

ARANI

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An Expression of Srishti
Bengali Cultural Association of
Charlotte, North Carolina

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

Promita Bhattacharya



The year 2020 has presented us with some extraordinary challenges as we continue to battle and coexist with a global pandemic. However, this has probably brought out some of our unique abilities as well, teaching us how to cope, reach out, and be more adaptable workers or students, more patient parents and extraordinary multi-taskers. In our Srishti community we have always tried to remain connected and build a home away from home on foreign shores. During this time of crisis, we felt this connection and closeness like never before when our friends and neighbors became our family.

At Srishti we launched several new initiatives under the tagline “Physically Distant, yet Digitally Connected”. As social distancing became a global norm, we united digitally. Schools and workplaces closed all over US in mid-march, there was a palpable uncertainty and fear in the community. One of the first initiatives of Srishti was to reach out to members and extend help and support wherever needed. We also connected with several previous sponsors and local businesses and pledged our support to them. To promote positivity among members, the first digital events were launched like the Arani writing contest and the Digital Youth Leadership Sessions. The online portal became a fun and interactive way for Srishti kids to connect and gave them a safe environment to express their thoughts and discuss their doubts as they navigated these unprecedented times.

Through the writing contest and youth engagement discussions, the creative genius of our young members became apparent. The Youth sessions ran from March 30th to August 9th, covering 17 weeks and over 75 sessions, 40 Srishti kids from over 35 families were engaged in this effort led by 25 youth and adult coaches. As

responsible role models, our Youth members hosted sessions on Science, Math, Reading, formed Book Clubs, provided story-reading sessions, taught art, painting, cooking and baking, home skills, and held dance, PE, photography, music, Microsoft Office sessions. The high-school kids participated in a Sunday Leadership Camp and launched our first ever digital coding camp, which was a huge success.

Srishti also came forward to acknowledge all our members who are doctors and medical practitioners by launching the digital series “Stories of Srishti’s Healthcare Heroes”, who are selflessly serving our community. The Mask-Making Initiative led by Srishti families donated masks to frontline workers and essential services. They worked tirelessly to procure fabric, cut, measure, stitch and distribute the masks.

With the coming of April, some fun element was added to the digital forum by arranging Mistimukh (dessert making) competition, Kids Art Contest and Alpona competition that kept us entertained as we ushered in the Bengali New Year. Even though a physical gathering was not possible, videos of beautiful songs and dances kept us enthralled. In May and June, our accomplished members came together to compile heart-warming videos to commemorate Mother’s Day and Father’s Day which brought us smile to our faces.

Through our community outreach and fundraising efforts (ASHA), we were able to collect a generous contribution that reached various local Charlotte organizations and far flung areas of West Bengal affected by COVID-19 and Cyclone Amphan. Funds reached beneficiaries such as the CMS School System, Renaissance West Community Initiative (Charlotte), Atrium and Novant Health Care systems, and Walton Wood Senior Living Facility in our

US community. In West Bengal, our support and contributions were deeply appreciated by Ram Krishna Mission and Matilal Bharat Tirtha Sheba Mission Ashram

In June, we got together to celebrate our high-school and college graduates to Srishti’s first ever online graduation ceremony. This was followed by the little graduate’s felicitation ceremony for our elementary students. Other notable events were digital monthly birthday announcements for all kids, digital introduction videos of the committee and board members, and the first ever customization of the Srishti logo to reflect the US flag colors.

On July 4th weekend we held a digital Summer Concert where we enjoyed a musical morning with Hriti and Sampa of Zee Bangla SaReGaMaPa. Other creative endeavors were Rakhi-making Workshop, online Rakhi (sibling day) celebration and Ganesh idol making workshop, helping our children connect to our roots.

In August we organized Srishti’s Bhaagathon, a friendly online marathon to commemorate the 73rd independence of India. We had a combined goal of 100 miles but we ended with over 1000 miles due to active participation and enthusiasm of our members – with custom Bhaagathon T-shirts, a digital photo frame and state-of-the-art Bhaagometer to chart daily progress, our motivated members collected 1131 miles. This was followed by a successful back-to-school drive to collect new school supplies for students in-need.

Autumn is knocking at our doors and it is yet another time for Bengalis around the world to come together and celebrate the advent of Maa Durga. The Srishti family will celebrate our first ever digital Durga Puja this year and now more than ever, we need the presence and blessings of Maa Durga to guide us. I shall end on a note of hope for the coming months because difficult times have taught us to be innovative, resilient and grateful. We have pooled our talents and resources to unite and celebrate small victories. Let us hope that wisdom, kindness and empathy prevail as the world recovers and heals. Let us pray that our indomitable human spirit can conquer all adversity and emerge victorious yet again, reflecting triumph of Good over Evil.

TEAM ARANI 2020

EDITOR'S DESK



Shyama Parui



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CREATIVE DESIGN

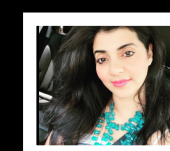


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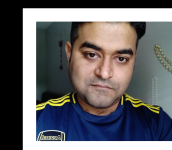
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SRISHTI of Charlotte is a registered (Federal ID# 47-2245896) non-profit organization that is dedicated towards social, cultural, charitable and educational purposes. SRISHTI of Charlotte is a beacon for promoting Bengali culture, literature, art and its rich heritage throughout the Carolinas.

The organization's goal is to both preserve as well as pass on this rich and vibrant heritage to the next generation growing up in this great country. It fosters unity and creates a cross cultural interaction and appreciation of diverse cultures, engages in cultural exchanges with like-minded organizations and participates in social welfare activities. Srishti of Charlotte organizes opportunities for local individuals to present Indian and South Asian performing arts such as dance, music and drama. Special efforts are taken to encourage youth participation so that they learn and continue these art forms and add to the diversity of their talents. Srishti of Charlotte actively partners and engages with various educational institutions in the Charlotte Area. It also organizes donation drives to serve the needs of the community like Hope House (Huntersville) and Renaissance West Community Initiative.

Like every year, we are excited to host our largest annual event namely our **Durga Puja / (Sharodiya Utsav) from Friday, October 23rd to Sunday, October 25th, 2020..** We expect over 200 viewers for our digital social and cultural extravaganza this year. We primarily rely on contributions from our members and commercial and corporate organizations like you to support our growing association. We humbly request your sponsorships by placing an advertisement in ARANI that cover both the print and the internet media for a full year.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact us at Teamsrishti@srishtiofcharlotte.org.

Thank you,

With warm regards,

SRISHTI of Charlotte

<https://www.srishtiofcharlotte.org/>



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A Road Trip Down Memory Lane (Winner - A Page from my Childhood Diary)

By **Promita Bhattacharya**

The most cherished memories from my childhood are undoubtedly those of winter vacations spent at our country home in the quaint little hilltown of Deoghar. It was an exciting road trip in the family car, which took almost all day, with several stops along the way. Often, it would involve a convoy of cars following us, as friends, extended family and cousins would also tag along as a part of our large group.

I cannot explain the special bond we shared with this house - the sights, sounds, and smells associated with the joy and warmth during the stay here. Perhaps the name of the house "Maatir Maya" held the secret clue to the magical charm the place wove over us. This home was built by my

great grandfather, so it was many years old. When my mother married into our family and visited this home as a newlywed, she was awed by the serene beauty of the home and its surroundings. It was a white two story house which had a rounded main building with two wings extending on either side. The top floor had a large sprawling sunroom of sorts which we lovingly called "Kaancher Ghor", as three walls of the room were made of large glass windows. The panes of each window had miniature glass segments, which could be opened and closed with tiny individual latches. This room was straight out of fairytale books and a dream come true for two little girls from the city.

In anticipation of the journey, my sister and I packed our little bags with toys, games, art materials, and tons of books, mostly borrowed from school friends thanks to an active storybook exchange system that we had in those days. The road trip involved the better part of a day with the car invariably breaking down at least once on the highway. Those were safe, carefree days where I distinctly remember the hospitality and kindness of strangers who would stop by to help, offer food and water, or even welcome us into their homes for rest and refreshment.

The delectable memories of breakfast stops along the way for crispy *kochuri* with piping hot *aloo* curry, large syrupy *jalebi*, or succulent brown *lyangchas* from Shaktigarh, melt-in-your mouth *balushahi*, and creamy, aromatic masala tea in earthen cups. Lunch breaks would be at our familiar roadside dhabas which served fluffy *rotis* topped with dollops of golden ghee to be devoured with delicious *saag* and *paneer* curries. We always carried the staple food of travelling Bengalis - a stack of *luchi* and *aloo-r dom-* with us, but these delicious roadside enticements were indulged in so freely that no one had any appetite for the home cooked food until we reached our destination.

As we neared the well-known lanes leading to the large iron gates, there was always an indescribable sense of homecoming. The house itself would stand out in the fading light of dusk by the time we pulled into the huge awning to park our cars in the courtyard. Between the fiery rays of the evening sunset and the red earth of the land, the house stood calm, almost regal. As the pale green ornate front doors swung open, we were enveloped with the unfailing warmth and comfort of the home as it welcomed us inside with open arms.

The house was surrounded by tall, majestic, eucalyptus trees which rose far above the height of the two-story home. I remember holding hands with my sister as we tried to hug these ancient trees with both our arms around the smooth, silvery trunks, but the thickness of the tree-trunks always eluded the grasp of our fingertips. I loved collecting the aromatic, long green eucalyptus leaves and often used them as bookmarks, leaving the books with their unmistakable earthy scent for days.

The garden would be in full bloom with flowers in a myriad colors. Bright chrysanthemums, marigolds like large wool pompoms, and my favorite, the elegant black prince roses, all filling the crisp winter air with their sweet fragrances. The vibrant reddish soil of the area stained our dresses and colored our white canvas shoes a bright, orangey hue. The mornings were always chilly, and we wore layers of winter clothes before we ventured outside. As the day progressed, the sun shone bright and warm. Woolen shawls and heavy sweaters were discarded on the terrace to catch some sunlight. We did bring along some schoolwork, but we spent most of our time outdoors exploring anthills, catching bugs, chasing butterflies, painting, reading, or playing with friends or cousins who had come along with us.

At the back of the house, cows, goats, and chickens roamed free. My favorite afternoon reading spot was a huge sunny haystack near the cowshed. I have wonderful memories laying in the sun staring up at the azure sky, the dappled sunlight and shadows of the leaves of overhead trees playing hide and seek with the sun, the cows grazing

calmly in the background. One day, my mother called me for an errand inside, and I left a book on the haystack for a few minutes, only to come back and find one of the cows languidly chewing the last few pages of the book. That was one mystery story that I never knew the end of, as I couldn't pry the pages out of her mouth before she swallowed them !!

Huge guava trees were laden with juicy fruit in the winter, the Kool Gach (Jujube tree) was always full of berries glistening pale green in huge clusters, enticing and tempting. However, dire warnings to never eat any kool before Saraswati Pujo, would keep us from trying them even as we sat in the garden swing and sadly stared at hordes of friendly, neighborhood monkey families feasting on them daily. Mango and lychee trees were abundant and during the summer, we would return to Kolkata with our car trunk packed with huge sacks of seasonal summer fruits from the garden.

Bonfires were lit every evening, and everyone sat around the crackling fire spinning elaborate tales, mostly local stories about hunting and tracking, thrilling tales of rogue leopards and man-eating tigers that we listened to in wide-eyed awe. On most evenings, there would be no electricity, and we were left



to amuse ourselves in the light of candles and ancient oil lamps. In the eerie semidarkness, we played board games, memory games, cards, and of course, practised our Rabindra Sangeet under strict surveillance of the family elders.

Some aunts and family friends were accomplished singers, and often guided us as we practised in the evening. I cannot fully describe the soulful melody of those winter evenings as the sky turned beautiful shades of pink, purple, and orange, and the trees became shadowy silhouettes as our voices mingled in surreal harmony. The staged tea parties under the trees, the boys got busy with impromptu games of cricket or soccer. We took aimless walks and bike rides in the countryside with no fear, racing over the red mud lanes, climbing hills and trees, running down meadows to

gather juicy, sour red berries by handfuls, eating some and packing more in our pockets - we felt at one with nature around us.

We had no running water, we had to use icy cold well water, yet we grinned ear-to-ear as our fingertips froze and our teeth chattered in the bitter cold mornings. There was no fancy food, only wholesome meals prepared with local farm vegetables, fresh milk, homemade ghee and fruits from our trees. Since we were often here during Christmas and New Year, the only "cake" available was from a local

bakery which was more like a slice of sweet bread with a tiny frosted flower on the top.

There was no reliable electricity, no television, no video games. The Internet and cell phones were unheard of in those

days, in that world. There were no movie theaters, shopping malls, and restaurants, either. Yet this was the holiday we yearned for every year. We also vociferously argued with our friends (just returned from famous hill stations or resorts with albums full of glossy photos) that OUR vacation had been the best vacation ever.

The simplicity and innocence of those days are treasured memories that remain unforgotten. These are stories that I have loved to share with my son. The closeness with family, cherished friendships, the simple joys of life... these are the most important things to put away in that little treasure box at the back of your mind. As we grow older,

these memories come back to us like a breath of fresh air, rejuvenating us as we trudge through the daily routine of our adult lives. So, as a message to all children reading this, hold your precious childhood experiences close to your heart. And as you grow up, save them away carefully and lovingly in your mind, as one day in the future, this will be your true treasure box, which you can share and pass down to the next generation as your unique gift.





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DONUTS

By Aleena Biswas - Winner - Senior Poetry

Donuts are awesome, I can't get enough.
 Actually sometimes I kind of can.
 They go into the fryer and then puff,
 Much like chocolate brownies in a pan.
 I am truly surprised I am not that fat!
 My love for sweet things is honestly bad.
 We don't really have to talk about that.
 Let's say donuts are undoubtedly rad.
 Genuinely, Chocolate glazed is best,
 They're great to share when hanging out with
 friends.
 Then after that, you can save all the rest.
 How much I eat, on my mood it depends.
 Generally, it's agreed they're yummy
 Until one throws up what's in their tummy!

YOUTH LEADERSHIP CAMP

By Anusha Ray

A little over a year ago, my family and I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina and a few months afterwards, we became members of Srishti. As time progressed, we realized that Srishti wasn't just a group of Bengali people, it was a family where we felt a home away from home. With the covid-19 pandemic taking a hit on North Carolina, social gatherings were prohibited and the new lockdown rules limited our chances of social interactions with other people. Despite every setback, the Srishti Family managed to maintain togetherness; we started a youth leadership program, hosted youth leadership camps and did so much more.

The youth leadership group is a great initiative and the camps provided exposure and important information! I had fun and I felt myself growing as an individual. I gained lots of knowledge and I know that these skills will be key for me when I enter the workforce. Once a week, the youth would meet with an adult facilitator (via ZOOM) and we would have a 2-hour session. Over the course of 6 weeks, I was able to broaden my horizons on many different topics such as Leadership, Product Development, Resume Writing, Marketing & Communications, Finance and Entrepreneurship! During the first week, we learned all about the principles of leadership and how different styles of

leadership can affect your end results. Week 2 touched upon, comparing failed products/services with successful ones and finding patterns between the two. Week 3 was all about building a strong resume, the skills required for it and some tips. This week we also had some older students come in and give us post-secondary advice. Week 4 was super-focused on Marketing and Communications. As a youth co-chair of the Marketing team, I found this session highly informative and helpful. We looked deeper into drawing the attention of a potential audience with the mission statement of a company. Week 5, we were guided through information on managing your finances wisely. We learned a lot about simple interest and how small savings can turn into so much more. We also had some older students come in and talk to us about their college

YOUTH LEADERSHIP CAMP

experiences. Week 6 was the last week and we certainly enjoyed ourselves. We interactively learned lots about starting your own business by answering questions to different scenarios.

Overall, the youth leadership camps were enjoyable, engaging, and valuable. I gained awareness on topics which I would have never learned at school. As John F. Kennedy says, **"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other!"** I've heard this quote many times in my life, but I never really thought much of it. I guess the Srishti Family helped prove it true. The youth leadership camps really changed the way I viewed learning and leadership, giving me a more open mind.



