

EIGHTEEN DAYS IN GEORGIA

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Prelude

I can still recall my habit of looking up names of strange countries in the school atlas. Steeped in their own history and geography, these countries have been around for centuries. But to me they were just an anonymous dot on the map. I was not even aware of how to get to most of them.

After returning from Amazon of Brazil, I set forth for one such unseen country. To Georgia. Unknown countries always fascinated me. Georgia is not only an ancient land but Georgians are also one of the oldest human races in the world. I also remembered reading that remains of Paleolithic men have been found in the Caucasian region, specially in Georgia. It is believed that men had settled along the Black Sea coast of Georgia and along the tributaries of the **Rioni-Kwirila** between 100,000 years and 65,000 years ago. I had a chance to see a few of the pre-historic ruins myself.

Surrounding Georgia on all sides except on the west, is the Caucasus mountain range which also separates this little country from its four neighbours- Russia on the north, **Azerbaijan** on the east, Armenia on the south and Turkey on the south-west. With a long, chequered history of wars won and lost, territories ceded and gained, Georgia's cultural heritage is also an interesting amalgamation of endemic and exotic traits. In 1991, with the break up of the Soviet Union, Georgia regained its status as an independent nation, something she had lost in 1921. I cannot say if this independence will help Georgia economically and socially or the country fared better in its pre-independent days. But what I saw in Georgia left a deep impression on me. People were smiling, they looked happy, they pursued their own language, culture and religion- they were happy being independent. But I also saw signs of great economic depression, the subdued pain hidden within the four walls of houses, dark clouds of uncertainty- the prices Georgia has to pay for gaining independence.

Georgia is hemmed by mountains on three sides and by the Black Sea on the west. The country is smaller than my own state West Bengal, only 69,500 sq km in area and with a population of less than 60 lakhs. Most of the citizens are Georgians with a small section of Abkhazian people. Abkhazins live along the border and have declared self-governance. The Republic of Georgia includes Abkhazia Autonomous Republic, Thouth Osetia Autonomous Republic and Achara Autonomous Republic. You will also find a sprinkling of Armenians, Azeries, Russians, Greeks, Germans, Turks, Kurds, Jews, etc. Although they have been living in Georgia for a very very long time, their population is very small. Jews settled in Georgia as early as 6th century B.C.

Georgia stands like a gateway connecting Asia and Europe, sharing the traits of both continents. Just like women in my country India, Georgian women too wear a shawl over their western dresses. Menswear in almost all countries is now very similar, it is only in the female attire that we can still see traces of traditional wear. The mixed influence of European and Asian cultures is not only seen in their dresses but also in their lifestyle. Unlike in most European countries today, families here are not estranged from each other. Teenagers still prefer to stay with their parents- like in our country- while they pursue studies or are on the look-out for a job. Young girls here do not lead a fast life like their European counterparts. But what impressed me most was Georgian hospitality. In India, we pay much respect to our guests and so does Georgia. On the second day of my visit, Tamaz Tsivtsivadze the Chairman of Writers' Union, raised a toast in my honour saying "You have come from India, the land of ancient civilization and rich philosophy to Georgia, a land that is small but with a rich cultural heritage. You are our honoured guest and we extend a hearty welcome to you. We believe guests arrive from paradise." He spoke in Georgian which was being translated to English for me by my friend Manana Dumbadze. In the beginning, I thought it was the customary, formal greeting. But later I realized that it was an expression from the heart. Georgians are very hospitable, it is like an in-born quality. Not only at capital Tbilisi but wherever I went in Georgia- to her east, west or south- I found the same warm welcome awaiting me. Everybody would come out and first plead with me to stay for one more day. When I said that I had to return to the capital, they would catch hold of my friend Manana and request her, "Please postpone his Tbilisi programme by a day so that he can stay today with us."

