



The Natural Wonders of India, From Haridwar to Pune, Part 1

In the weeks leading up to World Vegan Day, travel writer, author, and consultant chronicles his journey across different cities of India in part 1 of a travelogue ridden with herbivorous cuisine and picturesque scenery.



Guest Contributor | Updated: 11th October 2021 6:49 pm IST



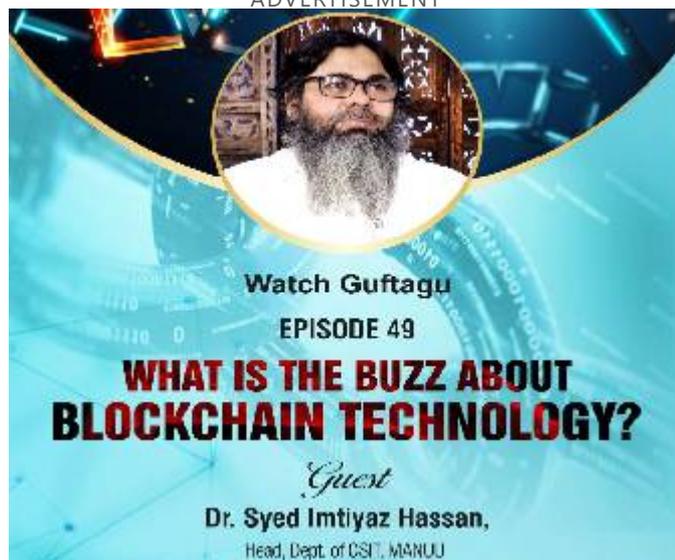
By *Murli Menon*

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After having travelled down the Mekong from its source in Tibet through China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam to the South China Sea in 2006, it had been one of my goals since 1995 to travel down the Holy Ganges. I finally achieved my goal in 2010 through a combination of creative visualisation, ZeNLP meditation and auto-suggestion combined with a strict vegan diet. Regular exercise, fasting and a spiritual connection to nature helped me to create meaningful coincidences, which guided me every minute during my long and arduous journey through North India in the most severe of winters!

Having my brick Nikon and netbook with a two-hour battery life enabled me to document my journey as it happened, thereby giving me the luxury of clicking more than 5000 high resolution pictures along the way!

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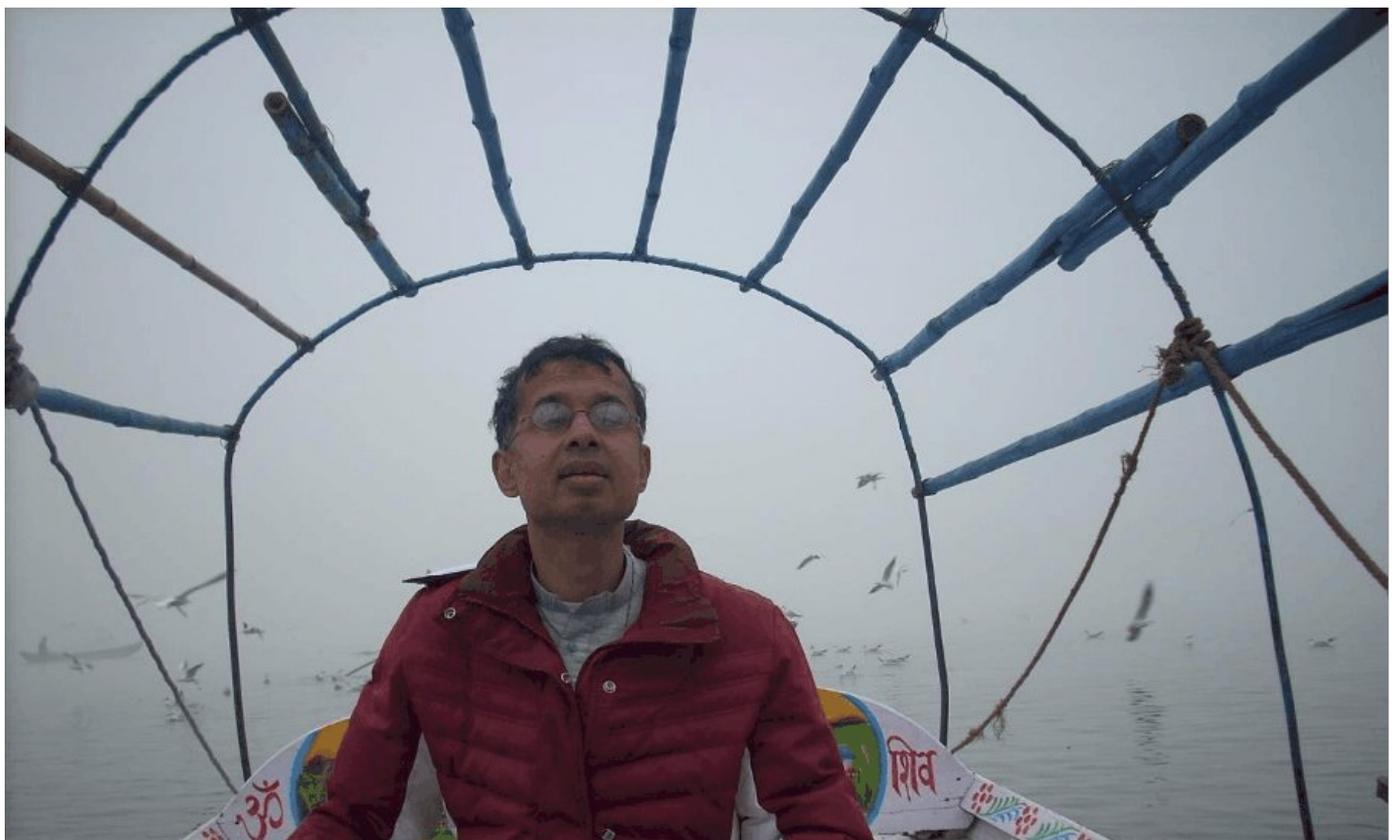
My travel plan was extensive to say the least. I planned to travel 5,000 KM across India, spanning ten states and cities like New Delhi, Kolkata, Bhubaneshwar, Hyderabad and Pune. My exact route is elucidated below:

| From | To | Distance | Mode |
|-----------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Ahmedabad | Haridwar | 1208 km. | Train |
| Haridwar | Rishikesh | 0025 km. | Taxi |

| | | | |
|----------------|----------------|----------|-------|
| Rishikesh | Kaudiyala | 0042 km. | Taxi |
| Kaudiyala | Rishikesh | 0042 km. | Raft |
| Rishikesh | Haridwar | 0025 km. | Taxi |
| Haridwar | Allahabad | 0725km. | Train |
| Allahabad | Varanasi | 0130 km. | Bus |
| Varanasi | Allahabad | 0130 km. | Bus |
| Allahabad | Jasidih | 0586 km. | Train |
| Jasidih | Kolkata | 0311 km. | Train |
| Kolkata | Canning | 0050 km. | Train |
| Canning | Kolkata | 0050 km. | Train |
| Kolkata | Bhubaneshwar | 0439 km. | Train |
| Bhubaneshwar | Chilka | 0094 km. | Bus |
| Chilka | Bhubaneshwar | 0094 km. | Bus |
| Bhubaneshwar | Hyderabad | 1150 km. | Train |
| Hyderabad | Srisailam | 0220 km. | Bus |
| Srisailam | Hyderabad | 0220 km. | Bus |
| Hyderabad | Manmad | 0690 km. | Train |
| Manmad | Nasik | 0125 km. | Taxi |
| Nasik | Tryambakeshwar | 0025 km. | Taxi |
| Tryambakeshwar | Nasik | 0025 km. | Taxi |
| Nasik | Pune | 0211 km. | Taxi |

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------|
| Pune | Bhimashankar | 0160 km. | Taxi |
| Bhimashankar | Pune | 0160 km. | Taxi |
| Pune | Ahmedabad | 0660 km. | Flight |
| Total | Distance | 5664 km. | |

I planned to raft down the Ganges from Kaudiyala to Rishikesh while also going to the Kumbh mela in Haridwar, and travel to Kolkata through Allahabad, Varanasi, and Jasidih. From Kolkata I planned to go to the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve where the Holy Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal. I would travel by boat on each destination on the banks of the river. Being a vegan, who lives on fruits, nuts, seeds, grains and vegetables, I photographed all 100 per cent vegan street food and put it on my blog for fellow vegans who want to follow in my footsteps. Being a vegan also meant surviving the harsh North Indian winter dressed in sambhalpuri kurtas, a khadi shawl, and a light synthetic jacket. I wished to explore the natural wonders at each of the destinations I stayed at and document them in my blog. I have just returned after completing my journey from Kaudiyala to Jharkhali.





Boating on the Yamuna River

Some of the most relaxing moments of my journey were experienced while river rafting down the Ganges, boating at Allahabad, climbing the Chitrakoot mountain in Jasidih (Jharkhand), or during the sunset cruise at Jharkhali in Sunderbans, while on a speedboat on the Chilka lake in Orissa. Trekking inside the Srisailem Tiger Reserve in Andhra Pradesh was also a pleasure. I could make time to take a leisurely dip in the Ganges, Krishna and Godavari during this trip. The luxury of being able to take unlimited high resolution digital photographs, meant every sunrise and sunset was captured. Every bird during my trip was clicked and more than 4,000 high resolution pictures are safely backed up in my pen drive, two laptops and netbook.

