



Fables From The Sea

A maritime legacy birthed from resonances, both familial and coastal,
SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA recalls his early trysts with the ocean.

Childhood rushes at me with the cool, dark kiss of turquoise. It rushes at me, somewhere in the imaginary confluence of 550 islands, give or take a few. My mother Rajini was born on the Andaman Islands, which is where she spent nearly all of her early life. My life as a travelling ruffian, thus, began with journeys 'home'—a concept that seemed dual in its existence (don't we already have a home?) and esoteric (but we live on land, how will we reach there?). I must've been three or four at the time of my first introduction to the islands. In those days, 'reaching there' meant taking a ship from either Calcutta or Madras (both named era-appropriately here). Madras

was nearly always the port of choice, closer to our real home (Pune) and redolent of one of my father's key requirements when it came to travel of any sort—filter coffee on tap. My memories of those early expeditions are sensory and intertwined, in the way childhood and remembrance often are: waves unfurling across a vast canvas of horizon, crashing against the rocks as their final encore; the full moon finding its place in the sky; the landscape speckled with a postcard-like placement of coconut trees;

ILLUSTRATION BY KIRSTY PARBETER/ALAMY

the taste of the Andaman Sea, a brine-scented collage of far-off lands; the barking of a night dog, the slithering flutter of fish in the sea.

Childhood rushes at me with the multi-tongued lingua of a local bazaar, it leaps out at me from half-eaten trunks of *mahua* and the windswept allegories of palms lining a coastline. My father Jayant's relationship with the islands was as potent as my mother's. He arrived there as a young college lecturer, eager to unfetter himself from the mainland. I sometimes wonder about the courage and exploration at play there, that willingness to travel thousands of miles to a then virgin island outpost, uprooting oneself from everything familiar.

Language remains a strong anchor to those days: Mum coaxing, berating, or bullying relatives—near and distant—in Telugu; Father eliciting *oohs* and *aahs* at the corner *chai* shack with his fluent Bangla; Father, again, trying to direct a rickshaw-*wala* in what he thinks is Tamil, but which in reality, is closer to Spanish; friends and strangers creating a bewildering network of guttural grunts and echoes.

I was idle and wild, and it's hard to deny the fact that those early learnings, gathered from the frequencies of the land and the mysteries of the sea, have shaped my life as a writer and a traveller.

Childhood rushes at me through the winding topography of Port Blair, where I trudged up huffing and puffing and sped down with glee. From within the folds of soil, they overwhelm me with fragrances plucked from air.

Our lives have diverged and converged and diverged again many times since those years, as they must. Though everyone's back home in Pune again after decades, we work, wonder, and wander in

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different frequencies. Travel for me has transformed into a journey of soul and self. The family trip to the Andamans remains a constant, though; if not an annual, then certainly a biennial affair.

Things have changed. The spice-laced, laughter-filled pampering of my maternal grandparents has left with them. Port Blair has become crowded.

My navigational coordinates have become more accustomed to Havelock Island and its sweet-scented interpretation of bohemia. But then, there is a lot that has remained the same.

That same thrill of running onto a beach left naked and untouched; the same looks on the drivers' faces as Father asks about their day in 'Tamil'; that same laughter that percolates between conversations among friends; those same horizons that don't think twice before unleashing a maddening syzygy of shades; and that same full moon, embraced in a tango with the vagaries of the sea. Our small farmhouse and apartment in Port Blair almost never see us, since a small but persuasive squad of friends always insists on having us over. I steal away, frequently and meditatively, occasionally led by the scent of memories. Childhood rushes at me; wordlessly, I let it. ■

Poet and novelist Siddharth Dasgupta had two releases in 2017—a short-story collection (*The Sacred Sorrow of Sparrows*) and a poetry collection (*The Wanderlust Conspiracy*). Follow his journeys—literary and otherwise on citizenbliss.squarespace.com and [@citizen.bliss](https://twitter.com/citizen.bliss)

FORM IV

(See Rule 8)

Statement of ownership and other details of the magazine Travel+Leisure India & South Asia are:

1. Place of Publication : Delhi
2. Periodicity : Monthly
3. Printer : Xavier Collaco
Nationality / Address : Portuguese
803, Angel Paradise,
J.B. Mata Road,
Amboli, Andheri West,
Mumbai 400058.
4. Publisher : Xavier Collaco
Nationality / Address : Portuguese
803, Angel Paradise,
J.B. Mata Road,
Amboli, Andheri West,
Mumbai 400058.
5. Publishing Director : Simon Clays
Nationality / Address : British
378-379, 2nd Floor,
Udyog Vihar, Phase IV,
Sector 18,
Gurugram - 122015,
Haryana

Name and addresses of individuals who own the magazine and partners or shareholders holding more than one per cent of the total capital Shareholders: M/s Hurbert Burda Media India Private Limited, B-1, LGF, Geetanjali Enclave, New Delhi - 110017

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Date: March 1, 2018