National Good Neighbour Day

National Good Neighbour Day is celebrated annually on 28 September to remind us of the importance of kindness, friendship, and cooperation in our communities. A good neighbour is someone who helps others, respects their feelings, and is always ready to lend a helping hand. This day encourages people to build strong and friendly relationships with those living around them. Simple acts like sharing, greeting others, helping an elderly person, or keeping the neighbourhood clean can make a big difference. National Good Neighbour Day teaches us that a caring neighbourhood creates a happy and safe environment. By being kind and helpful, we can make our community better for everyone.

#AHALYABAI HOLKAR

The Warrior Queen Of The Maheshwari Saree

The saree was not simply a piece of clothing. It became part of the economic and cultural world Ahalyabai was building around the Narmada

In the history of India, some queens are remembered for battles, some for palaces, and some for the kingdoms they ruled. But Ahalyabai Holkar left behind something more enduring, a legacy of governance, temples, trade and a textile tradition that still lives today in the folds of the Maheshwari saree.

Her story began far away from the royal courts. In 1733, Maratha commander Malhar Rao Holkar was travelling towards Pune when he stopped at a temple in the small village of Chondi, in present-day Maharashtra. There, he noticed a young girl, around seven or eight years old, involved in temple service.

Her name was Ahalya. Malhar Rao was so impressed by the child's character that he chose her as a bride for his son, Khanderao Holkar. The little girl who had grown up in an ordinary village would eventually become one of the most remarkable rulers of eighteenth-century India.

Marriage brought Ahalyabai into the Holkar household, but she was not simply expected to live behind palace walls. Her father-in-law recognised her abilities and gradually introduced her to the responsibilities of power.

She learned about administration, finances, diplomacy and military affairs. She also gained an understanding of the complicated political world involving the Marathas, the Peshwa and the declining Mughal Empire.

Then tragedy struck. In 1754, Khanderao Holkar was killed during the siege of Kumher. Ahalyabai was devastated. According to tradition, she considered joining her husband's funeral pyre, but Malhar Rao intervened and persuaded her not to do so. Instead of allowing grief to end her life, he continued preparing her for responsibility. A few years later, another tragedy followed. Malhar Rao died in 1766.

Ahalyabai now faced a completely different challenge. In 1767, she assumed control of the Holkar state, with Maheshwar on the banks of the Narmada becoming her principal seat of power. She proved to be far more than a ceremonial ruler. Ahalyabai governed with attention to administration, trade, infrastructure and public welfare. She supported temples and religious institutions, built roads and facilities for travellers, and encouraged commerce. And Maheshwar became closely associated with weaving.

Ahalyabai invited skilled weavers to settle in the region and encouraged the development of a distinctive textile tradition. From this environment emerged the Maheshwari saree, known for its elegant combination of silk and cotton.

The traditional fabric uses silk in the warp and cotton in the weft, creating a saree that combines the sheen of silk with the lighter, comfortable character of cotton.

The designs became associated with Maheshwar's identity, delicate stripes, checks and distinctive borders inspired by the architecture and surroundings of the region. The saree was not simply a piece of clothing. It became part of the economic and cultural world Ahalyabai was building around the Narmada. Today, the Maheshwari saree carries the memory of that transformation. Ahalyabai Holkar began life as a village girl in Chondi. She became a young bride, then a grieving widow, and eventually the ruler of a powerful Maratha state.

Her legacy survives not only in monuments and temples, but also in the hands of weavers who continue a tradition associated with her patronage. On the banks of the Narmada, a queen once built a centre of administration, faith and commerce. And from that world came a saree whose silk and cotton still carry her name: Maheshwari.

Trinetra Ganesh, Moti Doongri.

Mount Kailasha.

Khatu Shyam Temple.

Most importantly, pilgrims do not merely visit these places to see something. They go to participate. The journey, the hardship, the waiting, the chanting, the crowd, the ritual, and finally, the darshan create an emotional experience that a photograph or television programme cannot reproduce.

The 'Auspicious' Places

#TIRTH

Dr. Goutam Sen
CTVS Surgeon
Traveller
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This year on Ganesh Chaturthi, the throng of devotees at the Trinetra Ganesh Temple at the base of the Moti Doongri, Jaipur was unprecedented. As it is, the crowds are large, but this time, a rumour that special packets of blessed 'Mehndi' were available (to enhance the joy of married life or create better opportunities for happy marriages) caused the numbers to increase manifold.

