

Special Features

A candle flickers in darkness

Imagine waking up one fine morning to pitch darkness. When you can't see a thing around you! It took sometime for C A Ansar to realise that he had actually turned blind because of glaucoma, a disease in which the optic nerve is damaged leading to irreversible loss of vision. "I had seen this colourful and lively world for 26 years and then suddenly the light went off my eyes. I was stunned. I stood there unable to move. Life virtually ground to a halt for me," Ansar remembered those dreadful days while speaking to *Deccan Herald*.

Three years later, Ansar is a busy reflexologist in Kochi with a steady stream of clients, including some from the tinsel world like Mohanlal, Hariharan and Prabhu Deva. Reflexology is a natural healing art based on the principle that there are reflexes in the feet, hands and ears and their referral areas which correspond to every part, gland and organ of the body. By applying pressure on these reflexes mainly at the feet without using tools or lotions, reflexology relieves tension, improves circulation and helps promote the natural function of the related areas of the body.

Becoming a successful blind reflexologist is no small achievement when one watches Ansar still groping his way along the busy roads of Kochi giving tense moments to any onlooker. He gets on safely to one of those infamous speeding private buses of Kochi from his home in Aluva, gets down in the city some 15 km away and walks nervously with the help of a friend to the clinic where he works.

According to the youth, it all started with dust allergy and the medicines he took for it. Glaucoma is associated with increased pressure of the fluid in the eye. It was during his study at the Vyasa Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana in Bangalore that the tragedy struck him. As fate would have willed, Ansar had already taken a PhD in alternative medicine from Kolkata, completed a course in reflexology from an institute in Mumbai and dabbled with ayurveda a bit. These experiences came in handy when he realised "that the choice before a blind man was either to turn to begging or find a job which can accommodate impaired vision." A few things happened in quick succession which gave him confidence. First came the "white cane" provided by the Blind Association with which he began to take steps inside his home and premises. The second turning point was the role

played by the parents of a small boy who had turned paralytic and on whom he had done reflexology before he turned blind.

"The parents wanted me to resume the session. I was circumspect as I was not sure whether I would be able to feel the sensitive points on the foot to do reflexology without seeing them. My business-man-friend Jomon asked me to try out my skills on him. I tried and Jomon was ecstatic. "There is no difference in your work with or without your eyes, go ahead, he told me," Ansar recollected. There has been no looking back for the youth ever since as he soon joined the Taj Residency at Marine Drive in Kochi for offering reflexology to clients. Initially, foreigners were his clients as they were familiar with it. Soon, many VIPs in Ernakulam joined his client list. Ansar says that reflexology resolves mainly stress-related illnesses, sleep disorders and even obesity.

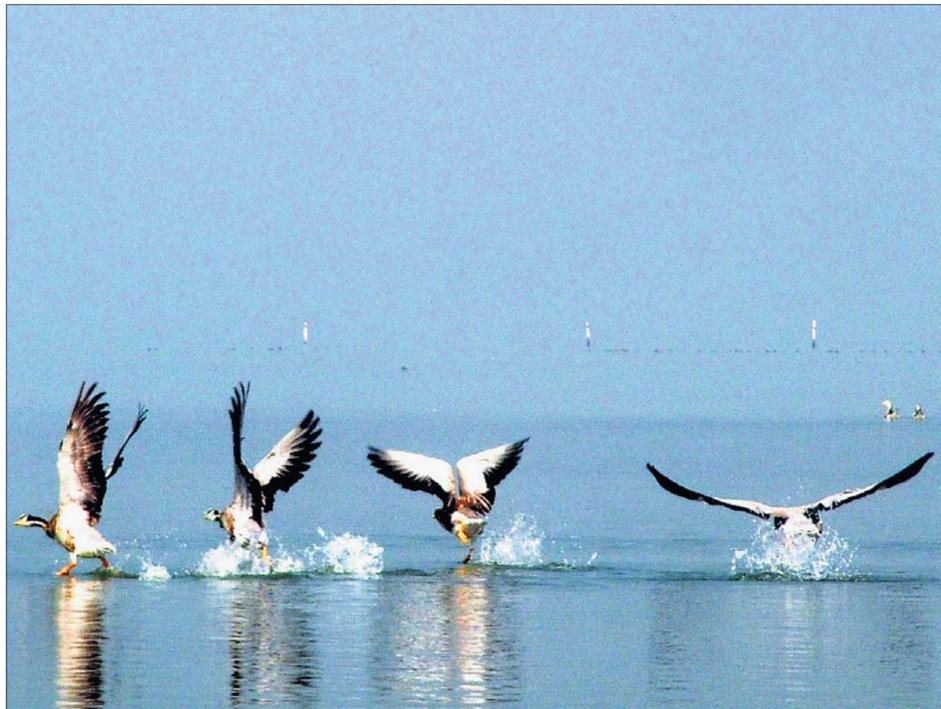
"What came as a blow to me was my inability to see the face of my mother for one last time when she died. My sadness can't be expressed in words. But I lived through it and got over it."

