmer of the fabrics and the confidence on the runway, it was hard to tell what impressed us more: the craftsmanship or the charm.

By evening, we returned to the hotel tired but cheerful—and carrying approximately three times more souvenirs than originally planned.

Back in the lobby, the group gathered for the nightly session of laughter and storytelling, comparing photographs and debating whose pictures were the most impressive.

Day Five: Laundrygate and the Five-Minute Myth: A Samarkand Saga

The next morning at breakfast, the conversation took a dramatic turn. Not politics. Not history. Not even tea quality.

No—the topic was Laundrygate.



**Bibi Khyam Mosque
Samarkhand**

It appeared that one of our fellow travelers had carefully placed certain garments, along with some other clothes, into the very attractive laundry bag provided by the hotel.



**Ismail Samani
Bukhara**

Now, when a hotel provides a laundry bag, it usually means, “Please use this if you want laundry service.”

But sometimes tourists interpret it as, “What a lovely storage pouch.”

The housekeeping staff, however, were not philosophers. They were professionals. They saw the bag, interpreted it as a clear cry for help, and removed it with breathtaking efficiency.

Thus, our friend now faced a profound mystery: Where were the clothes? When would they return? Would they return in this lifetime?



Ismail Samani Mausoleum Bukhara

This added a gripping subplot to our Bukhara adventure:
The Case of the Disappearing Laundry.

The following afternoon, we were to take the train to Samarkand. The instructions were very simple:

Check your baggage.

Board the train.

Sit peacefully.

After two hours and thirty minutes, get down.

The train stops for five minutes. Retrieve luggage and exit.

Simple.

However, instructions repeated too many times eventually begin to sound like ancient prophecy.

For two entire days, our tour leader repeated one sentence: “The train stops for only five minutes.”

Not four. Not six. Five.

By the time we boarded the train, the sentence had been engraved in our brains like a motivational quote in a gym.

Now, time is a mysterious concept.

For some people, five minutes means: “Plenty of time to calmly sip tea, adjust shoelaces, and reflect on life.”

For others, it means: “Run for your life.”

Half an hour before reaching Samarkand, something extraordinary happened. The empty seats near the exit door suddenly became the most valuable real estate in Central Asia. Passengers migrated toward them like birds sensing seasonal change.

I approached the problem scientifically.

Five minutes equals 300 seconds.

Three hundred seconds is respectable. You could give a speech, cook instant noodles, or reconsider major life decisions.

But several members of our group clearly believed five minutes meant five seconds.

At this point, Sumita delivered a philosophical insight.

“See,” she said, “we are told to brush our teeth for two minutes every day. How many of us actually do it?”

The entire coach fell silent.

Everyone knew the answer.

Meanwhile, the luggage compartment had developed its own identity crisis. Half the suitcases had red ribbons tied to them. The other half did not. This did not mean the ribbon less ones were not ours—but it also did not mean they were.

Mathematicians would call this situation *uncertain probability*.

As the train slowed near Samarkand, tension rose.

The train stopped.

Suddenly, someone shouted, “This is it! Five seconds!”

Pandemonium.

People rushed out of the coach as if the train would explode if they stayed inside. The luggage cabin was raided with military precision. Suitcases were pulled, dragged, lifted—and occasionally adopted.

Within moments, our entire group stood proudly on the platform, breathing with relief.

We had survived the legendary five-second stop.

But something felt strange.

The train... was not moving.

Still, we did not question destiny.

Our bags were loaded onto a trolley, and we marched behind the trolley man like victorious explorers returning from conquest.

The train still did not move.

Only when we reached the station exit did the train finally whistle and depart.

At that exact moment, a young railway staff member came running toward us in great distress.

“You are taking away my bag!”

Apparently, during our heroic “five seconds,” our group had emptied the entire luggage compartment, assuming the train carried only us.

Somewhere on that train, a confused railway worker probably opened the luggage rack and discovered nothing but philosophical emptiness.

My sympathies remain with that gentleman.

Eventually, we reached our hotel—the Asia Samarkand Hotel.

My body leaped with joy when the bus stopped right in front of the entrance.

Civilization.

My room contained three beds.

For a moment, my imagination went wild. Coming from West Bengal—where political mathematics occasionally produces fascinating family arrangements—three beds did not seem entirely impossible.

But I dismissed the thought.

Then I noticed two mysteries.

Mystery One

Why was the commode shower on the left side? Do most tourists in Samarkand happen to be left-handed? Or are guests expected to sit facing a different geopolitical direction?

Mystery Two

The room temperature was 31°C.

Inside.

We called housekeeping. A young boy arrived and handed us the AC remote with deep seriousness.

Only then did we understand the system.

The room is heated continuously to create the feeling of peak summer. If guests cannot survive the heat, they may turn on the air conditioner to cool the room.

It is a brilliant concept.

First create the problem. Then provide the solution.

Many governments could learn from this model.

I set the AC to 22°C, feeling like a climate engineer.

Soon another message arrived: "Please assemble in the lobby at 8:40 p.m. We are leaving for dinner."

Outside temperature: 4°C.

Wrapped like migrating penguins, we marched to a nearby restaurant.

Dinner was excellent: chicken kebabs, rice, generous salads, another mysterious salad that tasted wonderful, hot tea, and dessert.

After dinner, we trekked back to the hotel. By the time we returned, the room temperature had finally reached something resembling a human habitat.

We went to bed.

But I had already made a firm decision.

I would sit comfortably inside the bus.

My purpose in visiting Samarkand was not to study history, admire architecture, analyze conquerors, or even take photographs.

Our group already had many experts doing that.

Someone, after all, had to remain in the bus and guard the luggage.

Postscript

As of writing this piece, the fellow traveler whose laundry bag vanished earlier has finally received the clothes—beautifully cleaned.

Appropriate charges were paid.

Thus, Laundrygate ended not with tragedy, but with detergent.

Day Six: The Last Supper... After 100 Steps and a Horse Encounter

The last day in Samarkand began with what can only be described as a fitness test disguised as sightseeing. First stop: **Ulughbeg Observatory**.



Ulughbeg Observatory
Samarkhand

Now, unlike the previous day's heroic climb of 165 Everest-level steps, this one had only 100 steps—and a “mild gradient” (a term clearly invented by tour operators). My heart, after filing an official protest the previous day, reluctantly approved this plan. I even volunteered, mainly because my conscience had been nagging me for behaving like luggage on wheels and not getting off the coach earlier.



Moments of Rendezvous Ulughbeg

The observatory itself was impressive—built in the 1420s by Ulughbeg, who clearly had more stamina than our entire group combined. The man calculated the length of the year with remarkable accuracy—365 days, 6 hours, 10 minutes, and 8 seconds—while I struggle to calculate how many steps remain before my next tea break.

Inside the museum, things got even more interesting. We stumbled upon a painting called *Moments from Rendezvous*. A lady in it was offering a drink with her left hand. Naturally, our group turned into a panel of experts:

“She must be left-handed!”

“Paralysis, perhaps?”

“Ancient Uzbek etiquette?”

The guide, enjoying our intellectual gymnastics, finally revealed, “The heart is on the left side—so it symbolizes love.”

At this point, cameras came out faster than exam cheating chits.

Frankly, I suspect these guides have a secret competition titled *Who Can Make Tourists Believe the Most Creative Story*. Even emperors of the past might be shaking their heads.

After a lunch that tried very hard to convince us we were rabbits—with an astonishing assortment of leafy salads—

we set off to visit the magnificent Bibi-Khanym Mosque, one of Central Asia's most celebrated architectural landmarks.

Commissioned by Timur in the late fourteenth century, the mosque was intended to be among the grandest in the Islamic world—a monumental expression of the wealth, power, and ambition of his empire. Although time and earthquakes have taken their toll, its immense scale and soaring domes still evoke the splendour of Samarkand at the height of the Timurid era.

From the solemn grandeur of Bibi-Khanym, we stepped into an entirely different world at the nearby Siab Bazaar. If the mosque spoke of imperial ambition, the bazaar celebrated everyday life—colourful, noisy, fragrant, and alive with the cheerful art of bargaining.

In short: one represents imperial glory, the other represents everyday life—and together they give you the full Samarkand experience. Everyone suddenly developed Olympic-level walking speed to finish their local currency. Dry fruits were purchased in quantities suggesting we were opening export businesses. Returning, however, was beneath our dignity—so we upgraded to tuk-tuks.

The train ride back to Tashkent was smooth, except for one gripping drama: a water bottle rolling away as if it had its own travel plans. A heroic rescue mission was attempted using my walking stick (yes, I felt like an action

hero), followed by multiple failed pickup attempts. After five tries, success was achieved. Silent applause. No medals awarded.

At Tashkent station, the gap between the train and the platform was so wide that London's "Mind the gap" would sound too mild—it deserved "Mind the well." Thankfully, staff were present to ensure we did not accidentally extend our trip onto the railway tracks.

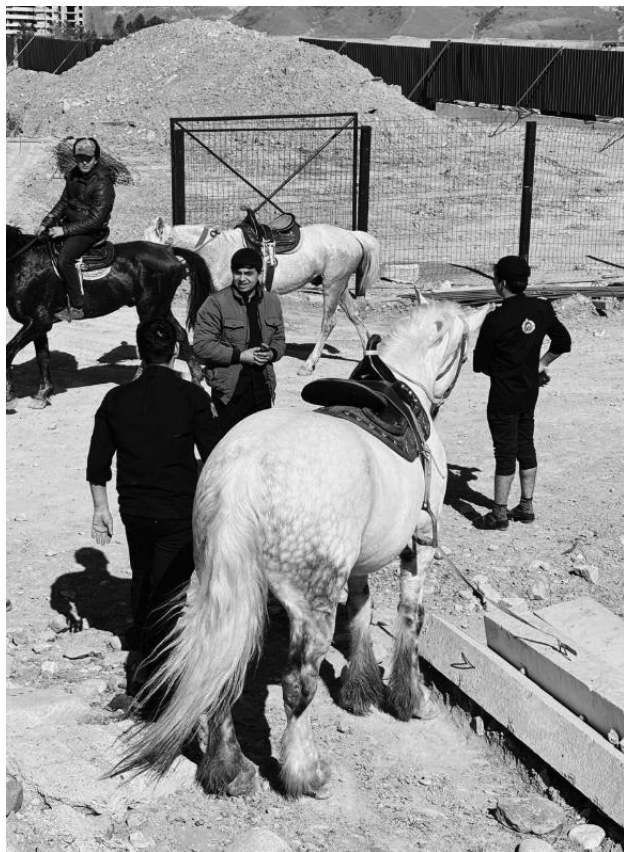
Dinner that night featured the star attraction: *baklava*. I had two pieces. Then considered a third. Then showed great restraint... and stopped at two.

The next morning, we headed to Chinorkent, a scenic mountain retreat so beautiful it briefly made us forget our knee problems. Cable cars, fresh air, and stunning views—all perfect... except that our group preferred photo sessions over nature appreciation. At least two couples recreated honeymoon poses. I quietly observed, having entered marriage the traditional way—love after EMI



Chinorkent Tashkent Region

On the way to lunch, we stopped near horses. Now, horses are majestic creatures—from a distance. Up close, they specialize in producing what scientists might call “advanced-level aroma compounds.” The moment the bus door opened, four people fled as if it were an emergency evacuation drill. No discussion was needed—their faces said everything.



Lunch bound

Post-lunch, there was a desperate hunt for more baklava. Ironically, the “famous shop” had everything except baklava.

Finally, the trip concluded with thirteen of us gathered around a table in Tashkent—our very own version of *The Last Supper*.



One Last Feast

No betrayal, no drama—just laughter, stories, and the quiet realization that the journey had been as memorable as the destination.

Day Seven: The Great 4 A.M. Expedition: Bags, Bodies, and Beluga

An Announcement after the Last Supper:

“Please put your bags outside your rooms at 4:00 a.m. for them to be brought downstairs.”

A simple sentence, really—but like all profound statements, it carries multiple interpretations.

For the supremely efficient species among us—those rare beings who complete their “morning rituals” the previous evening—this is merely a gentle nudge. They rise at 3:45 a.m., glide through brushing, dressing, and dignity intact, and float down to the lobby as if mornings were their natural habitat.

And then there is the rest of us.

For us, it is less an instruction and more a full-scale military operation. Alarms scream at 3:00 a.m. In the next sixty minutes, we attempt to compress four hours of biological, emotional, and philosophical processes into one. The human system protests—loudly. This is not routine; it is rebellion against routine.

Nevertheless, theories aside, one truth prevails: everyone is groggy. Even the efficient ones. They are simply quieter about it.

Soon enough, luggage is loaded into the coach. We collect our breakfast bags—lovingly and mysteriously

assembled by the hotel management—and take our seats. The bus hums toward the airport. Some members of the group are already dozing off with enviable ease. My eyes, however, remain wide open, absorbing life and sleep deprivation in equal measure.

The forty-minute drive feels both long and too short. At the airport, reality strikes: check-in is on the second floor, and trolleys have apparently gone on strike. We drag our bags like reluctant companions, take the elevator, and march onward. By now, my heart rate is competing with that of a marathon runner.

At the counter, a kind lady officer takes one look at me and decides that humanity still has hope. A wheelchair is arranged—after someone else, admittedly younger and probably more deserving by conventional standards—but I accept my victory gracefully. Most of our group has already checked in and is seated in the departure lounge, happily munching away at breakfast as though they have earned it. Which, to be fair, they have.

I sit. Immediately, an urgent call from the “big loo” demands attention. Crisis handled, I return, reclaim my seat, and finally join the breakfast club. Just a few steps away, the duty-free shop beckons. Several of us, displaying excellent cultural curiosity, pick up a bottle of the famous Beluga vodka—for research purposes, of course.

Boarding is announced. My designated wheelchair companion has vanished into thin air. Enter Rahul—once again proving himself the embodiment of devotion—who pushes me all the way to the gate like a son who deserves both blessings and a lifetime supply of good karma.

On the flight, I attempt sleep. Sleep refuses. Breakfast is served again—because clearly one round was insufficient for this group. Many dive in enthusiastically. I opt for black tea, becoming, it seems, a rare and complicated request. As the tea takes its own sweet time, a steward approaches and says, “Your behind is eating; please pull up your seat.”

For a moment, I am deeply concerned about the evolving capabilities of my anatomy. Only recently, my “behind” had completed an entirely different function—how it had now progressed to eating was beyond scientific explanation. The mystery resolves itself when I realize that the passenger behind me is struggling to eat because my seat is reclined. Evolution, thankfully, is not that rapid.

We land in Delhi. Fellow passengers kindly help retrieve bags, sticks, and dignity. I am reminded of a moment years ago at a railway station, when a stranger helped me carry a heavy bag and said, “Never hesitate to ask for help.” It stayed with me—and continues to prove true. People, more often than not, are kinder than we expect.