Free time – Joy or Pain? By Anuj Dey (Winner - Junior Essay)

Is free time really the best at current times?

What is Free Time? Free Time is a time when you can do anything you want. This can be very joyful, but it can also be a pain in the neck sometimes. So far, during the recent pandemic of the corona virus most people are staying indoors in isolation. Most people would think this is a dream of a lifetime but is it really? We will be talking about good and bad things about free time and how people are using their time while they're at home.

People can spend free time playing, exercising, painting, visiting new places, reading books and can also spend it sleeping. It varies from person to person. Free time in general can also be very painful. If the free time is for an extended period, people start running out of ideas about what to do. Then it becomes boring and stressful. Many people even develop psychiatric conditions. Also, it is very challenging for people to come back to normal life after a long period of leisure. It all depends on how people can utilize their free time. If they can engage themselves in multiple productive things that they enjoy, it will be the best way to spend the free time. People must not be too addicted to something during their free time because it just makes going back to a regular schedule very difficult.

Let's discuss free time during isolation. There are some things that are good about being in isolation. For example you could catch up on your school work, you could exercise, play, watch movies, and much more! Free time in general can be pretty much anything you want, like going on a cruise and going to the beach but free time during a pandemic is way different than free time in general. The reason is because during a pandemic most of us stay at home and we can't socialize with people out of our homes. If you have free time there's a limit to it during a pandemic, all you can do is play by yourself, study, and watch TV. There are bad things about free time during a pandemic though. Some people start to study less, lose social skills, and get more addicted to their phones, TV, computer, and gaming consoles.

Some people use their time wisely and some of them waste their time. Now people can do what they love or learn some new skills

such as learning a new sport, cooking new dishes or catching up on new shows and movies. At the end it feels like too much free time is a pain but if the free time is spent effectively and wisely it could be very joyful and productive.

Sharodiya Subheccha

Aarohan
Anurita's School of Music

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THE PHONE LIFE

By Roshni Akash (Winner - Junior Poetry)

Some people always spend their time alone,
because they are always addicted to their phone!
Sometimes they don't want to eat,
and they don't even keep their room neat!
They think they are a master at everything,
but they are actually a disaster at everything!
Some people can be in a bad mood,
and they can even be a little rude!
They are always lazy,
a little crazy,
and they always say "Oopsy daisy!"
Although these things can happen, phones can be really fun!
but when you hear this, you are going to run!
Phones can cause headaches, heart attacks, and more!
They can even make your throat sore!
That is why you shouldn't be too addicted to your phone!



THANK YOU HEROES

Srishti of Charlotte
would like to sincerely thank all doctors,
medical professionals, teachers, and essential
workers who have been putting their lives on
the line so we can be safe.



FREE TIME - JOY OR PAIN

By Sourodeep Bhattacharya (Winner - Senior Essay)

Free time is something that many of us wish we had more of. However, when we get it, it is important to know that the decisions we make during this time can turn it into either a joy or a pain.

Free time can be a great opportunity if we take advantage of it. We can use it to do daily exercise, learn new skills, or spend time with family. These activities are essential for our well being, and therefore, it is crucial that we devote our free time to them. For example, exercise leads to a healthier lifestyle, improves your mood, reduces stress, and enhances your thinking. It also improves your ability to learn new skills, which is another productive way to spend your free time. Because school and homework require so much time and energy, people often aren't able to hone their skills in non-academic activities. However, the free time we are getting from this pandemic gives us the liberty to learn anything we want. For instance, I practiced driving every day throughout the break, and every hour I spent on the road got me one step closer to owning my driver's license. In addition to driving, I was able to find time to learn songs that I chose along with what my teacher assigned. Devoting time to learning has many benefits, as it helps our brains grow, keeps us engaged throughout the day, and leads to yet more learning. However, the most important effect is that it keeps us happy. Another thing that can accomplish this is spending time with one's family. This is especially important for me, as I am going to NCSSM next year and this is my last full year staying with my parents and sister. While I am still in Charlotte, I would like to enjoy as much time with my family as possible.

However, free time can also be very detrimental. A few months without any structure or routine causes us to abandon many of our good habits, like going to bed early and keeping our rooms clean. Therefore, getting back to work can become a great challenge. In addition, the lack of work to keep us busy may eventually lead to us giving into temptations and spending too much time on pleasurable activities, like TV, video games, or social media. Lastly, too much unstructured free time can lead to boredom in the long term, as we may run out of engaging activities to keep us busy.

Therefore, we can conclude that it is up to us to choose whether our leisure time is a blessing or a curse; a triumph or a victory; a joy or a pain.



My Life During This Pandemic: We Are All In This Together

By Anish Sengupta (Winner - Junior Essay)

Let me tell you a story. A couple of weeks ago, I was at school having fun and it was a regular school day. The only exciting thing that morning was a hawk that flew into the classroom. It was scary. Everyone in my second block went to another classroom, and after about an hour we had to switch classrooms again. As we were settling down, the teacher started the morning meeting and announced that our overnight field trip to Charleston would not be possible because of the coronavirus, and it was horrible. After a couple of questions, my teacher talked about COVID 19 and said that the school might be withdrawn for a long time. We were all sad, some were a little happy.

Soon after we started to do our daily routine after Technology, we were packing to go home, and our teacher told us to pack our literacy books, and the next day we got an email from our school saying that school was canceled until further notice. So, we were quarantined !

After that, we didn't mind until a few days later, my mom was talking on the phone discussing COVID 19. Then she was looking around the house to see if there was enough food because stores would close in a couple of days due to coronavirus. My mom went to the store to get the food we needed, and my brother and I stayed home. For the first couple of days we watched movies and TV. In the next couple of weeks, we signed up for some online activities such as book club, drawing and more and on Zoom [program to talk to people online] I spoke with my teacher and friends in the mornings to catch up with my schoolwork.

Now it's almost been a month since I last went to school or even went outside. It is joy and pain because we get to spend time with family and do have more free time like sleeping in, watching movies and playing games with family, but there are some painful things too. Like not being able to play outside with friends, going to parties and not meeting my school friends. It is hard to stay inside and not do anything but here are some things you can do during your free time:

- Read a book, join a book club
- Play with pets, teach them new tricks
- Spend time with family
- Make a story, write poems
- Take online lessons to learn something new

In conclusion, having free time can be painful and joyful. We have to remember to wash our hands, drink plenty of water, use hand sanitizer, not touch our face and mouth and maintain a healthy lifestyle. So have fun, stay clean and healthy, and we can all do this together!

Please be safe, take care so we can all fight the virus together.

My Journey to AngleLand

By Rohan Chatterjee

(Winner - Essay with a topic of own choice)

Britain has a long and rather complicated history which I have read a lot about. I was further inspired to learn more on this topic by my trip to London last year. For this article I have focused on what I learned about England in the early Roman times.

In 55 BC the Romans with their great leader Julius Caesar attempted to conquer England. Though he had defeated and claimed much of Europe, his better armed troops could not overpower the brave British warriors. Caesar had to make a treaty and leave. He returned in 54 BC, only to find again that he could not win Britain. After this Caesar never attempted to conquer this country again.

In 43 AD however, the Romans returned under Emperor Claudius and managed to defeat the British chief Caractacus and his army in Southeast England. There were other British chiefs who fought the Romans and one of the greatest revolts was led by a woman named Boudica. Her husband, king of the Iceni tribe had died and in hopes of his family not being disturbed had given the Romans half of his territory. But the Romans paid no heed to the king's hopes and disrespected Boudica and her people by forcing her to pay large taxes and taking over her property. This made Boudica furious but when she complained about this, she was treated terribly and hurt by the Romans. That was the last straw for her and her people. Boudica stirred up her people with a fiery speech to fight the Romans. A force of Romans met Boudica and her army and though the Roman force was smaller, they were better trained and more organized so they won. Boudica, who was heartbroken with her defeat, ended her life with poison. The story of Boudica is very inspiring, especially since she was a woman warrior who defied Rome.

After this rebellion the Britons felt it was pointless to revolt and made no objection to the Roman presence. Now Britain was being raided by the Scots and the Picts from the north. The Romans built a wall along the northern border to keep the Scots and Picts out. In honor of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, this was called Hadrian's wall. Despite all their efforts, fighting the invaders became a big problem. At last it came to a point where the Roman army was greatly weakened. This forced all Romans in Britain to leave. When the Romans left, Britain was left defenseless. This caused fierce seamen from Denmark and Germany to invade. At first the Vikings made hit and run attacks, but then began to settle. So, many of today's English people are not originated from Britons but actually from the Danes and Germans. And do you know why it is called England? Because one of the tribes to invade and settle in Britain were called the Angles, so the country was called Angleland or England.

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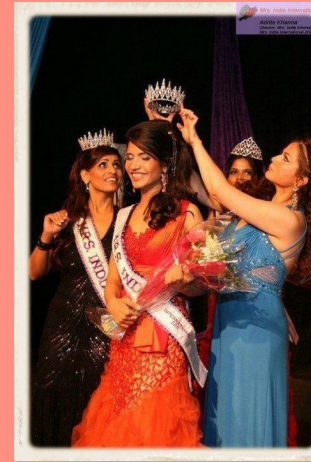


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Essence of The Crown

By Richa Sharma



"while beauty catches the attention, character catches the heart..."

Before being crowned the titles of mother, homemaker, schoolteacher, Mrs. India International, Bollywood actor, Tollywood actor, model, fashion icon, social activist, like many of you, I believed – and still do – I am a woman having the strength to change society, country and even the world.

When God created woman, he was working late on that day... An Angel came by and asked.

"Why spend so much time on her?"

God answered: "Have you seen all the specifications I have to meet to shape her. She must function in all kinds of situations. She must be able to embrace several kids at the same time. Have a hug that can heal anything from a bruised knee to a broken heart. She must do all this with only two hands. She cures herself when sick and can work 18 hours a day."

The Angel was impressed. "Just two hands.....impossible! And this is the standard model?"

The Angel came closer and touched the woman, "But you have made her so soft, Lord". "She is soft", said God, "but I have made her strong. You can't imagine what she can endure and overcome".

"Can she think?" The Angel asked...God answered. "Not only can she think, she can reason and negotiate."

The Angel touched her cheeks... "Lord, it seems this creation is leaking! You have put too many burdens on her". "She is not leaking...it is a tear" God corrected the Angel. "What's it for?" asked the Angel....God said. "Tears are her way of expressing her grief, her doubts, her love, her loneliness, her suffering and her pride."

This made a big impression on the Angel, "Lord, you are a genius. You thought of everything. A woman is indeed marvellous,"

God said. "Indeed, she is. She has the strength that amazes a man. She can handle trouble and carry heavy burdens. She holds happiness, love, and opinions. She smiles when she feels like screaming. She sings when she feels like crying, cries when happy and laughs when afraid. She fights for what she believes in. Her love is unconditional. Her heart is broken when a next-of-kin or a friend dies but she finds the strength to get on with life"

The Angel asked, "So she is a perfect being?". God replies, "No. She has just one drawback. She often forgets what she is worth."

While this portrayal is not originally mine, it neatly brings about the true essence of a woman. Yet, with the crown and title of Mrs. India International comes additional responsibilities. Society, in essence, puts their hope on the winner to empower women and youth and engage in social work by uplifting the underprivileged and marginalized in order to make a positive change. The "crown winner," in essence, is expected to represent India, her rich culture, heritage and beauty in the best way possible on the international arena.

Thus, started my journey to independence... after I was born to a traditional Hindu family in Kanpur, India. Like many of us, I was dominated by "helicopter parents" and siblings. I believed early on that beauty pageants are one of the best platforms to shine. Winners are expected to represent their nation globally as a civilized, socialized and a unified nation. In addition, I believed that the winner must deliver positive news about India, while fulfilling their main responsibility for which they are selected. The overly layered make-up and long hanging curls don't make girls prettier, their influential talk, character and attitude are a must that I thought they must bear apart from the life in lights and magazines. While beauty catches the attention, character catches the heart. Nevertheless, I was not allowed to participate in Miss Kanpur.

Shortly, after I graduated with a Master's degree in Chemistry, without any input from me, I was married off in an arranged setting. I landed in Kolkata as a "housewife" and daughter-in-law in another orthodox setting. I became a schoolteacher, but my aspiration to participate in a beauty pageant did not fade away. I had to brave my way through if I wanted to achieve my dream. A friend, Shivalika Sharma, who herself won

the Gladrags Mrs. India title in 2009, encouraged me to participate in the beauty pageant. I sent pictures to the organizers and was invited to Mumbai for my grooming sessions where I was trained by experts in the field. My daughter was nine years old at the time. Adrita Khanna, the organizer of the pageant, was also instrumental to my success as well. After winning the Mrs. India title, I went on to represent India at the Mrs. India International contest in Atlanta where I was crowned the winner.

When I decided to participate in the pageant in Atlanta, USA, I knew different doors would open for the winner and thus, more opportunities opened up, but expectations were to do something special, other than participate in a glamorous competition and avail the opportunity to make a mark in the ambitious world of cinema and fashion. Although I would get a chance to showcase my intelligence and beauty, I wanted to do something for the public good too. That is where I wanted to make my mark.

It is said that with power comes responsibilities. Since, I believe I didn't win the crown and title just like that, but because of my great spirit and inspiring nature. Being an Indian woman has neither been a privilege nor a hurdle for me. I successfully emerged and received the rightful recognition at home, nationally and internationally for my endeavors since being the winner of the Mrs. India International 2011 pageant in Atlanta, USA. After gaining widespread respect and recognition as a Bollywood and Tollywood actor and a fashion icon, I am also the brand ambassador for David & Goliath, a film production house, an Italian wine, olives and olive oil company. Additionally, I serve as a role model for motivating and encouraging other women to reach newer heights regardless of their background or the hurdles they face. I won a number of awards and accolades including, but not limited to, Naari Shakti from L N Mittal, and accolades from Brahmin Samaj, Rotary Sadan, Gaurav Samman, and The Times of India Award to name a few. I continue to work tirelessly with several NGOs towards the development of less privileged women and children in and around Kolkata.

Recently, I was the lead actor in a short film, "Every 68 Minutes". The message is close to my heart, the film introduces the harsh realities of the dowry system and domestic violence which are still a common practice among many households. Many women are the victims of domestic violence and abuse. Not only in rural areas but also it has been "normalized" by many upper-class households. Shamefully, domestic abuse is still very much existent behind the close doors of many Indian households. Those who come out or raise their voice against this violence are often shunned by society. Its impact is being felt globally. The film has been officially selected in a number of acclaimed national and international film festivals, such as Calcutta International Cult Film Festival, 2020, Crown Wood International Film Festival, 2020, Cult Critic Movie Awards, 2020, Golden Valley Global Cinefest, 2020, Global Cinema Festival, 2020, White Unicorn International Film Festival, 2020. I have four other films on women's issues in production in which I will be playing the lead.

In 1929 Virginia Woolf wrote, *A Room of One's Own*. In it, Woolf raised questions that remain relevant about the lives of men and women today. She said, "in a hundred years...women will have ceased to be the protected sex," adding that, "logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them." Hopefully, she is right, as she technically has until 2029 for her prediction to still be valid. Going further, she even suggested that "all

assumptions founded on the facts observed when women were the protected sex will have disappeared." Though things have gradually gotten a lot better for women since the sixteenth century, yet, an essence of what Woolf said is still felt today, as many assume women will eventually fulfill the stereotype of being a "housewife," bearing a child, meeting its needs, cooking, completing everyday household chores and attending to their husband and in-laws.

Thus, the true Essence of the Crown is to ensure our society appreciates women and their work, instead of putting them into the stereotype that women are only made for being a "housewife". The true Essence of the Crown is to ensure women should not have to fit society's expectations and stereotypes. Even though many in our society have a set of ideas about how we expect men and women to dress, behave, and present themselves, the true Essence of the Crown will ensure more women are climbing to the top of the world's highest peaks, diving into the ocean's depths, and skiing across both poles, but it wasn't long ago that women were discouraged from taking on these formidable adventures. The true Essence of the Crown is to assist in eradicating those clichés and their associated behaviors that put a label on women.



