

2 MY SPACE  
Miracles do happen

3 FICTION  
The advisor - II

4 ALL THINGS CONSIDERED  
Not a relation anymore

# The Assam Tribune READING Sunday



The elderly owner of the guest house in the Upper Assam tea town of Dibrugarh was worried. It was near midnight and his young guests were not in yet. A search party set out, a frantic search began. They were finally located at the only restaurant open, watching the Greece vs Nigeria soccer World Cup group match, engrossed in conversation with the master chef on the local cuisine and thoroughly enjoying the experience, oblivious of the scare and confusion they had created. "You nearly gave us a heart attack", said one from the search party. The deserted roads sans street lights, coupled with the silence outside, made them realise the gravity of the situation, touched at once by the concern.

It was not all fun and frolic however. While most young people enjoy a summer break—coming home to unwind from colleges and universities, this lot was different. Walking through mud and slush, wading across streams and paddy fields full of leeches and mosquitoes, they visited and explored flood ravaged villages, schools, interacting with villagers in remote Brahmaputra river islands, the *saporis*. Far away from the comforts of their homes and families, in an entirely unfamiliar terrain, playing volleyball in the sandy *saporis*, befriending villagers, relishing the local cuisine and catching up with the occasional World Cup soccer match had been their only means of relaxation.

Taarika Shridhar, Julia Evans and Alon Slutzky are undergraduates (under 20) at Tufts University, Boston. A little older (at 25) Brian Orland, is pursuing his post-graduation in international studies at Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC.

Taarika, an NRI, grew up in Muscat. The tattoo in her arm displays her philosophy—*Ubuntu*, a classical African concept, calling for brotherhood of men. "Followed by Desmond Tutu", she tells me promptly, acquired while on a visit to South Africa, two years ago, as a mere 16-year-old to perform community service. Julia, the budding litterateur-poet, belongs to the southern American State of Arkansas. Coming into Boston, to study at Tufts, was a big

challenge for this small town girl. She finds striking similarities between the simple village folk of Assam with people from her State. Alon, an aspiring medico, has his roots in Israel, from where his family moved 30 years ago to New York City and are now based at New Jersey. He attended a Jewish high school, applied to Tufts in 2009, and has finished his first year under graduation.

The classmates attended a year long intensive course "Education for public enquiry and international citizenship" (EPIC), run by the Institute for Global Leadership (IGL) at Tufts. The highlight of the course is a four-day international symposium where discussions are held on different topics with panel discussions and interactions. The topic focused on this year was: "South Asia: conflict, culture, complexity and change".

The entire course was an eye opener. The young minds were ignited, speaking to a wide spectrum of academicians related to South Asia at the symposium. The brilliant presentation by Sherman Teichman, Director of the IGL on South East Asia conflict, convinced them that studying international relations without understanding this crucial region would be incomplete learning. Adds Julia, "I was enthralled by the complexities of SE Asia, conflict of language, of culture, lifestyle, which was both shocking and stunning". A brief introduction to NE India was earlier provided to them by Prof Ananya Bajpayee from the University of Massachusetts. She focused on Manipur and the resentment of the people against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the State.

The turning point came when they happened to meet eminent journalist, author and expert on the NE India, Sanjoy Hazarika, who was invited to speak at the symposium. Tufts University has awarded the Dr Jean Mayer Award for Global Citizenship for 2010 to Sanjoy Hazarika for his advocacy of issues in India's North East to a national and international audience and in recognition of his lifelong contributions to improving the lives of the poor and marginalised in South Asia. They spoke to him. He motivated

ed them to come to North East India, to his home state Assam, where he has been dealing with marginalised river island communities through the innovative Boat Clinic health initiative and helped guide their project. They read Hazarika's *Strangers of the Mist*, which gave them a good introduction to India's North East, the challenges and problems plaguing the region and made up their minds. Complete with back packs, cameras and MP3 players, they landed in Assam in June 2010, for an internship programme.

Alon was to research on the boat clinics and the girls would conduct a study on the indigenous Muslim community of Assam, besides attending health camps. The prospect of visiting Assam and the boat clinics was exciting for Alon, who had wanted to see health service in a rural setting and this was the perfect opportunity.