The full name of my friend Manana is Manana Dumbadze. I had met her at the International Editors' Conference at Zurich where she had initiated the process of my trip to Georgia. Daughter of famous Georgian writer late Nodar Dumbadze, Manana is herself an accomplished journalist and Fulbright scholar. Late Nodar Dumbadze is an extremely popular writer. After his death, President of Georgia, took the initiative to install a statue of Nodar Dumbadze at the Children's Park. Government funded the project and interestingly, the Park itself had been designed by the famous author himself.

Next year I met Manana again at the World Congress of Newspapers in Rio De Janeiro. I again expressed my likings for Georgia, this time more elaborately. She assured me that all arrangements will be made once I sent her my letter by fax or e-mail.

On my return to Calcutta I wrote the letter expressing my desire to visit my dream country, Georgia to her from Calcutta and soon got a reply-

'Hello Dear Amarendra Chakravorty, I was delighted to receive your letter. As I promised you in Rio, I will do my best to bring you to Georgia, so you could see much of my country and write about us in BHRAMAN.'

I also received an invitation letter from Manana Kartoia, Chief editor of Dilis Gazeti-

The Georgian Daily Newspaper 'Dilis Gazeti' is honored to invite you to Georgia from October 7, 2000 until October 24, 2000 as our invited travel-writer and an editor of a travel magazine BHRAMAN. We highly appreciate your desire to learn more about our country, its people, feel traditions, culture, meet colleagues and write about Georgia in BHRAMAN magazine. We also hope that your visit of Georgia will strengthen cultural links between our countries and expand perspectives of further cultural collaboration.

'Dilis Gazeti' will be responsible for your accommodation, transport, tour guidance, introducing to various people and cultural organizations etc. throughout the country.

While e-mails went back and forth, Manana also informed me that my itinerary was also being drawn up gradually. The Chief Editor of Dilis Gazeti and she had been getting in touch with concerned people and organisations. She apologised for the delay in sending me the plane tickets.

Meanwhile, I got an invitation from World Association of Newspapers and IFRA. They wanted me to attend an international meet in Paris. A couple of months earlier, I had declined the same invitation expressing my tight schedule. But the invitation arrived a second time. This time it was from Bengot Brown, President, World Association of Newspapers and Murdoch Mclenan, President, IFRA.

Since Manana had already informed me about the delay in getting my tickets, I decided to visit Paris for the meet. I informed Manana accordingly and told her that she need not send me a Kolkata-Moscow-Georgia-Moscow-Kolkata ticket. I will go to Paris for 5-6 days and then proceed to Georgia.

On 5 October, I sent an e-mail to Manana from Paris from my friend Dr. Bikash Sanyal's computer. Sanyal is the Adviser of the Director General of UNESCO. I wrote:

My work here is now over. Now I am waiting to see your beautiful country. I will leave Vienna on 8 October and reach Tbilisi at 6.20 pm local time. My flight number is OS 682 (or may be A9 682).

On 6 October, I got my fifth e-mail from Georgia at my Paris address:

Dear Mr Chakravorty

Nice to hear from you.

We are waiting for your arrival. I think your stay in Georgia will be interesting. I planned some trips in the regions and good meetings with writers, journalists and students. You are supposed to talk to them. We'll take you to TV as well and show you to Georgian audience.

You will be my personal guest and stay at my home apartment which will be more comfortable than a hotel room.

I and some people from 'Dilis Gazeti' will meet you at the airport. Your arrival will be covered next day in Monday's issue.

About other events we'll talk on your arrival at home.

Yours

Manana Dumbadze

Guest in Tbilisi

I was to leave for the Georgian capital of Tbilisi on 8 October. I had spent two days attending seminars and workshops at Gressy-en-France. The place was about 15-20 km from Charles De Gaulle airport. I had five to six days to spare before I caught the flight to Georgia. So I spent a couple of days visiting Laon and Soisson. Both are medieval fortress towns and very picturesque. Soisson was the first capital of France.

On 8 October, I caught my flight to Vienna from Charles de Gaulle airport. From Vienna, the flight to Georgia leaves at 12 pm, local time.

