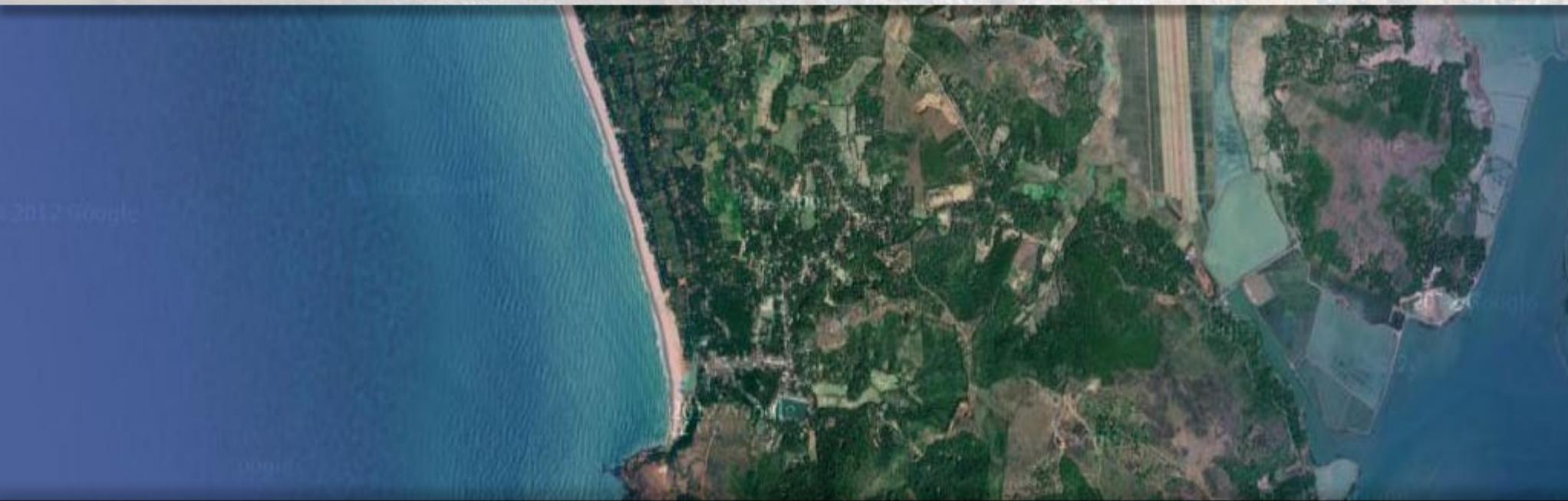




# *The Curse of Gokarna*

A dispatch from the Malabar Coast, by Iain Manley



*Gokarna is a fishing village growing awkwardly and uncomfortably into a town. It is in this sense an adolescent, unsure of itself in the modern world, but in every other sense Gokarna is old, with a history stretching back into the remotest parts of human memory.*

# Arrival

Gokarna is a village growing awkwardly and uncomfortably into a town. It is in this sense an adolescent, unsure of itself in the modern world, but in every other sense Gokarna is old, with a history that stretches into the remotest parts of human memory. For most of this time, it has been a village of fishermen and farmers with a single distinction: a temple that is believed to contain the soul of Shiva. But India has entered a period of rapid change, and Gokarna is being pulled along with it.

Two thousand years ago, monsoon winds blew Roman trading ships across the Arabian Sea to the nearby port of Muziris, [lost to history until 2006](#), and Indians have encountered foreign ideas and people along the Malabar Coast – the strip of tropical coastline that stretches south from Goa to Kanyakumari, at India's tip – ever since. Christianity found its first Indian converts here in 52 CE. Jews fleeing the destruction of Jerusalem arrived in 70 CE. Islamic merchants brought news of their prophet in the seventh century, and Portugal established its trading posts at points along the Malabar Coast after Europeans first rounded the Cape.

In the late seventeenth century, when British interests in the subcontinent were still confined to a handful of malarial outposts, the Englishman John Fryer travelled south from Goa to Gokarna. [His account of the village](#) is now almost 350 years old, but Fryer's description of its bathing tank – where “all of both Sexes Wash and Present Rice and Mony to the *Brachmins*” – might have been written yesterday. Even the two large wooden temple chariots he describes, “drawn on Wheels, two Stories high, with a Cupulo on the top, which was stuck round full of Streamers of Orient Colours,” are still there, kept in exactly the same position. Gokarna, wrote Fryer, “is of such repute for its Sanctity and Meritoriousness of a Pilgrimage hither, that all sorts of Idolaters, from the remotest parts of India, come in sholes... and we found so many that the Streets were troublesome to crowd through.”

Pilgrims are as common today. Farmers from neighbouring villages, Bangalore fatcats and *sadhus* with bloodshot, drugged-up eyes make their way through its temples to the beach, which they return from dripping wet after a ritual dip. Fryer's “Idolaters” have probably come to Gokarna since India's mythical golden age, thousands of years ago. The village is mentioned in the subcontinent's two most important epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and is considered one of India's holiest places, an equal of [the god Shiva's two other abodes](#), Varanasi on the Ganges and Mount Kailash, in the Himalayas.

Three hundred years after Fryer's visit, another group of people arrived from the

west, as full of new ideas about man and his place in the world as the Christians and Muslims were before them. The hippies started travelling to India in the late sixties. They made their way overland from Istanbul, passed through Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan along [a well-established route](#), and after crossing the Indian border, branched north towards Kathmandu, or south, [to the beaches of Goa](#).

Although the road to the village was still a dirt track, a few made it further down the Malabar Coast to Gokarna. Gokarna had no electricity and no guesthouses. The early arrivals slept on the beach. They picked bananas, bought rice from local farmers and collected drinking water from the spring at the Rama temple. It was exactly the sort of place they were looking for – close to nature, with locals who observed far-out customs and treated them well – and when they returned to San Francisco or London or Berlin, to share stories and swap advice, these hippy vagabonds became [the pioneers of budget travel](#), followed by successive generations of dope heads, dropouts, spiritual seekers, guidebook writers, students and – eventually – Claire and I, happy that we could connect to the internet, eat well and choose between places to stay.

[The Gokarna we arrived in](#) was the seasonal home of itinerant hairdressers, masseuses, yoga teachers and musicians, who advertised their services by pasting notices on restaurant walls. The notices – usually handmade, decorated with coloured pens and wax crayons – informed us of “Maria’s Masala Massage” and the services of Audrey, “a European hairdress (sic)” who could “refresh your haircut” and “beautify your rasta”. Sound massage, reiki, yoga classes and Thai massage competed for attention beside every table. Most didn’t list an address, some not even a telephone number. Hilda, a babysitter, could be found “at the Surya Café from 4-5pm”. Audrey, the hairdresser, was staying at Kudle Beach, but was “flexible to move to Gokarna and to the beaches (Om and Paradise)”.