COVID 19 PEOPLE AND PLACES

BY EKATA SAHA

When I look back at the past 6 months, things look unreal. The entire world came to a standstill and the effects of Covid 19 took a toll on everyone. Sitting at home I wondered about the situation across the globe. I was after all worried about my friends and family. And as distance makes the heart grow fonder, this worry, these unusual circumstances became a window of opportunity to connect and reconnect with all. While travel looked like a distant dream, phone calls, life event celebrations on virtual platforms were merely an opportunity to engage more actively. They took precedence over everything else. As they say, “adversity has a silver lining”.

Keeping above in mind, let us see how people across the globe adjusted to these unprecedented times. So, shake up that cocktail or grab a cup of tea and read about the stories of “Covid 19, People and Places”.

COVID is a big name these days, which has completely changed the face of the entire globe. I have been requested to share an article about its impact on my life. I am Suvra, an HR Professional and the mother of a growing teen. My primary goal has always been employee well-being and how best we can serve our customers.

It was in January when for the first time, I received an alert on how this deadly virus can create a pandemic not only in the US but for the entire world. My immediate concern was my employee's health and their families. I am happy that my employee's well-being is taken care of. It was indeed a big task to move all work to a remote format when the entire industry is used to working face to face. The passion for each team to ease this transformation was commendable. The struggle didn't end there! Every minute I started thinking about how to engage with my teammates while they are remote. How to generate positive change in the life of the employees, be it checking on them, building new benefits for their vacation plan, make work from home comfortable, and be mindful that every day, in addition to their work, they are managing elderly parents or young kids. Recognizing the hard work made a big difference. COVID has no power to destroy that.

Today I am proud to say that the new norm is working well, and together we are building a more positive culture.

It has been four years since I have shifted to Singapore with my family. It has been a big change in lifestyle as I was used to having maids at my beck and call back home. Yes, we do have the option to have a helper in Singapore too, but I preferred to keep the helms of my daily household routine in my hands. Over the years we have built wonderful memories. Travelling and cooking are my passions. So, I have gotten used to taking vacations at the drop of a hat. We have had the privilege of meeting wonderful people who have become more like family than friends. Weekends meant full on party mode.

But suddenly from mid of January things started to change. A virus, which originated from Wuhan, China, named COVID19 was invading our surroundings. From mid-March things started looking bad. But the Singapore government had awesome plans and policies which were successful in constraining the virus. However, things got worse and the government declared a circuit breaker because of which we were supposed to stay at home. The whole scenario changed. My husband started working from home. Children started virtual classes. They had to sit from 9am in the morning till 3.30pm in front of the computer with breaks in between. We always ask kids to stay away from screen as much as possible, but here we had no option but to allow them. My kids were getting restless as they could neither go out play nor could they meet their friends. The economy too went for a toss. The malls were closed with only the supermarkets being open. Restaurants were not allowed to have dine-ins but could do home deliveries. One good thing that came out of this situation was that we could have good quality time together. We played a lot of board games as a family and cooked with the kids.

Hopefully the situation will improve very soon all over the world. Things are getting normal in this part of the world. Waiting eagerly for the travelling restrictions to be removed so that can visit family and friends back in India.

Ekata Saha

Charlotte, NC



COVID STORY. Coppell, Texas.

Suvra Banerjee

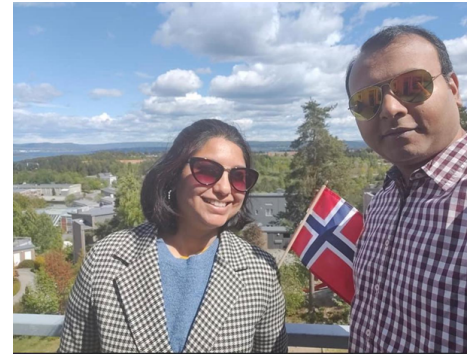
9/9/20



COVID STORY: SINGAPORE

Madhumita Mukherjee

5/29/20



COVID STORY: NORWAY

Swati Ganguly

4/4/2020

Norway was a little late in realizing how far COVID19 virus had spread its tentacles, however, when it did, it was quick to respond to a threat that is taking the world like a storm. Norway has a population of 5.3 million and most of it is concentrated in Oslo. Hence steps needed to be taken and taken quite fast. In Oslo they had to be more vigilant. Norway has been under a soft lockdown since 13th March. In Oslo, most people were asked to work from home, schools were shut down, most eateries and shops were asked to remain closed unless they fell under the “essential items” category. Supermarkets remained open along with pharmacies to make sure Norwegians had what they needed. Thus, began our lock-down life. People here in Oslo strictly follow the government guidelines. They maintain a strict one-meter distance from each other whether they are shopping for food or talking to their neighbors. Doctors and other people associated with the field were called back from their leave and those already serving, increased their working hours. In fact, any available health professional was asked for help and a lot of them went in for voluntary services. The police diligently patrol the neighborhood, and any suspicious passers by showing symptoms of the virus, are immediately swiped over to the testing centers. A heavy fine up to 20000 kroner (2000 euros) can be imposed on people found guilty of not following quarantine orders. Teachers are attending to the students through online classes and helplines have been set up in every public school where children can call just to talk if they find it challenging to handle this emergency. Nurses pay regular home visits from the nearby government health centers to keep a strict eye on the elderly men and women in the community. Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV) is paying workers who have either lost their jobs or were daily wage earners. Society has come together to help each other in such difficult times and thus showing us a beautiful side of humanity.

These past few months, which people all across the world have faced will probably go down in history as one of the “darkest times ever”. I had only heard and read about such pandemics, but never expected to witness such a thing myself.

Hi! I'm Shipra, residing in New Delhi, the capital of India. The situation here is no different from the rest of the world. This COVID pandemic has made life come to a sudden halt. Regular life where children went to school, we went to work, house helpers were available, malls and outings were essential part of life, it all seems to be of an era foregone. Parties, clubs, get togethers, all seem to be a distant dream now.

Also sometimes, because of so much uncertainty and chaos, times look very gloomy and depressive. Initially it was more difficult to cope up but gradually, we all got into the “comfort mode” where all the activities were replaced by an alternative. Eating out being replaced by trying new recipes at home, school education with online classes and assessment, gym routine to online training. So basically, “BASIC LIFE IS THE NEW NORMAL” now.

Though being in a joint family system, I'm glad, I always had the staff's and other family members' support so the “loneliness” factor thankfully was missing. But as they say, “every dark cloud has a silver lining”, here, it came in the form of increased family time, spending time on and with oneself, learning new skills and resting more. Also, when I look around, I see and feel people from all walks of life coming together, joining hands, helping the less fortunate ones including animals. This pandemic has definitely aroused HUMANITY..

I feel deeply sorry and hurt for all the families worldwide who lost their family members to this pandemic. This will certainly be remembered as the toughest times ever for them. But this war is not over yet ... if we are paying such a heavy price, then the least we can do is learn some important life lessons ... “be considerate, be patient, be selfless, learn to give away, be self-sufficient, invest in our health, respect environment, discover the purpose of our life and BE HUMAN”



COVID STORY NEW DELHI, INDIA

Shipra Singhla Aggarwal

6/25/2020

Arani 2020/28



COVID 19 STORY: London, UK

By Jonakee Chandra

June 29th, 2020

The pandemic hit a rather complacent world and the last few months have been nothing if not surreal. Somewhere through this dystopia a new utopian reality emerged, uniting neighbors (often perfect strangers previously) through new forms of symbiosis and solidarity that we'll probably look back on with a degree of pride.

On our street in London, I'd introduced a regime of 'community shopping', mainly aimed at the elderly and vulnerable so that they didn't have to go out to get their groceries and which meant that we notified our neighbors when we had an online grocery order arriving or indeed if someone was going to the supermarket. The regime seems to have outlived the pandemic and to this day, we continue to shop for each other. Not only that, we've picked up prescriptions for others who were shielding, we've printed off return labels for our neighbors when their printers ran out of ink. Once when I ran out of flour, all I had to do was let my neighbors know and the next day I ended up with 7.5 kilos of flour from three different neighbors! It really has brought us together as a community like never before.

We also discovered new talents and I've had my lovely octogenarian neighbor across the road bake scones and brownies for the whole street. It has made us wonder why we didn't live like this before, in a wonderful web of symbiosis where everyone was a giver and everyone a taker.

We've also managed to squeeze in some over-the-fence camaraderie and front-porch parties and celebrations like VE75 Day. Most recently I played the role of a hairdresser's apprentice as my hairdresser came on a home visit to cut my hair and ended up going from house to house, delivering much-needed haircuts to all of those of us who were beginning to feel like gorillas.

London is quite unique as a metro of its scale and size in that every house here comes with its own garden, which doubled up as my "fair-weather office". That combined with the fact that Britain saw its warmest and brightest Spring since 1929, made this period of extreme domestication so much more bearable. There were also mini and completely legal escapades to parks. Where we live in west London, we're blessed with many large arboretum-like parks that saw us embracing a delightful outdoor life beyond the confines of our homes.

So far, a tumultuous 2020 has forced a measure of 'correction' and calm to many aspects and excesses of our lives that were clearly starting to go awry, maybe even briefly stalling climate change. Desolate scenes of deserted streets and closed cafes and restaurants were heartbreaking but through it all, humanity triumphed. It taught us to appreciate what we'd taken for granted and it showed us to do things differently. Here's to new beginnings.

Regards,

Jonakee



Covid Story: Dubai, UAE

Tania Banerjee

5/10/2020

At last the world is united by a virus. We are all on our knees and waiting.... waiting eagerly for this to get over. Waiting to get back to our normal lives. The question remains, what is normal? Corona has not spared anyone. For once we can say that we are all sailing on the same boat.

My husband and I have lived in the UAE with our two daughters for 17 years now. Dubai, the city where life goes on 24/7, has also come to a halt. Under the able leadership of the rulers of this country's government has taken numerous steps to protect its citizens during these trying times. Precautions like a nationwide sanitation program and complete lockdown have been implemented. These are trying times for all of us. We are trying to help each other out as much as possible. Like any other situation in our life I feel that this too is a learning experience. This too shall pass. Until then we need to introspect, be kind, be strong and most importantly, pray.

Arani 2020/29



COVID STORY, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Sayantani Chatterjee,

10/3/20

I have been living in Australia for the past few years now. The government took strong measures to control the spread of Covid 19. To be very precise, there is no lockdown at present. The government has established strict guidelines to monitor people living in Australia. We have temperature check points and screening machines at public places like grocery stores, malls, cafes, and restaurants. Data is kept in the system to trace back an individual's whereabouts in case they are infected with Covid 19. To limit the country's rise in Covid numbers, the government banned foreigners from coming to Australia. A special provision is made for its citizens returning home, where they need to be quarantined for 14 days in a hotel and all expenses are paid by the state. Special grants are being provided to families with financial difficulties during Covid 19.

Being a mom of a 5-year-old, I had the option to work from home and take care of my daughter as she is on the virtual learning model. She misses school but gets more rest and time to spend with us.'



The New Chaperone - COVID-19

Anirban Karmakar. Kolkata - India

Go Corona, Corona Go'-the ranting and chanting sometimes seem amusing and sometimes annoying, but when medical science fails people resort to prayers. That's exactly how the scenario has been since the outbreak of this pandemic and till now this disease intimidates us. The contagiousness has left us locked and isolated for months. Social life has halted and professional life grasping at straws.

Waking up every morning I used to switch on the tv anticipating that maybe there will be some path breaking news of a solution to this menace but unfortunately it was all about casualties and positive cases rising everyday and I would retire to my room preparing for another day in isolation. The situation got me so panicky that even a calling bell would frighten me, the visit of a friend would baffle me and make me gaze at him until he understood 'Mate, you are not wanted at this hour of crisis'.

Gradually things started to change, not in the situation but in the mindset, because the situation is still as grim as it has been but I have learned to accept it and embrace the 'new normal'. Adapting hasn't been too hard, following the necessary precautions viz, sanitizers, masks and most importantly maintaining a considerable level of social distancing. Of course some activities had to be curtailed but life has so much to offer and positive thinking and responsible behaviour will certainly help us overcome the menace. So the lockdown is over for me now and I've resumed my daily activities keeping in mind all the safeguards required to be taken so as not to jeopardize others' life as well as mine.

Here in India and in rest of the world the situation is still very alarming but I'm sure our Government and concerned institutions are working very hard every day to find a solution to this, so let's cooperate with them and keep faith that good days are here ahead and till that time arrives let us embrace this moment, adhere to the safety guidelines and just be happy that we might be separated by boundaries but united by Covid-19.



Covid story of Canada by Mary Huang.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The sudden emergence of this deadly virus emerged in December 2019 and spread faster than wildfire across the world and in Canada. We felt the heat in early February of 2020. I live in Toronto, Ontario. The life we once lived was turned around in a moment with new norms to which we are all trying to adapt. Streets where we roamed freely, now have strict instructions to follow and we are required to abide by the rules of social distancing. Freedom has been stripped off and taught us the value of life. Life we often took advantage of. It has shown us how things can change in a flash. The country has shown support and preparedness to combat the virus. The hospitals were ready for an influx of COVID 19. Although there was an initial concern about lack of protective gear in April, the country quickly ramped up production.

My life was as unexpected as possible, with kids doing virtual schooling and me still having to go to work. Bank of Montreal took extra precaution with sanitizing efforts and mask mandate. I was glad to see the kids home and resting and we found more time for ourselves as a family. With summer approaching, hoping things will normalize soon. COVID19 has surely darkened a section of human history but we all know that we are in this challenging war together and we fight as one human. Hopefully the rigorous medical research will put an end to it.



COVID STORY: NEW YORK CITY
Snigdha Paul, 7th grade
7/7/20

Nostalgia hits me. I remember how I used to love the silence of the morning, with the first rays of sunshine finding its way to through the high-rise city buildings and the repeat of cars honking and people screaming outside my bedroom window. It would always buzz with transport and people, as it had always made me realize, "It's a new day, let's fight it in a new way." However, today it seems that the silence is more silent than ever. Not a single car on the roads, no shops seem to be open, no people walking down to the office in their business suits, no bikers in the morning finishing up their morning exercise or a woman trying to finish that extra mile to get in shape. Even the man with his street side deli shop is nowhere to be seen. No Starbucks, or DD to buy my coffee either, so I brew together some coffee beans and a warm cup of water. Now, to stuff my backpack with all the essentials. "Towel? Check. Mask? Check. Set of Clothes? Check. Hand sanitizer? Check. Water bottle? Check as well. Good."

I walk down the streets feeling very lonely, as there is no one to be seen as far as the naked eye can see. The warm air suddenly feels cold to me. I hold on to my backpack while I cross the deserted streets. Only a few more blocks to the hospital. Pushing open the large double doors, I can smell the disinfectant trying to hide away the odor of sickness floating, in the air. The check-in counter, busy as usual, taking in new patients and guiding them to the right department. Signing in, I sprint through the seemingly endless halls to get to the changing room. The cacophony of coughing, sneezing and screaming deafens my ears. I rush to my room and hurl on my N95 mask, gloves, head gear, and gown. Grabbing my wooden clipboard, which holds a paper with an endless number of names, I check to see which patient I have to attend to first. "Alright, first patient, charged with Covid-19. Room 205."

FREE TIME - JOY OR PAIN

By Nika Parui
(Winner – Senior Essay)



I wake up with the birds chirping and dogs barking (nature's natural alarm clock), I laze around and finally get up to have breakfast. My days consist of doing schoolwork, watching tv and picking up an odd hobby once in a while. At least one good contribution is picking up sewing again to make face masks for school workers. If you had asked me six months ago what I thought about this "lifestyle" I would have jumped at the chance. Now, more than a month has passed and I can safely say that free time is more a pain than a joy in society as a whole.

During this time everyone that is not a key worker is urged to stay at home and self isolate. Where does that put the people living alone? According to a study done in February about loneliness it found that "Loneliness is tied to an increased risk of heart disease and stroke, dementia, high cholesterol, diabetes, and poor health in general. People who are lonely are also more likely to use alcohol and tobacco and exercise less." This means that people who live alone are more likely to practice bad habits during their free time. This can be a pain for them and their families especially now when travel is hard.