Some places of worship seem to have gained a reputation of being more 'Auspicious' than others. They have hordes of followers waiting for the magic to take place in their lives. Over time, more rituals are added in venerating the deity. There must be at least a hundred more Ganesh temples in Jaipur which do not see such gatherings.

It is impossible to understand the aura. At the Ganesh Temple, the precise daily rhythm of Aartis, the scent of fresh laddu offerings (prasadam) and the crowded, synchronized chant of thousands of voices instantly signals to your nervous system that you have stepped out of daily life into sacred territory. When a devotee visits this Ganesh Temple before starting a business, after purchasing a vehicle or before writing an exam and subsequently succeeds, they attribute the positive outcome to deity's blessing. This creates a self-reinforcing psychological cycle.

The devotee enters with intense faith and high expectation. As a result of selective confirmation, successes are remembered and proclaimed as divine intervention (*chamatkar*). Failures are attributed to incorrect timing or personal karma. Personal testimonies shared among families and social networks build a collective consensus by 'Word-of-Mouth Transmission.'

"The deity listens."

Over decades, millions of individual prayers, tears, relief and gratitude accumulate in the public consciousness, creating an invisible, heavy atmosphere of sanctity that newcomers can instantly sense upon arrival.

Have you ever wondered why temples are often built on hilltops?

Paradoxically, the harder a place of worship is to access or endure, the more "auspicious" it is perceived to be. In behavioral economics and psychology, this is closely linked to effort justification. We assign higher value to experiences that require fatigue and sacrifice.

Khatu Shyamji is another example of the 'Auspiscious.' The pilgrimage begins from the home town or at least from the city of Reengus (which is 18 kilometers from the temple). All walk the distance singing 'Bhajans.' The old, infirm and handicapped are also able to do the pilgrimage. It seems that the surge of the devotees gives special energy to them! Standing in a line of thousands at Khatu Shyamji, surrounded by shouting, singing and intense devotion, creates a euphoric sensation where individual identity temporarily dissolves into the group.

Amarnath.

Sabarimala.

The whole cycle of 24 hrs for a fleeting Darshan is endured without fatigue! Sabarimala's austerities are another example. The journey to Sabarimala requires a strict 41-day *Vrutham* (ascetic regimen of celibacy, vegetarianism, and walking barefoot) followed by a trek through dense forests and climbing the sacred 18 steps (*Pathinettam Padi*). The physical discipline strips away the pilgrim's ego, making the eventual brief darshan of Swami Ayyappan feel intensely cathartic. At Sabarimala, every male devotee addresses the other as "Ayyappan" regardless of wealth, caste or social standing. The wearing of uniform black clothes dissolves societal hierarchies. An auspicious aura is not merely abstract; it is felt physically through the five senses. Unique rituals and sensory environments prime the human brain to enter an altered state of reverence.

Over time, as a temple grows in reputation, institutional authorities naturally introduce structured rituals to manage crowds, formalise worship and maintain mystery. Unique rituals emerge (e.g., offering specific leaves, water from sacred rivers, or gold foils). VIP lines, special puja slots and token systems heighten perceived exclusivity and value. Local legends, temple histories (Sthala Puranas) and devotional literature are published and widely disseminated, embedding the shrine into broader cultural canons.

In Eastern traditions, sites often centre on a deity that was not carved by human hands, but revealed itself organically, Myth of Self-Manifestation (*Swayambhu*). The 12 *Jyotirlingas* (columns of radiant light) are reverenced because Shiva is believed to have pierced the earth at those exact points.

Similarly, Khatu Shyamji derives its sanctity from the legend of Barbarika's head buried in the village of Khatu, discovered through a miraculous yield of milk from grazing cows. The phenomenon can be explained as the transformation of a place into a sacred destination through the interaction of faith, legend, geography, ritual, community and human psychology.

Why does a modest shrine become a global epicentre?

At the beginning, there is often a story, the belief that something extraordinary happened at a particular spot. A deity appeared there, a saint meditated there, a miracle occurred, a sacred object was discovered or nature itself produced something regarded as divine.