"Every survival kit should include a sense of humour" would best sum up Brian Orland's attitude to life. Brian is from Princeton, near New Jersey, graduating from Davidson College, North Carolina. His ready wit, sense of humour and near fluent Hindi brightens up conversations and helps him make friends aplenty. His father, a funeral director, often had a young Brian helping him in work for that extra pocket money—ordering coffins, arranging for paperwork and funerals, learning, in the process, to "find humour in grim situations." What eventually pulled him to India was reading the *Vedas and Upanishads*, a part of his course work. In early 2004, he was in India for the first time, coming six times in all. His stints in India have included voluntary work at a leprosy hospital in rural Tamil Nadu as an undergraduate, interning at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi after graduating, studying India—Sri Lanka relations, attending a Hindi school at Mussourie, to deepen relationships and make friends in this "language of the heart".

Brian is in love with the Brahmaputra. His interest in the river developed during a research internship with Strategic Foresight Group in Mumbai (they undertook a South Asia water security initiative by fo-

## Faraway friends

**Bhaswati K Goswami** writes about a group of young American university students who visited the North East as part of a unique internship programme.

cusing on the Brahmaputra). His Assamese friend at IPCS had briefed him on the natural beauty of Assam and NE India, and the challenges faced by the region. Assam gave him the perfect opportunity to conduct a research project related to the Brahmaputra—the impact of floods on the economic development of the State. Brian heard about the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) from common friends and contacted Sanjoy Hazarika, the Managing Trustee of the organisation, who offered the organisation's help in conducting the study.

From his flight to Dibrugarh, he saw the Brahmaputra for the first time and thought it was an ocean, so wide was the expanse. On arriving, the first thing he did was to walk down to the river to catch the sunset. Next morning, he travelled to Dhemajai, perched on the top deck of a ferry and joined the Dhemajai boat clinic, "SB Shanaz" and the health team conducting a health camp. He observed the camp—a mother with three children carrying medicines returning home from the camp walking through the marshes, a sick young man on a bicycle, friends pushing it along, mothers carrying infants on their back for immunisation, images he would carry back with him. He loved the spirit of the health team, their camaraderie and set off with community workers Santosh and Dharani, visiting villages, with mud up to the knees, conducting informal interviews about how people deal with floods. All seemed to have some plan—they stored food, most have boats and build second levels in their houses when floods come in. Children enjoy it, he found out, not having to attend school.

Since then, he has visited flood prone areas. Jonai, Sadiya, Dhakuakhana, Dhemajai, Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Majuli and Dibrugarh are places at his fingertips, so familiar have they become during the course of his study, preferring these nondescript towns to "urban" Guwahati. He laments about people having got too used to floods, with not much of a learning process happening for either the community or the government. How one practiced agriculture, growing different crops and crop timings, efficient grain storage are some of the workable solutions to deal with floods, feels Brian, with a proper scientific study of the river, which cannot be controlled otherwise.

Boarding "SB Swaminathan", the Tinsukia boat clinic, Julia, Taarika and Alon recall their trip, sailing to Laika *saporis*, a four hour journey from Tinsukia, sitting on the deck, admiring the picturesque lush green scenery. The health team members, forever jovial, indulged in some leg pulling about their "vanishing act" in Dibrugarh. Children from the *saporis*, waving their tiny hands, came running towards the boat clinic, welcoming the members. They watched how efficiently the members set up the camp, fighting all odds—tents pitched, tables and chairs for the doctors put, medicines arranged and people flocking to the doctors, with gleeful children following their parents.

They spent nights in the boat, relishing the food served by the boat crew and playing volleyball with the health team after the camps were over, bare feet in the sandy *saporis*. They explored villages, ending up once at a *Gaon burah's* hut. They watched his deft fingers make bamboo fish traps, even as they played a local board game akin to checkers, "cows and land" with the villagers. At Jorhat, they visited the ancient Shiva temple at Nagheriting, accompanied by Muslim friends, and were impressed by the spirit of tolerance.

Alon realised that convincing people who are totally ignorant about healthcare, immunisation, sterilisation, etc. is not easy, but the health teams have managed to do so. Doctors have to ensure that people do not stop antibiotics halfway, when they feel slightly better. He fears however about "Medicalisation" setting in, with people getting addicted to drugs, seeing the rush for medicines at the camps and people taking offence when told by doctors otherwise.