After immigration and customs, our group begins to fragment: different terminals, different flights, different directions. Our Akasa flight from Terminal 1 is smooth and uneventful—a quiet pause before the final leg home. Upon landing in Kolkata, the group of twenty-three begins to scatter further, each person peeling away into their own world.

And then, just like that, it is over.

We reach home, but something lingers. The memories remain vivid—almost stubbornly so—as I sit and write this: faces, laughter, small acts of kindness, shared exhaustion, unexpected friendships. The journey may have ended, but its imprint refuses to fade.

People had been so wonderfully human throughout the trip. Strangers became companions, companions became friends, and moments became stories that will stay with us far longer than we realize.

A heartfelt thank-you to each and every one. And especially to Fardeen—who, with effortless affection, called me “Bobo” and never once stopped looking out for me. In the chaos of travel, that kind of care becomes something rare, something unforgettable.

The last image I carry of our tour organiser Rita is from Kolkata airport—bravely limping toward the Akasa Air aircraft ramp, each step a testament to her determination, before finally allowing herself the support of a wheelchair. It was a moment that said more

than words ever could. Strength does not always announce itself loudly; sometimes, it walks quietly beside you, even when it hurts.

*(New Delhi, Tashkent, Bukhara & Samarkhand, Kolkata.
March 2026)*

9.

Mother o' Mine, O Mother o' Mine

By Jayasree Dasgupta

*Let a hundred flowers bloom,
The earth will laugh in blossoms
And shine a little brighter
In honour of the Mother.*



Part 1

The Search for a Treasure

Eight-year-old Guddu lived with his mother. He loved her dearly. The special bond between them was truly beautiful. She had made countless sacrifices to keep her little boy safe and happy.

One day, Guddu's father left for work and never returned home. Days, weeks, months, and years passed by. His poor mother waited and waited, but in vain.

Guddu was very young then. Many nights he saw his mother weeping silently. He longed to make her happy.

It was springtime. The air was gentle and fragrant, filled with blooming flowers. Fresh green leaves swayed merrily in the breeze. Birds filled the air with cheerful songs, and from somewhere in the distance came the melodious call of a cuckoo, as though nature itself were celebrating the season.

Guddu awoke to the gentle breeze. He was on cloud nine. The day was very special—it was his mother's birthday.

He had made up his mind. He would find a treasure for her. She worked so hard every day, and he wanted to make her smile.

He broke open his piggy bank, collected all the coins, slipped them into his pocket, and set out on his little

adventure. A large fair was being held on an open ground near their house.

Singing happily to himself, Guddu walked through the nearby park. A herd of cows grazed peacefully with their calves. The soft jingling of the bells around their necks filled the air with a gentle rhythm. Guddu stopped to pat them affectionately, and they nodded their heads as though greeting him in return.

He decided to take the shortcut to the fair so that he could reach it more quickly. His heart was full of excitement. He wanted to buy a treasure for his mother—a gift that would make her truly happy. As he thought about all the hard work she did every day, his eyes filled with tears.

Guddu entered the fair through a large gateway, following the stream of visitors.

It was indeed a magnificent mela.

Tastefully decorated, artfully arranged, and beautifully embellished, it was a feast for the eyes. Guddu stood still for a moment, awestruck by its splendour.

As he wandered through the bustling crowds, bright balloons floated overhead. Magicians performed astonishing tricks. Puppet shows delighted children, while the irresistible aroma of freshly prepared street food drifted through the air. Every corner of the fair seemed alive with colour, music, and laughter.

Guddu paused to admire the beautifully handcrafted articles displayed at various stalls. Everything seemed so wonderful that he hardly knew where to look first. Yet, even amidst all the excitement, his thoughts returned to his mother.

He had come in search of a treasure for her.

His eyes became moist once again.

Part 2

He Found His Treasure

At one stall, a few boys stood admiring toy guns that looked remarkably real. Guddu approached them slowly and handled one of the guns with great care, afraid that he might damage it.

About halfway through the fair, he stopped at another stall. His face lit up.

A beautifully dressed woman was selling colourful glass bangles.

His mother loved wearing bangles, but very few remained. Most had broken while she worked. Without hesitation, Guddu bought four colourful glass bangles for her.

Then he asked the woman, "Can you tell me where I can find a treasure for my mother?"

"A treasure?" she repeated, looking at him in surprise.

She smiled gently but could only shake her head.

Guddu walked away disappointed.

He wandered from one stall to another, searching earnestly for the treasure he wished to give his mother. The longer he searched, the more discouraged he became. Again and again, his mother's gentle face came before his eyes—tired from working so hard, yet always smiling for him.

His eyes filled with tears.

At another stall, beautiful sarees and dresses were displayed in every colour imaginable. Guddu thought of his mother. She always wore simple printed cotton sarees, with a tiny red bindi on her forehead and her long hair neatly tied back. She never dressed extravagantly, yet to Guddu she was the most graceful woman in the world.

She was, in his eyes, the best mother in the world.

He approached the woman at the counter.

"Can you tell me where I can find a treasure for my mother?" he asked innocently.

The woman looked at him with surprise. Seeing the sadness on the little boy's face, she felt sorry for him.

"Try a jewellery shop," she suggested kindly.

Guddu had never heard the word *jewellery*. He did not understand what it meant.

He continued from stall to stall. Everywhere he looked, there were beautifully handcrafted articles, each made to attract customers. Yet no one could tell him where to find the treasure he sought.

The cheerful excitement with which he had entered the fair slowly faded.

He began to feel hungry.

With a few of his precious coins, he bought a small piece of cake with a single candle and a few jalebis. His mother loved jalebis. Surely, they would make her smile.

After eating a little, he resumed his search, still hoping that somewhere in the fair he would discover the perfect treasure.

By now it was dusk.

The fading sunlight painted long shadows across the fields as herds of cows and calves slowly made their way home. The tiny bells around their necks jingled softly as they walked.

The sight reminded Guddu of his mother.

She must be worried about him by now.

Dark clouds gathered overhead, promising rain. The evening breeze grew cooler, but Guddu's heart felt heavy. Despite searching all afternoon, he had not found the treasure he had dreamed of giving his mother.

His eyes filled with tears once again.

An elderly woman, who had quietly observed him throughout the day, beckoned him with a warm smile.

"Little boy," she asked gently, "have you been looking for a treasure for your mother?"

Guddu nodded.

The old woman smiled affectionately.

"Go home," she said. "It's getting late, and it may rain soon. You'll find your treasure there."

Guddu looked at her, puzzled for a moment. Then his face brightened with a radiant smile.

Before the rain could begin, he hurried through the narrow lanes toward home.

The cool evening breeze carried the comforting aroma of meals being prepared in neighbouring houses.

His heart beat faster with every step.

He could hardly wait to tell his mother about his wonderful adventure.

As he reached the gate, he saw her standing at the front door, anxiously waiting with her arms outstretched.

Guddu ran towards her.

His thick, wavy hair bounced as he threw himself into her loving embrace.

Looking up at him through tear-filled eyes, she smiled and whispered,

"My Guddu... my greatest gift from God. You are my treasure."

Guddu smiled his innocent, radiant smile.

His mother wore the colourful glass bangles he had bought for her.

Together they celebrated her birthday with cake, jalebis, laughter, songs, and dancing.

Outside, the first raindrops began to fall, dimpling the still waters of the nearby ponds.

No words were needed.

A mother's loving gaze speaks more eloquently than words ever can

Part 3

A Mother's Endless Wait

To the reader:

I would have been the happiest person if Guddu and his mother had lived happily ever after. But life does not always unfold as we wish. What is destined to happen will happen.

As Guddu grew into his teens, he quietly left home one morning before dawn in search of his long-lost father. His absence created a void in their life so to make her mother happy Guddu left his house in search of his

father. Before leaving, he placed the colourful glass bangles carefully beside a note for his mother.

In it, he wrote:

"O Mother o' Mine, don't be sad."

Every evening thereafter, Guddu's mother waited for him, hoping that her beloved son would one day return.

She continued to live in the same old house, preserving his room and his belongings exactly as he had left them. From time to time, she visited the fairground, still hoping against hope that she might somehow find her long-lost child.

Time is like a brisk wind. Every hour it brings something fresh, something new, and something inevitable.

Guddu's mother, Lakshmi, worked in my school. Occasionally, Guddu accompanied her to school. He was a sweet child with an innocent smile that could brighten anyone's day.

At times, Lakshmi would share her memories of Guddu with me. As she spoke of him, her eyes would quietly fill with tears.

Even today, whenever I think of her, I remember not only a mother's endless sorrow but also her boundless love—a love that waited patiently, year after year, sustained by hope and cherished memories.

Some stories do not end with certainty. They live on in the hearts of those who continue to believe that love, however long the wait, never truly fades.

(Kolkata, 1986)

10.

An Unexpected Victory at Sea

By Sujit Sengupta

Cruises are fun. Cruises are de-stressing. One can literally let one's hair loose while on board a cruise liner, as one can get to visit many new places without the hassles of packing, unpacking, and checking into new hotels during the course of travel. Days are full of entertainment as cruises also offer great learning experience as any kind of travel to any new place does. To many, cruises often offer a perfect holiday—relaxing, effortless, and indulging to senses. There are promises of the rare luxury of a variety of unlimited food, tea or coffee and in theory, it is travel without friction.

And, in many ways, it truly is.



Cruise Liner

Modern cruise liners—especially those operated by Royal Caribbean International, which is the setting of this story—are less like ships than floating cities. On board are restaurants, theaters, spas, shopping arcades, swimming pools, and enough entertainment to make you forget whether you are sailing across the ocean or strolling through an exceptionally well-organized resort that simply happens to move. The only things conspicuously missing are motor vehicles and two-wheelers—apparently, even a floating city has parking problems.

Dining is abundant on this cruise liner—and slightly dangerous in its generosity. Endless buffets tempt even the most disciplined traveler, elegant dining rooms lend every meal a sense of occasion, and specialty restaurants

serve everything from Italian and Asian cuisine to prime steaks and fresh seafood. Choice is no longer a luxury; it becomes a daily negotiation with one's appetite, and of course wallet at some restaurants and bars.

Entertainment is equally impressive. Broadway-style productions, live music, comedy shows, casinos, and outdoor movie screenings ensure that boredom never comes aboard.

It was during one such evening on our first ever cruise - it was on the Mediterranean - that we strolled into one of the ship's theaters, expecting nothing more than an hour of pleasant diversion.

A program called the **Best Couple Contest** was about to begin. Since we were first timers, we knew absolutely nothing about it.



Contest Underway

So, we sat down.

That simple decision turned into one of the enjoyable moments of the entire voyage.

The host bounced onto the stage with infectious enthusiasm and immediately began inviting couples from the audience to participate.

"Couples married for sixty years or more, please raise your hands."

Silence.

"Fifty-five years?"

Nothing.

"Forty-five?"

Still no response.

"Forty years?" - still no raised hands!

The host now changed his numbers - "Ok, anybody married for more than 30 years!" Almost instinctively, our hand went up!

Completely inexperienced we walked on stage. For the moment, we were the only couple in the theater who had completed so many years of married life!

The host continued lowering the threshold. Two more couples joined us. At twenty-five, another couple appeared. At twenty years, two more climbed onto the stage.

Five couples in all.

The competition began by separating husbands from wives. Men sat on one side facing the east side of the stage, women on the other facing the west, making communication impossible. Each of us received a sheet of paper and a pen before being asked a series of intimate questions about our spouses.

The audience quickly realized they were watching something that was part game show, part relationship examination.

The questions sounded deceptively simple like -

What is your spouse's favorite food?

In the days of silence who's the first one to speak?

What habit annoys your partner the most?

Where did you first meet.... etc.

We were instructed to answer honestly. Our responses would later be compared.

One round after another, couples were eliminated as mismatched answers exposed the inevitable gaps that even years of marriage cannot completely erase.

Then something unexpected happened.

Our answers kept on matching.

Question after question, we stayed in the competition. Not every answer was identical, but enough of them were to carry us into the next round.

Some of the naughty questions put the audience roaring into laughter. And strangely our luck didn't run out.

To our complete disbelief, we won first prize.

There we were, in the middle of the sea, having accidentally won a contest we had never intended to enter.

For a few moments, we simply looked at one another, trying to understand what had just happened. Whether our victory reflected years of compatibility, remarkable coincidence, or extraordinarily successful guesswork remained open to debate. We gathered many gift hampers as the winners of the show!

What happened next was even more surprising. As we walked out of the theatre, we discovered that we were no longer anonymous passengers. People smiled as they passed us, congratulated us in the corridors, and regarded us with amused curiosity—as though we had become minor celebrities overnight.

“Married for that long!” we were greeted with astonishment, as if we had just announced that we had survived a particularly dangerous expedition.

And then came the elevator. On the way up to our room, we found ourselves sharing it with an elderly gentleman and a young, petite Thai woman. We exchanged polite smiles, but I couldn’t help wondering whether they, too, had heard about our remarkable marital achievement—or were simply wondering why we were being congratulated all over the ship!

By the time we reached our cabin, we had apparently acquired a new identity: we were no longer just passengers, but “that couple who had been married for years!”

That completely unplanned evening became one of the most memorable moments of our voyage. We admired the magnificent ship, enjoyed the beautiful coastlines of France and Italy, and savoured the excellent food and entertainment. But what stayed with us most was the laughter in the theatre—and our unexpected victory.

Even today, whenever we recall that journey, we smile at the thought of becoming “that couple who won!” It is one of those little episodes from our travels that we have enjoyed sharing with family and friends ever since.

(Somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, 2012)

11.

The Most Expensive Marble I Never Saw

By Sujit Sengupta

My assignment in Eindhoven had concluded, and I was on my way to São Paulo, Brazil for the next leg of my training. Since my flight from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport was scheduled for the evening, I had several hours to spare. After depositing my luggage and obtaining a ticket at Amsterdam Central Station, I decided to spend the afternoon exploring the city.



Marble Juggling

The day began sensibly enough. I grabbed a quick meal at McDonald's, wandered through the streets, and walked around with the confidence of a seasoned traveller—despite this being only my third overseas trip. The universe, it seemed, was waiting for the opportunity to prove me wrong.

Later, I came across a small crowd gathered around a man performing what appeared to be a simple game involving a marble and four metal cups...

This is easy, I thought. These people simply aren't paying attention.

The first volunteer confidently wagered fifty Dutch guilders—about USD 25 in those pre-euro days—and lost.

The second volunteer lost as well.

I felt a surge of intellectual superiority.

Amateurs.

Then something interesting happened.

The next participant guessed correctly and doubled his money. Another stranger won an even larger amount. More people seemed to be winning, and my confidence grew even faster than my curiosity.

Then the magician looked directly at me.

"You want to play?"

That was the moment when common sense quietly packed its bags and left.

Confident that I had solved the trick, I handed over USD 50. After all, I had been studying every move like a detective solving an international mystery. The magician urged me to increase my wager to USD 100, assuring me that bigger bets brought bigger rewards.