Amarnath Cave is a striking example. Deep in the high-altitude Himalayas of Kashmir, Amarnath Cave presents a distinct form of hierophany, a naturally occurring ice stalagmite (*Swayambhu Lingam*) that forms every summer. The cave is remote and physically difficult to reach, yet, the annual pilgrimage attracts enormous numbers because the naturally formed ice lingam is regarded by devotees as a manifestation of Shiva. The difficulty of the journey itself becomes part of the religious experience. The harder the destination is to reach, the greater the sense of having earned the darshan. Mythologically, this is the secluded realm where Lord Shiva revealed the Amar Katha (the secret of immortality) to Goddess Parvati. The temporary, perishable nature of the ice lingam paradoxically reinforces its imperishable cosmic authority.

Mount Kailash represents an even more powerful version of this phenomenon. It is not merely a mountain. Rising over 22,000 feet on the Tibetan Plateau, Mount Kailash is held to be the physical manifestation of Mount Meru, the spiritual center of the universe. It is sacred across four distinct world traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Bon). Believed to be the eternal abode of Shiva and Parvati, Kailash is considered so intrinsically holy that humans do not step foot on its peak out of reverence; instead, its sacredness is accessed entirely through circumambulation.

The mountain becomes, in effect, geography converted into theology.

There is another important ingredient: collective testimony. One person says, "I experienced something here;" another believes it; a family returns; a story is passed from generation to generation. Eventually, the reputation of the place becomes greater than the original shrine.

Most importantly, pilgrims do not merely visit these places to see something. They go to participate. The journey, the hardship, the waiting, the chanting, the crowd, the ritual, and finally, the darshan create an emotional experience that a photograph or television programme cannot reproduce.

In Western traditions like Lourdes in France, the sacred breakthrough happens through a vision. In 1858, 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous reported 18 apparitions of a "Lady" in a damp grotto. When a freshwater spring trickled out of the mud, accompanied by claims of unexplainable physical healings, the site was permanently set apart from the secular world. Lourdes represents a Pilgrimages of suffering. Thousands of terminally ill or physically impaired individuals travel across continents on stretchers to submerge in Lourdes' cold baths. The arduous journey transforms the visit into a profound act of devotion.

When a place demands rigour, reaching it feels like an achievement earned through faith. The perceived potency of the deity scales directly with the hardship required to stand before them.

Places of worship also serve as vital social anchors. In an increasingly fragmented, fast-paced world, visiting a hugely popular temple provides a deep sense of communal identity and shared purpose.

To understand why a particular temple or sanctuary becomes extraordinary while hundreds of neighbouring shrines remain quiet, we must look beyond pure religious doctrine. The creation of an "auspicious aura" is an intricate interplay of sacred myth, sensory neuroscience, sociological feedback loops, ritual architecture, and psychological comfort.

Mythology initiates sanctity, but human experience sustains and multiplies it. A temple's aura is heavily reinforced by collective emotional validation.

Then comes the pilgrimage network. Roads, railways, hotels, guides, religious organisations, government facilities, publicity and modern communications make an increasingly distant sacred place accessible to millions. Ironically, modern technology can strengthen ancient faith: a shrine that once belonged to one village can now be seen, discussed and visited by people across the world.

Once a location acquires a narrative of divine presence, the physical dirt, stone, ice, or water of that space ceases to be mundane matter. It becomes a conduit (tirth or bridge) connecting the finite human to the infinite divine. Thus, the transformation follows a recurring pattern: a place-> a sacred story-> a community of believers-> repeated pilgrimage-> ritual and tradition-> infrastructure and publicity-> mass devotion-> global recognition.

And there is a paradox at the heart of it.

The more ordinary the physical place may appear, the more extraordinary the meaning humans are capable of giving it.

A cave becomes the abode of Shiva.

A mountain becomes the cosmic axis.

A spring becomes a source of healing.

A small shrine becomes a destination for millions. In this sense, pilgrimage is not simply the movement of people towards a sacred place; it is the process by which human beings continually create, preserve and enlarge the sacred meaning of a place. Whether standing in the neon-lit queues of Jaipur, trekking through the Western Ghats, or quietly kneeling in a cave in southern France, human beings are drawn to these locations because they serve as physical anchors for hope, places where the ordinary boundaries of daily life feel thin enough for magic to break through.

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Lourdes in France.

#ANSWERS

Why Is the Ocean Salty?