I went through check-in and security at Vienna airport and was waiting at the lounge for the announcement of the Tbilisi flight to come through. I noticed that the passengers waiting to catch the same flight looked a little different from others. They had black hair and distinct facial features. I felt I was the only exception here.

I disembarked at Tbilisi airport around 7 pm. A sigh of relief escaped from me. I walked up to the counter marked Police and showed my passport to them. They gave me a form to fill up. The police officer stamped the form and directed me to another counter. I paid 40 US\$ at the second counter and received my visa.

As I turned back from the counter, an employee called out, "Do you have 10 dollars on you?"

'No.'

'Five?'

'No.' I had only 40 US\$ for my visa.

'OK. Please do not mind. Welcome to Georgia. Wish you a nice stay in Georgia.'

I had never heard such a humble request for a bribe.

As I waited to collect my luggage, I wondered if Manana was waiting outside for me. Then I saw her with her team. She was accompanied by a young man, a photographer and a young lady. The young man was holding a baby.

Manana and the other lady welcomed me at the airport with a large painting as a gift. The young lady was a reporter from Tbilisi's daily newspaper Dilis Gazeti. The photographer was also from her office. The young man was Manana's son and the baby her grandson. There was also another gentleman, very well-dressed. Manana introduced him as the chauffeur from Dilis Gazeti. We shook hands. He took up the straps of my trolley-bag and moved towards the car.

Manana opened a newspaper in front of me. There was a half page article in Georgian language that also carried my picture. There were also pictures of my book 'My White Horse' and the cover of 'Bhraman' travel magazine. I could understand the article was on me but could not read a word of it. The script was somewhat similar to our Oriya and Telegu scripts. It was a copy of the Dilis Gazeti.

It was evening by then. We were slowly driving through the town. I could see the houses on both sides of the road, the people passing by. It was as if I was looking up to some very old quarters in my country, there was a strange similarity with places like Chandannagar, Baharampur or Baghazar. The only difference being the presence of some excellent, more than a century old buildings. There was no ostentatious display- no flashy shops or people in festive cheer. Was it because I had arrived on a Sunday?

The neighbourhood surrounding Manana's house was even more quiet. The building was near the main road; it was actually a part of the several blocks of dull, decrepit highrise. There was an unkempt square piece of ground standing like an island in the middle of the highrise buildings. To meet the mundane needs of the residents, there was a shop beside the road that sold a few vegetables and fruits. Further down there was another shop that sold several varieties of fat, cheese, fruits, vegetable, bread, etc. On the opposite of the road was a half-complete highrise. From its immense size, it appears that whoever was building it had grand plans in mind but could not carry it through.

Manana read the query in my eyes and said that it was being built with government funds and work has been stopped for paucity of funds. Those who had paid an advance sum have now been asked to complete the work with their own funds.

I got down in front of Manana's block of flats, went up four flights of stairs and rode the elevator to the fourth floor. As I entered the flat, I was flush with excitement- here I was right in the middle of a Georgian family home. The first note of welcome was accorded by a cat. Hearing it purr slowly, Manana asked if I had any problem with cats? I had to say, of course not.

After crossing a small passage that also acted as the parlour, we entered a spacious living-cum-dining room. Manana almost dragged me to the dining table and said, 'Come. Lets talk while eating. Our Chief Manana Kartoza and her husband were also supposed to join us for dinner but it could not be arranged because of your delayed flight'.

I was welcomed with a bottle of Georgian champagne. Besides the 'Indian Guest', Manana, his son, his grandson, the reporter-photographer duo from Dilis Gazeti and our chauffeur were all present at the table. One had to admire his sartorial tastes. He drove me to all places outside Tbilisi.

The table was heaped with food. Each cooked in the typical Georgian manner. I sampled a few dishes. Observing that I was fiddling with my food, Manana at first tried to draw my attention to the dishes made from mutton, lamb, beef and chicken. Seeing that it did not work, she put some thin stems or something that looked like herbs with roots on my plate. She was sure I would like it, a sort of traditional pickled dish from Georgia. She regretted not being able to serve the famous red wine of Georgia. She was extremely busy over the last few days and had forgotten to buy the wine.