Ansar left his job at Taj (Now Gateway Hotel) to cater to more local clients though his old clients still seek him out. However, what came as a blow to him was his inability to see the face of his mother for one last time when she died. "My sadness can't be expressed in words. But I lived through it and got over it," he said. Later, he married to a girl from Ottapalam in Palakkad district and has a three-month-old daughter now. "I am financially better now. But life is a struggle and I prod on. I want to tell all those who are blind to learn reflexology as it best suits their condition to earn a livelihood. Otherwise, we have no other option but to beg," says the determined youth.

R Gopakumar in Kochi



Ansar treating one of his clients.



Birds at the Chilka Lake in Odisha

Conservation Efforts Bear Fruit

Birds pleased, extend stay

Obesity could be one of the major reasons behind the migratory birds' having an extended stay in the lake!

A rare but a pleasant change in the winged visitors' behaviour at Chilka Lake in Odisha has surprised bird watchers and ornithologists. One of every 15 birds that flew into the lake has decided to extend its stay.

Migratory birds from across the globe flock Chilka Lake in Odisha in the winter to have their seasonal sojourn in the picturesque water body. But this time around many of them have stayed back in the lake instead of making their homeward journey at the end of the bird season.

This interesting development came to light when the Chilka wildlife division of the state forest department conducted a "summer bird census" in the brackish water lagoon - Asia's biggest - a few weeks back.

The bird census revealed that instead of returning to their respective places of origin, nearly 60,000 migratory birds were still enjoying their stay in the Nalabana bird sanctuary located inside the lake. Besides, some of the birds were also sighted on the tree tops in villages in and around the lagoon.

Chilka Lake, considered to be one of the biggest winter homes for the migratory birds in the country, had played host to about 9.24 lakh avian guests last winter.



The outcome of the bird census came as a big surprise to many as migratory birds arrive in Chilka Lake around October-November every year and usually make their homeward journey by April end. The avian species which had extended their stay in the scenic water body included flamingos, pelicans as well as different types of ducks.

If experts are to be believed, "obesity" could be one of the major reasons behind the migratory birds' having extended their stay in the lake! "With the availability of plenty of food in the lake, some of the birds tend to eat more and get overweight in the process. As a result they face difficulties in flying for longer distances. Therefore, they have perhaps extended their stay to get themselves trimmed and fly back home subsequently", said Ajit Kumar Patnaik, the Chief Executive Officer of the Chilka Development Authority (CDA) which looks after the 1100 sq km lake.

Proper maintenance of the Chilka Lake mouth connecting the Bay of Bengal by the CDA has resulted in the adequate growth of marine grass, a major food for the migratory birds. In the year 2000, the marine grass was growing inside the lake within an area of 20 sq km. That has gone up to more than 80 sq km now.