The tourists in Gokarna’s restaurants conformed to a few easily recognisable types. There were couples over forty – eating awkwardly with limp right hands – accompanied by drivers and occasionally a guide, as well as unwashed British youngsters on a gap year and small families on a cheap beach holiday. But the inheritors of hippy fascination with South India’s beaches were by far the largest group. The women wore rough cotton, cheap bangles and bells around their ankles. They resembled gypsies or, if they had pierced a nostril and chose to wear a veil against South India’s midday sun, the women of Rajasthan, a state in north India from which the Romani emerged about a thousand years ago. The men were more diverse. Some wore white Congress caps, but looked like neither farmers nor politicians, with whom the headgear is normally associated; others imitated *sadhus*, the fantastically

garbed mendicants who travel between India's holy places, cultivating dreadlocks and a peculiar vanity; still others wore a short *dhoti*, like a loin cloth, and not much else. Sitting in a Gokarna restaurant with their children, eating a fruit salad, they looked like Hebrew or German or English speaking primitives, recently emerged from the bush.

Claire and I had come to Gokarna to work. Claire was under pressure to finish the first draft of a book about contemporary Chinese art, begun eighteen months ago in Shanghai. I was working on a project for an ophthalmology clinic, helping to sell [laser eye surgery in China](#) to the West. Allocating a chunk of our travel time to these tasks during the frantic activity of our final weeks in Shanghai, we imagined a quiet place in India's mellow south, where winter nights were cool but days long and hot.

We rented a cottage on a hill just above the village, with two desks and a kitchen, which allowed us to boil drinking water and make tea. It was in the Shastri compound, a few acres of land beside Gokarna's main drag owned by a family of Brahmins. The compound contained a shop at the entrance that sold fabric along with pots, pans and other household goods. Opposite it were doctor's rooms, with an apartment on the two floors above. The Shastri family home, with a few rooms at one side for guests, was between the shop and the clinic. Its front door was left open day and night. Peering in, past a veranda, it looked like a temple, with a shrine on the far wall, surrounded by bare lightbulbs.

Deeper into the compound, at the base of a hill, was a charmless multi-story guesthouse. A white man with a thick Indian accent kept his Tata jeep outside it. He had dreadlocks down to his hips: thick, matted strips, which he wrapped into a crimson turban that looked like scruffy baggage, carried on top of his head. Up a steep rise, through a well-watered coconut plantation, were four cottages and another guesthouse. The area on the hilltop was called the Shastri Resort. It had two ponds inhabited by croaking frogs, an abandoned lookout tower with a deck, which we climbed to watch the sun set over the Arabian Sea, and, near its centre, a fountain with a statue of Shiva on its top that glowed blue at night.

We established a routine of early, work-filled mornings and afternoons on the beach. In the evening, we ate at Sri Sai Restaurant, pausing between mouthfuls to encourage its garrulous manager, Rajeev, to continue telling us about Gokarna, his working life and the protection of his guru, [Sai Baba](#), whose statue sat cross-legged on Raveej's desk, amongst *puja* flowers and ash from incense sticks. After dinner, we filled five litre bottles with water from the Shastri's well and sweated with them up the hill, where the sounds of the ashrams below – tabla drums, Hindu chants and

fervent lectures – drifted up, long into the night.

On our second morning at the Shastri Resort, we were visited by its owner, Dr Shastri. The doctor knew that we were South African. His cousin must have told him after he checked us in, or perhaps he had spoken to Jimmy, the Finnish man who lived in the resort for six months of every year and had, he said, helped to design it. Jimmy dressed like a village Brahmin. He was a Hindu, a convert persuaded to accept the religion by Shiva, who had appeared to him in Sweden long before he started coming to Gokarna. Jimmy performed *puja* every evening at a small shrine in front of his cottage, with white jasmine flowers picked off a nearby tree. Afterwards, he quietly slipped two of the flowers into our door handle. When we thanked him, Jimmy said it was his responsibility to make sure we were *shanti* – at peace.

Dr Shastri normally wore trousers, but up at the resort, on a break from Western medicine, he had a short dhoti wrapped tight around his waist. The doctor wanted Claire and I to tell him about South Africa. His hobby was history, he explained, and with the help of guests and patients he had collected a small library of books about the past. But he didn't know much about Africa, and what he did know he had learnt indirectly, by reading about the British Empire. He invited us to visit him, to browse through his books, and on his way out the door, told us that our cottage was sometimes occupied by a Professor of Religion from Tamil Nadu, who was the author of many books.

The next evening, at nine, I found Dr Shastri reading the Hindustan Times in his office. It was the office of an Indian country doctor: patients sat on plastic chairs, looking at the doctor over a desk with business cards and a price list for basic services – house calls, lab tests, nebulisation – inserted under a glass top. His doctorate hung on the wall, next to a qualification in Ayurvedic medicine that had his full name – Mahabalamurthi Shastri – as well as his father's name printed on it. There was a statue of [a gopi](#) in a corner, underneath a circuit board with antique switches nailed to thick slabs of wood, and a curtain on the patient's side of the desk that led to his examination room, which I rarely saw him use. Patients left their shoes at the clinic's entrance and crowded around the doctor's office door, which was never closed. When I needed to speak to the doctor a few days later – to ask for a new gas canister – he beckoned me into the office during a consultation with an old woman, her adult sons standing pensively beside her, took my empty canister, put it underneath his desk, and returned without a pause to doctoring.

It took Dr Shastri a moment to notice me from behind his paper. When he did, he folded it up and guided me upstairs, to his home above the clinic. It had a small reception room at its entrance, which I carelessly stepped into with my shoes

still on. “It is no problem,” he said when I apologised, “I do not worship in this room.” The doctor’s bookshelf was short but wide, and stacked with familiar names. I saw Jan Morris’s *Pax Britannica* and William Dalrymple’s thick tomes about British incursions into Moghal India. There were books about WWII and the collected works of Shakespeare. It was the bookshelf of an Anglophile, and Dr Shastri turned out to have considerable respect for “the Britishers.”

