

TAJ MAHAL

&
TEA

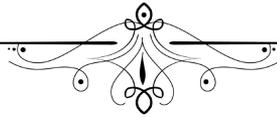
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INSPIRED
PUBLISHING

CHAPTER 1

NAMASTE, INDIA CALLING...



The road to Kashi, India and the greatest adventure that I didn't expect started several years earlier when I decided to start studying Hindi, following a quick business trip to Mumbai. Being in the distribution of films, we had briefly also been handling Bollywood content and I got the opportunity to visit India for the first time in 2008. Being of Portuguese descent and with the surname Rao, which is a common surname that originates in the south of India, I garnered interest wherever I went – “Are you married to an Indian?” – “No”, I would reply. “Is your Father an Indian?” – “No, but I think I have Indian roots on my Grandfather's side” – and that exchange usually broke the ice and made the conversations much more meaningful and productive. On my return I decided that speaking a little Hindi would also be useful since communication is always better when you can communicate in a common language, even if you're not very good at it. So, on my return home, I made enquiries of an Indian journalist friend, who referred me to a teacher who was giving classes

as part of a cultural programme arranged by the Indian Consulate in Johannesburg.

Being already proficient in six languages, I had thought it would be challenging, but doable, but little did I realise that mastering the Sanskrit alphabet would require a rewiring of my brain in ways I hadn't anticipated and the task of learning Hindi turned out to be both exciting and one of the most challenging endeavours I had ever embarked on. It was, however, to prove to be one of the greatest rewards of my life. At the time I reached the senior grades, I was allocated a teacher who was in Johannesburg. She had accompanied her husband from India, who was a Chief Manager with the Bank of India, and had been posted to the territory for three-and-a-half years. She was firm and fair but our initial lessons were challenging as we were trying to get to grips with each other's personalities, as well as, with each other's languages and accents. But it didn't take long for us to find our groove and her patience and guidance helped me to stay the course through the early senior years.

During this period, my parents would commute between Portugal and South Africa and stay with me for extended periods of time as both of them were not in good health. My mother had Alzheimer's and my father several chronic conditions including heart problems, diabetes and prostate cancer. Focused on their care and well-being, I had less time to apply to my Hindi studies and my teacher from India was a true anchor in keeping me going at that time. Whilst I only scraped through in the exams, my enthusiasm for the language and the culture never waned and it was always on my bucket list to return and visit India again one day. The Chief Manager was posted back to India after three-and-a-half years and I was left to finish the final two years of Hindi studies with the assistance of my original Guru. The warm bond of friendship that I had forged

with my Indian teacher continued even after they left and when we spoke (infrequently) she would always extend an invitation to visit and encouraged me to do so as soon as possible. She would say, “There’s free food and accommodation – you just need to pay for the plane ticket. What are you waiting for?”

At the time, my busy work schedule (which also included frequent overseas business travel) and the care of my parents occupied all my time, so a holiday to India was not on the cards for the foreseeable future. In June 2017, my parents returned home to Portugal and moved into a frail care centre owing to their deteriorating health. As November 2017 approached, I also started studying for what was going to be my final Hindi exam (equivalent to Matric) and my dad and I frequently talked about what an achievement it had been to reach this point after 10 years. However, on 3 November 2017, my world changed forever when I got a call that my father had passed away in hospital after the cancer had spread to his lungs and he was not able to recover from a bout of pneumonia. I had always been very close to my father and his passing is to date the single most devastating moment and day of my life.

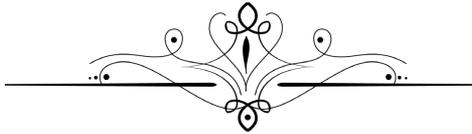
From that day forward, I went into mourning in more ways than one with 2018 passing in a blur of work and frequent overseas trips – both business and personal (to visit my mother in Portugal). Gratefully, her dementia spared her from any memory of my father’s passing. As I worked through my grief, I also focused on finishing the delayed final year Hindi exams, partially because I don’t like to leave things unfinished and partly to honour my father’s memory. As a result, I was also determined to finish a decade of studies on a high and studied like a demon to ensure that this time I would not just scrape through the final exam. I felt my father’s presence throughout this time and three weeks after the first anniversary of his death, I wrote

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and passed my final Hindi exam with flying colours – a distinction and the highest-performing *Kovid* (final year) student in the country!

It was a small light at the end of a dark tunnel and I decided to continue moving towards it and throughout 2019 I volunteered to teach Hindi to other senior students which turned out to be an overwhelmingly rewarding experience. It again brought to the fore the idea of travelling to India. So, as the second anniversary of my father's death approached, I decided that I needed to take a step towards living again not just existing. My father and I had shared a love for life and living it to the fullest. I knew he would have been disappointed if I had not continued to do so. I decided to focus on celebrating this anniversary in a place which would make me happy and also provide me with an opportunity to gain new experiences. Since the date coincided with the Festival of Diwali, which I always wanted to experience first-hand, I decided to finally take my ex-teacher up on her offer to visit India. This turned out to be one of the most pivotal decisions of my life. I had only a few requests – I wanted to plant a tree in honour of my father's memory, since he loved to work in the land and it would be a living memory and legacy. I wanted to visit Kashi (or Varanasi/Banaras as it's also known) and see the Taj Mahal, since I had not gotten around to it in my previous business trips. I also wanted to visit Khajuraho, which I'd seen in photographs and it had interesting architectural designs. Otherwise, the itinerary was in my teacher's hands.

All the arrangements were made in the space of a few weeks and then I was off on what was to be an adventure of selfies, surprises and self-realisation. But that was just the first leg and just four months later, I was back in India, this time celebrating the Festival of Holi in Kashi with friends who had now become family.



SELFIE

Your inner strength is far greater and deeper than you know.

SURPRISES

Not everything has to be planned to the nth degree to work out. Take the first step and you might be surprised where you end up!

SELF-REALISATION

Growth Can Come From Grief