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The journey from Ahmedabad to Haridwar was uneventful except for the beautiful sunset clicked over the hills of Mount Abu. The train was crowded with devotees proceeding to Haridwar for the Kumbh Mela so as to reach before 14th January, which was the most auspicious day to take a dip in the Holy Ganges since 1998. By a meaningful coincidence, at Haridwar station I met three young ladies, each from England, Netherlands and USA, who were seeking directions to go to Rishikesh! Soon, all four of us were in a taxi to Rishikesh. The journey took us through the outer fringes of the Rajaji National

Park, where we could sight some stump-tailed macaques! After checking-in at the Garhwal Mandal guest house at Rishikesh, we proceeded to Kaudiyala to complete the thrill of river rafting while returning to Rishikesh. Body surfing while hanging on to the raft in the ice-cold waters of the river in mid-January was a bone-chilling experience.

Kathy, Kristen and Naomi, who were teaching English in China, were travelling to Rishikesh for a break. After returning to Rishikesh, I headed to Haridwar for the Kumbh Mela. Lakhs of pilgrims from all over India had gathered for a once in a lifetime experience. Taking a dip in the freezing waters of the Holy Ganges at 4 AM in mid-January, reminded me of my dip at Lake Mansarovar in Tibet! However, it was a boon to my immune system as all my cells got rejuvenated after swimming in the placid waters of this mighty river. It surely is one of the most powerful experiences to discover the power of mother nature. Exploring the impromptu food stalls at the Kumbh as a food detective, searching for 100 percent vegan delicacies (food which does not contain any product of animal origin or even traces of any animal product) was another objective of my travels for my forthcoming book "ZeNLP-The Power of Veganism."

The food-stalls at the Kumbh had idlis and dosas jostling for space with samosas, dhoklas, and theplas.

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Feasting on samosas, Photo Credit: Murli Menon

The effects of the severe winter were compounded by the chilly winds and slight drizzle that seemed to pervade Rishikesh and Haridwar in January. Warming up near community bonfires and sipping hot ginger juice (as a strict vegan I do not drink tea, coffee or consume sugar due to chances of adulteration of these commodities by products of animal origin). Also, I do not consume any factory manufactured food-stuffs, sold across supermarket shelves. As a strict vegan, I avoid all foodstuffs containing caffeine, chlorine, fluorine, nicotine and iodine. I prefer to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts and grains! I never consume solids after sunset but instead stick to water fasting! Community bonfires, are an ideal socialising venue to find out about the latest events and to know the directions to reach the hawkers who sell the most delicious street food in town.

Rafting down the rapidly flowing river from Kaudiyala to Rishikesh in the wee hours of the morning — shrouded in mist and fog and caressed by a light drizzle — was a memorable experience. The highlight of the trip was jumping

into the ice-cold waters after reaching Rishikesh. The rush of adrenaline as one scurried to the safety of the shore seeking the warmth of the embers, while the body overcame its numbness after a thrill a minute rafting experience, is difficult to describe in words. A good night's sleep under a thick cotton quilt, was enough to rejuvenate one's aching muscles and numb fingers for the next adventure.



Sunrise from Manmand to Nashik, Photo Credit: Murli Menon

The trip from Rishikesh to Haridwar was like moving with a caravan. Thousands of pilgrims walking barefoot to reach Haridwar on January 14. Along the way, I met peasants from Bhagalpur, Rabaris from Gujarat, Bauls from West Bengal, villagers from Andhra Pradesh, sadhus from Uttar Pradesh, and gypsies selling everything from sandalwood-paste to vermilion. It was a "mela" in the real sense of the word! Most of the pilgrims braved the effects of the cold by sleeping outdoors. Many ingenuous devotees slept on the shores of the river to avoid the early morning rush!

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After reaching Haridwar, one wakes up at midnight to prepare for the trek to the ghats for a dip before the crowd starts to pour in. It is extremely cold and visibility is limited to the first three steps one takes. However, one trudges along the narrow path to reach the holy river before dawn and take a rejuvenating bath in the rapids as the first rays of the sun strike the earth. The most exciting part of the experience is the feeling of numbness in the fingers which makes buttoning one's kurta an achievement in itself! At the ghats, pink-coloured ghagras of the rabari women vied for attention with saffron Rajasthani turbans which were a striking contrast to the sadhus smeared in grey ash. It was a free for all with everyone for himself. Hawkers selling towels had a field day. I planned to travel from Haridwar to Allahabad to complete the next phase of my research on vegan Indian street food.

Murli Menon, is a travel writer, stress management consultant and author-based at Ahmedabad, India. He is the author of "ZeNLP-Learning through stories" published by The Written Word Publications, "ZeNLP-the power to succeed" published by Sage publications and "ZeNLP-the power to relax" by New Dawn Press. He can be reached at zenlp@rediffmail.com

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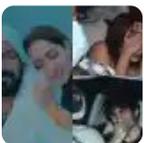
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