Naturally, I agreed. Why should greed ever listen to reason?

"Open that cup," I said with complete confidence.

No marble.

"Try the next one."

Another USD 50 disappeared.

"Then it must be the third one."

Another USD 50 vanished just as quickly.

By the time the performance ended, the only thing that had doubled was my embarrassment. I had lost USD 200—the entire amount I had carefully saved from my daily allowance to spend in the duty-free shops before boarding my flight. The tricksters pocketed my money and disappeared with remarkable speed, leaving me shocked, helpless, and with no opportunity to recover what I had lost.

It was an expensive lesson in human psychology.

The magician had not merely deceived my eyes; he had manipulated my confidence, my greed, and my conviction that I was the smartest person in the crowd. Looking back, I am convinced that many of the earlier "winners" were accomplices, carefully planted to create the illusion that the marble could be followed and the game won. I was never playing a game of chance. I was the victim of a well-rehearsed confidence trick.

The evening unfolded very differently from what I had imagined. Instead of browsing perfumes, chocolates, and electronic toys in the duty-free shops, I found myself sitting alone on a bench outside Amsterdam Central Station, watching the crowds drift past. The excitement of shopping had vanished, replaced by the nagging realization that the money I had intended for gifts and souvenirs had disappeared within minutes.

For nearly an hour, I replayed the incident in my mind. How could I have been so gullible? Gradually, the answer became obvious. My loss had not resulted from bad luck but from misplaced confidence. By the time I understood the deception, the lesson had already cost me USD 200—a considerable sum in the mid-1980s.

Eventually, I collected my bags from the left-luggage counter and boarded the coach to Schiphol Airport for my onward flight to São Paulo. My wallet was lighter, but my understanding of human nature had become much richer.

Today, I look back on the incident with a smile. At the time, it felt like a painful and expensive mistake. Over the years, however, the loss of money has faded while the lesson has endured. I learned that appearances can be deceptive, easy money is often an illusion, and overconfidence without caution can carry a heavy price.

That invisible marble became the most expensive one I never saw.

Perhaps that is what *Khatti Meethi Yaadein* is truly about. At the time, the experience was unmistakably *khatti*—bitter enough to overshadow the day. Decades later, it has become *meethi*: a story that evokes a smile, offers a lasting lesson, and reminds me that life's greatest treasures are seldom measured in money. The USD 200 disappeared long ago, but the memory it purchased has remained priceless.

(Amsterdam, 1986)

12.

São Paulo – A Brush with Danger

By Sujit Sengupta

The flight from Amsterdam to São Paulo seemed endless. For twelve long hours over the Atlantic, my thoughts refused to leave me in peace. They kept returning to the same bitter memory—the smooth-talking trickster who had relieved me of USD 200. In the mid-1980s, that was no small amount.



Near Mugging

Every dollar represented months of hard-earned savings. To make matters worse, despite my repeated requests, the airline had once again served me nothing but leafy vegetables. Between disappointment, frustration, and exhaustion, sleep came only in short, restless spells.

At around eight o'clock in the morning, our aircraft finally touched down in São Paulo, Brazil.

Waiting for me at the airport was Philips Brazil's local service representative. He spoke only a little English; everyone else conversed in Portuguese, a language completely foreign to me. We exchanged a few words, drove through the bustling city, and reached the hotel that had been booked for me.

It was one of São Paulo's better hotels. The room was spacious, spotless, and elegantly furnished. I still remember the tariff—USD 120 per night—a princely sum in those days. I was scheduled to spend ten days travelling across the Brazilian countryside with my local guide, studying Philips' franchise service arrangements. India and Brazil shared many geographical similarities, making the assignment particularly interesting.

Yet fate had other plans.

As we checked in, my local host informed me that Brazil's President had passed away early that morning. The entire city had virtually come to a standstill. Government offices were closed. Businesses had shut their doors. Sightseeing was impossible.

There was nothing to do except remain inside the hotel.

One thing immediately caught my attention. Throughout the hotel, at almost every prominent location, warning signs stared back at guests:

"BE AWARE OF PICKPOCKETS."

My host reinforced the warning.

"Do not carry your passport... don't carry cash... don't carry important documents."

His tone left no room for argument.

Taking no chances, I locked away my passport, travel documents, traveller's cheques, and all my cash in the hotel's safe deposit locker.

Still, sitting inside the room all day was unbearable.

After a refreshing shower, I decided to take a short walk—no more than a kilometre from the hotel—just to catch a glimpse of Brazil's largest city. Since I would be carrying no valuables, I believed it would be safe.

Or so I thought.

Before leaving, I removed everything from my pockets except two one-dollar bills, which I slipped into a flat leather visiting-card holder. Along with the two notes, it contained my business cards, my personal details, my Mumbai contact information, and the address and telephone number of the local host who was attending to me.

I informed the hotel manager that I was stepping out briefly and walked into the unfamiliar streets of South America.

The city felt strangely deserted.

The large shops were shuttered because of the national mourning. Only a handful of newspaper and magazine vendors remained on the pavements. I stopped at one stall and glanced through the colourful magazine covers. Unfortunately, everything was in Portuguese.

After a few minutes, I continued walking.

Soon I reached a pedestrian crossing. On the opposite side stood three African men talking amongst themselves. I allowed them to cross ahead of me.

As we reached the other side, two of them turned towards me.

One pointed at my wristwatch and, in Portuguese, appeared to ask for the time.

Thinking they simply needed assistance, I smiled politely and replied in broken English,

"It is about twelve noon."

They nodded.

Nothing seemed unusual.

I resumed walking.

Barely a minute had passed.

Without warning, everything exploded into action.

Two of the men suddenly grabbed me from behind in what appeared almost like a friendly embrace.

Before I could react, the third man's hand shot expertly into my trouser pocket.

In one swift movement, he ripped open the seam of the trouser pocket, snatched the leather card holder, and all three vanished down the street with astonishing speed.

It was over in seconds.

I stood frozen.

My heart pounded violently.

My legs refused to move.

For several moments I simply stood there, struggling to breathe, trying to understand what had just happened.

Never before had I experienced anything like it.

Slowly, after regaining my composure, I turned around and retraced my steps to the magazine vendor.

Pointing to my torn pocket, I tried to explain through gestures what had happened.

He immediately understood.

His expression revealed no surprise.

Instead, it carried sympathy.

Realising how badly shaken I was, he spoke in the local language to a companion and asked him to escort me safely back to my hotel.

As we walked, the companion explained something unexpected.

He gestured for me to check the litter bins along the way. "Many thieves are only after cash. If they find nothing else of value, they often discard wallets, card holders and papers in the rubbish bins."

I was astonished.

What a strange code of conduct!

Steal the money—but discard the rest so the victim might recover his documents.

He explained that most of these pickpockets were drug addicts. They needed quick cash for their next dose. Passports, business cards and addresses meant nothing to them.

Fortunately, I had listened to my host's advice.

Had I been carrying my passport, traveller's cheques and money, they would all have disappeared within seconds.

I would have been stranded in a foreign country thousands of miles from home, with no identification, no money and no way of proving who I was.

As I sat safely back in my hotel room that afternoon, the enormity of what I had escaped slowly sank in. The torn

pocket of my trousers was a small price to pay. Thankfully, I had followed my guide's advice and left my passport, money, and travel documents securely locked away. What might have become a far more serious ordeal ended with nothing more than a damaged pair of trousers and a lasting lesson.

Little did I know that my next overseas journey, from Amsterdam to São Paulo, would bring another unexpected adventure—and another lesson in international travel.

(Sao Paulo, 1986)

13.

Na Jajao Na Tasthao (The Frozen State)

By Anuradha Deb

This is the story of my friend Lena and me on a journey from Bratislava to Vienna.

We had just finished attending a conference in the newly formed city of Bratislava, the charming capital of Slovakia. Now we were heading home—she to Greece, I to India. There is one more detail you should know, dear reader: we were both people of color. Why that matters will become clear as the story unfolds.

We had bought our bus tickets from Bratislava to Vienna and were enjoying a pleasant journey through the East European countryside.

It was a Sunday, and we had a day to explore Vienna. Lena would take her flight back to Athens, while I would stay an extra day, explore Vienna—particularly Mozart's domain—and then fly back to Mumbai the following day.

We reached the Vienna bus station and went to the currency exchange counter. There, we were abruptly and

rather rudely met with complete noncooperation from the man behind the counter.

At first, he refused to open the counter. When he finally did, he refused to exchange our dollars into Austrian currency (Schilling) unless we could provide \$100 bills. It was clear to us that we were being treated differently because of our race. However, since he ignored all our explanations, we were directed to the underground metro station and told to try our luck there.

We went down to the station platform, which was underground, and looked for a ticket counter. We found none. Lena, being more familiar with European systems, walked toward a pillar-like structure that appeared to be a ticket machine.

But there was a problem—the interface was in German, and neither of us could read or understand it.

We were stuck. We could neither go forward nor go back. We had no usable money, and because it was Sunday, the platform was completely empty except for the two of us. There was no help in sight.

We looked at each other, shrugged helplessly, and were close to tears when, just behind me, I heard a male voice speaking in Bangla, asking whether I was Indian.

I turned around. There stood a man who appeared unmistakably Indian. He repeated his question, and when I nodded, he looked genuinely relieved and asked if he could help.

"Help?" I almost embraced him on the spot. We poured out our entire story of distress and asked, without hesitation, for his assistance.

He immediately took charge. The train was about to arrive, but he bought our tickets, helped carry our suitcases into the compartment, and assured us that he would take us to our hotel.

Despite our insistence that we could manage on our own—we had maps and directions—he refused to leave us. He got down with us at our stop, walked us to our hotel, ensured that our booking was in order, gave us his card, and told us to call him if we needed anything at all.

Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving behind only gratitude and disbelief.

Many years have passed since that afternoon in Vienna, yet I have never forgotten his kindness. We never met again, but I still remember how readily he stepped forward to help two strangers in a foreign land when we had nowhere else to turn.

At a time when we felt completely helpless, his generosity restored our confidence and transformed what could have been a distressing experience into one that I recall with warmth and gratitude even today.

(Vienna, 1994)

14.

More Than a Match

By Probir Mukherjee

Chapter 1

The Match

Kailash Devsingh Thakur sat quietly on the veranda of the old Gymkhana clubhouse, a glass of gin and tonic resting lightly in his hand. Beyond the railing stretched the cricket field, glowing gold in the late-afternoon sun.

Thirty years had passed, yet that Sunday refused to fade from memory.

He could still see himself—twenty-eight years old, nervous but determined, pads strapped on, gloves tucked under his arm, waiting near the pavilion steps.

The home side needed thirty-seven runs with four wickets in hand.

“You’ll bat at number nine,” the captain had said earlier.

Kailash had nodded politely. Nobody knew much about him. He had entered the side only because one of the regular players—a former Ranji cricketer—had fractured his leg the previous week.

At work, Kailash was already earning a reputation. Armed with a management degree, relentless discipline, and an instinctive understanding of people, he had quickly risen to head the Bombay sales team of Hindustan Care Products, an emerging personal-care company.

But cricket belonged to another life.

Years earlier, he had been a university-opening batsman who scored centuries with ease. Then came responsibilities, career pressures, and long absences from the game.

At the trials, his bowling had impressed the selectors. His batting had not.

Twice, he had been bowled in the nets.

So number nine it was.

Now, seated among senior Gymkhana members who viewed him with cautious doubt, he could almost hear their thoughts.

Can this young corporate fellow really replace a Ranji player?

To be fair, he had already contributed well—taking two wickets with his off-cutters, holding a sharp catch in the deep, and fielding energetically. But none of that mattered now.

The chase was slipping away.

Then he saw her.

She entered beside an elegant older woman, probably her mother. She wore a pale-yellow shirt with white trousers, her sunglasses pushed back over her neatly tied hair.

Confident. Graceful. Impossible to ignore.

Their eyes met briefly.

She smiled.

Kailash hesitated before smiling back.

Another wicket fell.

“Twenty-eight needed,” the captain muttered. “You’re next.”

He placed a reassuring hand on Kailash’s shoulder.

“Stay with Patel. Don’t do anything reckless.”

Kailash picked up the bat and walked out.

As he crossed the boundary rope, he glanced toward the pavilion again.

She gave him a small nod of encouragement.

Something stirred inside him.

Patel met him halfway down the pitch.

“Defend,” Patel instructed nervously. “Take singles. I’ll try to finish it.”

Kailash adjusted his gloves calmly.

“I’ll play naturally,” he replied softly. “I used to open.”

The field tightened around him.

Two slips.

Short midwicket.

The fast bowler, Zaidi, thundered in.

Short ball.

A mistake.

Instinct took over.

Kailash swivelled and hooked magnificently.

The ball sailed over square leg for six.

Silence.

Then disbelief.

The next ball was overpitched outside off stump.

Crack.

Cover drive.

Four more.

Now the fielders were shouting at one another.

“Keep it full!”

“Don’t give width!”

Zaidi glared furiously.

Kailash barely noticed.

Years seemed to fall away. His timing returned.
Confidence flooded back through him.

Another boundary sped past square leg.

Applause erupted around the ground.

The spectators sensed something extraordinary
unfolding.

The over ended with eighteen runs.

The captain tossed Kailash his own Panama hat from the
pavilion.

“Looks like we found our batsman,” someone shouted.

The penultimate over began badly.

Patel was trapped LBW.

Ali, the nervous leg-spinner, walked in as the last
recognized batsman.

“No singles!” barked the opposition captain.

The bowler steamed in.

Ali survived a loud appeal, and they scrambled a leg bye.

Kailash took strike again.

The next delivery sat up outside off stump.

Cut shot.

Four.

Only eight required.

The bowler pitched the next ball fuller.

Kailash leaned into a straight drive so pure that even the opposition stood admiring it.

Four more.

The crowd roared.

One shot away.

The final delivery of the over was driven powerfully through long-on.

The ball bounced once before crossing the rope.

Victory.

For a second, nobody moved.

Then the Gymkhana exploded into celebration.

Teammates rushed onto the field.

Someone lifted Kailash onto their shoulders.

And through the noise, through the cheers and applause, he heard her voice clearly.

“Well played.”

Chapter 2

The Dinner Party

That evening, Kailash returned to the Gymkhana after a quick shower in his modest paying-guest accommodation in Worli.

He almost turned back at the entrance.

The polished interiors, liveried stewards, and senior executives made him feel painfully out of place.

Then his boss, Regional Manager Vijay Sharma, arrived with his family.

“He’s with us,” Sharma told the steward firmly.

Inside the Chatham House Bar, conversations paused as Kailash entered.

Then came applause.

Warm. Genuine. Unexpected.

And standing at the center of it all was the young woman from the pavilion.

Now dressed in a maroon sari.

Radiant.

She walked toward him first.

“I’m Dr. Priya Sharma,” she said with a smile. “And that was one of the finest innings I’ve ever seen.”

“Kailash Devsingh Thakur,” he replied awkwardly.