Safety and secured surroundings, according to some experts, could also have

played a key role in some of the avian guests' decision to extend their stay in the Odisha lake. Chilka was once known as a poachers' paradise and migratory birds were being killed in regular intervals every bird season.

With relentless efforts of the government agencies and non-governmental organisations, poaching in Chilka Lake has gone down drastically. The reduction in the poaching activities has allowed the birds to move around in the lake freely without any fear.

Whatever may be the reason, the recent development has definitely made the bird lovers in the state extremely happy. "The migratory birds have once again displayed their love for Chilka. The lake continues to be their favourite destination", said Rabi Goud, a Bhubaneswar resident who had been visiting Chilka every winter since long to have a look at the winged guests. The CDA, in the meantime, has also decided to go for a detailed study on the entire habitation process of the migratory birds in the picturesque lagoon with the help of Mumbai-based Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS).

"We had approached the BNHS for the study and they have agreed to do it. The Rs one-crore project will be completed within a time span of five years", Patnaik said.

S T Beuria in Bhubaneswar

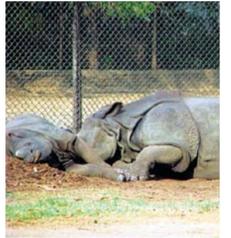
Patna zoo on world rhino map

The Sanjay Gandhi Park came into the limelight due to high breeding of rhinos.

Ten years after the Sanjay Gandhi Zoological Park came into existence in Patna in 1969, a pair of rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) - Kancha and Kanchi - was brought here from Guwahati. Three years later, or to be more precise - in 1982 - another rhino, Raju, was captured from Bettiah on Indo-Nepal border, and brought to the zoo.

Though the warm climate of Patna is not conducive for housing rhinos, Raju and Kanchi mated successfully and gave birth to a baby rhino after a long gestation period of 18 months. The year 1983 proved to be a turning point for the zoological park, as four more rhinos were born in successive years.

Three decades down the line, the Sanjay Gandhi Zoological Park here has six male and as many female rhinos. Today the zoo has second largest population of rhinos in the world.



Rhinos in the Patna Zoo

"So far as the population of rhinos is concerned, the Patna zoo tops the list in India, and is second in the world after San Diego, (in US)" the zoo director Abhay Kumar told *Deccan Herald*, while dwelling at length on how there was a difference between a rhino breeding in Kaziranga (Assam) and one in the cage of a zoo.

Three cheers

"The year 2010 has witnessed successful mating of three female rhinos. So we are expecting three more 'new guests' next year," said Kumar.

In view of the large number of rhinos, the problem of housing them is bound to arise. So he is now mulling over the proposal to set up a rhino safari, much on the lines of lion safari in Nandankanan (Odisha). "Once these rhinos grow up, it will be very difficult to keep them confined within a cage or a limited area. Chances are they might harm themselves by constantly clashing each other. So we have sent a proposal to the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) for setting up a rhino safari in the southern area for providing a good and natural congenial habitat to rhinos," he added.

Earlier, under the mutual exchange programme carried out by the International Rhino Federation, two rhinos were transported from Patna to the US in exchange of three giraffes and two female rhinos from St Diego Wild Animal Park.

Endangered species

The Indian rhino is primarily found in Terai regions (in the foothills of Himalayas). It is confined to tall grasslands in the Indo-Gangetic belt. But after poaching began, their numbers dwindled over the years. The Centre then declared it a Schedule I animal. Eventually, an ambitious project was launched in the country for the conservation of the endangered species. "This is precisely why the CZA has selected Patna zoo as a breeding centre for rhinos," Kumar said, and added, "The Sanjay Gandhi Park came into limelight due to high breeding of rhinos. Now more countries want to know about the techniques used at the Patna zoo, the kind of food we give to the world's most endangered species, and the size of the cages."

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Abhay Kumar in Patna

The couple driven to their wits' end

The two are now 'sick and tired' and have approached the NHRC to allow them to lead a normal life

A boy sees a girl at a social gathering and instantly decides that he should get married to her. After several days of courting, he succeeds in wooing her and proposes to her. The girl is reluctant and hesitant as she is from a different community. Finally, the boy manages to convince her to marry him.