I used my notebook to sketch a map of South Africa and started explaining what I knew about the country’s pre-colonial history, but Dr Shastri didn’t show much interest in my scribbling. I put down my pen. The doctor told me a story he had read at school, [in a Kannada textbook](#), about a British adventurer in East Africa. The adventurer meets a herbalist with the secret of eternal youth. Understandably sceptical, he convinces the herbalist to treat three volunteers – elderly women who are brought to Africa from the UK. The women spend a lunar month in seclusion with the herbalist. At the end of this time they start menstruating. The adventurer is convinced, and tries to buy and bully out the herbalist’s secret. He fails. Desperate, he takes to stalking the herbalist through the jungle, watching him pick and dig up the ingredients of his cure – but the herbalist understands the jungle; he knows its sounds, and can hear the adventurer crashing through it behind him. He attacks the adventurer with a bow and arrow who, in self defence, shoots and kills the herbalist. With his death, the secret is lost forever.

The story was a perfect allegory, too perfect to be true – but the doctor believed it, and the story was the real source of his interest in Africa. Man, he told me, had come from Africa, and knowledge lost to modernity must still exist there. I know nothing about African medicine and all I could offer the doctor was an introduction to my grandfather, who explored and worked in remote parts of [what was then Rhodesia](#). Instead, I asked him to answer my questions. I was fascinated by the doctor, by his interests and contradictions. He agreed to an interview, and we set a time for the next day. That interview was too short. Patients came and went while we spoke, and his family appeared occasionally, trying to coax him away from his office, where he was kept busy from seven in the morning until nine every night. In the end, I interviewed the doctor three times, and there are still questions scrawled in my notebook that we didn’t ever have time for.

# The Curse

I wanted to ask Dr Shastri questions about three things: about Gokarna, its past and the changes he had witnessed living in it, about his family, Brahmins in one of India's most important temple towns, and about his medical practice, to which he was so devoted. I wrote down my questions under separate headings, and intended to deal with each separately, but when I spoke to the doctor, he jumped from Gokarna's history to his family to medicine. In his mind and life, all three were connected, because the doctor turned out to have an overarching worldview, which to my mind was distinctly Indian.

I went down the hill in the dark the next day, using my torch to make sure of every footstep. Jimmy had seen a cobra on the path a few days before – he considered the encounter auspicious – and a long brown snake had fallen asleep in the sun a few metres from our cottage that afternoon. Occasionally a troop of Rhesus monkeys passed through the coconut plantation, on their way to and from the village, where they stole into shops to scoff handfuls of fruit and vegetables.

My first question for Dr Shastri was about his childhood. "How has the village changed since you were a boy?" I asked.

"When I was born," he replied, giggling at the memory, "it was the beginning of electricity, and definitely for weeks together we didn't have electricity during the rainy season, and the happiest thing is most of the people were honest." The shift from electricity to honesty in the same sentence, without a pause, was a surprise, but I learnt that the material and spiritual always went side-by-side in the doctor's thoughts.

"People were happy-go-lucky," he continued, "and there was no difficulty for two meals a day, so the people were content with whatever they had in their house." Dr Shastri was born in 1970, when Gokarna was emerging from a long period of isolation. For generations it had only been accessible by boat – small, unsteady dingies that still operated between the beaches around the village – but a dirt track had recently been cleared, and a bus service had started running. Its religious festivals were becoming important, attracting people from as far north as Goa, who came to trade, to worship and to be entertained by troupes of travelling actors performing scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. There was only one car in the village.

"One Ambassador car," said the doctor, giggling again, "that was used for all purpose."

"Who owned the car?" I asked.

“There was one family owning the car, but that family was considered quite rich and they never said no to any person who was in need of a car. Travelling by car was not a luxury in those days. It was only for emergencies. If you are sick, the car used to go, and they used to pay the rent after a few months or like that. But it was shared, like a village property.” Telephones were also village property. The post office had one, but if it was closed, private residents allowed anybody to make and receive important calls – including farmers, who had to walk, sometimes for hours, to get to the village.

The doctor was describing [License Raj India](#) – Nehru’s India. Bureaucrats had a stranglehold on the country’s economy, dictating not just the quantity but also the quality of industrial output. There was little private enterprise and almost every good job was a government job. In Gokarna, as elsewhere, the upper castes fared better. The village had long been a centre of Sanskritic learning, where Brahmins taught [the Vedas](#) to their sons and disciples. Lower caste Indians – the farmers and fishermen – were mostly illiterate, even after Independence, partly because provincial governments did a dismal job of providing them with a basic education, but also because they pulled their children out of school as soon as they were strong enough to fish or work in the fields.

The upper castes, with their existing tradition of learning, were the first Indians to attend university, and when the British left, it was the upper castes who took up positions in the civil service as doctors, engineers and lawyers. They got the best jobs, usually in big cities, and rarely came back. Dr Shastri’s family was no exception: his brother lived in Bangalore, his sister in Calcutta. The doctor was sentimental about the old social order. “Even though one family was educated and one family was totally uneducated,” he said, “there was harmony in the village.”

I asked the doctor when tourists had started to arrive in Gokarna. He wasn’t sure – “15, 20, maybe 30 years back,” he said – but he knew that there was just one guest house in 1986, with only four rooms, and he was clear about the effect of tourism on his village. “Tourism, he said plainly, “is a curse for Gokarna,” and he began to explain. “As tourists started coming to Gokarna, the people that benefitted most, economically, were the fisherman and the farmer. Although they got more and more money, they didn’t send their children for education. There were very few government jobs and the private sector wasn’t as advanced as in Europe or the US. Government jobs meant either you have to be a teacher or a policeman or work in customs or the revenue department, or you have to go to a very high job in Delhi. Even if you are learned and work as a teacher, you used to earn two hundred rupees per month. These fisherman and farmers decided ‘Why you go and earn two hundred

rupees per month when you can earn one thousand rupees per month here?’ They worked to attract tourists and sell things to tourists and education didn’t help, and this kind of easy money spoiled the people. With easy money, you don’t get intellectual satisfaction because you didn’t strive intellectually to earn that money, so you go for easy enjoyment, like drinking – and alcoholism has become rampant in Gokarna.”

Like their hippy forerunners, tourists usually bypassed the village and stayed on the beach. The land just behind it was farmland – unusually rich and red, so close to the sea – and the people working the land, who had sold rice to hippy pioneers, built huts and eventually restaurants, competing for the tourists’ business – which grew and grew until the whole of Gokarna’s long brown beach was lined with identical establishments, made of timber frames roped together with coir, supporting roofs and walls made from woven palm leaves. Every place had a name like Zen Café or Shiva Lodge; there was a formula, and nobody had the courage or the imagination to deviate too far from it.

“What do you think about the type of tourists that come to Gokarna?” I asked.