As I am entering my 5th week of online school I can tell you it is very different from school. When school was still on, I was going to three places everyday, (School, Swim Practice and Home) now it's all in one. It took some time to get used to. These days, we are under the same roof all day everyday disagreements happen more often and more frequently especially with my sister. At least I have my own room. People living in smaller houses or apartments don't get the luxury of privacy and that can be stressful especially when they have nowhere to go. This is painful for everyone involved.

These all bring me to my last point which is stress. At some point in your life you have heard of it and you have most likely experienced it. Now, with a lot of people getting laid off of their jobs and relying on the government for money they are feeling it more than ever. An article talking about the negative effects of stress says "Distress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases." The more free time people have the more time they have to stress which can be very unhealthy. Other reasons people might stress or worry would be older family members, food, kids and bills just to name a few. This is pain in a literal sense.

However, it's easy to argue about the joys of free time. Seemingly endless time to try

new skills and cook new foods. I will admit doing those things are fun and enjoyable. You also get to spend more time with family. But free time is only good for those who can afford it. Also, spending more time with family can lead to disagreements and problems. Ultimately, free time is good in moderation.

In society free time can be very painful. It can lead to loneliness, stress and health problems. Make sure "to look for something positive each day even if some days you have to look a little harder." We can and will get through this time.

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Treasured Moments on the Lake

By Sohini Chatterjee (Winner – A Page from My Childhood Diary)

Some of my favorite childhood memories are those of rowing on the Dhakuria Lakes during my high school days. I did not have much opportunity to get involved in sports while growing up, so when I was asked if I wanted to join the school rowing team, I very excitedly said yes. Since there were not too many girls who knew how to row, there were no tryouts or competition to determine who would be chosen and since I had signed up, I was readily accepted into the team.

On the first day of practice, I woke up early in the morning and walked over to the rowing club which was a short walk from my house. Since this was my first rowing lesson, I had to begin my training by doing land exercises and learning the basic rowing techniques while sitting in a boat which was fixed to the shore of the lake. With my feet strapped onto the footboard I practiced pulling the oar through the water in a smooth motion while gliding forward and back on my sliding seat in the boat. After a couple weeks of doing this, the coach said that I was ready to go out on the water. I will never forget that first day on the lake, the experience was very different from practicing my strokes on the boat fixed to the land. I felt like I was flying across the water surface, since the boats were designed to skim over the water at fast speeds. When I got home, I told my parents that I was loving the experience of being a rower and decided to continue to train for upcoming races when the school competitions were over.

Being part of a team was an amazing and completely new experience for me. Our coach was determined to help us to be the best we could and gave us the training we needed to perform well in the races. I became used to my new routine of waking up early in the morning every day and walking to the club to meet my teammates. We would start off with some warmup exercises and a run and then go on to rowing up and down the lake together. It was hard work and sometimes we felt like our coach was pushing us too hard but it was also so much fun that not one of us ever thought of quitting. We did not win in the school races since some of us were still new to rowing but we signed up for upcoming regattas and continued training together. Since we were representing the club for these races, we were given a complimentary breakfast at the club each day for a month before the regattas. It was such a fun time for us to train and row as a team and then sit down and eat breakfast together at the club. All of us girls on the team became great friends and the club became like our second home. We would even meet up there on weekends sometimes without our parents. Since most of the governing members of the club knew us, they would never complain about us hanging out there for hours. The club ambience was very inviting in the evenings with the club lawns gently lit by landscape lights and the lake looking deep and mysterious in the darkness. We would sit around the bar too sometimes chatting together, ordering only sodas of course but still feeling very grown up enjoying ourselves without our parents nearby.

One of the most fun races we took part in was a regatta where we were competing against a team of girls from another local club. The race was exhausting but we gave it our all and to our complete astonishment came in first place. It was an exhilarating experience for me and it was my first taste of victory and shared success with a team. We were each handed a small trophy at the prize distribution which was very exciting. The club organized a dance night after the regatta and we all dressed up and went to it. The fun of attending the dance together made it as special for us as going to prom is for high schoolers in the US. When I look back on those days, I feel that learning and competing in a new sport and sharing those times with close friends were what made it a truly magical experience for me. I know that I will always treasure those memories as some of the best ones I have had in my life so far.

Youth Fitness Series:

NIKA PARUI

My name is Nika Parui. I am 15 years old. Fitness is especially important to me and my family. I usually stayed fit by swimming as I used to be on a competitive swim team that met four times a week. Right before North Carolina closed everything we had the last Meet of the short-course (held in 25- yard pools) season. After we started self-quarantining I had so much free time and no access to a pool. I had no idea how to stay fit. My dad suggested that my sister and I get back into running. (If you did not know I used to do triathlons.) We agreed and started with a one-mile jog up and down a hill in our neighborhood. After a few weeks we were comfortable with a 5k. Then, my dad said we were ready to run a 10k. At that point in time I had never run more than 4 miles at a stretch. So, I was scared. My dad found an 8-week plan and we started. As time progressed, I felt myself becoming more and more comfortable with long distances. Running was not the only thing I did to stay fit. My swim team had weekly Zoom meetings where our team worked out together. My sister and I also did a two-week Chloe Ting Ab challenge.

Now that school has started my running has not stopped. We are now in the process of doing a 10-week 15k running plan. My goal for the future is to run a half marathon. At the end of the day running is for everyone. No matter how experienced or old you are you can find a way to run and enjoy it.



SOUMYO

During quarantine, I maintain my fitness by going to Soccer practices (3 times every week until the season ends), competing all over NC at soccer matches, and going to tournaments as well. I also play tennis & bike when I can. I try my best to run 3 miles every morning. Even if it were raining outside, I still choose to be active by running after my four-legged brother Gage, chasing Gage up and down the stairs, or just walking /running around the house. I also enjoy swimming in my backyard pool! My name is Soumyosundar Dutta and this is how I devote myself to maintain my fitness.



RITU

From the get-go, I have always been restless for action. Quarantine or not, I am always hitting a ball on the tennis court, biking around my neighborhood, swimming in my backyard pool, and working out as frequently as I can. While following safe practices, I still do all these activities frequently, making sure to stay active in this especially difficult climate. Fun fact: I almost got in trouble for playing tennis in my dorm room against the wall, a very competitive opponent. I am Ritushree Dutta, and I encourage you to stay active!



STAYING FIT DURING SUMMER BREAK BY ADITYA SAHA

I am Aditya Saha, I am in 8th grade at Cuthbertson Middle School. I love to play SOCCER. During the Covid times, trainings and games were cancelled. I was motivated to stay fit and continue with online training. I did get some time off playing with my soccer buddies at the fields. I rested well, read books, watched lots of games, movies and slept well for long hours.



When my soccer practices were on halt, I was motivated to stay active during the challenging times. 2 mile run around the neighbourhood with a 7 min pace and playing basketball were my regime. My online Olympic Development Program Training continued till the end of summer break. Agility and footwork were the priority.



STAYING FIT DURING SUMMER BREAK BY RAINA SAHA

I am Raina Saha. I am in 4th grade at Kensington Elementary School. I swim all year at Swim Mac. I was practicing for Junior Swim League when the pandemic started in US. My swim school closed, practices meets were cancelled. I stayed fit by learning Bollywood dances at Nrityangan Cultural Academy, biking in my lane and jumping on the trampoline night and day. I slept for long hours, played and partied with my brother often.



SHIREEN (MAYA) COLLAM, TRIATHLETE

Hi, I'm Maya Collam and I am 13 years old. I've been high energy from the time i was born. So, my parents thought it would be good for me to get into sports. While i tried my hand at different sports like swimming, soccer, cheer leading, karate (yes that too!), when I was 9, my mom showed me a post of Rika & Nika (Parui) winning a triathlon and man! I was hooked. Since then it was not just the physical activity, but the team spirit, camaraderie and the overall fun that came along with it that pulled me into this amazing sport. Yes, Covid 19 has been a downer as events got cancelled and training facilities shut down. Many of my teammates stopped training as they were uncertain of the future but i chose to persevere with training schedules that i could follow at home. My coach very kindly designed them for me. She has also been giving me 1-on-1 practice at home and i feel very fortunate about it! So, if you really like something, don't give up on it. Just keep going and keep up the hope!



NIKHIL COLLAM, TAEKWONDO

Hi, I'm Nikhil Collam (Nik for short) and I'm 9 yrs old. I've been learning Taekweondo since my preschool years. I started learning when I was just 3 yrs old. I love doing Taekwondo as it has taught me the 5 fundamentals of a good life - Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control & Indomitable Spirit. It is a Korean martial art that has taught me the art of self defense through kicks, blocks, stances, routines and physical exercise. I've also learnt a lot of Korean words and about their culture during the last 6 years. I am currently a high red belt and I hope to earn my black belt some day. Kahmsahamnida! (Thank you in Korean)





It was middle of March when this pandemic hit and the government decided to close the school for few weeks, but it extended till summer vacations. I was both scared and excited at the same time as I will be working from home and will be able to spend time with my children. During this lockdown I made it a point to call a few friends that I was not able to connect because of my busy schedule. With every call our conversation ended with the concern of how to engage children at home for the whole day as the parents were working fulltime from home.

As a teacher and a parent, I could understand that it was going to become an exceedingly difficult task to engage our children and have less digital influence as anyways all the schoolwork was also proceeding digitally. So, I had a brainstorm session with Anita and Shyama. Anita said that she was having same thoughts and we decided to connect with few other Srishti members and conceived Quarantine original sessions. We had two sessions, one spring session where our older children mentored young children. Second session was summer session where a few respected members of Srishti who were well established

in their career, mentored our children. The birth of the spring session was a fluke, we just wanted to have our kids engaged as well as learn something. So, we decided to have hobby classes. It was comprising of art classes, singing classes, dance classes, physical education classes, cooking classes, and book club. The summer session was planned, and we approached IT professionals to teach our children the art of computers. In this session we had coding classes that our kids enjoyed. As a parent I am commenting kids used to have fun during the class as well as after the class chatting with friends. Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint for younger kids. Photography classes where kids made their own camera with shoebox. During summer session we also had art, music, and dance sessions for young children on popular demand. As we did these summer camps, Zoom helped us a lot in scheduling and communications.

The final segment was the youth leadership session every week on Sunday where highly established individuals taught our young leaders how to get better in taking charge in leadership roles and

being able to successfully look into particular jobs for the future. We would like to thank all the individuals for helping our young leaders cope with the current tribulations. It was a great privilege working with such an innovative idea with everyone and I hope to be able to enjoy the rest of the year with you all.

Words from our Youth Engagement Chair Anita Sarkar

2020 has been an unprecedented year. Early in the year we watched news of the pandemic unfolding halfway across the land. And then, suddenly in March, our lives changed. Remote learning and work from home became a new norm. For the first time in our lives, we were forced into isolation. This was difficult for us adults and it was totally unfathomable as to what was going through the minds of our young ones.

And then Srishti family pulled together, we started the youth connect sessions in late March and went through the entire summer. Along with the kids, we parents too eagerly looked forward to these sessions. We joined in the chatter and laughter, leaving the world of lockdown

Arani 2020/41



aside.

Strongly connected even when socially distanced. That is Srishti Poribar!!

Summer and spring camp leaders saying a few words for encouragement.

Dola Photography instructor. "Working as a photographer comes easy to me. Our class had participation from Srishti kids from middle school to high school. This course was designed to give a foundation to these budding photography enthusiasts with most of them starting out with phone cameras. We learned history of photography to perspective of composing we had fun projects like making camera Obscura and Pinhole cameras to understand physics of image making. I used to be so excited for every class just to see what the the young minds must

share with me with their photography experiment. I really enjoyed mentoring this camp, I would like to thank Srishti for giving me this opportunity"

Art Instructors of Quarantine Camp

Priyanka Mandal - "I am extremely happy that I got an opportunity to take an art workshop this summer. I love the fact that I was able to share my love of art with the little ones and help them grow as artists and creative thinkers. I enjoyed thoroughly all the session and look forward to interact with them in the future."

Sudeshna Kumar- "When I was asked to conduct some summer art sessions, I felt so glad to be a part of this awesome mission of engaging and sharing your knowledge with the kids and get some real nice talent to come

forward. Really enjoyed each moment with these kiddos."

Our guest Junior Art instructor was **Diya and Aleena**, a special thank you to you for your patience in guiding the kids.



Junior Master Chefs of Srishti

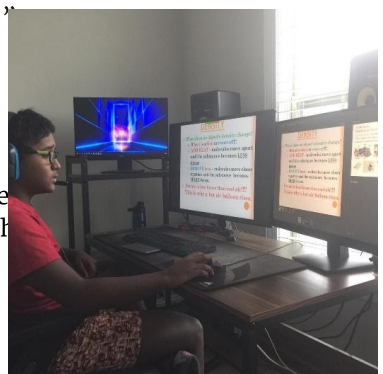
Anish Sengupta- "I am thankful for sharing my recipes to people and it was overly exciting when I was on Zoom giving instructions. I enjoyed everything about it."

Nik Collam- "It was fun! I could express myself well during cooking and I learnt the skill as I did the session. And since I could teach other kids, I felt like a Master Chef"



Physical Fitness

Ayush Sengupta- "Doing the dance camps and helping with the Microsoft class was fun and I enjoyed teaching the kids something which I love so much. I hope I can do this





again with all these great little kids.”

Maya Collam- “When I started the fitness sessions, I was a little nervous because I was not sure if I could be fitness role model. But as I got into the sessions, I started having fun hanging out with all the kids and I also got my workout done in the process. Thanks to Srishti, it increased my confidence to run PE sessions!”

On behalf of Srishti family moms we like to appreciate **Ekata Basu** for teaching our children the basic life skills like folding and ironing clothes. This has made our life easier as our children are at least folding and keeping clothes in the right place. A clean house is a blessing sometimes when we have little helpers.

Reading Camp Junior Instructors

Pushpita Behera- “I enjoyed the Srishti Camp, which was held during the spring and summer seasons. During quarantine, I needed some socialization, so to see a community, run by kids, was enough to fulfill that need. I liked that Srishti let kids run the camp for some time. It helped build and improve my leadership skills when I was able to hold a book club. I also liked that they had a variety of subjects, that you could participate in. I had an interest in art and the art classes were fun; they helped me think of new ideas, for my art. I also liked the photography class. I didn’t know it before, but photography is so interesting, the ways editing can take an “okay” picture and make it look like a professional took it, and the way the lighting and position of an object makes a huge difference on the overall picture. The coding club helped me to code my very own website. It also motivated me to look into everyday websites, that I use and see what

Music lesson camp

Leena Basu- “Anita approached me for music summer camp to teach singing to the Srishti summer camp. It was a ray of light during the time of doom and gloom every week was an absolute delight because they got to see each other’s happy faces and at the same time I could teach them some of my favorite songs. While teaching them virtually I used to enjoy watching their excitement in meeting friends. Overall, it was a pleasure to mentor those little hearts which I do every year face to face, but this year we did it with a twist.”

A special thanks to **Suprav Basu and Anushka Pramanik** for giving a crash course on science topics related to EOG’s. End of grade tests did not happen, but our children had a wonderful revision.

features make it work so well and to look into the websites’ code. These clubs sparked my interest in many ways, and I probably would have never been interested, if it weren’t for the Srishti Camp.”

Nika- “Reading stories from Panch Tantra and Mahabharath reminded me of when I used to read those same books and I wanted to share my experience with the younger kids. It was a nice way for them to learn more about our culture and gods through tales, especially if they had not heard them before.”

Rika- “it was a lot of fun to interact with the younger kids especially with the ones I had not interacted with before. It was really nice to see how excited they were and eager to know what happens next in the story.”

Coding and Microsoft camp Gurus

Professor Sunny- “When the youth outreach team reached out to me to teach our wonderful Srishti kids was just awesome!! I really felt very much excited to get a chance to teach these talented brilliant kids. I had 26 kids involved for 6 weeks in this coding camp. The kids performed exceptionally well during this time. They learnt coding as well as got an exposure on how to work in a group.