Brian and Alon particularly liked their visit to Majuli, visiting the 16th century Vaishnavite monasteries and interacting with the monks, who were as curious about their lives as they were about theirs. The monks lamented about how the island is getting eroded year after year.

"Explore as much" was Julia's spirit. She loved the local food, spicy chicken curry, ferns, local vegetables and mangoes, not getting to taste however the *Bhoot jolokia*, the world's hottest chilli, keeping it for her next visit. Brian particularly loved the Mishing food, more so the traditional pork, charmed by their hospitality, visiting Mishings huts raised on stilts to keep them safe above the flood water, which is never too far away. The local beer, *apong*, hit him once and the first time he had the humble betel nut, the *tamul*, he had a smile on for fifteen minutes, he jests. They were all charmed by this beautiful State, by the hospitality of the people, though they had not a minute to themselves, being often flocked by villagers, as most had not come across light skinned Caucasians. "But for the bumpy roads, everything about Assam is good", sums up Brian.

These young people, whom I got to meet officially, soon became near family members during their stay at Guwahati, bonding with my sons, the older of the two nearly their age group. They would join the boys in their music and guitar sessions. The only time I thought Julia was homesick was on hearing a familiar number by the Allman Brothers. The band comes from Little Rock, Arkansas, her home state. We would look forward to their visits, to enjoy the soccer matches, close friends joining in, sharing meals with lively conversation, opening up our vistas and minds. Taarika has given us an open invitation to watch the next World Cup, sharing her apartment at Brazil, where she hopes she will find a job by then. We take up the offer. Till 2014 then...

bhaswati.goswami@yahoo.co.in

Reshmi Singh, a doctor, was attending a marriage party of her colleague. It was an elaborate affair consisting of delicacies from all over India. Being a foodie, she was enjoying every bit of her gastronomical experience. "But what came as a surprise was the dessert: traditional Bengali sweet *Malpoa* served with brandy sauce! Though I knew about Bengali sweets gaining international flavour lately—but brandy sauce! Simply out of the world," she enthuses.

This kind of happy surprise is becoming common these days at opulent parties. With increasing overseas travel by Indians, food—along with many other things—are acquiring an international aura. Bengal sweets are not lagging behind.

From the archaic to the ultra modern, from the rich to the plebs—and from the veggies to the non-veg, sweets—typical Bengali sweets—have successfully wooed them all. That includes celebrities, Bollywood stars to international sports persons visiting Kolkata. Few can withstand the temptation of savouring a hot *rosogolla* or a *nalen gurur sandesh* (with a jaggery made from date palm). This item hits the menu during winter when this jaggery makes its appearance.

*Rosogolla* is believed to have been first made by Nabin Chandra Das, father of Krishna Chandra Das (the original owner of the famous sweet joint KC Das) in 1868, though some say that the *rosogolla* actually originated in Orissa and is as old as the *Ratha Yatra* in Puri. But *sandesh* was in vogue even before that. Though it is hard to determine exactly when the term *sandesh* came to indicate a sweet made of *chhana* (sweetened cottage cheese), rather than *kheer* (thickened milk), it is reasonable to assume that the term became quite common by the later half of the 19th century.

Sanjay Budhia, managing director, Patton Group, is a self-confessed sweet lover. Though he has tasted some of the new innovative sweets like the black current *sandesh* and liked it too, he confesses that "I prefer to stick to the traditional stuff when it comes to sweets."

Indrani Mukherjee, a young entrepreneur who runs a boutique, loves sweets in any form. "I have tasted the strawberry and papaya flavoured *sandesh* and loved it. But the mere mention of Bhim Nag's (a famous sweetmeat shop in Bowbazar area) *Abar khabo sandesh* or the *Jaw bhora sandesh* or *Surya modak* of Chandannagar, makes my mouth water. Still, I feel that the experimentations are good, especially the recent innovation of low-calorie 'diabetic *sandesh*'."

However, for the renowned writer Mani Shanker Mukherjee of



Bengal is known for its delectable sweets. Now it is going global in taste and marketing, in keeping with the times, finds **Baishali Mukherjee**.