The pickled roots had a tangy taste. A traditionally favourite dish of the Georgians, it had the inscrutable name of 'Jonjoli' and was uncooked tips of sugarcane or some such plant, steeped in vinegar and other ingredients.

The reporter quickly polished off her plate and said, 'I have come to interview you. So if you do not mind, can I start asking you questions rightaway? You can answer while eating. The interview will be published in tomorrow's newspaper.'

Manana was about to prevent her but I agreed.

The questions put to me were difficult and with a philosophical ring to them. My answers were simple, from the depths of my heart and contained my conviction in the humane feelings of mankind. But the constant loud meowing of the cat as it sniffed at the repast and the volley of baby talk directed to me by Manana's grandson forced us to leave the table and continue with the interview in another room.

Next day after Manana was all praises for the interview published in the newspaper, I felt nice too.

Manana's father's name was Nodar. Son's name is also Nodar. I forgot to ask if the grandson was also called Nodar. Both son and grandson calls Manana by her first name. So even though I was staying with a Georgian family, it took me quite a while to learn that in Georgian language, 'mother' is called 'deda' and 'grandmother' is 'bebo' or "bebia". In Georgia, father is 'mama'. But in the Guria village- the birth place of Manana's father and also of Georgian President Shevarnadze- father is 'baba' just like in my own language.

Later I did pick up a few words and phrases of Georgian but as I toured through this tiny but ancient country, I regretted not having a chance to learn the language.

There was an old gun hung across the wall of my bedroom. Guessing my curiosity, Nodar narrated to me in detail the martial history of the Georgians.

Whenever I am in a new country, sleep does not come to me easily or may be I want to stay awake. I leafed through the books on the shelf-most of them were written in Georgian, a few were in English. I looked out of the window and found that most of the flats in the opposite building had no lights shining at their windows. I too retired to bed. Just before falling asleep, I recalled that I had seen neither Manana's husband nor Nodar's wife.

The cry of a hawker woke me up. It was a female voice, a little hesitant and shaky. I could not follow what she was saying but I could sense the pity in her voice.

As I passed from my room to the adjoining empty room to the dining-cum-sitting room to reach the bathroom, I found that my host family was already up and about. Seeing me, Nodar said, 'Gamarjoba'.

It was around 8 am. I guessed it must be the Georgian for Good Morning, Bon Jour, Guten Tag or Buenos Dias. So I also wished a hearty 'Gamarjoba' to all three present.

Quarter of an hour later, we were called to breakfast. We had the same thick bread like last night, jonjoli, butter, cheese, egg and tea or coffee.

We sat at a small table in the kitchen for breakfast. I was informed of my itinerary. Manana would leave for office in another 15 minutes. Nodar and his son would return to their own flat. Then Nodar would come back around 11 am to pick me up in his old car and take me to his house. During lunch hour, he would drop me at Manana's office and go to his own workplace. He was some kind of assistant to a judge in the Supreme Court.

After everybody left for their daily work, I went to the balcony and looked around the neighbourhood. It was a cold, cloudy day. Down below, I spotted a middle-aged lady trying to sell something. Her countenance revealed that she was from a sophisticated family and was not used to hawking on the streets, she looked like a novice. Clutching her cloth-bundle, she was speaking in a mild, shaky voice.

Nobody keeps track of the minute changes that take place in the lives of the ordinary citizens- the sadness, the break-ups, the sense of loss- when there is a political upheaval in the country.

For the first time in my life, after coming to Georgia, I realized that the mountains, rivers and seas were like the frame that held a picture. The people of the country were the picture itself.

Standing at the balcony, I took a good look at the highrises in this block. From the main road, two roads led to Manana's block of buildings. One was to my right and another to my left. On each side of the unkempt courtyard were rows of highrise apartment blocks. Traders were hawking their wares at the foot of the apartment blocks. The people had the looks of being once upon a time middle class citizens.