So, overall, the entire coding camp was very much successful, and kids loved it. I believe the kids will participate for the coming year as well.”

Bipasha Tiwary- “When I learned about the initiative to conduct a training for MS Office tools for the kids, I was overly excited. It was a great opportunity for me, primarily, to know all the amazing kids on a personal level and secondly to do something which I immensely enjoy. This kind of activities not only helps kids to communicate their insights but also to build a competitive advantage. It was an absolute pleasure”

Our heartiest thanks to all the instructors and coordinators, who volunteered and took out time from their busy schedule to encourage and teach new things to our next generation.





DOLPHIN DISCOVERY

Raina Saha, 8 Years.

4th Grade. A piece from my school assignment

It was winter break, my family and I wanted to go for a vacation. We wanted to escape the cold weather of Charlotte. We were looking at beach vacations. After exploring a bit, we chose Punta Cana in Dominican Republic. We flew to the place on a Tuesday morning and I was excited for all the fun things we were about to do.

Punta Cana was a wonderful place with warm weather, lots of sunshine. I was happy I did not have to wear the winter jackets. We stayed in a beautiful resort on the beach. We played the whole day, took part in hotel activities, like cooking, ginger-bread house decoration, painting and playing table tennis on the beach. "What next?" asked my parents and gave me some options. "Do you want to swim with the dolphins?" "YES", I said excitedly.

It was the morning of December 29, 2019. I wore my favorite swimsuit and we took the hotel bus to the Dolphin Park. We were greeted by an instructor who gave me, and my mom life jackets and instructions to follow at the park and while we played in the pool with the dolphins. There were other families too waiting for their turn. As I approached the pool my excitement grew, and I could not wait for the moment to get inside the pool. The sight of them was amazing, they were big, wagging their tails and swiftly moving from one end to the other. I got into the pool with my mom. The dolphins were very friendly. The instructor introduced me to JULIET, my pet for the next hour. She splashed water and went round and round making me laugh aloud. Finally, I got on Juliet's back and she swam fast gliding through the water.

The next adventure with Juliet was too much fun. I had to lie on a surfboard and Juliet pushed me and I screamed, "yah, yah, yah". This went on until my time was up. Then we had a greeting and handshaking time with the dolphins. I got a chance to touch and feel all the dolphins. They had a hard and slimy body. Next, we fed the dolphins snack which was dried fish. The instructor fed them live fishes. The fun adventure with the dolphins came to an end, I was sad to leave but before we left my parents bought me souvenirs to keep. It was my pictures with the dolphins. My favorite one was kissing JULIET.



MY FRIEND HAZEL

By ANNIKA BHATTACHARYA

This painting was created by 6-year-old Annika. The subject is her dog Hazel, who was adopted last year. Annika has autism and it has been miraculous to see how quickly she formed a loving bond with Hazel, who is now her constant companion. Here is the photo of the little artist with her subject.





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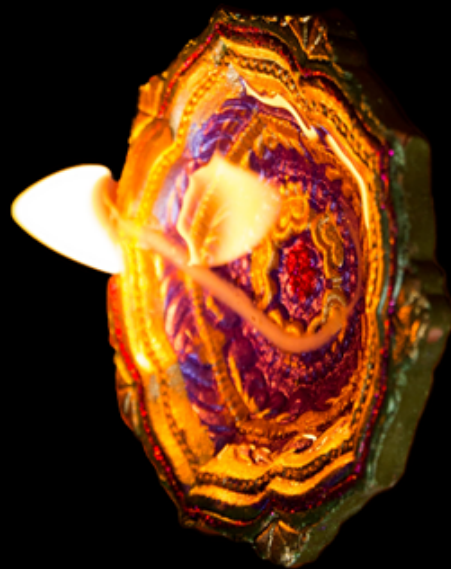
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Are you a sari person? I am one for sure.

A sari is the combination of oomph and grace. It is so versatile that there is no right or wrong way of wearing it. In fact, each state in India has its own way of draping it.

Growing up In India, I saw the women in sari all the time. When more diverse outfits emerged over the years, sari took a backseat. Now, wearing sari has become more of a special occasion affair.



Sari Blends

By Madhavi Kumar

Innerstyleguide by

Madhavi @ innerstyleguide.com



At times draping sari the traditional way poses a great deal of effort. So, over here I am sharing 3 stylish but easy ways to drape a sari.

The first one is a satin silk sari, wearing it with leggings and off shoulder bell sleeves.

The second one is a Georgette sari, wearing it with pants and ruffled crop top.

The third one is a south silk sari, wearing it like a dress.

Hope you like the looks and try them!

Beautiful Mind or Beautiful Heart

By Saswato Mitra (Honorable Mention - A Page from My Childhood Diary)

I was seeing the movie, “A Beautiful Mind”. It is a biographical drama film based on the life of the American mathematician John Nash, a Nobel Laureate in Economics and Abel Prize winner. A very meaningful quote from the film that stayed with me was “Perhaps it is good to have a beautiful mind, but an even greater gift is to discover a beautiful heart”.

And I’ve experienced that “beautiful heart” in my life. Let me recount a real life story from my school days. The year was 1990. My father (Sri Satanjib Kumar Mitra) was serving in the Indian Air force and we were posted in Chandigarh. That year was big for me. Class 12th. By May 1990 my fate would be decided as to which college I would go to for my graduate degree. I was an OK student. I passed the NDA exam (National Defence Academy) but I declined the offer to join as I wanted to be an engineer. I didn’t want to be a doctor as I could not stand the dissection of a white rat in Bio lab. I could never convince myself to kill an innocent animal just to learn more about human beings. So, I had somewhat pushed myself to a corner in terms of career choices that we used to have in those days for middle class families in India. I HAD to make it to a reputed Engineering college. And as was needed, I had appeared in 4 such entrance exams – Punjab engineering college (PEC), Dhanbad Mines (DM), Rookie University and IIT JEE. I got through all except Dhanbad mines. My PEC rank was 180, Rookie 1150 and IIT was 1729, also known as Ramanujan’s number. It was discovered by the renowned Mathematician Ramanujan. A little trivia - 1729 is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.

The two different ways are:

$$1729 = 13^3 + 12^3 = 9^3 + 10^3$$

Even though my rank in other institutions were decent but the IIT rank, albeit Interesting number wise, it was low rank wise. And the only IIT (amongst the 5 at that time) where I could get a B.Tech degree was IIT Kharagpur. I had always had my heart set on IITs. IITs were THE thing for me. Also as a matter of pride for Bong parents when a child goes to IIT Kharagpur. I remembered the day how I waited for the newspaper that morning to see my result. A zillion butterflies fluttering in my stomach. As the initial euphoria settled down I was the only one of the two who got through IIT from Kendriya Vidyalaya Sector 47. My EGO gradually got inflated. Never realized that.

However the joy was short-lived. As luck would have it my 12th mark sheet from CBSE was printed with a name error. SASHATO MITRA as against SASWATO MITRA (correct name). I cursed myself as to why this had to happen at this time. CBSE needed 3 weeks’ time to correct, and it could be only done in Delhi Headquarters. Without the correct name in XII marksheet, my admission could be denied. I just had one week left for my counseling session at IIT Kharagpur & the train tickets had already been booked for June 1st. No planes since it was an unthinkable, unaffordable luxury for us at the time. Trains were the only mode of transportation for long journeys. There wasn’t a way to fix the issue sitting in Chandigarh. There were no mobile phones or internet in those days. Everything had to be done by physically visiting the offices and we had no means of doing that. Dad was extremely worried. So as a last resort he called up his senior and a dear old Air Force friend, Pal da. Affectionately, we used to call him “Pal Jethu” (Pal Uncle). When my father

narrated the issue that we were faced with, Pal Jethu simply responded with a “dekhchi” (let me see in Bengali).

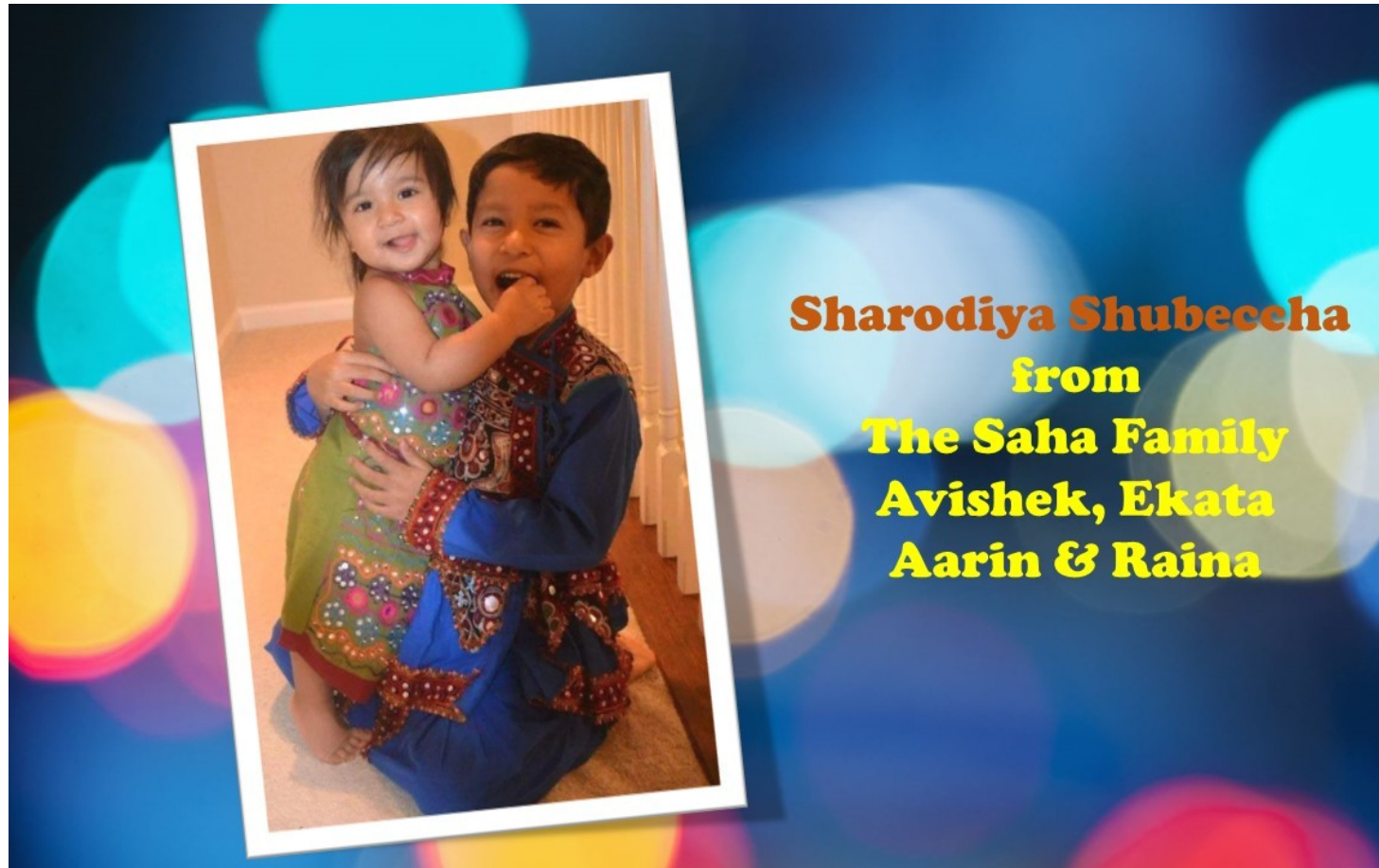
After that cryptic conversation, we kept in touch on a daily basis, but no luck. The D-day arrived when we had to head out for Kharagpur. We boarded Kalka - the longest train in India, that evening. It reached Old Delhi railway station at 7 am the next morning. We had lost all hope. I was totally resigned to my fate...And just when I felt that all my hopes of getting into IIT after years of toil and hard work were dashed, we heard a faint voice from far away. “Mitra... Mitra ... Saswato ... Saswato, tora kothai?” (Mitra .. Mitra.. Saswato.. Saswato where are you). Now Kalka is a long train with 23 bogies. We were in sleeper class. I could not believe my ears that someone was calling my name. But the voice grew louder. It was a familiar voice. It was Pal Jethu! I jumped up from my seat and ran towards the platform. We had only 5 min left before the train departed. It sounds like a Karan Johar movie today but the excitement was palpable. The speed with which I sprinted that day, I would have defeated Usain Bolt on any track!

We saw Pal Jethu running towards us. He spotted us and he was sporting a huge smile on his face. In fact, he was waving a piece of paper. I had goosebumps. Lo and behold, it was the new certificate with my corrected name on it! He quickly recounted that he had somehow managed to approach the highest authorities at CBSE (the school board) the previous evening, got them to sign the necessary letters and managed to get the certificate done by 7 pm the previous evening. But he had no way to inform us (no phones). All he knew was that we will be passing by Old Delhi by Kalka train the next day. He didn’t even have our bogie number or seat details.

I was completely bowled over by Pal Jethu’s generosity and his willingness to help selflessly. We were not related. He was almost retired and there was no reason for him to go to such lengths at that age. But Pal Jethu, being who he was, was just proud that his friend’s son was joining a premium institution and he couldn’t see a young man’s hopes dashed. Truly a man with a Golden Heart. They say that some people are God sent. For me it was Pal Jethu. Even today when I recount that day, I struggle to hold back my tears, tears of joy and thankfulness.

I always remember the statement from Mark Twain – Kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see. I might have been a little bit sharper with a Beautiful Mind solving the JEE problems but surely it was a great gift to discover the Beautiful Heart of Pal Jethu.

Today is Jun 1st, 2020 and 30 years have passed by since then. But every moment is fresh in my memory as if it was yesterday. It is etched in my heart. And I’ve tried to give back ever since, tried to be the reason for tears of joy for others just like Pal Jethu had been for me. Life is a circle, wonderful and beautiful. Thank you Paul Jethu! Your beautiful heart transformed me.



Sharodiya Shubeccha
from
The Saha Family
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- Paneer Pataka



ফ্যারাওর রাজ্যে আমরা

17th January 2019, আমরা **Saudi Arab**-এর রাজধানী রিয়াধ থেকে রওনা হলাম **Egypt** এর পথে। রিয়াধ থেকে বিমানে **Egypt** এর রাজধানী কায়রোর যাত্রা পথ **4:30** ঘন্টা। রিয়াধের রাত সাড়ে দশটায় রওনা হয়ে কায়রোতে পৌঁছলাম আমরা। তখন কায়রোর রাত সাড়ে ১২টা। আফ্রিকা মহাদেশে আমাদের প্রথম দিন, প্রথম রাত। বাইরে বেরোতেই দেখা পথসার্থীর সাথে। হাতে তৈরী আমাদের **Immigration**-এর কাগজ পত্র, আমাদের সই করা আর ছাপ মারা হয়ে গেল কয়েক মিনিটে। এবার সোজা হোটেল - **Steigenberger Hotel El Tahrir**.