“If you are not annoyed,” he replied, “I say that every year the quality of tourists get lower and lower and lower”

“In what sense?”

“In every sense: in the sense of money, in the sense of honesty, in the sense of humanity. The best example I can give you is when I opened my practice fifteen years ago, I used to treat European patients and I used to charge them one hundred or two hundred rupees. They never used to ask for a bill because they considered the amount too small. Now, they ask me what percentage I would take for producing a fake bill for them to submit to their insurance company or their government.” The doctor laughed ruefully at his example.

“Are there other examples?” I asked.

“As I told you, there are two types of enjoyment: physical enjoyment and intellectual enjoyment. Intellectual enjoyment is the greatest kind of enjoyment, but when you don’t have it, you have to go for physical enjoyment. Either you have to go to prostitutes or you have to take drugs, to have your own dreams.”

“So there’s a drug problem?”

“Oh, this is a big problem. It’s an easy way to get money in Gokarna – the local people offer tourists drugs.”

“What kind of drugs?”

“Cannabis, ketamine...”

“Ketamine!” I was genuinely surprised. There was cannabis in Gokarna –

I'd watched *sadhus* ceremoniously pass a chillum at a beach bar and had smoked a bit myself, when a joint was passed my way at Zen Café – but there was cannabis everywhere in India, and in a handful of states it was sold at licensed government *bhang* shops. I assumed that other hippy drugs were available – acid, magic mushrooms, that sort of thing – but ketamine was different. It is a horse tranquiliser and an anaesthetic; a perfect illustration of the doctor's theory of physical satisfaction. "Yes, ketamine is a bad problem here," he continued. "Chemists sell ketamine to tourists, because they can't get it easily at home. I used to ask chemists, please don't sell ketamine and they agree, but they still sell it."

A week later, Claire and I were offered heroin by a man wandering the beach. It was early afternoon, but the sand farthest from the sea was already too hot to walk on. People with deep tans were splayed on towels laid close to the water, with a lazy eye on their children playing naked in the surf. The man was wearing a ragged dhoti and a dirty shirt. He had a stained rag wrapped around his head; it was the same colour as the whites of his bloodshot eyes. Initially, he offered us Afghani hash. When we declined, he said "black tar" twice, to make sure we had understood, and wandered on.

When I wrote down my questions for Dr Shastri, I thought tourism might help to hold Gokarna's people together. I had come from China, where picturesque villages like Gokarna [were slowly dying](#). Young people left home to take jobs in factories and after a few years in this larger world, many didn't want to return to a life of subsistence farming. Tourism had brought the larger world to Gokarna; there were fewer reasons to leave and although the community might struggle to adjust, it would at least continue to exist. The doctor didn't agree. For him, the community was already dead, or close to it. "It is impossible to believe the people are the same as twenty years ago," he told me, not just because interacting with tourists had made them more materialistic, but also because money had given them access to international media. "People have access on television to what is happening in the United States and Europe, and there are always advertisements stating that in America they have two cars and in the UK they have two cars and Germany is so powerful and you can earn so many rupees and people live such a luxurious life."

The doctor might call tourism a curse, but he was as much a part of Gokarna's struggle with modernity as its farmers and fisherman. His grandfather was an astrologer, his father a village bookkeeper, but Dr Shastri had grown up around tourists. He enjoyed their company. He teased Jimmy about his health and how much he should charge him for small favours. He lent guests books from his library and, at the end of the first interview, when I worried that I was taking up too much

of his time, he said, “this type of conversation I used to do five, six, seven years back. Nowadays most of the people are not at all interested in talking about these type of things, so I am pouring my heart out to you.”

Dr Shastri portrayed tourism as a curse of the lower castes, and there was much in the village to indicate he was right. Girls as young as ten spent their days sitting outside shops on the main drag – shops stocked with chillums, bongos and bohemian clothing – when they should have been at school. They called out to us – “You look my shop! Good price!” – every time we passed. Gokarna’s two wine shops were well stocked and busy. Both had places to sit, where tourists drank beside local businessmen and farmers. The farmers drank alone. They bought half jacks of cheap, colourless whisky, mixed half a glass with an equal measure of water and knocked the whole lot back. They got drunk fast. It was hard for them to adjust their *dhotis* when they stood to leave, and it seemed unlikely that their wiry legs could keep them upright for the entire journey home – but there were equally drunk businessmen and tourists, and they were loud, obnoxious drunks, who shouted over each other or, if they were alone, at nobody in particular.

It seemed more likely that Dr Shastri was only half right. Brahmin families were also susceptible to the temptations of easy money, and there were people that were neither Brahmins nor Kshatriyas – the upper castes – who spent their money wisely. Rajeev at Sri Sai Restaurant was [a Vaishya](#). Work had kept him away from Gokarna for most of his adult life; the restaurant had given him a reason to return. Rajeev was tireless. He opened Sri Sai at nine every morning and closed it at ten every evening, but all through his marathon day Rajeev remained cheerful – annoyingly cheerful when we, with our comfortable routine, allowed ourselves a bad mood. His daughter was a precocious 14 year old with none of her father’s charm. She helped out in the evenings; in the day, she attended Gokarna’s English-medium school. Her English was poor and her service worse, but she liked pestering me from a magisterial seat behind her father’s desk, and especially liked it if I touched the roof. I rarely obliged her, because when I did, she looked at me as if I was a highly intelligent giraffe.

Rajeev’s mother worked in the kitchen at Zen Café, on the beach, and he had put a poster advertising ad-hoc jam sessions at the café – evenings of “folk music and Hindu *bhajans*” – on Sri Sai’s wall. They were hosted by a self-described veteran of Glastonbury’s Avalon stage, who was there, he claimed, when the Isle of Wight first had a music festival. Rajeev encouraged us to go – “the kingfish is very good,” he said, although Sri Sai only served vegetarian food – and on my birthday, we did.

A German with a vast Buddha belly was playing a drinking song when we

arrived. He had a single Brahminical tuft of hair on the crown of his head; it swayed as he sang. A skinny youngster was accompanying the German on a saxophone. His tightly-wrapped belt kept up trousers that must, not long ago, have accommodated a much larger waist. When the song finished, the youngster addressed the whole ragged assembly. "On my last trip," he said, "I lost everything. Money, laptop, everything." The musicians all cackled; empty bottles of rum were piled up around them, and losing everything was obviously hilarious after enough rum. The next song was led by an Israeli with a ukulele. He struck the strings hard and sung wildly, and when I first identified the veteran of Glastonbury, clutching an acoustic guitar with a custom headstock, he was sneering at him with contempt.