“I know,” she said with a laugh.

The evening passed in easy conversation. Priya was a surgical resident at Bombay Hospital—intelligent, composed, and refreshingly direct.

For the first time in years, Kailash found himself distracted from work.

Yet he left early.

Ambition still ruled him.

He came from a disciplined Army family. His dreams were practical: earning promotions, achieving financial stability, and bringing his younger siblings to Bombay for higher studies.

Romance belonged to another world.

Or so he believed.

Chapter 3

Rising Fast

Weeks turned into months.

Kailash immersed himself in work.

When the company faced an aggressive sales target during a transport strike, his Bombay team developed an innovative marketing campaign—a nationwide consumer raffle offering apartments and cars as prizes.

The campaign became a sensation.

Sales surged.

Market share expanded dramatically.

Consumers loved it.

Senior leadership took notice.

Most importantly, Arjun Parekh—the legendary division director everyone called "Jun"—recognized something exceptional in Kailash.

Not just intelligence.

Leadership.

The ability to inspire people.

Kailash was promoted rapidly to marketing operations at headquarters.

The cricketing hero had become a rising corporate star.

Yet somewhere in the back of his mind remained the memory of Priya Sharma.

Chapter 4

The Alley

One evening, after a meeting at the Gymkhana with visiting executives from London, Kailash unexpectedly ran into Priya again.

“Where have you disappeared to?” she teased.

He struggled for words.

“Come to Bombay Hospital after you finish,” she said lightly. “I’m on night duty. We’ll have coffee.”

For nearly an hour afterward, Kailash debated with himself as he walked through the city.

Should he go?

Should he stay focused?

Should he risk emotional complications?

Fate answered for him.

Cutting through a dimly lit alley near the station, he spotted two thugs threatening a young couple at knifepoint.

Without thinking, Kailash charged toward them.

The confrontation turned violent.

One thug slashed at him with a knife, cutting his arm and chest before Kailash fought back, striking him with his belt buckle and bringing him down.

By then, nearby police officers and passersby had rushed into the alley and overpowered the attackers.

Bleeding heavily, Kailash collapsed against the wall.

Minutes later, an ambulance carried him to Bombay Hospital.

Chapter 5

More Than a Match

The emergency room doors swung open.

Dr. Priya Sharma walked toward the incoming patient—and froze.

“Kailash?”

Even through the blood and chaos, she recognized him instantly.

“I invited you for coffee,” she said sharply, fighting back panic. “Not surgery.”

The wounds were serious but not life-threatening.

She supervised every stage of his treatment personally.

For a week, Kailash remained in the hospital.

And for a week, Priya visited him every day.

Not always as a doctor.

Sometimes simply as Priya.

They spoke for hours—about cricket, ambition, fears, family, loneliness, and dreams.

For the first time, Kailash allowed someone past the armor he had built around himself.

One evening, as rain lashed against the hospital windows, Priya finally asked quietly,

“Why were you always trying to run away from me?”

Kailash smiled faintly.

“Because I knew that if I stopped running, I would never want to leave.”

She took his hand.

“You don’t have to.”

Epilogue

Years later, Kailash Devsingh Thakur became one of the most respected leaders in the Indian consumer-products industry.

Priya became a renowned surgeon.

Together, they built a life filled with hard work, friendship, laughter, and unwavering partnership.

Every year, on the anniversary of that unforgettable cricket match, they returned to the old Gymkhana.

He would sit on the verandah with his gin and tonic.

She would smile at him exactly as she had that afternoon, decades earlier.

And Kailash would always think the same thing:

Some matches are won on the scoreboard.

The important ones change your life forever.

(Mumbai 1985)

15.

Knowing Anna

By Debashis Paul

Flashback to the early years of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's economic liberalization of India. The backdrop: the opening of India's doors to globalization and the end of the infamous license raj.

It was 1993. A widely respected European manufacturing company operating in India's consumer electronics and electrical products category—with its umbrella house brand—was increasing its stake in the Indian market, thanks to the new economic policies.

To expand its footprint during this exciting new chapter, the Company decided to launch branded televisions in India—backed by sizable media budgets, plenty of marketing flair, and a bold communications strategy. The brand, already trusted in India, was ready to make a splash.

I was in Kolkata in my early 30s, and working at one of the top-ranked international advertising agency networks in the country.

It was a great time to be in advertising. Careers were fast-tracked, and creative output, productivity, and accountability were all at their peak. I was brought in to handle this new client—the European manufacturer and marketer—operating out of Mumbai and Kolkata.

For the high-stakes TV launch, the client asked our agency to find a ‘fresh face’, striking in appearance and appeal, for the campaign, a term that, today, we’d equate with a ‘brand ambassador’. But there was a catch: no celebrities, no movie stars, and no well-known models would be acceptable. The operative word was ‘fresh’.

And so, the hunt began.

I briefed my colleague, Meenu, the head of the modeling and photography department in our Mumbai office. Within weeks, she had compiled a shortlist, and I flew in to review the portfolios in our Mumbai conference room.

My task was to narrow it down to 2–3 candidates to present to the creative team. After that, the client would be looped in for discussion and their final approval.

Needless to say, this decision would be the linchpin of the entire brand communication process. Every creative execution—print ads, TV Commercials, in-store—would hinge on this choice.

From experience, we knew these decisions could drag on—subjective as they were—and there was no time to conduct consumer research. Speed was of the essence.

So, as the man on the spot, I valiantly moved forward.

There were about 60 portfolios laid out—showy, professionally bound, each containing 10–12 photographs showcasing different styles: Western wear, Indian ethnic, Indo-Western, casuals, and more. I browsed through them, examining each model's versatility in appearance and alignment with the creative brief.

Then, something unusual happened.

Buried within the stack was a single, modest photo—just 5x7 inches—that slipped out and landed on the table. It showed a girl in the foreground among a group of people, seemingly at a birthday party. She wasn't smiling, she wore no noticeable makeup and had no extravagant clothes. Yet, her sharp features caught my eye.

It wasn't a stylized or posed photo. It looked completely candid. And that made it stand out.

I flipped it over. Scrawled on the back in rushed handwriting was her name: Anna.

Puzzled, I turned to Meenu, seated at the other end of the room.

“Hey, tell me more about this girl, Anna. Is she even interested? This submission looks so casual.”

Meenu nodded. “She’s definitely interested. She called to say she’s never done a professional modeling shoot. This was the only photo she had. She’s a college student.”

“Alright,” I said, “let’s meet her. Just her, for now.”

“What about the others?” Meenu asked, clearly surprised.

“Put them on hold,” I replied without hesitation.

“Let’s meet this intriguing student to start with.”

The next morning, as I rushed into my office on the 13th floor, Meenu called on the intercom.

“Remember the girl from the birthday party - Anna is here in the reception.”

As I stepped into the bustling reception area, full of footsteps and chatter typical of an ad agency, I spotted Anna—a 22-year-old art student—sitting calmly, almost like a Buddhist monk amidst the chaos.

I introduced myself and sat beside her. She spoke in a soft, refined tone.

“I’m interested in modeling for well-reputed brands, Mr. Paul. Please give me a chance. I’m still a student, but I’ll make the time.”

I looked up at her. Nah! she needed no tiaras or tassels to stand out.

She wasn't bubbly or charming.

She was composed. Poised. She barely moved her hands or head while speaking.

She was different.

There was no effervescence—a quality we ad folks often look for. But her green-blue eyes were stunning and mysterious.

Still, I needed to stay objective.

“You seem very young,” I said. “We’re looking for someone in their late twenties—someone with a more mature presence, as this is a high-involvement purchase category.”

For the first time, her expression shifted.

“I can easily be made to look older with the right hair and styling,” she replied quietly.

It was decided. She'd do a test shoot the next day at the agency, assisted by a pro make-up artist.

When the results came in, I was stunned.

That overt innocence was gone. She looked confident, striking and at ease in every type of attire. Her versatility was remarkable.

I showed Anna's photos to the creative director. There was no other model option.

He gave an immediate nod: "Unusual face. Radiant. Glamorous".

The client's top boss in Kolkata liked her, as she was clearly a 'good fit' for the 'fresh face' brief. Approvals came quickly. No alternatives were requested—a rarity for high-profile campaigns.

Then came the contract negotiation. Anna handled the entire process with composure and professionalism. Her quiet confidence, her calm demeanour, and her clarity of purpose would give her a clear edge in the competitive world of modelling, going forward - these thoughts swirled in my head for long.

The photo shoot was followed by a TVC series.

What struck me the most was her grace under pressure. She was never nervous before a shoot. Never irritable. Never demanding. No tantrums. No need for validation.

This was rare—not just among newcomers, but even seasoned models.

Even with my limited experience then, I sensed that Anna had something special.

Not just her looks or height (5'7"), but her quiet determination, her inner calm, and her strong sense of self.

One day, during the seven-day shoot, she called me to her room.

“Could you help me with the legal and contractual details of my next modelling assignment?” she asked.

“Anna, you should get a legal expert,” I replied professionally.

She smiled and said, “You’re competent enough. Most importantly, I trust you.”

I softened a little, I admit. I read through the paperwork and penned in my recommendations.

Our campaign launched with great success across print, television, and trade. Dealers were energized, the sales team was inspired, and we organized large-scale dealer conferences in several cities. The campaign significantly strengthened the company's market position, enabling it to gain considerable market share in a highly competitive market.

Cut to the following year.

Following our media campaign, Anna, became the cynosure of the advertising modelling industry. The talk of the town!

She soon dazzled at international pageants and events.

A look back, and my instincts about her, were entirely validated. That’s a thrill beyond compare.

- She became a brand ambassador for many international brands of repute
- She made it to the list of the world's most influential people
- She was cast in lead roles in both Indian and Western films

Years later, I met her again—at an awards ceremony. I mustered the courage to say hello.

Despite her global fame, Anna was still the same—poised, calm, authentic, and grounded. No arrogance. No need to impress.

We reminisced about her early career days.

She told me, “I want to use my success to uplift at least one village in my home state. I dream of building world-class schools for the next generation.”

I wished her happiness and success in fulfilling her dream and said a quiet goodbye that evening

As I left that evening, I found myself thinking once again of the 5 × 7-inch snapshot that had slipped out of a portfolio all those years earlier. It had shown an unknown college student at a birthday party. To everyone else, it was just another photograph. To me, it had been the beginning of an extraordinary journey.

(Mumbai, 1993)

16.

The Vegetarian Default

By Sujit Sengupta

As preparations for our Uzbekistan trip (Story 8) gathered momentum, Rita, our ever-efficient tour organiser, unleashed the question that has the power to divide travellers more effectively than politics or cricket:

"Please confirm your meal preference."



Hindu Vegetarian

Watching the spirited discussion, I couldn't help smiling. It reminded me of an incident from years ago that taught me one simple truth: asking for a vegetarian meal is often the easiest part. Getting one is where the real adventure begins.

This story goes back in the mid-eighties, when I was working with Philips India, I was deputed to Brazil to conduct a study. In those days, foreign travel was not common. Airfares were high, foreign exchange was guarded like family silver, and overseas trips were generally reserved for very senior officials—or for those who had mastered the art of looking indispensable.

Most employees who did travel abroad had one thing in common: they were strictly vegetarian. Somewhere in corporate India's travel department manual, I suspect there was a line that read:

If Indian, assume vegetarian.

My journey was planned meticulously. I was to fly from Mumbai to Amsterdam on KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, spend a week in Eindhoven at Philips headquarters, and then continue onward to São Paulo on Varig, once Brazil's proud flag carrier. The return was by the same route. Our travel department handled everything—tickets, hotels, probably even my destiny.

It was my first visit to Holland. I boarded the KLM flight excited, dignified, and blissfully unaware of the culinary drama awaiting me.

Act One: The Leafy Betrayal

Dinner service began. The steward moved efficiently down the aisle, placing trays before each passenger with the precision of a chess grandmaster.

When he reached my row, he looked at his list, paused, skipped me, and continued serving everyone else.

I sat there, smiling politely, assuming he would return with something special. Perhaps I had been upgraded to lobster.

He did return.

With a large bowl.

A large bowl filled entirely with leafy vegetables.

Not a garnish. Not a side dish. The entire meal.

It looked like the contents of a well-maintained Dutch garden.

I informed him gently that I had not ordered a lawn.

He checked his sheet and announced confidently, "Hindu vegetarian, sir."

That was the moment I realized that somewhere in Mumbai, someone had decided my dietary destiny without consultation. I requested a non vegetarian meal.

“Sorry, sir. No stock.”

Of course. Why would there be extra chicken when clearly all Indians graze?

I ate what I could. My stomach remained three-quarters empty. My dignity, however, was fully intact.

Because the journey was long, I requested that my meal preference be changed for the next leg.

The steward said he would “try.”

Whenever someone says they will “try,” you must prepare emotionally for disappointment.

Act Two: Hope at Schiphol

After my productive week in Eindhoven, I took an early morning train to Amsterdam. My plan was simple: sightseeing and duty-free shopping at Schiphol Airport. I once again requested—firmly—that my meal preference be updated.

Surely, by now, the system would respect my protein requirements.

It did not.

On the flight from Amsterdam to São Paulo, the same drama unfolded. Once again, a bowl of enthusiastic leaves appeared before me.

I began to wonder whether I had unknowingly joined an international vegetarian exchange program.

I ate silently, whatever I could consume.

In São Paulo, the very first instruction I gave my Brazilian colleagues was not about business strategy, market research, or Philips operations. It was:

Please change my meal to standard.

Miraculously, the return journey was smooth. Chicken reentered my life. Balance was restored to the universe.

Fast Forward: A Tale of Redemption

Years later, my friend Dinesh and his wife, Deepa, were flying from Delhi to Singapore on Singapore Airlines in economy class.

When dinner service began, the crew offered them non vegetarian meals.

Dinesh requested a vegetarian meal for Deepa.

The crew checked the device. Both passengers were listed as non-vegetarian. The tickets had been booked by an agent, and no spare vegetarian meals were available in economy.

Déjà vu.

Deepa resigned herself to hunger.

But here is where the story takes a beautiful turn.

After serving everyone in economy, the cabin crew returned—triumphantly—with a vegetarian meal sourced from business class.

Problem solved.

Dinesh and Deepa were grateful. The story could have ended there.

But it did not.

After dinner, the same crew member returned and asked whether they would be flying back to Delhi on the same airline.

“Yes,” Dinesh replied cautiously.

She smiled and said, “Let me correct this in the system so that your return journey is comfortable.”

She updated the meal preference then and there.

On the return flight, Deepa received her vegetarian meal without drama, without negotiation, and without leafy trauma.

That thoughtful gesture—correcting a future inconvenience without being asked—made a lasting impression on Dinesh. He made a mental note: when given a choice, he would always fly Singapore Airlines.

The Moral of the Meals

In my case, the system assumed.

In Dinesh’s case, the crew cared.

One airline followed data. The other followed empathy.