Manana's son, arrived around eleven a.m. with his Russian car. We went to visit his family home, an old, three storeyed building in an erstwhile well-to-do neighbourhood. With almost the same respect that people have for museums, he took me round his parental home. He showed me each and every room. The old but beautiful furniture used by his grandfather and greatgrandfather, the old stylized cups and saucers, wineglasses, pictures, statues, I saw them all.

From a cupboard, he delicately brought out a commemorative pictograph that the Russian emperor had issued to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon in the hands of Russia. I almost jumped with joy upon spotting a large, bound volume from among the pile of old, worn books. The book was called 'The Knight in the Tiger's Skin'. It was written by Georgia's national poet **Shota Rustaveli**. When I was very small, I remembered reading the English translation of the book. It was called 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin'. I had read only half of the book and did not quite follow it. But the valour and the pain contained in the story moved me a lot; the anxiety and the courage of the beautiful woman greatly influenced the imagination of a rural boy from Bengal. Now I had the original! Right in the middle of the poet's homeland. I had laid my hand on his magnum opus,

translated to English more than a century ago. I borrowed the book from Nodar because as long as I will stay in Georgia, it was to be my companion.

Nodar dropped me and the book at Manana's office. We will be meeting in the evening I hoped. But I was told it would not be possible. Nodar does not stay with his mother. He stays in his father's house. I was really puzzled, how could a son have separate homes for his mother and his father. Then was Manana estranged from her husband?

Nodar's father, that is Manana's first husband, had died in a car accident about 20 years ago. Nodar is very fond of his mother and was delighted to stay in her house- Manana had received the house as a gift from her father Nodar. Dumbadze- but he was also reluctant to sell the house that is so full of his father's memories. Hence the staying apart.

First husband? Then where is her second husband? Usual such family ramifications never bothers me. I may not even notice it after many years of friendship. Sometimes, when I see a picture of a known face- someone with whom I have shared a table or engaged in conversation at the Coffee House- and then hear about his achievements, I realize so this is the person about whom I have heard so much. I also feel happy that I know him.

I had to tell you about this lapse of mine because no sooner than I had solved the mystery of the two houses, I was again deep into another, this time about the two husbands.

Nodar drove away. Manana's office car was stuck somewhere so Manana and I decided to take a walk along the lonely street in search of a place to eat.

We did not have much time in hand. Post lunch, we would be visiting the Nodar Dumbadze Museum on Chavchavadze Avenue in Vake district. From there we would go to the 'Mziuri' Children's Garden.

As we walked, Manana unravelled the 'two-husbands' mystery for me. Her second husband Vadic (Vladimir) has gone to Russia to attend the Tourism Fair. Vadic dreams of travelling across the Silk Route in a balloon. The Silk Route would extend from Japan to Georgia. Vadic had gone to meet the ballooning experts at the Travel Fair in Moscow.

In the end she added- You will like Vadic. He is a sportsman, had a fine job under the Soviets, application of computers in submarines or something like that.

The best place to have a quick lunch is the cafe at the Press House. You had to choose from a set menu comprising of several glass covered dishes and pay accordingly. They would serve it hot. And it was cheap too.

Manana lunches at her office. So we ordered only a meal for me. We ordered a whole fish (in Georgian it is called Siga), a plate of brinjal fry with paprika and bits of garlic, jonjoli and a thick circular Georgian bread. As my eyes fell on the neighbouring tables, I realized that probably I had ordered a little more than the usual. Even then it costed me only three dollars or six Georgian Lari.

After finishing our meal at the Press House Cafe, we strolled down the Rustaveli Avenue till we reached a smaller lane. It was called Perovskaya Street.

It was quite similar to Park Street of Kolkata. It was a street full of restaurants. Restaurants belonging to various countries were located here. There was an Indian restaurant too. But it was the Indian shop that caught my attention. It was more like an exhibition hall than a shop. It was owned by a Georgian female artist. Her age was anything between 60 and 75 years. She was wearing heavy-set Rajasthani, Gujarati and Ladakhi ornaments. She was an old friend of Manana's. Speaking softly in Georgian she said, 'We love India. We are devoted to your country since ages.' Manana translated for me.