There were a few more loud, lively songs. In the intervals the veteran – deeply tanned, with a bandana over his thinning grey hair – softly strummed his guitar. His intimations were ignored. For some reason he took against another Englishman, who also played guitar and was, without doubt, extraordinarily drunk. "Why do you hate me?" he asked the man, and, turning to the group, "Why does he hate me? Ask him why he hates me." His tantrum hushed the café. It was probably calculated to hush the café. The veteran started to strum his guitar again, saying "I'm sorry, I'm just soft," as he did. It seemed as if he might at last play a full song, but a man rolling on the floor with an instrument made from a pool hose had not noticed the lull. He was blowing hard into the pool hose, producing a sound reminiscent of a didgeridoo, and in high excitement he continued, pausing only to execute an occasional somersault across the floor. Every time there was a pause, the veteran would start strumming, but the madman with the pool hose didn't notice. He was oblivious to everything but his own discordant trumpeting and the feeling of beach sand in his hair and on his skin.

This went on for close to ten minutes – strum, trumpet, strum, trumpet – until a friend shook the pool hose player and he reluctantly sat up. The veteran was at last able to play his song. It was John Martyn's Sweet Little Mystery, which he played softly, but also well. Later that night, he played it again. It was the only song he attempted alone, and might have been the only song he knew – but I thought it more likely that he considered himself something of a sweet little mystery.

We were by now sitting at a table with a Gujarati from Elephant and Castle called Mansu. Mansu had spent every winter in Gokarna for the last six years. In the summer, he went to Himachal Pradesh, where he rented a small cottage, grew vegetables and lived quietly. Assuming his arrangements in Gokarna were similar, Claire asked where he was staying. "Right here," he said, pointing down, "at Zen Café." Every night, Mansu waited for the last drinkers to stumble out of the café;

when they did, he covered himself with a mosquito net and went to sleep on a bed that was just moments ago a couch for barefoot strangers that spilled their drinks. He was a beach-bum – a well spoken, intelligent beach-bum, who dressed simply, in rough cotton clothes, and wore his hair a long black ponytail.

I described my interview with Dr Shastri to Mansu. He told us about friends of his, a Brahmin family, who five years ago had called television the idiot box. “That’s exactly what they called it,” he said, “the idiot box.” But recently, when Mansu went to visit them, they had led him proudly into their living room, to see a brand new flat screen TV hanging on the wall. Mansu was circumspect about Gokarna’s creeping materialism. Like the doctor, he thought representations of Western life in advertising and elsewhere were responsible, “but who can blame the people here,” he said. “If you already have smart cars and washing machines, it’s easy to decide that they’re not important, that they won’t make you happy.” Mansu had made this decision himself. He was born in Surat but moved with his parents to London when he was three years old. Emigrating to the West was the dream of many Indians, but Mansu had returned, to live an unassuming, penniless life.

Our conversation turned to the hippy mob all around us. Gokarna was a jumping off point for beaches further south, with names like Om, Half Moon and Paradise. “Everybody we’ve met,” I said to Mansu, “talks about how one beach is better than another because it doesn’t have electricity or because it’s *shanti*. Although they’ve come all the way to India, to a place with such an ancient civilisation, all they can talk about is escaping civilisation – but when they get to the beaches, what do they do? They lie in hammocks stoned, drinking banana smoothies.” Mansu laughed, but said quite seriously, “I think they’re looking for innocence.” “But by being here, they destroy that innocence,” I replied, “and when the locals satisfy their need for accommodation, food, beer, drugs and music, what do the hippies do? They complain that the place has been spoilt. Spoilt by who?” I stopped, surprised by my own vehemence. Mansu paused before replying. “Um, yes,” he said “but I think it’s more complicated than that. When you’re a child, everything is wonderful – unless there’s some trauma in your family. But then, as you grow older, you begin to understand the way things really are, which causes you to suffer...” Mansu trailed off. He didn’t seem sure that Claire and I had followed his explanation. I said I did, and he continued. “Ignorance is bliss, but it’s only temporary bliss, because in time you’ll start to see beyond the simple picture. When you go to a beautiful place, which you feel you’ve discovered, you get one free gift. You can see the people as innocent and share their innocence, but only because you know nothing about them. Then you go back and you find out that this person doesn’t like

that person. You keep going back, to take more from this beautiful place, but you're sucking too much out of it and you become depressed, because you know enough to see it changing."

Mansu was right. I thought that idly and in the abstract the Gokarna hippies wanted a place without other hippies. Perhaps they wanted to be pioneers, but I considered it more likely that they were after a kind of utopia – a perfect place and no place, [in the sense of Thomas More's original pun](#). Mansu's paradox of innocence and experience was more profound and more human. It was also a better explanation for Dr Shastri's discontent. His harmonious village was more concrete. It was rooted in the experiences of his childhood, but just like the hippies, he was probably fooling himself. Money might have robbed Gokarna of its innocence, but there was new knowledge too, even without education.

The hippies wanted a primeval India. The Indians – the farmers and fisherman, and at least a few Brahmins – wanted the hippies' money. It was a wonderful paradox, with rich images that – like all paradoxes, and especially paradoxes discussed when you, like the musicians around you, have drunk too much Old Monk rum – hinted at some great truth. We discussed it long into the night. There was just one interruption, when a Scottish woman with a clear, powerful voice started singing songs by Janis Joplin and Joan Baez. She was consummate, and from her first note made the other musicians seemed like small boys playing make-believe. The saxophonist tried to accompany her for a while, but his show was over. After her second song, he made a performance of breaking down his instrument then stormed out, and was not far gone when the veteran of Glastonbury shouted, "The bastard's stolen my stash!"

Mansu, Claire and I took our conversation as far as it would go. Afterwards, when we could go no deeper, we spoke about the mundane details of our backgrounds and our time in Gokarna – but there wasn't much to say. Claire and I eventually drifted off, to walk through the deserted, moonlit streets back to our home on Dr Shastri's hill.

# The Memory Vault

When I next spoke to Dr Shastri, he was in a black, bitter mood that made him impatient with my questions. His brother in Bangalore had called an hour or two before we sat down; he told the doctor that it now cost Rs. 70,000 per year – about \$1,500 – for his niece to attend a private school. I didn't consider the amount extravagantly high, even by Indian standards, but the news upset Dr Shastri. It distracted him from the topic of my interview – his medical practice – and for an hour he I listened as he described how India's government was failing its people.