## Sweet nothings

*Chowringhee* fame, experimentation with Bengali sweets is a no-no. He believes that there are certain things in this world like the classical music, where there isn't any scope for experimentation. Bengali sweets should stand firm against the tide of interference. "Traditional Bengali sweets", Shankar says, "are so rich and satisfying in taste that they don't need to be changed in any way."

Nevertheless, Bengali sweets are now spreading its wings to woo the new generation with its many variations. Savour these mouth-watering items: *Parjat* (a mix of pista, nuts and *kheer*), *Moushumi* (*sandesh* stuffed with nuts and coconut), *Golapi pera* (pure *chhana* rolled in rose water), *Dilkhush* (*kheer*, *chhana* and pista) and *Sourabh* (*chhana* with sugar globules and pista).

Maestro Satyajit Ray was a frequenter at Nokur, as now is his son Sandip Ray, as well as Tollywood director Rituparno Ghosh, often billed as Ray's protégé. Singer Manna Dey has a sweet tooth; so do

actors Vidya Balan, Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai, who try out the Bengali goodies when in Kolkata. "Bengali sweets are now travelling beyond Bengal. This recent gourmet trend is aimed at keeping sweets of Bengal contemporary and relevant to younger people," says Prashanta Nundy of Nokur. Therefore, to tempt the new palate, the 165-year-old Nokur is adding new flavours—orange, pineapple, mango, lichi, black currant and kiwi—to its *sandesh*. Nokur already "exports" its sweets to various parts of the country and abroad, from its base in North Kolkata. The enterprising confectioners are honing the *desi* spread with some internationally preferred flavours like black current, kiwi and strawberry. So, you have alphonso *dahi* from Balaram; black currant *sandesh*/*kiwi sandesh*/*strawberry rabri* from Nokur; strawberry *rosogolla* from Gupta's; tulsii *doi* and tulsii *sandesh* from Hindustan Sweets and soya roll, rose-cream *peshwari*, orange *dahi* from KC Das.

Says Rabindra Kumar Paul, general secretary of the West Bengal Sweetmeat Makers' Association and director of Hindustan Sweets: "Though people of Asian origin are our primary customers, Americans and Europeans are increasingly taking interest in this delicacy. They are gradually getting aware that where a pastry is full of empty calories, a *sandesh* or *rosogolla* has some nutritional value. However, compared to the Indian customers, who often ask for the international flavours, the foreigners and the NRIs prefer the traditional flavours."

KC Das, arguably the most popular brand of Bengali sweets (particularly for its canned *rosogollas*), is also gearing up to go global, albeit more aggressively as is clear from its retail spread—five shops in Kolkata, as many as nine in Bangalore and one shop in Mysore. What was a shanty shop at a corner of Baghbazar in North Kolkata way back in 1866, now boasts of many innovative sweets.

Hemen Das, one of the proprietors of KC Das, is excited about their Bangalore outlet. "We are having 1.5 times more sale there than in Kolkata. Most of our customers there are non-Bengalis," he says. The popularity of Bengali sweets among the non-Bengalis can also be made out from the fact that Haldiram's, which mainly cater to the non-Bengali customers, are now coming up with sweets like *rosogolla*, giving steep competition to the traditional outlets.

So, would the fusion sweets mark the end of the good ol' *mishiti*? A vehement no comes from Amor Bhattacharya, an NRI living in Dallas: "Traditional Bengali sweets are inimitable and have proved their worth. They are part of history now. Let them come up with items like carrot *rosogolla*, soya *rosogolla*, tulsii *rosogolla*, but nothing can take the place of a plain hot *rosogolla*."

The next course? Sweet makers are now taking steps to integrate traditional and modern methods of production. KC Das is carrying on research at its southern unit in Bangalore to improve the flavour of its prime product, the *rosogolla*.

Aiding these efforts is Jadavpur University, where scientists are trying to evolve standardised procedures to be followed by the sweet makers. "Since health and fitness have become important nowadays, Kalyani University, Indian Institute of Chemical Biology and IIT-Kharagpur are coming up with new ideas to help us develop new sweets that are healthy," says Paul.

Ranging from traditional to international, Bengal's repertoire of sweets is getting more and more colourful and exotic, thus making its birth place the dessert capital of India.

Trina World Features (TWF)