She invited me to have a cup of Darjeeling tea. But we had no time to spare. Later, I visited her and enjoyed a nice cup of tea.

Manana took me to Kostava Park. We availed a small eight-seater coach to reach the Park. In Tbilisi, you will find plenty of these coaches, with a uniform of fare half Lari. In Kostava Park, there are two ancient cathedrals standing side by side. One was a Russian Cathedral and the other Georgian. The Russian Cathedral was a plain, white washed building that hurt the eye. But the Georgian Cathedral was old and derelict but its ancient appeal had a soothing effect. But the fine wall paintings inside the Cathedral were all covered with layers of whitewash. Very little was exposed.

There were a few beggars around the Kostava Park. But the manner of their begging belied their positions. They were neither professional beggars nor were used to begging. They were so unused to their task that if you refused to give them anything, some would challenge you, why are you not able to give me a Lari? And still if you turn away your head, they remark, you are a miser.

On seeing an old lady gesticulating and looking up at the sky, muttering to herself, I stopped awhile. I could not understand if she was begging or speaking to herself.

I requested Manana to translate what the old lady was saying. Manana listened carefully and replied in English, "You will be surprised to know what she is saying. She is saying- this is not the Georgia that I had left behind. Georgia you look so different, I cannot even recognize you." Manana also added, "Her words sound like a song to me. But I have never heard such a song before."

Vodka

Most of you have heard about Russian Vodka- its good and bad influences on Russia's social system, the strictures imposed by the government, the incidents and legends woven around it. In Georgia too it is not strange to find a citizen or two reeling under the influence of Vodka. But Georgians, by and large prefer their age-old, very own wine- there is no end to their pride over it.

Manana's mother welcomed me with a glass of Guria Vodka, a drink that was brewed in her native region Guria. Her litterateur husband Nodar Dumbadze was also born at Guria. The last foreign minister of USSR, a person who had helped the union of East and West Germany, the President of independent Georgia, Shevarnadze was also born at Guria. This special kind of Vodka is made

from beehives and only at Guria. It is said that if you take a deep whiff of its aroma, you can smell the beehive.

I took a droplet of the Vodka, equal to a dewdrop, at the tip of my tongue and rolled it over. Nanuli was describing its magical powers, Manana translating it for me. But somehow the Vodka failed to impress me. On the other hand, I was quite impressed by the endearing behaviour and hospitality offered by Manana's mother. It needed no commentary. In the middle of the conversation, she would dart inside and come back with hands full of homemade cake, pastry or a cooked dish.

A large hall in the flat was converted to Nodar Dumbadze Museum. Books, photographs, manuscripts, etc. were nicely arranged to highlight the life-story of the author. To me these were mere artifacts, dry information but to my two companions it meant something much more- it was a part of their living memory.

Nodar (1928-84) is a popular Georgian author. His stories, novels, children's poems, poetry are read in almost every household. His novels have been made into films. He is the only Georgian author to be honoured with the Lenin award.

We do not know anything about the present day poets and writers of Georgia or their works. On the following day, that is 9 October, I met the literary giants of Georgia at the Writers' Union. There were angry writers, poets with a sharp modern wit, famous novelists, poets reflecting the pain of Arkhajar. As Manana continued with her interpretations, I was stricken with remorse- I have not had a chance to read the works of any of the people over here. Even then, just to commemorate my meeting with them, I wrote down the names of a few of them- Rezo Cheishvili, Tamaz Tsvitvadze, Geno Kalandia, Zaur Kalandia, Murman Jguburia, Levan Malazonia.

I also met Niko Kenchosvish here. He was a 'pundit' in Indian literature. After the Chairman's customary welcome speech, Indologist Niko made me jump out of my skin by welcoming me in Hindi. He was waiting to meet me since morning.