This real-life incident being enacted in West Bengal has some trappings of Maniratnam-directed 'Bombay' made in 1995. But the comparisons stop at the marriage.

But Tarun Modak, an employee of a private shipping company, and Jahanara Khatoon (names changed), have already married three times in six months and now a sword of Damocles hangs over them in the form of a fatwa.

The events have taken a bizarre turn and the couple had to marry thrice - twice only to please the society, relatives and the families. The two went through torrid time, which they would not have bargained for at the time

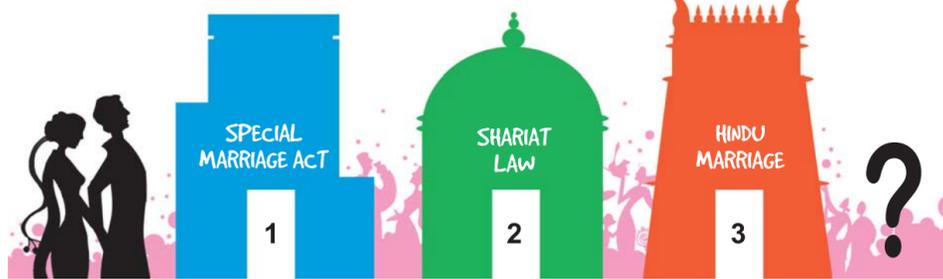
of deciding to get married. They had to willy-nilly kowtow to an adverse fatwa from the community leaders. The young couple had little alternative but to please.

Tarun was aware of the sensational wedding between computer graphic designer Rizwanur Rehman and Priyanka Todi, daughter of a business tycoon, in Kolkata and the media attention it had attracted. He knew the fate Rizwanur met. But, Tarun threw caution to winds as he thought that he was not marrying any prominent person's daughter.

He was shocked beyond his senses by the events that followed his marriage. Khatoon, a primary school teacher from Metiabruz near Wategunge in the southern fringe of Kolkata, first married Tarun in February 2009 under the Special Marriage Act.

For a couple of months, the newly wed had a nice time and things were hunky-dory as they lived separately without depending on others.

The troubles started when the girl's community came to know about the developments. During Khatoon's first visit to her parent's place at Rabindranagar in South 24 Parganas district, she was categorically told by the community leaders that if she declined to marry Modak again as per the laws of Shariat, her husband



would be ostracised in the locality and she would not be allowed to stay at her father's place.

"I realised the predicament of my father and naturally, I had to give in," revealed Khatoon. After a lot of persuasion stretching into a few weeks, Modak agreed to re-marry her under the Shariat law. More drama unfolded thereafter. Tarun's parents wanted the couple to marry as per the Hindu customs and rituals. When there was little objection from Khatoon, the third marriage of the couple within the six months of their first wedding took place. Modak's parents organised it at the Kalighat temple in the city

and were too happy to see their daughter-in-law condescending to wear conch shell bangles and apply vermilion on the forehead like a Hindu woman.

However, this did not go well with the girl's community leaders. They were furious and targeted Khatoon's father. He was summoned to a community meeting where he was allegedly thrashed and forced to sign on a judicial stamp paper. "Have we or my father committed any crime that we've to go through all this?" Khatoon asked. "Can't we and our family members have a peaceful life? We've tried to oblige all their (read community leaders') wishes. Still, why there is so much

persecution of us and my father?" she added in anguish.

Khatoon along with her father has already registered a complaint with the local police. Unable to withstand their trauma any longer, the couple has now approached the National Human Rights Commission, pleading they may be allowed to lead a normal life of their own as they are actually 'sick and tired' of appeasing the community chiefs. When contacted, a local police officer said that security for the family members has been ensured and efforts have been on to resolve the matter amicably.

Prasanta Paul in Kolkata