

from the editor-in-chief

## Return of the Frugal Traveller ?

Quite many – if indeed not many, know of Rahul Sankratayan as a great Sanskrit scholar, philosopher, literator, linguist and erudite pundit but perhaps few know that he was the first Indian writer to publish a book in Hindi on the art of travel (*Ghummakar Shastra*), unravelling the phenomena seminally. Forever footloose, he was an indefatigable wanderer, hungry to know about peoples and places, both in his homeland and abroad. As a Himalayanist, he traversed far and wide, deep into the remote valleys; stayed in forlorn caves and rock-shelters, mingled with indigenous people – *Marcchayas* and *Sherpas* – spoke in their lingo and danced their way. His graphic account of Himalayan ethnography is mostly written in non-English languages, not easily accessible. Rahul's Himalayan travels came to a halt when he was rendered almost crippled due to frost bite, yet he passionately longed to drink life to the lees. Sankratayan embodied in him the true spirit of a traveller – 'it is not too late to seek a newer world'.

Another Indian who stands out as a great travel enthusiast was a missionary, Adi Shankracharya (800 CE) who virtually democratised travel. Taking cue from *Puranaic* literature, in religious framework, he firmly established the concept of pilgrimology what Indians practice in *Tirthyatras*. Over time, it developed into an institution, characterized by the notion of austerity, humility, simplicity, hardship and penance with high regard to geo-piety and topophilia (place attachment) where a pilgrim undertakes 'inner' as well as physical journey to unfold the meaning of life. Hindu pilgrimages are quintessentially community-based, long-haul, monolithic, having specific code-of-conduct, and marked by 'road-culture', that kept the entire nation on the move, more for 'self-spirituality' than 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism'. Hindus were ordained to leave their homes for far flung peripheries, known as *dhamas*\* to earn divine merits or to attain *moksha* (salvation). They travelled on minimal support services while many preferred to cross vast distances bare-footed, half-fed, barely clad and often with the sky as their roof. The mantra was: the harder you work for, the better you gain.

Pilgrims' tales on return were narratives filled with awe and wonder, mystry and mythologies – Himalayan wonderman *Yeti*, the invisible elves and fairies of the Valley of Flowers, the thunderous water falls, dramatic emergence of the Ganga from the glacier's cow-mouth, strange ways of *Bhotia* tribals of Mana and the warm hospitality of *Pandas*. All this inspired listeners by the fireside for a *yatra* next summer, after the harvest.

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\* Hindus' four dhamas of high religious merit are Rameshwaram (deep south), Dwarika (looking Arabian Sea), Puri (looking Bay of Bengal) and Badrinath (Himalayas).

Alas! The processes of modernization have eroded the ethos of archaic pilgrimages as most of these sites were considered 'markers' of tourism development. Mass tourism overwhelmed the character of many places beyond recognition and to the detriment of pilgrimage-culture. Tourism literature is replete with what bad tourism can do. The story of developed societies is not much different from the developing nations, particularly Europe, where medieval pilgrimages changed from spirituality to novelty and for bizarre touristic experiences (Sumption 1975). In India a pilgrim increasingly exchanged character with pleasure-seeking tourist when more tourists inroaded religious landscape, profaning the sublime and the sacred. Shrine resorts transformed to tourism, blurring spirituality between religious and secular domains - 'religion became just another marketable commodity' (Olsen 2003). Seeking spirituality became fad and travellers' native instinct gradually faded away with secular overtones, what Solomon (1999) termed 'Spiritual Promiscuity'. Lord Byron laments in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 'from mighty wrongs to petty perfidy, have I not seen what human things could do'. Gladstone (2005) in his recent book *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour* elaborates on this subject more succinctly.

In pilgrimages we have almost lost a noble art of travel.

Disgusted with modern life and living that appeared too materialistic, empty and meaningless, 'nomads' from the affluent-west began searching for existential reality in the Orient and 'exotic Other'. Cohen named them 'drifters', others called them 'junkies' and a few pronounced them 'flower children', euphemistically for their atypical life-style. Finally, somewhere in the 1980s, they were seen as independent travellers who loved freedom and serendipity, donning typical backpack. They wore a sanguine attitude towards life and were eager to integrate with local community; used accommodation owned by host society and made efforts to consume locally produced commodities. They loved to be called a traveller or a backpacker rather than tourist, though academics classed them amongst 'alternative tourists'. Wedded to principles of austerity and travel ethics; oriented to self-development and acquisition of knowledge; parsimonious backpackers are often considered as 'secular pilgrims'.

Within a period of about 40 years, the backpacking phenomenon has grown worldwide with major concentration in Asian countries, such as South East Asia and Australasia besides South America. North America and Europe have the lowest population of backpackers. Since they demand a different infrastructure, their destinations have developed a distinct backpacker market. Backpacking may be fringe economy but it helps destination communities to sustain for all its indigenous touch that prevents leakages. Backpacking has developed into an important socio-cultural and economic phenomenon around the world. It needs to be examined more seriously than to be taken as 'time-bubble'.

Since conventional tourism has a tendency to pre-date benevolent attributes of travel, backpacking could hardly remain untouched. Signs of distress are discernible in the statements of backpacker-critics, who found that the scene has lost its innocence; it is shaping into mass-backpackers market. That backpackers' culture has suffered a setback by creating a rift between ideology and practice and that backpackers' newly discovered peripheries have paved way to mass tourism, it is getting more packaged than packaged tours. It promotes ghettoish enclaves and that it is far from real travel; it is not what it used to be.

While these are veritable and quite provoking findings on the complex backpacking phenomenon, there is urgent need to go in for research programmes addressing transnational and transcultural issues to establishing state-of-the-art on the universe of backpackers. There are backpackers and backpackers. The fact remains that backpacking is still in its evolving stage and ground realities would not come-by so easily for these gypsies function in remote and isolated destinations, often in wilderness. Commendable task has been performed by the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS) by setting up the Backpacker Research Group (BRG) (2000) comprising over 30 active scholars from different parts of the world with a well-discussed research agenda. They have expertise of two pioneering high-ranking scholars in this field of enquiry – Professor Erik Cohen and Professor Philip L. Pearce who closely watch BRG research programmes. This issue of *Tourism Recreation Research* carries a report on BRG second meeting held in Bangkok, prepared by the Director, ATLAS Cultural Tourism Project, Greg Richards. Greg has also assembled and co-edited research papers presented at the first conference with a title *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice* (2004) that carries very useful information on the subject (see book review in TRR, 2005, 30(1): 111-112).

Considering the seriousness of the problem and the Centre's commitment to encourage, promote and disseminate tourism knowledge, we proposed a special issue to be guest edited by Professors Cohen and Pearce who have been working meticulously on this theme for the last two years. I hope TRR readers shall find the contents worthy of reference. For my part, I am happy if this precious little can inspire future researchers in this new field of enquiry where backpacking is often thought of as an 'intriguing ideology' practised by some 'imagined communities'. Authentic research will reveal the truth whether this tribe is a bunch of apparitions or 'real travellers' who often work as unacknowledged cultural ambassadors of good-will, peace and harmony in this strife-torn world. Perhaps, we need more of them, be they Rahul Sankratayan or Hermann Hesse who wrote such beautiful words of inspiration:

*We separate love from its object, love alone is for us, in the same way that, in wandering, we don't look for a goal, we only look for the happiness of wandering* (Hesse 1972: 24-25).

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