Sometimes loyalty is built not through grand marketing campaigns but through a simple act—a meal corrected, a preference remembered, a passenger treated like a person rather than a code on a screen.

As for me, I still double-check my meal preference whenever I fly.

Because somewhere, in some travel department, there may still be a checkbox that reads:

Hindu vegetarian—default.

And I refuse to be defeated by spinach again.

*(Across the continent somewhere on flight between
Mumbai, Amsterdam and Sao Paulo, 1986)*

17.

The Accidental Commuter

By Sujit Sengupta

It was May 1964. I was in my third year of engineering at BITS, Pilani – home for the summer holidays and fully committed to doing absolutely nothing productive.

My days followed a disciplined routine: wake up late, drink something cold, complain about the heat, promise vaguely to “revise Schrödinger’s equation,” and then make sure I didn’t. Delhi summers had a character of their own – blazing afternoons, ceiling fans that moved lazily, khus sherbet in tall glasses, and mangoes appearing at dinner as reliably as sunset.



The Long Queue in the Summer of '64

That year, the house was particularly lively. My mother's hospitality was legendary. Relatives arrived and stayed long enough to qualify as semi-permanent fixtures. Among them was my cousin Phalgunda, visiting from Calcutta. He was a few years older and carried himself with the calm confidence of someone who believed he understood the world — and directions — better than most of us.

Then, on the 27th of May, the mood shifted.

News came that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had passed away.

The house fell silent. My father returned early from work and told us that Panditji's mortal remains would lie in state at Teen Murti House from 6 p.m. for the public to pay their respects.

Without much discussion, we decided to go.

After an early dinner, the entire group assembled: my father, mother, Phalgunda, my three sisters, and I — all squeezed into our ancient Ford that had a sliding sunroof that we considered a luxury feature. My father drove, and the car moved forward with determination, rattling slightly in patriotic solidarity.

As we approached India Gate, it became clear that all of Delhi had chosen the same destination. Delhi had only about 27 lakh residents then, but that day it seemed the

entire city had turned out. Roads overflowed with people. Cars crept forward, buses were packed, and it felt as if the whole city was moving together. We popped our heads through the sliding roof to take in the sight—an endless sea of humanity and remarkably long queues. Eventually, we realized the obvious: unless we walked, we would never reach.

My father parked near Ashok Road, where many other cars had been left in orderly rows. We stepped out and, for reasons known only to fate, divided into two groups.

My parents, sisters and I went one way.

Phalgunda went another with confidence

We merged into what seemed like endless serpentine lines. The crowd was solemn and patient. People stood quietly, shuffling forward inch by inch. My mother observed that the last time she had witnessed such a gathering was during Mahatma Gandhi's passing.

Hours passed. We walked, waited, and shuffled some more.

At nearly 2 a.m., we finally reached Teen Murti House. Security personnel gently but firmly instructed us not to stop. We caught a brief glimpse of Pandit Nehru resting peacefully on slabs of ice. He had died earlier that day, May 27, 1964, bringing to an end the life of independent India's first Prime Minister and one of the most defining figures of the nation's early years.

The moment was solemn and fleeting. Yet, standing there in the middle of the night, amid thousands who had come to pay their respects, it was difficult not to feel that we were witnessing a moment of history.

Then began the long walk back to the car – at least three kilometres away. By the time we reached home, it was nearly 4 a.m. We were exhausted and reflective.

Only then did someone ask, “Where is Phalgunda?”

It hadn’t occurred to us earlier to worry. He was sensible and capable – and, after all, confident about directions.

We waited.

Five o’clock came and went.

Then, as dawn began to lighten the sky, we saw him approaching – Phalgunda looking tired and slightly irritated.

“How was the darshan?” we asked.

Phalgunda replied with visible frustration.

“I stood in a queue for four hours,” he said.

“Yes?” we prompted.

“And then I found myself boarding a bus.”

In the massive and orderly crowd, he had unknowingly joined a queue that did not lead to Teen Murti House at all, but to public transport. The line was long, disciplined, and indistinguishable from the others. Only

when he reached the front did he realize he was being guided – quite efficiently – toward a bus.

By the time the mistake became clear, he was already part of the boarding process.

Even in the midst of national mourning, the situation had an undeniable absurdity.

Today, Phalgunda, my father, my mother, and two of my sisters are no longer with us. One sister is still very much around – and she never lets Phalgunda's navigational achievement be forgotten. The ancient Ford is long gone. Delhi has changed beyond recognition.

But that night remains vivid – the endless queues, the shared sense of history, and the cousin who stood with dedication for four hours, only to nearly commute instead of pay homage.

It is a story that still brings a smile – gentle now, touched with memory – and reminds me how even in the most solemn of times, life quietly inserts a moment of unintended comedy.

(New Delhi, May 1964)

18.

All of You Forgot Me

By Sujit Sengupta

The rain began the previous evening as a whisper. By midnight, it was a roar.

Nearly ten inches of monsoon rain fell over Delhi that night in July 1956. Kailash Colony (GK-1 now) resembled a stranded island. Water rose steadily through the darkness, swallowing streets, pavements, and parked cars. By dawn, boundary walls in New Delhi had trapped the water like a vast tank. Cars stood half submerged, tilted at odd angles, their headlights dim beneath muddy water.

The rain did not cease. All day the sky hung low and swollen. Drains overflowed, the Yamuna swelled, and the city felt waterlogged and uneasy. Only by evening did the floodwaters begin to recede, leaving behind silt, debris, and an unsettling silence.

At 8:40 p.m., our family finally sat down to dinner. A faint drizzle tapped against the windows, and the electricity flickered. My mother served hot potato curry,

steam rising from the bowl in her hands. We spoke of the flooded cars outside.

Then the earth growled.



The Day the Earth Shook

beneath the floor. Doors, windows, and plates began to rattle; glasses trembled. The growl deepened into a roar. The house lurched violently, as if seized by a giant determined to wrench it apart. The ceiling fan swung wildly. The electricity failed, and the lights went out.

The shaking intensified. The monsoon-soaked ground beneath Delhi seemed to roll. Windows banged; somewhere nearby, glass shattered.

“It’s an earthquake!” my father shouted. “Run outside—now!”

There was no time to gather belongings. Death felt frighteningly close. My mother, still clutching the bowl of curry, rushed toward the door. As we stumbled onto the small lawn, the bowl tipped, and scalding curry splashed across my shirt. For a moment I felt only heat spreading across my chest and imagined some overheated appliance had fallen on me. There was no burn.

In our panic, we forgot my five-year-old youngest sister, whom I lovingly called Gauri, who lay ill with typhoid in the next room. Fever had drained her strength; even lifting her head required effort. When the shaking began, she could not run. She lay frightened and confused, too weak to move.

My father dashed back inside. In complete darkness, he lifted her in his arms and carried her out. She sobbed, crying, “*Tomra amakey shabai bhuley galey*”—“All of you have forgotten me”—unable to comprehend the chaos around her.

Drizzle fell as we stood barefoot on trembling soil. Neighbors screamed; dogs barked. We feared the house might collapse at any moment. I remember thinking, this is the end of our family.

Gradually, the violence subsided. The roar softened to a tremor, then to stillness. Only the drizzle remained. We moved cautiously into the covered veranda. Neighbors emerged, calling out to one another in the darkness.

Minutes later, the ground shuddered again—a sharp aftershock. Then another, and another. In all, four aftershocks followed that night. Each was weaker than the first quake yet strong enough to renew the panic. No one dared reenter their homes. We remained outside for hours, huddled together, listening for the slightest rumble. Flooded streets glistened under distant flashes of lightning; half-submerged cars looked like wreckage from an unseen war.

The rain had threatened to drown us. The earth had threatened to bury us.

The aftershocks continued for two or three days, though milder. The earthquake, magnitude 6.7 and centered near Buland Shahr, about sixty kilometres away, shook Delhi severely. Buildings cracked across the city; some older structures partially collapsed. Closer to the epicentre, towns suffered greater destruction, and more than a hundred lives were lost.

Today, when we see the devastation caused by the earthquakes in places such as Colombia and Indonesia, both around the magnitude of 7.4 the destruction is almost unimaginable. Yet there is one important difference between then and now: modern buildings are increasingly designed with earthquake resistance in mind. In 1964, such protection was far less common, leaving many older structures dangerously vulnerable.

Gauri later grew up to become a doctor, yet the sentence she spoke that night never left her: “*Tomra amakey shabai bhuley galey.*” Those simple words carved themselves into her memory. My mother, too, carried a quiet shadow for years afterward.

When Gauri passed away unexpectedly two years ago, far from home and family, I could not help but wonder whether that same sentence “*All of you have forgotten me*” echoed softly in her mind. We were not at her bedside when she breathed her last. The thought lingers still, and it hurts.

(New Delhi, October 1956)

19.

The Dhaba That Won Our Hearts

By Sujit Sengupta

In July 2025, I was invited by a mid-sized company to conduct a day-long workshop on *Winning and Retaining Customers* for its employees in Mohali, near Chandigarh. My wife decided to accompany me, and what began as a business trip soon turned into a memorable road journey.

If you've ever driven on the Delhi–Chandigarh highway, chances are you've heard of the legendary **Sukhdev Dhaba**. Its reputation precedes it. Almost everyone we met insisted, "Don't miss the aloo paratha!" With recommendations coming from every direction, stopping there became less of a choice and more of a mission.

Fate, however, had other plans.

The newly built eight-lane highway made the drive so smooth and effortless that we sped right past the exit without even noticing it. By the time we realised our mistake, turning back felt like admitting defeat. We

reluctantly continued our journey, promising ourselves we'd make up for it on the way back.



The following morning, I spoke almost continuously at the workshop until 5:30 p.m. By the time we set off for Delhi, my voice had given up, my energy reserves were exhausted, and my stomach was protesting loudly after being neglected all day. There was only one possible destination on the way home—Sukhdev Dhaba.

The place was buzzing with life. Rows of parked cars lined the entrance, families chatted over steaming food, and the aroma of freshly cooked parathas floated through the air. It felt less like a roadside eatery and more like a celebration of good food.

Without hesitation, we ordered the famous aloo parathas with fresh dahi.

That's when something unexpected happened.

The waiter smiled and gently advised us, "One plate should be enough for both of you. They're quite large."

Think about that for a moment.

Here was a restaurant that could easily have sold us twice as much food. Instead, the waiter chose honesty over a bigger bill. There was no attempt to upsell, no pressure to order extra. His only concern was that we had a good experience.

His quiet confidence spoke volumes. It reflected a culture where customer satisfaction mattered more than squeezing a few extra rupees from a visitor.

He was absolutely right.

The parathas were enormous, delicious, and more than enough for the two of us. We finished every bite with immense satisfaction—not just because the food lived up to its legendary reputation, but because the service exceeded it.

As we drove away that night, I realised something profound.

Customers rarely become loyal because of a product alone. They become loyal because of how a business makes them feel.

That waiter didn't merely serve us dinner; he earned our trust.

Since then, we've enthusiastically recommended Sukhdev Dhaba to friends, relatives, and colleagues. We haven't become repeat customers simply because their parathas are outstanding. We keep going back because they demonstrated something far more memorable—integrity.

And that's the real recipe for winning and retaining customers.

(Murthal, Haryana July 2025)

20.

Scotch, a Snapshot, and a Skipper

By Sujit Sengupta

It was sometime in the early 2000s. I was accompanying my wife to the Taj Palace Hotel in New Delhi, where Arun Jaitley was launching his book on cricket. Around the same time, the Australian cricket team, led by Ricky Ponting, was touring India for a Test series. Their legendary leg-spinner, Shane Warne, had not made the trip, and the Australian squad happened to be staying at the very same hotel.

I had nothing whatsoever to do with the book launch. My role was far simpler—and far more dutiful. I was the designated chauffeur.

My wife's work often took her to fashion shows, book launches, cultural events, and the cocktails and dinners that followed. No matter how busy I was, I rarely minded being her chauffeur. Well... almost never.

I had my own quiet incentive.



*"The customer's
perception is your
reality"*

...Kate Zabriskie

These gatherings invariably served excellent single malts and premium Scotch—luxuries that were well beyond my budget but happily within reach of invited guests. While my wife mingled effortlessly with journalists, authors, artists, and assorted celebrities, I perfected the fine art of occupying an unobtrusive corner with a glass in hand. Occasionally I even met interesting people. If nothing else, the whisky was consistently first-rate.

That particular evening, however, offered an additional attraction. As an ardent cricket fan, I was delighted to find the Australian team already gathered in the hotel poolside, chatting with reporters over drinks.

My wife's photographer, Atul, was busily covering the event while she caught up with fellow journalists. I, naturally, secured a respectable Scotch before doing anything else.

A group of reporters surrounded Ricky Ponting. Australia had just lost the first Test—whether at Gwalior

or Indore, memory now refuses to cooperate—on a wicket that had behaved less like a cricket pitch and more like a spin bowler's dream. India, in those days, possessed an enviable arsenal of spinners.

Suddenly Atul beckoned.

"Stand next to Ponting!"

Simple instruction. Extremely complicated execution.

Ponting was surrounded by journalists firing questions from every direction. Somehow, I managed to edge my way close enough to catch his attention. At precisely that moment, Atul clicked the photograph.

That photograph still survives.

Years later, while conducting training programmes on customer service and sales, I often spoke about perception. I would tell participants that appearance, posture, body language, and first impressions shape our conclusions long before words are spoken.

Then I would project that photograph and ask a simple question.

"What do you think Ricky Ponting is saying to me?"

The answers were wonderfully predictable.

- "He's welcoming you."
- "He's saying it's a pleasure to meet you."
- "He's asking how are you?"

Every single participant believed the photograph captured a warm, friendly exchange.

Not one of them came close.

What I had actually asked was, "Are you missing Shane Warne?"

Ponting looked at me, visibly annoyed, and replied, "Can't you see I'm talking to someone else?"

That was it.

No smile.

No conversation.

No budding Indo-Australian friendship.

Just a wonderfully timed photograph that suggested exactly the opposite.

It became my favourite illustration of the difference between perception and reality. One frozen frame created the illusion of warmth, familiarity, and mutual respect. The truth was that I had interrupted the Australian captain in the middle of a media interaction and received a perfectly justified brush-off.

Even so, I treasure that photograph.

After all, it shows Ricky Ponting apparently enjoying a delightful conversation with me.

Why should I let the facts spoil such a good picture?

(Hotel Taj Palace, New Delhi 2004)

21.

My Head Is Horsing My First Contribution to the English Language

By Sujit Sengupta

My father was convinced that the future belonged to those who could speak English fluently. I was then studying in a Bengali-medium school, and he felt that I should move to an English-medium institution at the earliest opportunity.



His long-term plan was to send me to La Martiniere College, Lucknow, one of the country's finest boarding schools. Before I could be entrusted to such an institution, however, he believed I needed rescuing from my decidedly provincial English. The rescue came in the form of a private tutor.