The Rs. 70,000 was his starting point. "If students who pay Rs. 70,000 per year are getting an education that a person who is poor cannot afford, even if he is intelligent," then India, he said, would never rise – it would never become a superpower or, in his words, "a big country." He considered it the government's duty "to create equal opportunity. If it fails to do this, then why should there be a government? Let India be an anarchy."

India's government schools are plagued by petty corruption. In Bihar, the state with the lowest level of literacy in the country, [two out of every five teachers](#) didn't report for work in 2004. Bihar's new leadership is [apparently working hard](#) to develop India's most backward state, and teacher absenteeism along with illiteracy are lower elsewhere in India, particularly in the south – but it was not just access to education that bothered Dr Shastri. "The people who go to private schools will," he said, "become doctors or engineers or government officers directing the policy of the country. My brother's daughter has never played with a boy who comes from a very poor family, with torn shirts and unwashed hands, so how can she understand? How can she be a part of India when she has not seen it all? I visit poor people in their homes. When they are sick, when they are not in a position to come to my clinic, I go and see them in their sick bed. I always ask my son to accompany me. I don't say he should go there with a torn shirt or unwashed hands or legs, but he should go and see how they live, and how they are fighting their best to produce something. He needs to remember when he wastes something that these people are not even in a position to afford it. They don't even have a cot to lie down on – they lie on a mattress on an unprepared floor, and their sons and grandsons and granddaughters go to government schools."

It was difficult to interject. The doctor – a small, sometimes bashful man – was speaking with such stridence that when I listened to my recording of the interview, months later, his ragged frustration was still palpable. It was discomfoting too. I

disliked having to listen again and again, while transcribing his words.

I managed to interrupt the doctor to say, “So you think that unless the government can deliver a decent education to people from poor families, then there is no hope.” “There cannot be,” he agreed, “because there is a huge gap. But the people from poor families are the real Indian people and the economic pillars of India – not software engineers. Software engineers are just 5% of the Indian population and if software companies are destroyed I don’t think the common man who fishes the ocean will have no money.”

Dr Shastri’s reference to software engineers was, for me, a concrete reflection of the difference between China’s economic transformation and India’s. China’s new prosperity grew out of cheap, unskilled labour. Its unsentimental government and entrepreneurial knack helped, but it was the migrant workers in China’s factories that gave it a competitive advantage. India’s competitive advantage was skilled labour, sold for a song. It was software engineers and English speaking office workers who were paid a relative pittance – partly because private schooling cost only \$1,500 per year. The boom enriching the educated infuriated Dr Shastri because India’s yawning income gap was not perceptibly narrowing. I had read analyses of the trend [again](#) and [again](#), but sitting in a dilapidated clinic in Gokarna, words that had flickered on my computer screen were at last given substance – and substance, or substantiation, is part of [why I travel](#).

I wasn’t entirely convinced by the doctor’s pessimism. The new prosperity of India’s middle classes must trickle down, especially in urban centres. I put this to the doctor. “Yes,” he responded, “the next generation is running to cities. But what do they do there? They go to the city and they work in a restaurant as a dishwasher. Of course, they’re earning more than what they can here.”

“And they can send that money home,” I broke in, pleased to have at last found a hole in Dr Shastri’s pessimism.

“But they are not getting educated!” he shouted back.

I wasn’t sure I understood his point. “You mean children?” I asked.

“Yes children. 20, 23 years old. Or even 19.”

“Even younger than that. At tea shops you see children who are ten or twelve years old.”

“Yes, ten, twelve years old. They just drop out of school and run to Bangalore, Bombay, Calcutta or whatever – other big cities – and they are selling or doing washing in hotels or other very mean work. Of course they earn money, but it’s a maximum of five thousand rupees per month and out of that they will send two thousand home and the rest they will drink at a bar. They know that even if they try

very hard, they cannot be the boss of the hotel. There may be one or two exceptions – forget about them. In general. That is the reason I am angry. These people can try whatever they like. To earn five thousand rupees they put in twenty hours a day, but still they can't afford to send their children to the same school as my niece." The doctor had rubbished my argument. I suggested he go into politics.

"How can I?" he chortled in response. "I am an honest person."

Dr Shastri might not want to go into politics, but he did offer some solutions. He said that "American private enterprise" had no place in India. "India is different," he explained, "and we have to mould policy to India, not the United States." When I pushed him for examples, he said that the family tradition should be preserved. By this, he meant the system of passing down skills from one generation to the next, so that the son of a village potter would also be a potter – or a sculptor, weaver or painter, depending on the family trade. He also thought there should be a cap on wealth. "You can have a little bit plus or minus," he said, "but not too much on either side." And the rich should, he said, lend money to the poor at low interest rates. If the rich owned unused land, then the poor should have access to that too.

To support his idea, Dr Shastri gave the example of Infosys. [The poster child of outsourcing](#) had bought hundreds of acres of land to build its Bangalore campus. "They gave money," he said, "and took the land from poor people." But Infosys wasn't using the whole area yet, and in the last five years it had built nothing new. "They say that the land is required for the further expansion of the company," said the doctor. "Of course the company needs to expand, but they should have taken the land slowly. It is hundreds of acres of fertile land. They should at least loan the land to farmers, then 50% of the crop can be shared with the Infosys people."

Dr Shastri was preoccupied with the idea of land. It was partly a reaction to rising food prices: India was experiencing an onion crisis because the crop grown in Maharashtra had failed, and the price of the country's small, pungent red onions was skyrocketing – doubling, at one stage, [in the course of a single week](#). It led to absurdist headlines – *Inflation sparks India-Pakistan onion struggle, Rising onion prices give India's ruling party cause to cry* – but a similar crisis in 1998 had cost the BJP its majority and the country's Congress-led coalition was, with good reason, doing its best to appear proactive. It eventually allowed onions from China to cross the border duty free. The grapefruit-sized imports that arrived at Indian markets were a blow to the national ego.

Dr Shastri seemed to believe that if farmers – his economic pillars – were allowed onto all of the country's unused land, there would be far fewer food crises. India would be self-sufficient, and if the government implemented his other ideas,

there would also be a continuation of village crafts and some kind of wealth parity, with nobody owning more than “a little bit plus or minus.” Although he denied the link when I made it, the doctor’s economic principles were [almost exactly the same as Gandhi’s](#). Gandhi believed in the harmonious village and in self-sufficiency. Reduced to sound bites, he thought there was “enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for anybody’s greed,” and that the basis of prosperity was “not mass production, but production by the masses.”