The Georgian writers quizzed me about their Indian counterparts and sale of books, the publishing scenario, the place of writers in our society, their economic standards and lots more. It was as if the floodgates were opened and the people were trying to know desperately about life in India, like the people washed by the floodwaters and sheltering on trees and roof tops want to know about the safe houses in other areas. My mind fills up with sorrow.

Later I met more of Georgia's famous poets and writers. Some of them were also shortlisted earlier for nominations for Nobel Prize. After talking to them, I had a deep urge to start a bilingual paper in Georgian and Bengali. We could translate selected Georgian stories and novels and print them. Is it really impossible to provide such a supplementary income to them? Is it an unrealistic thought?

Turkish Border

Next day we went to visit **Akhaltzikhe**, a town in southern Georgia, on the Georgia-Turkey border. It is a 12th century name and means 'new fort'. The town is more than 1500 years old. During 3rd and 4th century AD, it was called Lomsia. About 15-16 km away from Akhaltzikhe is the town of Rustavi, the birth place of the great Georgian poet **Shota Rustaveli**. The house where we were staying was about 15 km north of the Georgian border with Turkey. Akhaltzikhe is a war-ravaged town. Turks invaded it many times. Even though I had no chance to check out the facts, I learned that Temur Lang, Chingiz Khan and others had attacked southern Georgia several times. In Akhalsike, the population is made of Georgians and Armenians. (check spelling of these names in encyclopedia, they are world famous).

Manana and me had left Tbilisi around 1 pm. Our car was being driven by the driver from Dilis Gazeti. We reached Akhalsike in the early evening.

At Akhalsike, we were putting up at the house of Madame Ethery, a 60 year old kindergarten teacher. Her daughter Maya was a veterenarian and also taught biology at school. But the school is not able to pay her salary, they cannot even bear the cost of transport, so treating animals is her only source of a meager income. Maya graduated in 1982 from the Agriculture and Veterinary College at Kirov.

It was almost dark, so we just had a snack and rushed to the Akhaltzikhe Museum. Two young boys from the neighbourhood were waiting for us and we went in their car. Looking around the display of the prehistorical and historical era, we could almost feel the breath of the old civilization on us.

Today's itinerary was so packed that it was more like participating in a sprint competition than touring around a country. I hardly got a few minutes to see a very old village out here. **Khreli** is a very old village. The villagers belong to the same family. Everybody is called Nebadze. I was so delighted to see members from four, may be five generations, that I could not help clicking away with my camera. A man who was picking apples was also part of my photographic campaign. He gave away apples freely to all of us, as much as we could take away in our two hands- to me, to Manana, the two young men, to Maya and Maya's cousin Tina.

Packed inside the car, munching away our apples, we drove to an ancient Safara or Monastery through a forested, hilly pathway. On the way, we met with an old cowherd returning home with his cattle, woodcutters with axes thrown over their shoulders, men and women carrying faggots. Probably they were also Nebadzes.

The condition of the road worsened after Khreli. It seemed as if I was riding an elephant. About six years ago, I was on an elephant safari in Nepal, looking for the one-horned rhino. It was a bone-jarring ride and once I nearly blacked out, hit on the head by a large branch of a tree. But the story and the account of the

bone-jarring elephant ride amused everybody and they broke into peals of laughter.

People in Georgia are very religious too. They belong to the Orthodox Christian Church. The earlier monarchs had build many churches and monasteries.

Bekha Jakeli, the highly religious landlord of Akhaltsikhe, established the Safara in the tenth century. It is spread over an extensive hill top and tucked inside a series of caves. The evening arrives late in the mountains than in the village. It was just beginning to get dark when we came across two bearded monks. They were returning to the caves. One of them walked away but another one stopped in front of us. Manana spoke to him in Georgian about me to which he also replied in Georgian. Manana translated for me- the monk was saying that he needed people like me. Looking at me, he added with a soft smile- religion needs people like you.

Manana replied, he has his own religion. The monk smiled and said, he is without religion. People like him need to be baptized. Shall we? The last part of the question was addressed to me. Even without Manana translating it for me, I could understand it by looking at his deep and cordial expression.