His name, as far as I remember, was Mr. D'Souza.

Every evening, without fail, he appeared at our house precisely on time. He was immaculately dressed, impeccably polite, and passionately devoted to English grammar. He spoke what we proudly called Queen's English—slowly, clearly, and with the confidence of a man who had never misplaced a preposition in his life.

I, on the other hand, was doing my best merely to survive the language.

English was still a mysterious country where familiar Bengali words refused to carry valid passports.

To Mr. D'Souza's credit, he remained remarkably patient. He corrected my pronunciation, improved my vocabulary, and introduced me to strange creatures called irregular verbs. Looking back, I suspect he believed that, with sufficient effort, I might someday become reasonably fluent.

Neither of us anticipated that I would instead make a small but original contribution to the English language.

One evening, Mr. D'Souza suggested taking my two elder sisters and me to a carnival. Our parents readily agreed. Any outing supervised by an English tutor automatically acquired educational respectability.

The carnival was magical.

Strings of coloured lights sparkled overhead. Loudspeakers blared cheerful music. Vendors sold balloons, roasted peanuts, candy floss, and mysterious delicacies that seemed to consist mainly of sugar and bright colours. Children ran about with the boundless energy that only children possess.

Naturally, we headed straight for the rides.

One machine in particular caught our attention. It looked exciting enough to impress us, yet not sufficiently alarming to discourage our courage. We climbed aboard with complete confidence.

The ride began gently.

Round and round we went.

So far, so good.

Then it gathered speed.

Soon we were circling much faster than I considered reasonable. The lights merged into colourful streaks. The music became one continuous noise. My sisters screamed with delight.

I silently reconsidered every decision that had brought me to that particular seat.

After what seemed an extraordinarily long time—but was probably no more than a couple of minutes—the ride finally slowed and came to a stop.

My sisters stepped down effortlessly.

I attempted to follow.

Unfortunately, the ground appeared to have developed independent movement.

The trees were rotating.

The stalls were rotating.

Even the respectable-looking gentlemen buying roasted peanuts seemed to be rotating.

I clutched my elder sister's arm before the entire carnival floated away.

Now, Bengali presents an interesting linguistic complication.

The word *ghora* can mean both "horse" and "to go round in circles," depending entirely upon the context. I desperately wanted to explain that everything around me was still going round and round.

The difficulty was that I did not know the English word.

So, I turned to my elder sister and asked,

"Didi, what is the English for *ghora*?"

She answered instantly.

"Horse."

That was all I needed.

Armed with my newly acquired vocabulary, I felt completely prepared to communicate my condition to the world.

Mr. D'Souza smiled kindly.

"Shall we try another ride?"

I raised one hand weakly.

"No..."

Then, in flawless confidence, I announced,

"My head is horsing."

Silence.

My sisters stared at me.

Mr. D'Souza slowly removed his spectacles, cleaned them carefully, and put them back on, perhaps hoping he had misheard.

A small boy nearby stopped eating his ice cream and looked at me with genuine curiosity.

Thinking they had not understood me properly, I repeated the sentence.

"My head is horsing."

What I intended to say was perfectly sensible.

My head was spinning.

What I actually declared was that my head had somehow become a horse and was apparently occupied with horse-like activities.

For a few glorious seconds, nobody spoke.

Then my sisters burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Even Mr. D'Souza, whose reverence for correct English bordered on the sacred, surrendered completely. He laughed so heartily that he had to remove his spectacles a second time.

Only later did he explain, with admirable restraint, that the word I had been searching for was *dizzy*.

By then, however, it was too late.

"My head is horsing" had already escaped into family history.

The sentence spread through our extended family with astonishing speed. My uncles repeated it at family gatherings. My aunts recounted it to every new visitor. Cousins who had not even been present at the carnival narrated the story as though they had personally witnessed the event.

Years passed.

I learnt proper English.

I passed examinations.

I even spent much of my professional life writing reports, articles, and books in English.

None of it mattered.

Within the family, I remained the little boy whose head had once gone horsing at a carnival.

In retrospect, perhaps that was my first truly original contribution to the English language.

Unfortunately, neither the Oxford English Dictionary nor the Cambridge Dictionary has yet seen fit to acknowledge it.

(New Delhi, 1953)

22.

Lessons Beyond the Classroom

By Sujit Sengupta

Not long after my memorable contribution to the English language, my father's grand educational plan moved into its next phase.

At the age of nine, I was packed off to La Martiniere College, Lucknow, as a boarder in Standard III.



A visit to La Martiniere College
Lucknow 2018

My father believed that I was growing up in the midst of all girls who were sister's friends and the experience would make me independent and amongst the boys.

It certainly did.

It also made me homesick with remarkable efficiency.

I spent one academic year there 1954-55 a period distinguished by homesickness, occasional canings, and the bullying that educators of the day generously described as "character building."

In those days, boarding schools believed that boys should become self-reliant and tough as early as possible. Homesickness was something to be endured, not indulged, and the cane was very much part of the disciplinary arsenal.

I cried helplessly.

Frequently.

Writing letters to my mother soon became my principal extracurricular activity. Every envelope faithfully carried an update on my worsening homesickness, along with persuasive arguments explaining why my immediate return home was essential for my continued survival!

Fortunately, I had a local guardian in my mother's cousin, Batumama. On some weekends, he would come to see me, take me home with him for a night, and make sure I was well fed with some much-needed home-cooked

food. He worked at the National Botanical Garden and would often pick me up on his bicycle, with me perched on the crossbar like a prized passenger.

Those visits were a wonderful antidote to homesickness. My aunt and uncle, Batumama, were incredibly loving and made me feel at home whenever I stayed with them.

My father remained unmoved.

He believed adversity-built character.

I believed character was considerably overrated.

The principal's son provided another valuable educational experience.



The same staircase that carried me to my dorm as a nine-year-old in 1954—still standing, 70 years later.

His father occupied an office overlooking the long corridor leading to the dining hall. From its large window, the boy developed an unusual pastime. Like an energetic young monkey, he would swing out of the window whenever he spotted unsuspecting juniors walking below.

The moment he saw me, he would shout triumphantly, "Sengupta! The Principal is calling you for caning!"

No boarding-school boy ever ignored such a summons.

The words "The Principal is calling you" invariably suggested that some dreadful offence—real or imagined—had finally caught up with you.

Terrified, I would rush towards the office.

There was, of course, no summons.

The Principal looked up in mild surprise.

"Yes?"

"S-sir... s-someone said you had c-called me."

"I did no such thing."

The principal's son, meanwhile, had vanished, no doubt searching for his next victim.

After falling for the trick several times, I eventually learnt that not every official announcement deserved unquestioning obedience.

It was an unexpectedly useful lesson for adult life.

After a year, my father concluded that I had received sufficient exposure to boarding-school discipline and transferred me to St. Columba's School in New Delhi.

I have often suspected that my mother's persistent campaign to rescue her homesick son had finally succeeded.

St. Columba's was run by the Irish Christian Brothers.

Discipline there was not merely encouraged.

It was institutionalised.

In the 1950s, corporal punishment was accepted in many European-style schools as an entirely respectable educational tool. Parents rarely questioned it. Teachers regarded it as indispensable. Students simply learnt to calculate how many strokes a particular offence might attract.

The Irish Brothers had perfected the system.

Each Brother carried a short leather strap tucked neatly inside a specially stitched pocket hidden within his cassock. It rested there like a gunslinger's revolver, waiting for the appropriate moment. It came to be known as Black Jack.

Whenever a boy committed some offence—unfinished homework, talking in class, or displaying excessive originality—the ceremony followed a familiar pattern.

"Show me your hand."

The unfortunate student extended a trembling palm.

One stroke.

Perhaps two.

Occasionally three.

Justice was swift, economical, and remarkably memorable.

The Anglo-Indian teachers preferred the traditional bamboo cane.

Apparently, educational philosophy permitted considerable diversity in the choice of weapon.

Looking back today, some punishments seem almost unbelievable.

Our Class IV teacher, the lady Anglo-Indian, once noticed that a boy's white school shirt had several black marks on the back.

Whether the stains resulted from poor washing or an unfortunate encounter with playground dust hardly mattered.

She wrote the words COAL MAN'S SON on a sheet of paper, pinned it to the back of his shirt, and made him sit through the entire school day wearing it.

Even as children, many of us felt uncomfortable.

Today such public humiliation would rightly be considered unacceptable.

Those were different times.

By Standard VI, one of the Irish Brothers taught us almost every subject except History and French.

One afternoon he arrived carrying the previous day's mathematics homework.

He called upon the first boy.

"What is the answer?"

Silence.

"Come here."

Out came the leather strap.

Two brisk strokes.

The second boy fared no better.

Two more strokes.

Then came the third.

The fourth.

The fifth.

Each produced an incorrect answer.

Each received precisely two strokes.

The atmosphere gradually acquired the efficiency of a factory assembly line. Incorrect mathematics travelled in one direction; leather straps travelled in the other.

Finally, the Brother's patience evaporated. Our section had sixty students.

Looking around the classroom in complete despair, he announced,

"Those of you who do not know the answer may come forward now and take your two strokes."

It was perhaps the most honest invitation ever extended to a class of schoolboys.

Almost every boy rose immediately.

Within seconds, an orderly queue had formed.

No one wished to risk the consequences of pretending to know mathematics.

I alone remained seated.

Not because I was exceptionally courageous.

Certainly not because I enjoyed leather straps.

I remained seated because I was absolutely convinced that I knew the answer.

The Brother noticed immediately.

"*Sengauptha*" (Irish pronunciation for Sengupta)

"Yes, Sir."

"You know the answer?"

I nodded confidently.

A fatal mistake.

"Excellent," he said.

"Come and explain it to the class."

I walked to the blackboard with all the confidence of a future Nobel Prize winner.

Then I picked up the chalk.

The numbers stared back at me.

I stared at them.

Somewhere during the short walk from my desk to the blackboard, every mathematical principle I had learnt the previous evening quietly abandoned me.

Whether it was stage fright or complete mental evacuation, I shall never know.

My confidence dissolved.

My explanation collapsed.

The classroom became silent.

The Brother looked at me for several thoughtful seconds.

Then he spoke.

"Sengupta, since you were so confident..."

He paused.

"...you shall receive four strokes."

Not two.

Four.

My overconfidence had doubled my punishment.

That afternoon I learnt two lessons far more valuable than Algebra.

First, overconfidence can be physically painful.

Second, whenever an entire class voluntarily joins the punishment queue, there is usually an excellent reason for doing so.

(Lucknow & New Delhi, 1954-1958)

23.

From Leather Straps to Paper Aeroplanes

By Sujit Sengupta

The final three years of my schooling were spent at the newly established—but today highly regarded—Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in New Delhi a Higher Secondary School.

The decision was entirely my father's.

He was convinced that the mathematics taught in the Senior Cambridge system was inadequate preparation for engineering studies. Whether he was right is a matter best left to engineers.

I simply obeyed.

Academically, the transition proved beneficial.

Socially, it felt as though I had emigrated without leaving Delhi.

Until then, I had lived almost entirely within the disciplined world of European-style schools. Morning assemblies were orderly, classrooms fell silent the

moment a teacher entered, and even whispering required considerable courage.

Sardar Patel Vidyalaya introduced me to a completely different ecosystem.

I was the only boy in my class who had come from that background. Most of my classmates belonged to Hindi-, Bengali-, Gujarati-, or Punjabi-speaking families and from local schools. They were bright, cheerful, outspoken—and astonishingly uninhibited.

Conversation seldom began with polite greetings.

It usually commenced with a hearty slap on the thigh.

"Arre! Where were you yesterday?"

Thump.

Apparently, friendship required physical confirmation.

Colourful expressions—many of which I had never encountered in respectable conversation—flowed through the classroom with remarkable ease. They were exchanged not in anger but almost as punctuation marks.

Paper aeroplanes achieved levels of aerodynamic excellence that would have impressed the Indian Air Force.

Occasionally they reached their intended destination.

Quite often they landed on the teacher.

To my immense surprise, the world continued functioning.

At St. Columba's, such behaviour would have produced immediate disciplinary proceedings, followed by theological reflections on sin and several well-aimed strokes of the Black Jack.

Here, teachers displayed remarkable patience.

They scolded.

They confiscated paper missiles.

They restored order.

Ten minutes later, another aeroplane would take flight.

Initially, I watched these proceedings with the fascination of an anthropologist encountering a previously unknown civilisation.

I spoke cautiously.

Sat quietly.

Avoided drawing attention to myself.

And waited for someone to produce a leather strap.

None ever appeared.

Slowly, I began to understand that discipline could wear different clothes.

The contrast between my schools could not have been greater. St. Columba's believed in discipline enforced with leather straps; Sardar Patel Vidyalaya believed that

friendship could survive paper aeroplanes, colourful language, and the occasional friendly thump on the thigh.

Slowly, I adapted. More importantly, I flourished. Despite moving from St. Columba's, then at the height of its academic reputation, to the relatively young Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, I went on to stand first among my school's candidates in the Higher Secondary Examination, paving the way for an engineering degree. Looking back, my father had been right. Somewhere along the journey, I also learnt English.

Reasonably well, I hope.

ROLL OF HONOUR

(10+2)

NAMES OF STUDENTS OF THIS VIDYALAYA WHO TOPPED THE LIST IN SCIENCE AND ARTS IN THE HIGHER SECONDARY EXAMINATIONS.

GROUP	MARKS	YEAR	SCIENCE GROUP	MARKS	ARTS GROUP	MARKS
	353/500	1960	RAKESH CHANDRA AGRAWAL	452	BINA PRASAD	432
	383/500	1961	SUJIT SEN GUPTA	506	MANJU JAIN	442
		1962	GURINDERPAL SINGH HARULA	544	VIBHUTI DIVETIA	437
	314/400	1963	RAVINDRA MATHUR	576	LALITA ADVANI	446
	331/400	1964	VINOD KUMAR GUPTA	603	BHARAT MERCHANT	510
		1965	ARUN SHAH	624	JASVINDER SINGH BEDI	439
		1965	ANIL KUMAR SAXENA	622		
	327/400	1965	ATANU BANERJI	611		
	320/400	1965	ARUN CHANDRA KURI	610		
	332/400	1966	ANITA SETHI	628	ANURAG MADAN	554
		1966			INDIRA NAMBOORI	524
	318/400	1967	ARUN KUMAR GUPTA	664		530
	317/400	1967	VINAY JOLLY	643		
	317/400	1967	VIJAY SONI	636		
	343/400	1967	PRADEEP ANAND	630		
	345/400	1967	ABHIJIT SEN	620		
	330/400	1968	ARVIND MALHOTRA	614	ANAND MANDEKE	474
	427/500	"	"		ANIL CHOPRA	
	433/500	1969	ARVINDER SINGH SETHI	627	KETAN MEHTA	522
	420/500	1970	VIKAS BHAKTE	637	MANITA BHATT	548
	440/500	1971	KAUSHIK MUKHERJEE	664	SHALINI RANDEKIA	620
	433/500	1971	PRADEEP SINHA	655	ARCHANA GUPTA	580
	422/500	1971	KAMAL KUMAR AGRAWAL	652	DIVYA SRIVASTAVA	574
	458/500	1972	RAVI KAPOOR	642	VIJAY LELE	531
	464/500	1973	SHRIKANT	778/1000	GANESH TEWARI	640/1000
	453/500	1974	BRJLMDHAN MASAND	793/1000	ANJALI VERMA	729/1000
	432/500	1975	MOHIT RANDEKIA	636/750	ARCHANA BHATNAGAR	495/750
	432/500	1976	PARAG TRIPATHI	632/750	MAHENDRA THANKY	487/750
	442/500	1977	MADHURA SWAMINATHAN	634/750	ALOK VIDYALANKAR	517/750
	469/500					

Highest marks—evidence of steady improvement over the years.