Salt builds up in the ocean because the only way water can leave the ocean is through evaporation. And when the water evaporates, it doesn't take the salt with it

Oceans make up about 70 percent of Earth's surface. But why is the ocean salty?

Ocean water contains lots of different mineral salts: sodium, chloride, sulfate, magnesium, calcium, potassium, bicarbonate and bromide. These salts enter the ocean through rivers, which pass over rocks and soil, picking up salt along the way.

This salt builds up in the ocean because the only way water can leave the ocean is through evaporation. And when the water evaporates, it doesn't take the salt with it. So, you end up with less water, and the same amount of salt, resulting in a pretty salty sea.

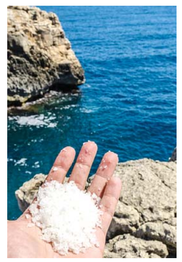
The same thing can happen to a smaller, landlocked body of water, such as the Great Salt Lake in Utah, where water evaporates quickly in the desert climate, the lake has dropped 20 feet since 1849. A favourite pastime for visitors is to float on the lake like a cork, because the high salinity makes people more buoyant.

Ocean salinity levels can vary dramatically from place to place. For example, the Mediterranean Sea is more salty than oceans off the coast of continents that have large freshwater rivers, such as the Amazon. The Atlantic Ocean near the mouth of the Amazon River has relatively low salinity due to the mixing of fresh river water with salty ocean water.

Spending time in the ocean compared to other natural bodies of water, one of the key differences is the noticeable difference in salt content in the water.

Oceans and seas cover roughly 70 per cent of the world, and contain about 97 per cent of the Earth's water, and yet, the water is undrinkable due to the salt levels.

However, the five oceans aren't the only saline bodies of water, most water on earth has some levels of salt.



Why are the oceans salty?

The salt is the result of land erosion and begins when rain containing dissolved carbon dioxide falls on land.

As rocks erode, the minerals, mostly chloride and sodium, are washed away by rivers and streams, and carried to the oceans, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Although sodium chloride makes up the majority of the salt in the water, other minerals such as magnesium, calcium, and potassium are also dissolved in salt water.

Do all of the oceans have the same amount of salt?

Each ocean has a different salt content and each ocean is not uniformly salty, rather different areas and seas have higher or lower salt levels.

On average, saltwater contains 35 grams of salt per kilogram, according to Scripps Institution of Oceanography. The ocean with the most salt is the Pacific Ocean, the largest and deepest of Earth's oceans. Located between Asia and Australia in the west and the Americas in the east, the Pacific Ocean has the most salt because parts experience excess evaporation, which leaves the water more dense and salty.

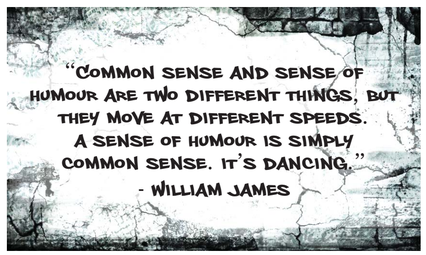
Why are rivers not salty?

Because the water comprising the oceans comes from rivers and streams which deposit the water into the oceans, it would make sense that rivers and streams are also salty, which is partly true.

The constant replenishing of rivers with rainwater keeps rivers from becoming overly salty, as the salt is always pushed out and into the seas, where it collects.

Throughout the world, it is estimated that rivers carry four billion tons of dissolved salts to the oceans annually, according to NOAA. However, the majority of water, including rainwater, contains some salt.

THE WALL



BABY BLUES

By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

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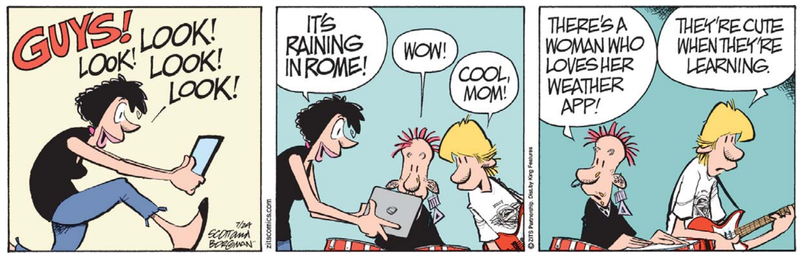
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