Class VII এ আফ্রিকা মহাদেশ পড়ার সময় জেনেছিলাম, মিশরকে বলা হয় **Gift of the Nile**. এই নীল নদীর অববাহিকা জুড়ে রয়েছে হাজার হাজার বছরের সভ্যতা। অনেক ভ্রমণকাহিনী, গল্প, **movie** তৈরী হয়েছে তার নীলনদী, পশুপাখী, মরুভূমি, পিরামিডকে ঘিরে। সেই ছোটবেলার স্বপ্ন আজ বাস্তবে পরিণত হল। আমরা আফ্রিকা মহাদেশের ইজিপ্টের মাটিতে দাড়িয়ে।

রাতটা কাটিয়ে পরদিন (১৮ই জানুয়ারী) ভোরবেলা হোটেলের **breakfast** করলাম, খুব ভালো ছিল খাবার গুলো। এর পর বেড়িয়ে পড়লাম কায়রো শহর দেখতে। গেলাম তাহরীর **square**, কায়রো **tower** - কায়রোর বিখ্যাত আধুনিক স্থাপত্য - উচ্চতা ১৮৭ মিটার, পদ্ম ডাটার মত টাওয়ারের মাথায় ঘুরায়মান **observation deck**। **পরিষ্কার** পরিচ্ছন্ন রাস্তাঘাট, বড় বড় বাড়ী, দোকানপাট - দেখতে দেখতে চলে এলাম মিশরের গঙ্গা, নীল নদীর ধারে। নদীর উপর ছোট বড় **boat** ভাসমান। নদীর জল স্বচ্ছ। নদীর দুপাশে রাস্তার ধারে চা, কফি ও অন্যান্য ড্রিংকসের দোকান। খুব পরিষ্কার সব। নদীর উপর পর পর ব্রীজ দিয়ে দুপাশের রাস্তাকে সংযোগ করেছে। নদীর দুপাশেই পায়ে হাঁটা বাঁধানো রাস্তা। এই নীল নদীকে ঘিরেই গড়ে উঠেছে এখানকার মানব সভ্যতা—মিশরীয় সভ্যতা। ঘন্টা ছয়েক টানা হাঁটার পর আমরা নদীর উপর ভাসমান এক **Boat** এর **restaurant**-এ বিকালের চা ও **snacks** খেয়ে হোটেলের ফিরলাম।

19th January, বেরোবার জন্য আবার আমরা তৈরী। গাড়ী ও **guide** দুইই **ready**। সকাল ৮:৩০-এ রওয়ানা দিলাম পিরামিড দেখার উদ্দেশ্যে। গাড়ী ছুটলো ঘিজায় নীলনদীর পশ্চিম পার ধরে। নদীর দুপাশে আখ, কলা, তুলো, খেজুর প্রভৃতির সবুজ খেত। দু চোখ জুড়িয়ে যাচ্ছিল। আস্তে আস্তে এই সবুজ গাছ প্রথমে কোপের মত, পরে কাটা গাছে পরিণত হলো। এখন চারিদিকে শুধু ধু ধু বালি। আমরা এখন মরুভূমির মধ্য দিয়ে চলেছি। দূর থেকেই দেখতে পাচ্ছিলাম পিরামিডের মাথা। প্রায় তিন ঘন্টা পথ চলার পর গাড়ী থামলো বালির রাজ্যে। যে দিকে তাকাই শুধু বালি আর বালি।

এই বালির মধ্যেই দাড়িয়ে বিশাল পিরামিড। আমরা তার সামনে দাঁড়িয়ে। আমি তাকে ছুয়েছি, স্পর্শ করেছি। আমি অভিভূত, বাকরুদ্ধ। মনে মনে ভাবলাম, সত্যিই কি আমি ইজিপ্ট? হ্যাঁ, সত্যিই আমি ইজিপ্ট। বই এ পড়া পিরামিড

এখন আমার সামনে। আমি স্মৃতির সমুদ্রে ভেসে গেলাম। ছোট ছেলে শুভর জন্য আমার স্বপ্ন পূরন হোল। আমাদের **Guide Owalid** এর কাছে জানতে পারলাম, ইজিপিয়ানরা চতুষ্কোণ বেদী, মজতবা, বানিয়ে তার নীচে সমাধি দিত। তৃতীয় রাজবংশের রাজা জোশের, তার মজতবাকে পছন্দ না হয়ায় সেটাকে আরও জাঁকজমক করার চেষ্টা করেন। সেই জন্য ঐ বেদীর উপর আরও ছয়টা বেদী বানালেন। যেহেতু একটা বেদীর উপর আর একটা বেদীকে দেখতে সিঁড়ির মত লাগে, তাই এই প্রথম পিরামিডকে **Step Pyramid** বলে। ইজিপ্টে মোট ১৩৮-টা পিরামিড আছে। **Step Pyramid** এর উচ্চতা ৫৪৫ মিটার এবং চওড়া ২৭৫ মিটার। এই পিরামিড প্রায় ৪৫০০ বছরের পুরোনো। দ্বিতীয় পিরামিডে যে কোণ নিয়ে পিরামিড তৈরী শুরু হয়েছিল দেখা গেল এর উচ্চতাকে ধরে রাখা যাবে না। তখন উচ্চতাকে কমাবার জন্য দেয়ালের কোণকে আরো বাড়িয়ে দেওয়া হয়। এর ফলে পিরামিডটাকে আধ বাঁকা দেখতে লাগে এবং এটাকে **Bent Pyramid** বলে। এর পর চতুর্থ রাজবংশের আমলের তৃতীয় পিরামিড **Red pyramid** থেকেই শুরু হলো জ্যামিতিক পিরামিড তৈরী করা ।

Bent Pyramid এর ভিতর ঢুকতে পারা যায়। আমাদের বয়স হয়েছে বলে গাইড আগেই আমাদের ঢুকতে নিষেধ করেছিলো। সাহস দেখিয়েই আমরা পিরামিডের ভিতর ঢোকার চেষ্টা করলাম। একটা সরু টানেলের ভিতর দিয়ে ৬৫ মিটার নীচে নামতে হয়, ঢালু টানেল প্রায় ১২০ মিটার। তারও পরে একটা **ladder** এর সাহায্যে আরও ৬ মিটার নীচে নামতে হয়। সোজা দাঁড়িয়ে নামা যায় না, কুঁজো হয়ে নীচে নামতে হয়। ভিতরে মৃদু আলো, প্রায় দেখা যায় না। তবুও আমরা দুজন চেষ্টা করেছিলাম। ৪০/৫০ মিটার নীচে নামার পর ছেলের কাছে জানলাম আরো অনেক পথ বাকী। যে কজন নীচে নেমেছিল, তাদের উপরে ওঠার কষ্ট দেখে খুব ভয় পেয়ে গেলাম। মুহূর্তে একটা মৃত্যুভয় আতঙ্ক আমাকে গ্রাস করে ফেললো, যদি আর উঠতে না পারি। আর সাহস দেখাই নি, উপরে উঠে এলাম। শুভ (ছোটো ছেলে) একেবারে নীচে নেমেছিলো। আলো না থাকায় **cell phone**-এর আলোয় চেষ্টা করেছিল কিছু ছবি তোলা। খুব অস্পষ্ট কিছু উঠলো। ওর মুখে জানতে পারলাম একেবারে নীচে ছোটো বড় তিনটে **chamber** আছে। একটা থেকে অন্য টায় একটা কাঠের সিঁড়ি বেয়ে সরু টানেলের মধ্য দিয়ে হামাগুড়ি দিয়ে ঢুকতে হয়। ওখানেই সমাধী দেওয়া হতো।

এবার **Lunch break**. গাইড আমাদের নিয়ে গেলো এক বিখ্যাত মিশরীয় ভোজনালয়ে। নেয়া হলো চার খালা মিশরের বিখ্যাত **Layered** নিরামিষ রেসিপি। চেহারা দেখেই আমার পূর্ণাহার। ওরা তিন জন সদ্যবহার করে চললো। ফল তোলা রইল ভবিষ্যতের জন্য। এবার গেলাম এক কার্পেট **Factory** তে, হাতে কাজ করছে কারিগররা। স্কুলের ছুটিতে ছোট ছেলে মেয়েরা কাজ শিখছে। চার দিকে অপূর্ব সব কার্পেট। অনেকটা সময় চলে গেলো।

এবার সবচেয়ে বড় পিরামিড, গ্রেট পিরামিড। এর বিশালত্ব বিহ্বল করে তুললো। অনেক ক্ষণ চুপ করে তাকিয়ে রইলাম। এই পিরামিডেও ঢোকা যায়, আমরা চেষ্টা করিনি। **Great Pyramid** এর প্রায় কাছাকাছি আরও তিনটে পিরামিড

আছে। **Great Pyramid** হলো রাজা খুফুর। কাছেই দুটো ছোটো পিরামিড, মাঝখানে ছেলে খাফরার এবং তার পরে মেনকারের। একটু দূরে কাছাকাছি তিনটে ছোটো পিরামিড, এগুলোকে বলে **Queens' Pyramid**.

এখানেই উটের পিঠে চেপে, ঘোড়ার গাড়ী চেপে মরুদেশে পিরামিড দর্শন ও আশপাশ ভ্রমণ। এরপর গেলাম **Sphinx** দেখতে। এই স্থাপত্য একটা পাথরের তৈরী, যার মাথাটা মানুষের মত এবং শরীর সিংহের মত। গাইডের মতে, এই মূর্তির প্রতিক হলো, সিংহের মত শক্তি এবং মানুষের মত বুদ্ধি।

সূর্য পশ্চিমদিগন্তে চলে পড়ায় আমাদের গাইড আমাদের নিয়ে **Papyrus Factory** তে গেল। **Papyrus** ঘাসের নরম ডাল দিয়ে বিশেষ পদ্ধতিতে এক রকম কাগজ তৈরী হয়। বিশেষজ্ঞরা হাতে কলমে আমাদের এইসব করে দেখালেন। এই **Papyrus paper** বহু শতাব্দী ভালো থাকে। এই কাগজের উপর অনেক ছবি, অনেক লেখা মিশরের ইতিহাসকে জীবন্ত করে রেখেছে। এখান থেকে বেরিয়ে একটা **International restaurant** এ রাতের খাবার শেষ করে আমরা হোটেল ফিরলাম।

গাইড, আগেই বলেছিল পরদিন সকাল ৭টায় বেরোতে হবে। কিন্তু মাঝ রাত থেকে দুপুরের খাবার ফল দিতে শুরু করলো। ঐ খাবার দেখে ভাগ্যিস ইচ্ছেটা চলে গিয়েছিল; যিনি (আমার পতিদেবতা) অতি উৎসাহে সেই খাবার উপভোগ করেছিলেন, তিনি মাঝরাত থেকে বারবার মন্দির দর্শন করে ক্লান্ত হয়ে নেতিয়ে পড়লেন। ফল, তিনি আর সকালের অধ্যায়ে আমাদের সংগী হতে পারলেন না।

২০শে জানুয়ারী, গাইডের সংগে আমি আর শুভ বেরোলাম ইজিপ্টের রাজধানী কায়রোর পুরোন শহর দেখতে। ভীষণ ব্যস্ত সময়, অনেক আকর্ষণ। এখানেই আছে বিশাল **Babylon Fortress** - তার ভিতর **Greek Church**, অনেক পুরোনো **Church**. কিছু দূরে শিশু **Moses**-এর স্মৃতি জড়ানো **Ben Ezra Synagogue**. এর পর **St. Sergius Church** - রাজা হেরোডের হাত থেকে পালিয়ে এখানে **holy family** ছোট্ট যিশুকে নিয়ে কিছু দিন লুকিয়েছিলেন। এবার বহু প্রাচীন **Coptic Christian Cemetery** - পরিচ্ছন্ন সমাধি উদ্যানের ভেতরে এক সুন্দর **Church**. তারপর **Hanging Church** - বহু প্রাচীন রোমান **Gatehouse**-এর উপর দাঁড়িয়ে আছে **St. Mary's Church**. সব শেষে **Amr Ibn el-As Mosque** - আফ্রিকার বৃহৎ প্রথম মসজিদ। যুগে যুগে অনেক পরিবর্তনের পর ১৮৭৫ খৃষ্টাব্দে **Muhammad Ali Pasa** নতুন করে গড়ে তোলেন।

আমরা ফিরে এলাম হোটেল এবং শুভর বাবাকে সংগে নিয়ে গেলাম তাহারীর স্কোয়ারে **Museum of Cairo** দেখতে। এই মিউজিয়ামে মিশরীয় সভ্যতার স্থাপত্য, শিল্প, মমি প্রভৃতি রয়েছে। এ ছাড়াও রয়েছে ফারাও রামাসিস ২-এর ব্যবহৃত **Jewellery, weapons**, নেফারতিতির মূর্তি **Momification** কী ভাবে করা হত তার নিদর্শন, মমির **case**, পাথরের বেশকিছু বিশাল বিশাল মূর্তি। রামাসীস ২ এবং আরো ১১ জন ফারাও এর মমি পিরামিডের

ভিতর থেকে নিয়ে এখানে বিশেষ ঘরে এবং বিশেষ পদ্ধতিতে রাখা রয়েছে। মহিলা ফারাও নেফেরতারির মমিও এখানেই শায়িত। এবারকার মত কায়রো দর্শন শেষ করে হোটেলে ফিরলাম।

পরদিন ২১শে জানুয়ারী রওনা হলাম ইজিপ্টের পুরোনো রাজধানী **Luxor** এর পথে। বিমানে ২:৩০ ঘন্টায় পৌঁছলাম **Luxor**। এখানে **Guide** আমাদের নিয়ে গাড়ীতে তুললো, এখানেই দেখলাম আরও দুজন আমেরিকান সহযাত্রী— জন ও ষ্টীভাওরা ফিলাডেলফেলিয়া থেকে এসেছে। গাড়ীতে, গাইড আমাদের নিয়ে এলো নীল নদীর ধারে। সার দিয়ে বিশাল বিশাল **Boat** অপেক্ষমান। আমাদের **Boat, Excellence**-এ উঠে **lunch** করে বিকেল ৩টা সময় আমরা বেরোলাম **Karnak Temple Complex** দেখতে। প্রাচীন মিশরের মহানগর থেবেসের গৌরব এই **Complex**-এর নির্মান চার হাজার বছর আগে শুরু হয়ে আলেকজান্ডারের সময় শেষ হয়। বিপ্লবে অবিভূত হয়ে যাই এই ২০০ একর বিস্তৃত **architecture** বা স্থাপত্য বিশালত্ব আর সৌন্দর্যে।

বিকেল ৫:৩০, আমরা পৌঁছলাম **Luxor temple**-এ। বিশাল স্তম্ভের সারিতে দেবতা (সূর্য) এর মন্দির। দুটো বিশাল উঁচু মিনার, একটা বড়ো , অন্যটা ছোট। কিন্তু বোঝা যায় না। সন্ধ্যা নেমে এলো। জ্বলে উঠলো রাতের আলো। সূর্য মন্দির এক রহস্যপূর্ণ হয়ে গেলো। এবার ফেরার পালা।

২২শে জানুয়ারী সকাল আটটা, **Breakfast** শেষে রওনা হলাম **Vally Of The Kings**। দূর থেকে দেখলে মনে হয় বিশাল একটা পাহারের গায়ে ছোট ছোট ইঁদুরের গর্তের মত। বাইরে থেকে বোঝা যায় না এগুলো আসলে হাতে কাটা সারি সারি পাহারের গুহা যাতে রামাসীস ফ্যামিলির ১১ জন সহ ৪১ জন ফারাও, তাদের সন্তানরা এবং বহু অভিজাতদের **tomb**। আমরা তিনটে গুহার টিকিট কেটে শুরু করলাম। প্রথম **KV 7 (Kings' Valley)**, রামাসীস ২ এর প্রথম সমাধি। তার পর **KV 27**। তখনকার সমাজ ব্যবস্থা, জীবন যাত্রার প্রতিচ্ছবি দেওয়ালের গায়ে খোদাই করে রং দিয়ে ফুটিয়ে তোলা আছে। খোদাই করা চিত্রিত শিল্প অনেক নষ্ট হয়ে গেছে। বাইরে থেকে বোঝা যায় না। এখান থেকেই ১০ জন ফারাও অর্থাৎ রাজার মমি নিয়ে কায়রোর মিউজিয়ামে রাখা আছে। **Ramasis IX** এর কবর খুঁড়তে গিয়ে নষ্ট হয়ে যাওয়ায়, এই মমি রক্ষা করা যায়নি। তবে তার মুকুট ও অন্যান্য জিনিস মিউজিয়ামে রাখা আছে ।