Yet, after all these years, the sentence my family remembers most is still not one I learnt from Mr. D'Souza.

It is the one I invented myself:

"My head is horsing."

The Oxford English Dictionary has never accepted my contribution to the English language. My family, however, has preserved it for more than seventy years.

Today, it remains one of my favourite *Khatti Meethi Yaadein*—where the embarrassment disappeared long ago, but the laughter never did.

(New Delhi, 1958-1961)

24.

The Family of PhDs

By Supriyo Sengupta

A PhD is the highest academic degree to which many students aspire. It is a rare achievement that represents the pinnacle of the educational qualifications awarded by universities. Earning a PhD is a long and arduous academic journey that requires intellectual curiosity, a research mindset, resilience, patience, collaboration, academic rigor, and several years of sustained hard work. Many aspire to earn a PhD; few are admitted to doctoral programs at prestigious universities, and fewer still successfully complete the rigorous academic requirements to earn the title of Doctor of Philosophy in their chosen field of science, the humanities, or the social sciences.

This story is about a family for whom earning a PhD has become almost a tradition, with generations of family members entering the hallowed halls of universities around the world. The story begins with Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta, who established the family's PhD tradition in the 1960s when he earned his doctorate from the Department of Applied Physics at the

University of Calcutta. Remarkably, he conducted his research and wrote his dissertation while working full-time as a research scientist at the National Physical Laboratory in Bangalore rather than studying on campus at the University of Calcutta. Since then, five of his eight immediate family members have gone on to earn PhDs from leading universities in India, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In fact, every member of the family's third generation—including spouses—holds a PhD.

The tradition of higher learning established by Dr. Sengupta extends beyond his immediate family to encompass members of his extended family across generations. These include several grandnephews, grandnieces, and their spouses in India and the United States. Even more remarkable is the diversity of disciplines in which these family members have earned their doctorates, including aerospace engineering, chemistry, computer science, economics, literature, nuclear physics, and sociology.

This chronicle of the family's remarkable academic achievements concludes with the inspiring story of Dr. Amit Mitra, the father of Dr. Sengupta's daughter-in-law. Dr. Mitra was a career engineer as well as a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent. Following his professional retirement, he began a PhD in computer science at the University of Pune at the age of sixty-six and completed it four years later, at the age of seventy.



The PhD alumni of Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta's extended family would easily fill a room. The oldest is ninety-eight years old, and the youngest is thirty.

List of PhD holders in Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta Extended Family

No.	Name	Relation	Field of Study	University
1.	Dr. Malay Kumar Sengupta	Self	Applied Physics - Optics	University of Calcutta.
2.	Dr. Amlan Dasgupta	Grandson	Developmental Economics	University of British Columbia, Canada
3.	Dr. Arjun Sengupta	Grandson	Nuclear Physics	Texas A&M University, College Station, USA
4.	Dr. Amit Mitra	Father of daughter in law	Computer Science	University of Pune
5.	Dr. Ananya Sengupta	Daughter in law	International Business	University of Reading, Berkshire, England
6.	Dr. Arpita Bhuiya	Grandniece	Chemistry	IIT, Kanpur
7.	Dr. Debnath Bhuiya	Grandnephew in law	Chemistry	IIT, Kanpur
8.	Dr. Prasenjit Sengupta	Grandnephew	Aerospace Engineering	Texas A&M University, College Station, USA
9.	Dr. Suchisree Chatterjee	Granddaughter in law	Sociology	IIT, Mumbai

10.	Dr. Urmi Sengupta	Grandniece	Comparative Literature	University of Jadavpur, Kolkata
11.	Dr. Uttara Sengupta	Niece	Chemistry	Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

25.

Two Passports, One Heart: *A Journey Between Two Homes*

Punya Palit

Prologue

I was twenty-six when I boarded a flight to Sydney in the mid-1980s, carrying two suitcases and a permit that felt like a golden ticket.

India was still a country where the Reserve Bank kept a very close eye on your foreign currency. You could take out only a few hundred dollars per trip, and even that required paperwork substantial enough to make you feel less like a traveller and more like a suspected economic offender.

Then there was the Australian salary. It was nearly ten times what I could expect to earn in Bombay.

At twenty-six, ten times the salary has a remarkable ability to simplify life's complicated decisions.

So, I went.

On paper, the decision made itself. In practice, it took me another thirty years to understand what that decision actually cost—and what it gave me.

This is the story of that journey. It is not just my story, but the story of a generation of Indians who left in search of opportunity; those who stayed; and those, like me, who eventually returned, only to discover that you can leave a country much more easily than you can leave it behind.

Over the years, I learned that having two homes sounds romantic. What nobody tells you is that you may spend the rest of your life explaining to each country why you still belong to the other.

The Road Before Mine

I wasn't the first Indian to make the journey. That honour belonged largely to the doctors of the 1970s.

When Australia dismantled its "White Australia Policy" in 1973, the first wave of skilled Indian migrants were physicians. Australian hospitals needed doctors, particularly in places where local doctors were not exactly queuing up to work. Indian doctors arrived with qualifications that were recognised, filled important gaps and established the first bridgeheads of the Indian diaspora.

By the time my turn came in the mid-1980s, the demand had shifted.

The computer had arrived—and with it came a new kind of migrant.

Mainframes were giving way to personal computers, and Australia, Canada, the United States and the United

Kingdom all needed programmers and systems analysts faster than their universities could produce them. India's English-medium engineering colleges had suddenly become something of a talent reservoir.

For someone like me, the timing was almost suspiciously convenient.

The immigration process was also refreshingly meritocratic. It didn't matter who your father was. What mattered was your degree, your hands-on experience and your performance in a points-tested skills assessment.

In other words, nobody asked for a family tree. They wanted a résumé.

Countries wanted people who could do the job on day one. That principle—matching skilled people with countries that needed their skills—remains at the heart of skilled migration even today.

For my generation, it was a remarkably straightforward proposition:

India had talent. Australia had jobs.

We supplied the talent. They supplied the salary.

Everyone seemed happy.

At least initially.

Life as a Migrant

The first ten years were, honestly, wonderful.

I was young, adaptable and technically current. I moved through roles—programmer, systems analyst, team lead—riding each new wave of technology as it arrived.

Salary comparisons with India soon became almost meaningless. I was living in a different country, in a different economy and, most importantly, in a different currency. My payslip occasionally gave me the pleasant feeling that someone had accidentally added an extra zero.

Life was good.

But somewhere in my late thirties, the shape of the problem began to reveal itself.

The management ceiling

Technical competence was not the same thing as being seen as "management material."

Moving from a technical role into management required something that no engineering college taught: cultural fluency, confidence in the local environment and a network built over years.

Many technically brilliant migrants discovered an invisible ceiling.

We trained local colleagues. We solved difficult problems. We sometimes knew the system better than anyone else in the building.

And then, quite often, those same colleagues were promoted to manage us.

It wasn't universal, and it wasn't always deliberate. But it happened often enough for migrants of my generation to recognise the pattern without needing a seminar on workplace culture.

You could be the person everyone called when the computer refused to cooperate and still not be the person they wanted in the manager's chair.

That was an education in itself.

The technology treadmill

Then came another uncomfortable truth: technical skills have a shelf life.

Unfortunately, nobody puts an expiry date on your forehead.

I watched contemporaries who had built entire careers around a single technology suddenly become unemployable when that technology fell out of favour.

The problem was not that they had become less intelligent. Far from it.

The industry had simply moved on.

Companies did not necessarily want to retrain a 45-year-old in a new technology when a 25-year-old already knew it. The younger candidate was cheaper, current and probably had fewer complaints about working late.

Sharp, capable professionals could go from six-figure salaries to unemployment within eighteen months

simply because the industry had changed and they hadn't changed with it.

It was a brutal lesson.

In technology, experience is valuable—but only if your experience happens to be in something the market still remembers.

The age wall

Australia has no statutory retirement age. In principle, you are legally entitled to keep working for as long as you wish.

A wonderful idea.

Unfortunately, a legal right is not the same thing as a job offer.

Age discrimination in hiring is technically illegal and practically difficult to prove. Recruiters rarely say, "You're too old."

They say, "You're not quite the right fit."

After hearing that often enough, you begin to wonder whether "fit" is actually a euphemism for "birth certificate."

The irony was hard to miss.

You had complete legal freedom to work until you dropped—and increasingly little practical opportunity to get hired once you crossed fifty.

The contracting lifeline

There was, however, one genuine silver lining: contracting.

If you became one of the few people who deeply understood a particular technology, there was work. And contract rates could be excellent.

The catch was that contracting came with its own price: no job security, no long-service leave and constant pressure to remain technically sharp in an industry that seemed determined to reinvent itself every few years.

You were only as valuable as your latest skill.

It was not a particularly comforting thought.

But it was a useful one.

Coming Home

I returned to India after roughly twenty years abroad.

I didn't return because I had failed.

I returned because my parents were ageing, and because I believed the India I had left two decades earlier had changed enough for my international experience to count.

In some ways, I was right.

My foreign degree and international exposure opened doors. India still places enormous value on educational pedigree and demonstrated experience. A good degree,

unlike a particular software language, does not suddenly become obsolete because a newer version has arrived.

That was reassuring.

But coming home revealed a few uncomfortable truths of its own.

Some were almost the mirror image of what I had left behind.

The non-negotiable retirement age

In Australia, I had the legal right to work indefinitely but increasingly little practical opportunity to find a job.

In India, the arrangement was more straightforward.

Someone else decided when I should stop.

In most organised-sector employment, the retirement age is typically 58 to 60 in government service and PSUs, and close to that in much of the private sector.

There is no great mystery about it.

You reach the number.

You retire.

Thank you very much.

It does not matter particularly whether you are healthy, energetic or still have something useful to contribute.

And long before the formal retirement age, there is another, unofficial ceiling.

Try getting hired—not promoted—after forty-five.

Suddenly, experience becomes expensive and youth becomes an attractive qualification.

So, an Indian professional effectively faces two walls: an informal one somewhere around the mid-forties and a formal, immovable one at retirement.

Australia seemed to say, "You may work forever, if somebody will employ you."

India seemed to say, "You may work until this date, whether anybody wants you to or not."

Between the two, there was apparently no country saying, "Come in, we need someone with experience."

The cost of raising the next generation

Migration also creates complications for the next generation.

If your children were born abroad, or hold an OCI card rather than full citizenship, education in India can become extraordinarily expensive.

Many private schools and universities charge NRI or OCI fee structures that are multiples of domestic rates.

You may bring your children back to India because you want them to reconnect with their roots.

Their school fee may then reconnect you very firmly with reality.

The children you brought home to rediscover their roots can find themselves placed on a considerably more

expensive financial track simply because of the passport in their hand.

The competitive gauntlet

And even if you can afford the education, there is another challenge waiting.

Competition.

India's college admissions and job markets can be unforgiving. There are large numbers of highly qualified young people competing for a limited number of opportunities.

But children of migrants usually retain one priceless advantage.

They have a door they can go back through.

If India doesn't work out, they can return to the country where they were raised—without needing visa sponsorship, an employer petition or someone in a government office to approve their future.

That door was created by their parents' migration decades earlier.

It may remain one of the greatest gifts migration gives the next generation.

Two Ways of Living: Australia vs India

Career is only half the story.

The other half is the daily texture of life.

And here, Australia and India pull you in very different directions.

Australia's great strength is its social safety net: universal healthcare through Medicare, a well-funded pension system, unemployment benefits, subsidised aged care, dependable roads, water and public order.

The trade-off is cost.

Everything is expensive by Indian standards.

And then there is the small matter of doing things yourself.

In Australia, if something needs cleaning, driving, repairing, carrying or organising, there is a strong possibility that the person doing it will be you.

Domestic help is prohibitively expensive and culturally uncommon.

In India, the equation is almost reversed.

India wins decisively on cost of living and on the availability of human support.

The retirement corpus that might support a modest lifestyle in Sydney can fund a genuinely comfortable life in Pune or Bangalore.

Full-time domestic help and caregivers—almost unimaginable luxuries in Australia—are affordable for much of India's middle class.

There is also something that doesn't appear on a government balance sheet: family, friends, neighbours and old acquaintances.

Someone knows someone who knows someone.

And somehow, the problem gets solved.

India's weakness is the formal safety net.

Healthcare costs can come substantially out of pocket. There is no equivalent of a guaranteed state pension for most private-sector retirees. Public infrastructure can be inconsistent.

Australia offers greater institutional security.

India offers greater everyday convenience.

Australia can insure you against catastrophe but expects you to pay—in money and labour—for many of life's small conveniences.

India can stretch your money remarkably far, but asks you to make more of your own arrangements for the big things.

Neither system is simply better.

They are simply different ways of answering the same question:

How do you want to live when work is no longer the centre of your life?

If I'm honest, for those who have the means, the ideal answer may not be either-or.

It may be both.

Use Australia's healthcare and institutional stability when they matter most. Enjoy India's affordability, family connections and human warmth when you want a slower, more comfortable pace of life.

Of course, dual-citizenship rules and tax-residency requirements have a habit of appearing just when your lifestyle plan starts looking too clever.

Still, for those with the flexibility, spending meaningful periods in both countries can come remarkably close to having the best of two worlds.

Three Roads, No Signposts

Looking back, I can see three broad paths.

A. Go abroad and settle permanently

This offers the highest ceiling.

There is first-world infrastructure, strong healthcare systems and, often, better opportunities for children.

But there is also cultural distance.

And eventually, the technology treadmill and age factor may catch up with you precisely when you have the least flexibility to reinvent yourself.

Migration systems have also changed.

The relatively straightforward skilled migration routes of the 1970s and 1980s have given way to more complicated visa regimes. The H1B system, for example,

now involves lottery uncertainty and long green-card backlogs for Indians.

The journey abroad is no longer quite the simple proposition it once seemed.

B. Go abroad for a defined period, then return

This was the road I took.

You accumulate foreign savings, international exposure and perhaps a foreign passport for your children.