But Dr Shastri also wanted large corporations to involve themselves in what was normally the job of government. He thought Infosys should allow sharecroppers onto its land, making it a sort of feudal landlord as well as a multinational IT company. He praised the Tata Group, which awards scholarships to underprivileged students through its universities and lent experts to the Indian government when there was a skills shortage after Independence. Although the doctor didn’t say it, Tata is a useful example in other ways too, because it is probably the most interesting instance of what he might call Indian private enterprise.

The family-owned company is a behemoth, with subsidiaries in the automotive, steel, media, mining, IT, real estate and power industries, among others, allowing for the surreal possibility of sitting in a Tata built home that you arrived at in a Tata made car, drinking Tata tea or Tata coffee while you talk to a friend on the Tata Indicom mobile phone network and perhaps gaze absently at a show airing on Tata Sky, a satellite television company. The group donates [a reported 66% of its profits to charity](#), and after the 2008 terrorist attacks on Mumbai, which hit the Taj Mahal hotel established by the [founder of the Tata dynasty](#) harder than anywhere else in the city, it kept every member of staff on payroll while repairs were made. It also established a psychiatric institute for victims of the attack, paid an allowance to injured railway employees, policemen, street vendors and pedestrians and even replaced vendors’ carts. The group’s present chairman, Ratan Tata, visited the families of employees who were injured or killed during the attack, flying them to Mumbai in some cases and accommodating them at one of the group’s hotels.

Dr Shastri ran his clinic with a similar sense of social responsibility. The Indian government had recently standardised doctors’ fees. A print-out of the new charges was wedged beneath Dr Shastri’s glass-topped desk – but he rarely referred to it. Instead, he decided on a price he considered fair, which was often much less than the government prescribed one hundred rupees for a consultation or two hundred for a house call. During my third and final interview, when I at last had an opportunity to focus on the doctor’s medical practice, I asked him how he made this decision.

“I started my practice in 1996 and I’ve visited 90 percent of the houses in the

village," he replied. "I know everybody by name and I can see. Just imagine: a boy who was one year old then is now sixteen. I knew him when he used to run around the house without underpants."

With the help of a paediatrician, Dr Shastri had also started an immunisation program. On Friday afternoons, mothers brought squealing children to the clinic, filling the courtyard of the Shastri compound. The program covered 50 percent of the cost of vaccines that were either not part of the Indian government's own immunisation program or not administered to rural children because of corruption and inefficiency.

I asked Dr Shastri why he operated the program.

"I am socially bound," he said, "because I take money from patients."

When he told me that he also paid for six of the nine month course of antibiotics used to treat tuberculosis, if a patient couldn't afford it, I pushed him to explain his motives. At first, his answer was specific. "If I can save one person from tuberculosis, I can save the whole family. The disease spreads like anything."

"But why do you feel such a strong sense of responsibility?" I asked.

"I was a poor student you know. My father is not a rich man. In 1995, he used to earn one thousand rupees per month and with that he had to support four children and an uncle. The family business was still new then. Initially, I didn't think I could be a sole practitioner because of my limited knowledge. I thought I could earn a maximum of three thousand rupees per month."

"Is that what a GP normally earns?"

"Yes. I thought three thousand rupees would be enough for me to have a decent life. But fortunately I have a good practice. I don't need to pay for any assistants and this land is my own – I don't need to pay rent. So, as I said, I'm morally bound. If I was anywhere else, I would have to pay rent. Other doctors might have a receptionist and a nurse, but the only difference is they have more time off. They can go to cinemas or elsewhere, but because these don't really interest me, I save that money. I keep just three thousand rupees per month and I get maybe two thousand extra per month from the land, so I earn what is good money in India."

Dr Shastri essentially capped his own earnings. He spent the remainder on vaccines or medicine for poor patients with tuberculosis, not because he wanted to be charitable, but because his intimate involvement in his patients' lives seemed to instil in him an automatic, almost immutable sense of responsibility. Later in the interview, the doctor spoke about two British surgeons, [John Hunter](#) and [William Harvey](#), whom he considered "dedicated doctors". Both men were anatomists whose discoveries are considered medical breakthroughs, but Dr Shastri used them

as examples of sacrifice. Dr Hunter had, he said, infected himself with syphilis to better understand the disease that eventually killed him, while Dr Harvey cut and catheterised himself to investigate the circulatory system, opening wounds that caused his death. “Compared to these men,” said Dr Shastri, “I am not a dedicated doctor. I am nothing.”

If you walk south from the Shastri compound, past the children in trinket shops imploring you to buy and a family run *mutt*, painted yellow, where Brahmin boys are still taught to read and recite the Vedas, you arrive at an intersection busy with vegetable sellers, stray dogs, buzzing motorbikes and scavenging cows. Straight ahead, the road narrows in the jumble of old houses around Koti Tirtha, Gokarna’s bathing tank. To the right, it widens slightly, and is flanked by the village’s largest shops, where you can buy a wireless data stick at a counter older than the internet, *masala* Maggi noodles, a bus ticket to Bangalore or a brass statue of a Hindu god. The road is metalled and just wide enough for two cars. Follow it for about five hundred metres, towards the beach, and you reach the entrance of Mahabaleshwar Temple, Gokarna’s historical and spiritual centre.

Tourists are not allowed into Mahabaleshwar Temple. I was told that the *swami* who runs the temple introduced the prohibition ten years ago. He is prejudiced against Westerners and – so the story goes – is also trying to force Gokarna’s oldest Brahmin families from the temple’s management. Dr Shastri offered a much simpler explanation. He said that only Hindus could enter Hinduism’s most sacred temples. These holiest of holies are few, but the prohibition is so unswervingly enforced that Jagannath Temple in Puri refused to admit Indira Gandhi. She professed Hinduism and was serving as India’s prime minister, but had married a Parsi – and that transgression was enough.

Mahabaleshwar Temple is counted among Hinduism’s holiest places because a story in the Ramayana places what is perhaps the religion’s most important relic inside its walls. The story begins when Ravana, the epic’s villain, who is both a demon and the earthly king of Lanka, travels to Shiva’s abode high in the Himalayas. He wants the god’s patronage and new supernatural powers, but the bull Nandi, Shiva’s gatekeeper and vehicle, prevents him from ascending Mount Kailash, where Shiva sits in eternal meditation. Ravana throws a tantrum, impertinently lifting Mount Kailash over his head. Roused from contemplation, Shiva pushes down with his little toe, crushing Ravana beneath the mountain.