গ্রীক সম্রাট আলেকজান্ডার ইজিপ্ট জয় করেছিলেন । গাইডের কাছেই জানলাম ইজিপ্সিয়ানরা তাঁকে **emperor** হিসাবে সমাধি দিয়েছে । ঠিক কোথায় দেওয়া হয়েছে, সেটা জানার চেষ্টা চলছে। তবে অনুমান করা হচ্ছে, সেটা আলেকজান্ড্রিয়াতে। **Valley Of The King** এ এখনও অনুসন্ধান চলছে। পিরামিডের যুগে ফারাওদের মমির সমাধিতে সেই রাজার প্রিয় দাসদাসী, পশুপাখী, যা কিছু ভালোবাসতেন, সে সব কিছু সেখানে রাখা হতো। পরবর্তী সময়ে পিরামিড তৈরীর খরচ এবং মমির সংগে রাখা সোনাদানা চুরি হয়ে যাওয়ায়, **royal family** র বাকিদের এবং তাদের ছেলেমেয়েদের **valley of the kings** এই সমাধি দেওয়া হতো।

২৩শে জানুয়ারী সকাল ৭টায় ঘোড়ার গাড়ীতে করে গেলাম **Edfu Temple**। তাড়াতাড়ি **boat** এ ফিরে **lunch** করে ২:৩০ মিনিটে আবার গেলাম **Kim Ombo Temple** দেখতে। বড় বড় পিলার ও **wall** এ নানা চিত্র খোদাই আছে। এই স্থাপত্য নষ্ট হয়েছে অনেকটা, রোমান ও খ্রীষ্টানদের আক্রমণের দ্বারা। কয়েকটা **crocodile** এর মমিও দেখলাম। ইজিপ্সিয়ানরা কুকুর, শেয়াল, পশুপাখী সবকিছুরই মমিফিকেশন করত। শুধু ভয় বিভালো।

“বন্দরে বন্ধন কাল এবারের মত হলো শেষ” আমাদের যাত্রা শুরু হলো আসোয়ানের পথে। পাঁচতলা বোটের ওপরের ডেকে রোজই কিছু বিনোদনের ব্যবস্থা থাকত। আজ ছিল নুবিয়াদের নাচগানের অনুষ্ঠান। দেখে বেশ ভালো লাগলো, মজাও লাগলো। **Boat** কিন্তু চলমান। মাঝরাতেই পৌঁছে গিয়েছিলাম **Aswan**। একেবারে তৈরী হয়ে **breakfast** করে বেড়িয়ে পড়লাম **Abu Simbol Temple** দেখতে। প্রায় সাড়ে তিন ঘন্টা ধবধবে মরুভূমির উপর দিয়ে গাড়ী ছুটে গেলো ঐ মন্দির পৌঁছাতে। এখানে রামাসীস টু এর ছেলেমেয়ে ও স্ত্রী নেফারতারির দুটো মন্দির। বিশাল বিশাল মূর্তি ও অন্যান্য স্থাপত্য খোদাই করা আছে। ঘুরে বেড়ালাম নাসের বাঁধের উপর। এবার নীলনদীর বুকে ফালুকা বোট ভ্রমণ। চারিদিকের মনোরম দৃশ্য দেখে বোটে ফিরলাম। **Dinner** করে পরের দিনের যাত্রার জন্য তৈরী হলাম। **Luxor to Aswan** বোট **journey**-র আজই শেষ রাত।

২৫শে জানুয়ারী, অত্যন্ত ব্যস্ত দিন। **Breakfast** করে সকালে রওনা হলাম **Aswan** এর **Unfinished Obelisk** দেখতে। এখান থেকেই পাহাড়ের গ্রানাইট কেটে মূর্তি তৈরি হতো। এরপর গেলাম **Philae** (ফাইলি) টেম্পল দেখতে। এটা নীলনদীর উপর একটা দ্বীপে। এর পর **Aswan Dam** দেখে সোজা চলে এলাম **airport**-এ কায়রো যাবার জন্য। বিকালেই পৌঁছে গেলাম কায়রো। হোটেলে ফিরেই আমরা আবার বেড়িয়ে পড়লাম - শেষবারের জন্য নীলনদীর ধার, তাহারীর স্কেয়ার, কিছু কেনাকাটা। ফিরলাম অনেক রাতে।

পরদিন ২৬ শে জানুয়ারী, ভারতের **Republic Day**। ইজিপ্টকে বিদায় জানিয়ে ফিরে এলাম রিয়াধ। স্বপ্নেও যা কল্পনা করিনি, বাস্তবে ছেলের জন্য তা পূর্ণ হলো। গর্বিত আমি। ঈশ্বরকে প্রণাম করে, সন্তানদের আশীর্বাদ জানিয়ে মিশরকে বিদায় জানালাম।

Bye Cairo!! Bye Missor !! Bye Egypt !!

আত্মীয় এবং আত্ম সম্পর্ক - সোহিনী সেনগুপ্ত

কথা হচ্ছিল ভিডিও কল এ। এমন সময় প্রশ্নটা এল আমার পাঁচ বছরের ছেলের কাছ থেকে। হাজার হাজার কিলোমিটার দূরে, সুদূর আমেরিকায় বসে কলকাতার এন্টালির বাড়ির ছাদে ঘুড়ি ওড়ানো ছোটো কাকাকে চিনতে না পারার অবোধ প্রশ্ন। "মা, কাকা কে হয়?" চুপ থেকে অসহায় সময়ের হাতে উত্তরটা ছেড়ে দিলাম। সম্পর্কের নাম, চিহ্ন, প্রয়োজনীয়তা সবগুলোই বোধহয় আমরা না চাইতেও আজ প্রশ্নের মুখে।

বেশ কিছুদিন আগের কথা। জলপাই গুড়িতে অসুস্থ মাসির সাথে কথা হচ্ছিল। আমার পাঁচ বছরের শিশুপুত্রটি কখনোই কোনো কথপোকথনে অংশ নিতে উৎসাহ দেখায় না। এক্ষেত্রেও নিয়মের অন্যথা হয় নি। জলপাইগুড়িতে থাকাকালীন এই 'বড়দিদা'টির বাড়িতে কারণে অকারণে মিষ্টিমুখের দিনগুলো স্মৃতির সরনী বেয়ে কবেই ঝাপসা। ও-প্রান্ত থেকে এই অসম বয়সীর প্রতি কৌতুহল এলেও এ-প্রান্ত নির্লিপ্ত ও নিরুত্তর। আত্মীয়তার গরজ তাগিদ হারায়।

মেলাতে চেষ্টা করি অনেকবার। সময়ের পার্থক্যে সম্পর্কের তলানি ধরতে পারিনা, পড়তে পারিনা। ছোটো নোকো টানতে টানতে এগিয়ে যাই পেছনে। পিসি, কাকা, মামা, মাসিদের মনে রাখতে চিঠি, দূরভাষ, 'বলতো এটা কে?' এই ধরনের প্রশ্নের দরকার হয়েছে কি কোনোদিন? মনে করতে পারিনা। কেমন যেন গুলিয়ে যায়। নিজের লোক কে মনে না করতে পারাটা কখন যে এত সহজ হয়ে যায়, আর কাকা পিসিকে চিনতে পারার মধ্যে আত্মতুষ্টির প্রকাশে কেন গর্বে বুক ভরে ওঠে জানিনা।

মনের কোনে প্রশ্নেরা মাথা তোলে। আমাদের সন্তানেরা কতটা শিকড় বিমুখ, কতখানি অসহায় বা ভাগ্যবান? বাবা এবং মা নামক প্রাণী দুটিকে আদ্যোপান্ত আঁকড়ে ধরে বাঁচতে শেখা আমাদের পরবর্তী প্রজন্ম, কাকা পিসির আদর আহ্লাদ এর স্বাদ না জেনে চলতে থাকা এই প্রজন্ম, এরা কি জীবনের বিরাট বড় প্রাপ্তি থেকে বঞ্চিত হলনা? চেষ্টা চলতে থাকে নিরন্তর। কিন্তু চেষ্টা আর স্বতস্ফূর্ততার ভাব যে হতে পারে না কখনোই। খাপছাড়া ছলছাড়া মনগড়া আর ভালোবাসাহীন আদান - প্রদান চলতে থাকে। যুগ যুগ ধরে চলে আসা নিয়মের এবং সম্পর্কের ব্যতিক্রম না হলেই ভালো বোধহয়। কাকা, পিসি জ্যেষ্ঠ, মামা মাসি রা থাকুক তাদের নিজস্ব আপন ভালোবাসার পরিচয়ে। আমার আপনার সন্তানেরা আত্মদান করুক সম্পর্কের রস। জারিত হোক মামা-ভাগ্নের সম্পর্ক, মাসি-বোনবির খুনসুটি চলুক নিরন্তর, কাকা-ভাইপোর গল্প হোক রাত-জাগা।

মনকেমনের সেকাল-একাল

এখানে বৃষ্টি হয়, মন ভেজে না। আগে কিন্তু ভিজত যখন বৃষ্টির পরে ভেজা কুয়ের পাড় আর চিলের ডানায় ভর করে পৌঁছন যেত স্যাঁতস্যাঁতে দিনে। বৃষ্টি এখন অভ্যেস।

বৃষ্টি কে বলি 'তোকে আর ভালবাসি না আমি'। না, রোদ্দুর ও তেমন টানে না আর। সেই লালনীল দিনগুলোর মত রোদ্দুর কে পাইনা যে আর। সকালের রোদে ছিল নতুন তুলোর গন্ধ, দুপুরের রোদে ছিল একাকীত্বের ভাললাগা, আর বিকেলের রোদ? সে তো আঁকড়ে ধরার সম্বল। রোদ্দুর আজ বড্ড একলা, বড় একঘেঁয়ে। বন্ধুনির মত আর ভালবাসে না আমায়।

অনেকে বলে "ছোটবেলাটা অন্যরকম"। আমি বলি 'অন্যরকম ছোটবেলা'। সেই যে বার নদীর অভিমানে বান ডাকল ছোট্ট শহরটায়, শাপলা শালুক কে সঙ্গী করে কেঁদেছিলাম। বড় একমুখী ছিল সেই কান্না, বড় স্বার্থপর একরোখা। "বন্যা যেন না কমে"- ভগবান শোনে নি, জল সরে গেছিল। আজ জমা জলে আতঙ্ক। ভালবাসা কবেই মরে গেছে।

ক্যালেন্ডারে মেরেকেটে একমাস, মনের ফাণ্ডন থাকত অনেকটা সময় জুড়ে। শুকনোকুয়োতলা, উঠোন, ধুলো-বাতাসের সোহাগ, পাতার সরসর, নারকোল গাছের খোল আরখোলস ছেড়ে যাওয়া বুড়ো কেউটে- ফাণ্ডন যেন আষ্টেপৃষ্ঠে আদর করত আমায়। আচারচুরি, গাছে চড়া তেমনভাবে করিনি কখনো। বকুনি খাইনি কখনো সেভাবে। বোবায় ধরা, আপাদমস্তক ভেবলে যাওয়া মাংসপিণ্ড হয়ে চেটেপুটে খেতাম চারপাশকে। ভাললাগায়মরে যেতে ইচ্ছে হত বারবার।

এর মাঝেই ছিল কুলফিওয়ালার পাশে দাঁড়িয়ে থাকা 'সেই' ছেলেটার চাউনি, ফুচকা খেতে গিয়ে সদ্য 'ব্যথা' র সামনে হাত ফসকানো শালপাতা আর পড়ে পাওয়া চোদ্দ আনা লজ্জা। এখন ভরা বর্ষা আর 'ভরা' লাগেনা, ফাণ্ডন বড় শুকনো। আইসক্রীম গলায় লাগে।

শুধু মাঝে মাঝে যখন পেছাতে পেছাতে, ঘষটাতে ঘষটাতে দেয়ালে পিঠ ঠেকাই, এক অদ্ভুত সৌন্দর্য বুনো ভাললাগায় মন ভেজে। মনকেমনেরা নিজের মত করে আসর বদলায়, আমরা অভিনয় করে যাই, ভালো-খারাপকে আলু-ভাতে করে আরও একবার এগিয়ে যাই'পেছনে'।

- Sohini Sengupta

সে এক দিন ছিল, আমার ছোট বেলায় মধুর মিষ্টি দিন। কথায় আছে "স্মৃতি সতত সুখদায়ী"। আচ্ছা সত্যিই কি তাই? যাদের শৈশব, কৈশোর চরম দারিদ্র, চরম অত্যাচারে, নিপীড়ান অসহনীয় যন্ত্রনা নিয়ে কেটেছে, ফেলে আসা দিনগুলো নিয়ে নাড়াচাড়া করতে করতে। তাদেরও কি মনে হবে "স্মৃতি সতত সুখদায়ী"? হয়ত হয়, তারই মাঝে কোনো একটা দিন বা মুহূর্ত থাকে যা এসেছিল ভীষণ সুন্দর হয়ে, যেটা নিয়ে যে বড় হতে থাকে, সেই যন্ত্রনার মাঝে একটু আশার আলো, কিংবা পাশাপাশি যখন সে অন্য কারুর সুখের দিন গুলো দেখে, সে নিরাশ হয় না, বড় হতে থাকে একটা আশা নিয়ে। তখন হয়ত কোনো সময় তার কাছে সেই স্মৃতি সতত সুখদায়ী হয়।

আমার ছোটবেলায় দিনগুলো কিন্তু বড় মনোরম ছিল। আমার এই দিনগুলো শহরেও কেটেছে আবার গ্রামেও কেটেছে। শহরের দিন গুলো ছিলো যেমন আর পাঁচটা শহরের মতন থাকে, কিন্তু গ্রামের দিনগুলো প্রকৃতির সাথে আঁটে পৃষ্ঠে জড়িয়ে, প্রকৃতির কোলে গড়াগড়ি দিয়ে। কিসুন্দর আমার সেই গ্রাম। চন্দ্রভাগা নদী দিয়ে ঘেরা পুরো গ্রামটি। যেখানে বহু পুরনো বিশাল বট গাছ, আর তারই পাশে কালী মন্দির। দুর্গাবাড়ী, ধর্মরাজ ঠাকুরের মন্দির, লক্ষী নারায়ণের মন্দির। কালী মন্দিরের পাশে অষ্ট শিবের মন্দির, আবার দুর্গামন্দিরের পাশে আরো এক প্রস্থ অষ্টশিবের মন্দির। প্রতিদিন গ্রামের বাঁধা পুরোহিত পরিবার তাদের সেবা পূজার্চনা করেন। কাল বৈশাখী ঝড়ের রাতে আম কুড়ানো, বর্ষায় নদীতে বাণ আসা। ভয় ডরহীন গ্রামের ছেলে মেয়েদের সাথে বাণের জলে ঝপাং ঝপাং করে সাঁতার কাটা। সব থেকে যেটি আমার কাছে অমূল্য রতন রূপে স্মৃতি হয়ে আছে তা হলো আমার পিতৃদেবের তর্পন করা। আমাদের সবাই পিতৃদেবকে 'বাবা' না বলে বাবু বলে সম্বোধন করতাম। বিপদ তারিণী মায়ের পূজার দিন থেকেই দেবী পূজার মরশুম শুরু হয়ে যেত। ওইদিন মায়ের কাঠামো পূজার ঢাকের শব্দই জানান দিত 'মা' আসছেন। দুর্গাপূজা আমাদের দোর গোড়ায়। কাঠামোতে খড় চড়ানো, এক মৃত্তিকা, দুই মৃত্তিকা সব কিছু নিয়ম মেনে হাত। হাবুকাকা মাটির সাথে খড় মিশিয়ে বিশাল এক কাঠের হাতুড়ী দিয়ে পিটিয়ে খড় নরম করতেন। সেই মাটিই মায়ের মূর্তি গড়ার কাজে ব্যবহার হতো। এটাই এক মৃত্তিকা। এর পরে আরো মাটির প্রলেপ পড়ত মায়ের শরীরে। আমার বাবা ও কাকাদের সাদাপুরোনো ধূতি ছিড়ে টুকরো করে পলিমাটির খোলে চুবিয়ে সব মূর্তির গায়ে চড়ানো হত। এরপর কাঠের Spatula দিয়ে মূর্তির গা মাজা হতো যাতে অসমান না থাকে। মূর্তি শুকিয়ে গেলে কালু কাকা আসতেন মূর্তি রং করতে। আমরা ছোটরা সবাই এক দৌড়ে তখন দুর্গতলাতে।