Then you return before either country decides you are too old, too expensive or insufficiently current.

It sounds logical.

But there is a danger of ending up in a no-man's-land.

Not senior enough abroad.

Not young enough at home.

And children who may wonder whether they are Indian, Australian—or simply permanently international.

C. Never leave

This is the safest option in some ways.

You avoid displacement and family separation. You remain embedded in a support network that migrants may spend decades trying to rebuild.

But you also accept India's career limitations: the informal wall around the mid-forties, followed by the hard retirement ceiling.

You accept intense competition.

And you give up some of the currency advantage and formal safety net that originally attracted migrants abroad.

There is no perfect road.

The signposts, unfortunately, appear only after you've passed them.

What Has Changed

Artificial intelligence is now rewriting the rules yet again.

The very "hands-on skilled" work that once made migration so attractive is increasingly being automated. At the same time, judgment, adaptability, creativity and the ability to work with people are becoming more valuable.

The irony is not lost on someone who began his career when a mainframe certificate could help buy you a visa and a life abroad.

Technology once helped us migrate.

Technology may now make some of those same skills less valuable.

The lesson is painfully familiar:

Never assume that the skill that made you valuable yesterday will make you valuable tomorrow.

Conclusion

Four decades have taught me that there is no universally right or wrong answer.

There is only your answer.

It depends on your family, your ambitions, your tolerance for risk, your finances and, above all, your ability to adapt.

I do not regret going.

I do not regret coming back.

Both decisions changed me, and both gave me things I could never have received by staying on one side of the world.

What I do regret is something else.

At twenty-six, I thought I was making a single decision.

I wasn't.

I was signing up for a lifetime of deciding what "home" meant.

For years, I thought home was a place.

Then I thought it was a passport.

Later, I thought it was wherever my family happened to be.

Perhaps I was wrong each time.

Maybe home is simply the collection of people, memories and experiences that make you feel that you belong.

That would explain why, after living between two countries for much of my adult life, I still feel a little at home in both—and a little like a visitor in each.

Perhaps that is the real price of having two passports.

You gain two countries.

And spend a lifetime figuring out where your heart actually lives

(December, 1999)

26.

Meethi Khatti Yadein: The Road to Kolkata

By Sujit Sengupta

July 2026 marked a year since we moved to Kolkata. Friends often ask, “So, when are you returning to Delhi?” My answer is simple: “We aren’t.”

The inevitable follow-up is, “Why would anyone leave Delhi after living there for almost seventy years?”

The answer is equally simple: we made a permanent decision under the influence of a temporary emotion.

Delhi was never just a city for me. It was home.

My parents settled there in the early 1940s, and in 1954 my father built our family house on a 500-square-yard plot in Kailash Colony, now GK-1. There were no high-rises or developers then—just modest houses, open spaces and a neighbourhood that was still taking shape. That simple house, built brick by brick under my father's watchful eye, became the backdrop to almost every important chapter of our family life.

For my three sisters and me, visiting the construction site with our father was an outing in itself. Once we moved

in, life unfolded at an unhurried pace. Friends lived within walking distance, and without mobile phones, we simply climbed onto our rooftops and called out each other's names. Within minutes, the gang would assemble for cricket, football or whatever adventure the day suggested.

From our rooftop, I could see the lights of Eros cinema in Jangpura, nearly five kilometres away. To me, those distant lights seemed magical—a glimpse of a world beyond our quiet neighbourhood.

Our large central park was the venue for endless cricket matches. I still remember one sweltering June afternoon when Atanu and Mainak's mother marched across from her nearby house, gave us a proper mouthful and promptly brought a closely fought match to an end. We were furious. Today, it makes me smile.

With three more school friends I cycled six kilometres to school every day, even in Delhi's bitter winters. Every morning I bathed before leaving, and my mother would lovingly apply coconut oil to my hair. By the time I reached school, the cold had frozen the oil into a crust. At the time, it was simply part of the routine; today, it is a treasured memory.

Memories Under the Gulmohar

My mother's love of gardening transformed our house into a little oasis. A magnificent Gulmohar stood outside the gate, while *kath champa*, roses, chrysanthemums,

sunflowers and *mogra* filled the garden with colour and fragrance. Mango, guava, pomegranate and custard apple trees supplied fruit, while the kitchen garden provided fresh vegetables. My mother loved gardening; years later, that love passed naturally to my wife, Sumita.

The house was also a home in the truest sense. Relatives and friends visiting Delhi often stayed with us, and short visits had a habit of becoming extended stays. An elderly cousin of my mother, who visited almost every year for nearly two months, claimed a particular corner of our three-seater sofa as his throne. By the time he left, the springs had surrendered and a permanent crater had appeared. My parents simply had the sofa repaired and welcomed him back the following year.

All this happened in a house with just one bathroom and one toilet. Somehow, everyone survived. Perhaps people were more patient then—or simply better at queuing!



A Rare Family Picture — 1956

(One year after our house was built, with my parents, uncle, aunt, sisters and cousins).

Those were also the days when Kailash Colony still had a touch of wilderness. Before Greater Kailash came into existence, rocky hills and open terrain surrounded the neighbourhood, and jackals could be heard howling at night.

One of my maternal uncles, *Tonimama*, a young doctor on internship with a cheerful personality and a love of music, often joined my sisters and me on evening walks across those hills. He played the harmonica as we walked, and those melodies remain among my happiest childhood memories. He gave me his small German PUCK harmonica and taught me how to play it, unknowingly planting the first seeds of my love for

music. Years later, my school friend Subhash Sarin gifted me a chromatic harmonica, which took my playing to another level. At BITS Pilani, I went on to win the instrumental solo competition playing that very instrument. Looking back, it is remarkable how a simple gift from an uncle, followed years later by another from a school friend, became such an unexpected part of my journey.



Harmonica with BITS Orchestra

Life, however, was not always kind. My father died unexpectedly in 1970, aged only fifty-eight, leaving me, as the only son, with responsibilities I had hardly been prepared for. My eldest sister later died of cancer at just thirty-nine. Loss became part of our family story, even as

the arrival of grandchildren gradually brought back some of the sunshine.

Durgabari

Another institution that became an integral part of our family life was the Durgabari Society, established in 1974. It soon grew into a socio-cultural hub for the Bengali-speaking community of South Delhi, hosting religious, charitable and cultural activities throughout the year. The temple complex houses Maa Kali, Lord Shiva and Lakshmi Narayan, while its annual Durga Puja is celebrated with devotion and grandeur. Over the years, many of our family rituals and celebrations took place there, making Durgabari much more than a place of worship—it became part of our family story.

My mother was closely associated with Durgabari and regularly visited its library near our home. Years later, after returning to Delhi, I became actively involved with the Society, serving two terms as General Secretary, followed by a term as President and later as a member of the Board of Trustees. My wife, Sumita, was equally devoted to Durgabari, playing an active role in the Durga Puja celebrations and rising at 4:00 a.m. each day to assist the *purohits* with the morning rituals. Thus, Durgabari became woven into the lives of three generations of our family. My association with Durgabari continues as a member of the Board of Trustees.

The tradition of Durga Puja in the area goes back to 1958, when Bengalis from Kailash Colony, Lajpat Nagar

and Andrews Gunj joined hands to organise the first Puja, known as “Tribeni.” After the Society was established in 1974, the celebrations moved to the Durgabari complex.





Golden Jubilee Celebrations 2010

The Golden Jubilee of the Puja was celebrated in 2010 with a commemorative publication, *The Golden Years*, and honours for 21 pioneers and their families. As General Secretary, I was fortunate to lead the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2010. It was a memorable occasion, made possible by the enthusiasm and dedication of the entire team—a fitting celebration of community spirit and Durgabari’s enduring legacy.

Friends Who Became Family

Delhi also gave me friendships that have lasted for half a century. Of my eight close school friends, only four remain—Subhash Sarin, Mohinder Walia, Vinay Mathur and Shyamal Bagchee who resides in Edmonton, Canada. The others have gone, some tragically young. Kalyan Mukherjee and his wife, Tripta, perished in an Air India crash while travelling to Japan when they were still in their twenties. Arvind, Aparesh and Vijay passed away in more recent years. It sometimes felt as though

they had decided not to make the journey to the other side alone.

Another circle of friendships began in the early 1970s, when four couples came together through Philips India and the Food Corporation of India. We proudly called ourselves The Saturday Club—an institution with just one strict rule: every Saturday, one of our homes became headquarters. The menu was unfailingly simple—Old Monk, an assortment of snacks and, of course, unlimited adda. The conversation wandered effortlessly from politics to cricket, office gossip to philosophy, children's report cards to the mysteries of married life. No subject was too trivial, too serious or too controversial. By Monday morning, we had usually solved most of the country's problems—though, regrettably, no one had asked for our advice.

Meet the happy gang:

- Pradip ("Barda") & Manjulika (Manju) Sarkar
- Darik & Mounolelekha Ghosh
- Jagannath (Jagan) & Nandita Sengupta
- Sujit & Sumita Sengupta



The Saturday Club

*L to R: Sujit, Jagannath, Nandita, Sumita,
Mounolekha, Manju Pradip & Dwarik*

More than fifty years later, we've learned that while engineering builds bridges, it's friendship that keeps them standing—and marriage that keeps us all properly grounded!

Our friendship didn't stop with us—it happily recruited the next generation! Our children grew up together, shared school days, birthday parties, family picnics, and enough mischief to keep all eight parents on permanent alert.

The junior brigade grew up together, spent countless weekends, holidays, picnics, and celebrations together, and became more like cousins than friends. They somehow managed to survive our collective parenting, and today, though they are scattered across India and

around the world, the bonds they inherited from us remain as strong as ever.

Our adventures weren't confined to living rooms. Together we explored Kashmir, Ranikhet, Madhya Pradesh, and many other destinations. Yet one of the happiest memories was far less exotic—a drive along the Chandigarh highway to a roadside dhaba that served aloo parathas so delicious that we were convinced they alone justified the journey.

The Saturday Club was never just about good food and good cheer. It was our extended family. Whenever illness struck one of us, the others appeared at the hospital or bedside without being summoned, regardless of the hour. As our children left home for college and careers, they carried one comforting certainty: if their parents ever needed help, three other families would be there before they could even catch the next flight.

Like every long story, ours too has had heartbreaking chapters. Mounolekha was the first to leave us after a long and painful battle with a rare illness. Then cancer claimed Jagan, whose courage inspired everyone around him. Nandita, never quite able to recover from the loss of her lifelong companion and later battling kidney failure, followed him all too soon. Each left behind a void that can never truly be filled and countless friends who still miss them deeply.

Today, Sumita and I live in Kolkata. Barda and Manju divide much of their time between Delhi and Mumbai

with their son, while Darik continues to live in New Delhi. The Saturday evenings around a bottle of Old Monk have become memories, but the friendships have refused to retire.

The Saturday Club now meets in a different drawing room—our WhatsApp group. Every day it buzzes with messages, old photographs, birthday wishes, jokes of varying quality, health updates, and lively debates. Technology has replaced rum glasses, but thankfully not the laughter.

Looking back, I realise that the Saturday Club was never about Old Monk, aloo parathas, or even Saturday evenings. It was about finding friends who became family; about celebrating one another's joys, sharing one another's burdens, and standing shoulder to shoulder through every season of life. Time has changed many things, but it has never diminished what we built together over half a century ago.

The End of an Era

After my mother died in 1996, our old family house was redeveloped. The arrangement among the siblings was amicable, but the garden that my mother had lovingly created disappeared forever. With it went the trees, the flowers and a piece of the world in which we had grown up



The Beginning of the End – 1999

The new building brought its own problems—maintenance disputes, parking battles, plumbing failures, an ever-open main gate and stray dogs who discovered that our ground floor was cool and comfortable. The building had been redeveloped, but unfortunately, the old sense of community had not been redeveloped with it.

Meanwhile, Sumita began a new chapter of her own, studying journalism and building a fulfilling ten-year career. Our sons grew up, married and eventually settled abroad. The house remained the centre of family life for many years, but gradually the family itself became scattered across the world.

And then came the thought: enough was enough.

Our sons suggested selling the property.

In 2022, influenced more by emotion than economics, we did exactly that.



The Day We Said Goodbye – April, 2022

We moved into a rented apartment in Chittaranjan Park. Every time I drove past our old neighbourhood, however, memories came flooding back—my parents, childhood friends, festivals, family gatherings, the garden and the house my father had built.

Then came the irony.

Soon after we left, many of the problems that had troubled us began disappearing. The basement office was sold and the troublesome sewage issue vanished. One of the few considerate families in the building also moved away.

Perhaps we had simply been impatient.

But hindsight is always wiser than foresight. We make decisions with the information and emotions we have at the time. Life rarely gives us the complete picture.

When Delhi Faded, Kolkata Called

Kolkata had gradually become our happy place. Family, friends, culture, music, food and its gentler winters drew us back year after year. We even bought a modest flat there, never imagining that it would one day become our permanent home.

Then circumstances changed. My brothers-in-law, Bappa and Rajat, who had been an important part of our Kolkata connection, passed away within two years of each other. Tuntun, my youngest sister, a doctor who lived in Durgapur, close to Kolkata, also passed away under tragic circumstances in 2023.

Her loss left another deep void in my life. With so many loved ones gone, Kolkata inevitably came to carry a mixture of happy memories and painful ones.

Then came another unexpected turn.

One morning, our landlord, who lived in Vienna, called to say that he had decided to sell the flat. He asked whether we would like to buy it, as he planned to purchase another property in France.

The price he quoted was almost exactly what I had received from selling my Delhi house.

I could not resist replying:

“If I wanted to buy your flat, why on earth did I sell mine?”

Little did I know that this seemingly ordinary conversation would eventually set us on the road to Kolkata—for good.

One thing led to another, and in July 2025, we finally moved there.

A year later, when friends ask whether we are returning to Delhi, I smile and say, **“No.”**

Do I miss Delhi? Of course I do. How could I not? Seventy years of childhood, family, friendships, a career and countless happy memories cannot simply be left behind. Delhi shaped my life and will always have a special place in my heart.

But life cannot be lived entirely in the past. At some point, we have to embrace what lies ahead.

Delhi gave us our roots; Kolkata has given us a new beginning.

And perhaps that is what *Khatti Meethi Yaadein* is really about. Life is never entirely sweet or bitter. The people we meet, the homes we build, the losses we endure, the

friendships we cherish and the choices we make all leave their mark and become part of our story.

I look back with gratitude, not regret.

The old house is gone. The garden is gone. Many of the people who filled those years with laughter are gone too. But the memories remain—and, just as importantly, there is still time to make new ones.

As Rabindranath Tagore reminds us, we may cherish our memories, but we cannot remain trapped in the past. Life unfolds in ways we cannot always predict. What matters is that we accept its twists and turns and keep moving forward.

One chapter has closed; another has begun. And after seventy years in Delhi, I am discovering that there is still plenty of life left to write.

(New Delhi, 2022-26)