The million word epic might have ended there, centuries before the birth of its hero Rama, but Ravana cannot be killed by a god. Stuck under the mountain,

he somehow pulls the nerves from his broken body, to pluck like guitar strings in songs praising Shiva. The music drifts up to Kailash's peak for decades and Shiva is eventually so flattered that he frees Ravana and presents him with the Atmalinga – a lingam pulled from inside his heart – with a single warning: Ravana must only let it touch the ground at his destination, where he can properly consecrate it. Ravana stretches the god's generosity by asking for another gift: a wife as beautiful as Uma, Shiva's consort. Claiming that she has no equal, Shiva gives him Uma herself. Ravana triumphantly throws her over his shoulder and leaves, to travel back to Lanka.

The couple's children are appalled and beg Shiva to take the gifts back. He demurs. Shiva says that Vishnu, his only equal in the Hindu pantheon and a colleague of sorts, will sort Ravana out – and Vishnu does, both immediately, by making Uma look like an old crone who Ravana discards, and in the end, when he is born as Rama, the mortal who will kill Ravana with the help of the monkey-god Hanuman.

Vishnu leaves the job of denying Ravana the Atmalinga to Ganesha, Shiva's elephant-headed son. Ganesha lays a simple trap: when Ravana is passing through Gokarna on his way south, he takes the form of a Brahmin child and has the sun-god make dusk appear early. Ravana might be a demon, but he is also devout, and like any Hindu must perform a *puja* at sunset – but unless he finds somewhere to put the Atmalinga, he can't. The arrival of a Brahmin child is a relief. Ravana asks him to hold onto the Atmalinga while he performs his sunset *puja* and, because he's in a hurry, agrees when the child says that he will call three times if he needs to put the heavy lump of rock down. Ravana is immersed in his devotions when Ganesha mutters three quick warnings and drops the Atmalinga. Enraged, Ravana bashes the Brahmin child over the head and tears at the lingam, trying to rip it from the ground. [Its cloth and silver coverings come off](#), but the Atmalinga is immovable, stuck where it still is today – if you, like most Hindus, read the story literally – within the inner sanctum of Mahabaleshwar Temple, which was built around it thousands of years later. There is a Ganesha temple opposite its entrance, with an idol that has short legs and a dented head, as if it too had been bashed down by an angry demon.

Hinduism is not an organised religion and there are [competing versions of the myth](#). In one, Shiva gives Ravana a sword, not the Atmalinga, and there is no mention of Gokarna. Archaeological evidence is scarce too. The Atmalinga, a chunk of moon rock shaped like a crooked wizard's hat, has never been carbon-dated. Even Dr Shastri, who was in other ways devout, questioned the myth. He pointed out that Mahabaleshwar Temple is basic compared to the imposing buildings constructed at India's other holy places. Why, he asked, did India's pious Hindu kings not build a suitably grand structure to house such an important relic?

The point is more or less moot. [Indians still make the pilgrimage to Gokarna](#), just as they did when the Englishman John Fryer visited the village in the seventeenth century. Most never even see the Atmalinga. It is buried up to its tip; a small protuberance remains uncovered, but is immersed in the mixture of water and milk that is used to bathe sacred objects. Pilgrims must feel the rock through the cloudy liquid instead of beholding it. There is a single exception to the rule: once every sixty years or so, at a date determined by Hindu astrologers, it is dug up and left exposed during an important religious festival. It is then reburied and the inner sanctum's floor is retiled, to be dug up by Gokarna's next generation of Brahmins.

The idea of a conscious rock – a rock with an *atma*, or soul – became a way for me to think about Gokarna's past and future. It was a kind of memory vault, which emerged every sixty years to assess a disorienting present, and a way of taking a long view of the village and, by extension, India's progress through time. The Atmalinga was last unearthed when Dr Shastri was a boy, in the late seventies or early eighties. Isolated by its lack of infrastructure, Gokarna was parochial and poor. Sixty years before that, in the 1920s, India was a British colony, experiencing the first stirrings of an independence movement that would mark it as a place apart, a place where a great soul – [a Mahatma](#) – was a better leader than a great general. The Atmalinga was unearthed during or just after [the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857](#), and several times while Gokarna, like most of India, was ruled by Muslim sultans and the great Mughals in Delhi. The period [both enriched Indian culture and destroyed a great deal](#). The Atmalinga played witness to the worst of the destruction. It was dug up within a few years of 1565, when a Muslim army reduced [the sophisticated capital of the Hindu Vijayanagara Empire](#) to ruins, destroying a political entity with borders that encompassed Gokarna. And so the backwards progression went on, until history was conflated by myth. The Atmalinga was never dug up by the same people and has never emerged into a completely familiar world. Viewed like this, in a series of snapshots taken every sixty years, India looked a dynamic but unpredictable place.

It will be roughly 2040 by the time the Atmalinga is next dug up, to once again take stock. At least one thing is certain: pilgrims will be there to behold it, probably in greater numbers than ever before. The rest is obscured by a haze – by thirty years of well over a billion people kicking up dust. A few things seem likely: for the first time, the unearthing will be a twice-in-a-lifetime event, because [India's median life expectancy has risen from 55 in 1980 to 64 in 2009](#). In 1960, it was just 42. The pilgrims will not only be older, they will also be more cosmopolitan, connected to the world beyond India by English, the internet and uncensored news. They will probably be richer too. Most of the pilgrims in Gokarna sleep in over-crowded, shabby guesthouses.

Many bring their own food and, after hurrying through religious rituals, return home on an overcrowded bus. At the moment, pilgrims and foreign tourists are distinct economic groups, but by 2040, that might no longer be true.

What, then, of Dr Shastri's pessimism, of the income gap and the moral degradations of materialism? I often think that I love India because, more than anywhere I have been, it feels timeless. In the turbans, *saris* and *dhotis* that its people still wear and in the gods that they pray to at roadside shrines and grandiose temples, there is an unbroken strand connected to the country's most distant past. Wandering through this with my camera and my tourist's eyes, it is easy to forget that India is actually going through tumultuous, chaotic change, and is the only place where predictions of disastrous collapse and global supremacy must be treated with equal seriousness. It is reassuring to know that tumult is nothing new and that India will probably do a better job of modernising without unnecessarily Westernising than any country that has gone before it. I have no answer for Dr Shastri's pessimism. I am sure that poverty does not make people honest or good, but I don't know what India will look like in 2040 and – while I accept that there are many people more qualified than me to hazard a guess – I don't think that anybody else does either. I doubt even Shiva, sitting atop Mount Kailash in contemplation, or buried in the form of the Atmalinga, beneath Mahabaleshwar Temple, is entirely sure, but I suspect that he – like me – is looking forward to finding out.

*The Curse of Gokarna was first published on 6 June 2011. For more dispatches from the Old World, go to [oldworldwandering.com](http://oldworldwandering.com).*