কালু কাকা, রঙ করতেন- আমরা অবাক, শিশু মনের বিস্ময় ভরা চোখে দেখতাম। আমরা ছোটরা যে যার মতন ছোট ছোট নারকেলের মালা নিয়ে কালু কাকার কাছে রঙ নিয়ে আসতাম, আমার ছোড়া, সেজদি খুব ভালো আঁকতে পারতো, ওরা পূজার সময় দরজার পাশে, দেওয়ালে অনুপম আলপনা দিত, ওই রঙ দিয়ে। শরৎকালে তিরতিরে নদীর জলে, ঝিরি ঝিরি হাওয়াই মাছ ধরতে যেতাম, চুন, গচি, পুয়ে- ছোট ছোট মাছের ঝাঁক ধরে, আবার ছেড়ে দিতাম। জলে, গচি, পুয়ে, আওয়াজ, পেলেই বালির ভেতর সেধিয়ে যেতো, হাত দিয়ে বালি তুলে নদীর পারে ফেলতাম। এই ভাবে চলত মাছধরা খেলা। শীতকালে নদীর চরে কুলবনে কুল তুলতে যাওয়া। কাঁটায়, 'জামা কাপড় ফুটে সে একশা কান্ড হতো। তারপর ছিল বৈশাখ মাসের কালবোশাখের ঝড়ে রাতের বেলায় আম কুড়ানোর মজা, আঁধার রাতে হ্যারিকেন নিয়ে দৌড়, দৌড়, একেবারে আমবাগানে, কেউ কাউকে দেখতে পাচ্ছি না শুধুমাত্র লণ্ঠন এর আলো দৌড়াচ্ছে।

অনেক গুলো ভাইবোন, একান্নবর্তি পরিবার, বারান্দায় আমের পাহাড় জমতো, বর্ষাকালে রাতের বেলায় সারারাত বৃষ্টি হলে জানতাম, সকালে নদীতে বান আসবেই, গরমের ওই শীর্ণকায় নদীর তখন কি রূপ, যেন খোলা চুলে অট্টহাসি হাসছে, কিছুদিন পর বানের জল কমলে, আমরা দিতাম নদীর বুকে সাঁতার, যেটা ভাবলে এখন ভয় করে, কত আনন্দের দিন আমরা কাটিয়েছি, আমাদের বাড়িতে একটি মিষ্টি জলের কুয়ো ছিল, অপূর্ব সেই জলের স্বাদ, গ্রামের সবাই জল নিতে আসত, পিতলের ঝকঝকে সব কলসি কাঁখে, জল নিতে এসে পাড়ার বৌ-রা, আমার মায়ের কাছে তাদের ঘরের সুখ, দুখের গল্প করে যেতো। অনেকে আবার জল নিতে যেতো নদীর ধারে। গর্ত করে বালি খুঁড়ে জল বার করতো, তাতে পরিষ্কার টিন বসিয়ে দিতো, কি সুন্দর টলটলে জল ভরে নিয়ে যেতো, আমি ওদের সাথে অনেক গল্প করেছি, তারা ঘরে গিয়ে কি রান্না করবে, কখন খাবে।

আমাদের বাড়িতে সন্ধ্যা বেলায় সকল ভাইবোনরা হাঁটু মুড়ে বসে, ঠাকুরের ভজন গেয়ে, জলখাবার খেয়ে, পড়তে বসতাম। উননে মা রান্না করতেন, রাত্রি হলে খাওয়ার ডাক, সবাই মিলে আনন্দ করে খাওয়া, দাওয়া। বালতি ভরে আম ভেজানো থাকতো, মা আম কেটে দিতেন। বাবামশাই, কাকারা, খুড়তুতো দাদা দিদিদের সাথে কি আনন্দে আমরা দিন কাটিয়েছি বলার নয়, ইঙ্কলের গল্প, ফুটবল খেলা দেখতে যাওয়ার অ্যাডভেঞ্চার, বাড়ীর উঠানে মহালয়ার দিন পুরোনো মারফি রেডিওতে পাড়ার লোকের মহালয়া শুনতে আসা, নদীর ধারে র ঠান্ডা হাওয়া, শিউলি ফুলের সুবাস, ঠাকুরের সাদা ধবধবে থানের ধূতি পড়ে ধূপকাঠি জালানো, ভোরের হিমপড়া ঠান্ডা হাওয়ার মাঝে মহালয়া শোনার অনির্বচনীয় স্মৃতি কত কি যে মনে পড়ে।

তারপরে আসে সেই সময়, আমার বাবামশায়ের তর্পণ- সেই কথায় আসি এইবার। দেবী পক্ষের ১৫ দিন আগে থেকে বাবু প্রতিদিন তর্পণ করতেন। সকাল বেলায় বাবু ধূতি পরে গায়ে গামছা দিয়ে নদীতে যেতেন। তাঁর হাতে থাকতো তর্পন করার উপকরণ, তিল, তুলসী, কোশাকুশী গঙ্গামাটি ইত্যাদি। আমার হাতে ইয়া মোটা এক ফুল পঞ্জিকা। আর ওই পঞ্জিকা তেই থাকতে তর্পণ এর নিয়মাবলী। বাবু আগে আর আমি তার পিছনে গুট গুট করে পঞ্জিকার বোলা হতো। বাবু নদীর জলে কোমর ডুবিয়ে বসলে আমি পঞ্জিকা খুলে তার সামনে ধরতাম। বাবু বহু সময় ধরে তর্পণ করতেন। সব নিয়ম বা মন্ত্র তাঁর মুখস্থ থাকতেনা, তাই পঞ্জিকা দেখে তর্পণ করা। মহালয়ার দিন ব্রাহ্মণ ডেকে পূর্বপুরুষকে পিণ্ড দান করে শেষ করতেন তর্পণ, এর পরেই দেবী পক্ষের শুরু। সে যে কত সুন্দর এক সকালবেলা, শান্ত গ্রাম, শান্ত নদী, নদীর পাড়ে কাশ ফুল, সর বন। পাশ দিয়ে কুলকুল করে বয়ে যাওয়া নদী, শরতের মিঠে রোদ, এক অনির্বচনীয় স্নিগ্ধতা, যা ভাষায় প্রকাশ করা যায়না। ঠাকুর দালানে তখনও মায়ের মূর্তির রং চলছে।

শরতের সকালের সোনা গলানো রোদুরের মতো সোনার ফ্রেমে বাঁধা, আঁধার রাতের ঘন নীল আকাশের হিরে জহরত বসানো সেই ছবির ফ্রেম খানি আমার হৃদয়ে ধরা আছে। এই মধুর স্মৃতির ছবিখানি কোনো ক্যামেরার পক্ষে ধরে রাখা সম্ভব নয়। আমার এটি চির বিশ্বাস। আজ সেই সত্য ছবির রূপটা সকলের সাথে ভাগাভাগি করে নিলাম।



*Akanksha &
Aditya Singh
Wishes Srishti
of Charlotte
A Very
Happy Durga
Puja*

KOLKATA

By SOURODEEP BHATTACHARYA

The radiant sun rises,
Releasing its bright golden rays,
Revealing the City of Joy.

The sun shines down as it hears and inhales...
The chime of bells and hum of prayers chanted in unison at the
Kali temple,
And fragrant, spiced "chaa" steaming in the tea-shops of
quaint, old alleys...
As the city wakes up.

The long rows of yellow taxis ply the streets like a meandering
river,
Collecting and delivering all day long,
Carrying the ebb and flow of busy people to their destinations.

In the crowded streets dotted with colorful stores, like hidden
gems...

Selling traditional ware in myriad hues.
Tiny eateries with delectable treats that surprise the palate
With their rich pastries, spicy kebabs and syrupy sweets.

These experiences are all a part of us,
They make us yearn for Kolkata,
The City of Joy, the City of our roots.



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Virus

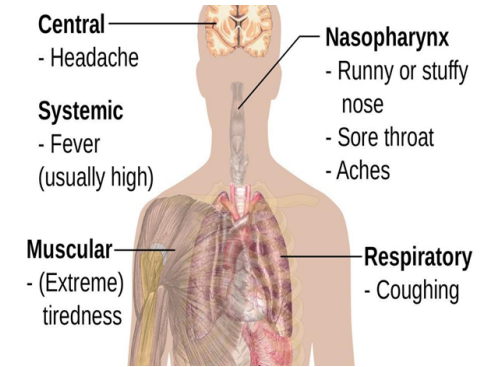
by Anuj Dey

What are Viruses?

What are viruses? A virus is an infectious agent that replicates only inside the living cells of an organism. Virus cannot reproduce by itself. Viruses only multiply when they stay inside living cells.

Types of Viruses

There are many types of viruses. Some infect plants, humans, food, and many more living things. For example the pappataci fever infected many animals which resulted in killing many of them.



Symptoms of Corona Virus

History of Viruses and Remedy

Thousands of years ago, at ancient times, people were also becoming infected by multiple viruses. Millions of people were dying because of infections caused by viruses. At the same time many people were getting cured from viruses as well. How is that possible? This is because some people have stronger immunity systems. This is independent of the muscle strength of the person. A skinny person can have a stronger immunity system.

Thousands of years ago different civilizations were finding different ways to cure the diseases from viruses. Chinese civilizations used a unique technique to treat smallpox. They collected a dry skin of a blister of a person who had been infected with smallpox virus and ground that dry skin. Then they blow that matter in the nostril of the children. As a result children got a mild reaction but after it went away the children never got the smallpox virus ever again.

In ancient India people took a little blood from a person who is infected with a disease from a virus and mixed it with the blood of a healthy person. In this case the healthy person used to get sick to some extent but once recovered they never got that disease again.

In modern times, Louis Pasteur discovered the principles of vaccination. He developed the vaccine against rabies, anthrax and chicken cholera and saved many lives. He is also well known for his way of keeping milk and wine from going sour for longer periods of time. That process is called pasteurization. Later on he started to work on viruses that infect chickens.

Recent Pandemic caused by Coronavirus

The corona virus is one of the deadliest viruses of recent times. The virus is spread by little droplets of coughs or sneezing and moves through the human body. The disease has evolved and become a pandemic! Scientists are saying that the corona virus came from bats that infected pangolins and then changed inside the pangolins until it could infect humans.

To stop spreading the corona virus people should stay at home and sanitize and clean their hands daily. Sometime in the future scientists will find a way to produce a type of vaccine for the corona virus.

The corona virus is one of the deadliest viruses that humans have faced in recent times.



A Bangali's love for mishti is legendary and this year in April, Srishti held its first ever "Mishti Mukh Challenge" as part of our Boisakhi celebrations.

All the participants sent pictures and videos of the mouthwatering desserts they had prepared. Check out the videos on our YouTube channel and we are sure that once you prepare the mishti according to the instructions, the taste will be amazing.

Our winners were:

1st Place –Subrato Dey for "Mithai –e- Lockdown"

2nd Place –Nik and Srinu Collam for Roshogolla

3rd Place –Uttam and Rika Parui for "East-West Patishapta"



1ST PLACE SUBRATO DEY



2ND PLACE NIK & SRINI COLLAM



3RD PLACE UTTAM & RIKA PARUI



ART
COMPETITION
WINNERS

Group A

Theme: Sunset Landscape

1ST PLACE ROSHNI AKASH



2ND PLACE TAKSH VERMA



3RD PLACE ANNAM PATEL



3RD PLACE DEVISHI PAUL



**ART
COMPETITION
WINNERS**

Group B

*Theme: Animal/Bird
Portrait*

1ST PLACE SAHASRA



2ND PLACE VARSHA EZHILAN



3RD PLACE AKSHAYA NIDADAVOLU



ART COMPETITION WINNER

Group C

Theme: Indian Folk Art

1ST PLACE ALEENA BISWAS

ALPONA COMPETITION WINNERS



1ST PLACE SHIREEN PATEL



2ND PLACE MAHUA CHOUDHARY

PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION WINNERS

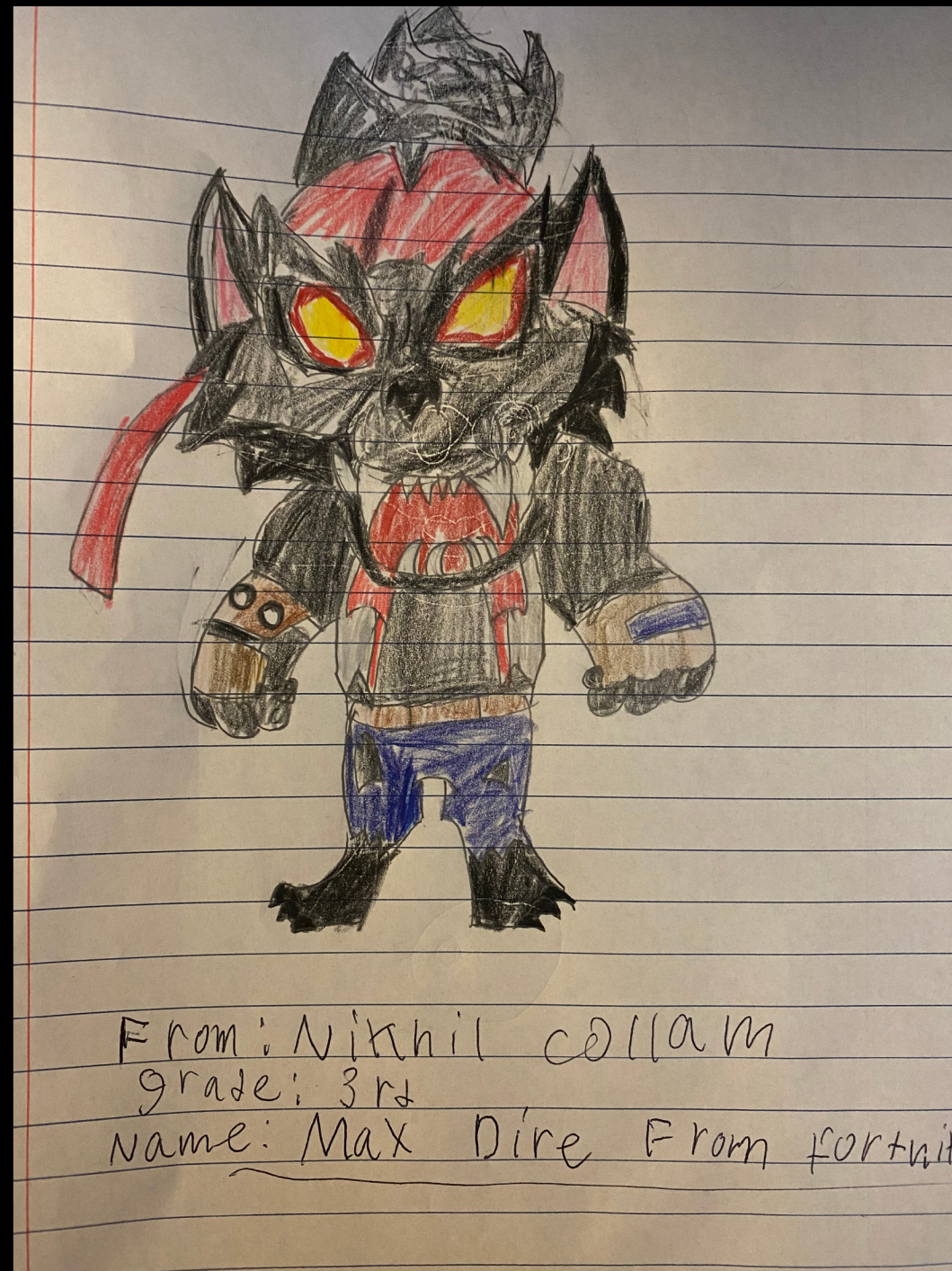


BEGINNER CATEGORY SOUVIK CHATTERJEE



AMATEUR CATEGORY RIKA PARUI

MY CREATION BY NIK COLLAM



MY CREATIONS BY DEVISHI PAUL



श्रीश्रुति

Srishti's Saraswati Pujo 2020 Highlights



श्रीश्रुति

Srishti's Durga Pujo 2019 Highlights





श्रीशक्ति

Srishti's Durga Pujo 2019 Highlights



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