Standing near the desolate Georgia-Turkey border, surrounded by pristine forested hills, far away from the social ties that bind a man, the words of the unknown monk created a strange feeling- how about turning into a monk and stay on permanently in this surrounding.

The only saving grace was that such fleeting visions often rise up like a bubble and then disappear like it too.

Three of us had driven over from Tbilisi, now we were joined by three more. The young man was called Mindia. The other two were girls. Later on I realized that Manana and her staff had come to Akhalsike on official work and had brought me along too.

We put up at Maya's mother, Ethery's house. Two or three people were assigned to a room. But I got a room all to myself. After breaking away from the Soviet Unions Georgia is going through a number of problems of which power failure is one. There is no power supply to Akhaltsikhe during day. In the evening, power supply is resumed around 8 pm.

We returned before 8 pm and sat round the dining table, chatting. Tina had lighted two candles. A candle was kept in front of the bathroom. Buckets, bath-tubs, water-drums, etc. have been used to stock water. Despite my loud protestations, Tina would come up and pour water on my hands everytime I soaped them. Mean while, Maya and Tina had laid out dinner for us. Maya's mother had first sent in the soup and then arranged the other dishes. Mindia was probably well acquainted with them. Despite the darkness, Mindia brought two bottles of wine and poured it into everybody's glass. Tina walks softly. It was difficult to keep a track of the number of times she shuttled between the table and the kitchen to satisfy all the needs of her guests.

Georgians also partake of a dish that is somewhat similar to Tibetan momos. It looks like the 'sandesh' made in Bengal with a filling of pork. It can be bought easily in the markets. One had to simply boil them at home. Tina, put down two plates of this Georgian momo on our table and asked if we would take tea or coffee?

Tina's house was at Borjomi. We had crossed Borjomi on our way to Akhaltsikhe. The mineral water of Borjomi is very famous. It is bottled and sold under the same name. Probably because Tina came from the same place, she gushed merrily about the water's usefulness. She even added that if anybody imbibes too much alcohol, he is made to drink bottles of Borjomi to counter the ill-effects.

Tina caught me pouring out a glass of Borjomi to have my sleeping pills. In a warning tone she added that one must not take any kind of medicine with mineral water. Medicines contain various chemicals in a fixed dose. Mineral water too contains a number of chemicals. She had learned it all from a professor at the University.

Tina is studying Law at the government-run University. She is in her final year and will graduate in a year from now. Her parents live at Borjomi. The Borjomi National Park is behind their house. The mineral water springs lie within the forest.

Borjomi is 60 km away from Akhalsike. But according to Tina, the two places are very different from each other. They speak the same language but pronunciations are different. Borjomi is much cooler than Akhalsikhe. In Georgian 'Tina' would be pronounced as 'Theena'. Her mother calls her 'Thato'. Tina's mother is also called Manana.

Power resumed around 9.30 pm. The Georgia-Italy match of the World Cup Football was being shown on television. A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to see France-Brazil World Cup Match along with a French family at Lovaloya in France. France had won the World Cup that year by defeating Brazil 3-0. My hostess was sure that it was my presence that had proved lucky for France. But in Akhalsikhe, Italy scored the first goal of the match in my presence. So I went off to sleep. Next morning, I heard that Georgia had lost the match 0-2. The only consolation was that Italy had scored both goals through penalty kicks.

A little later, two young men joined us. One was Tina's brother, the other introduced himself as Tina's brother-in-law. Hearing him, Tina remarked, 'he must be crazy, he is my cousin.'

Later, I learned that this self-declared brother-in-law of Tina had actually vacated his room for me and was staying with a friend. Manana told me that whenever they come to Akhalsikhe on duty, they put up at the Ethery's House as a paying guest.

Entrusting Maya and Tina with the task of taking me around the place Manana, Mindia and others left for work. We decided to make a walking tour of

the place. It was also decided that Manana and the others would return after lunch and they would take me to a lovely hill-top place. (But ultimately I could not go there and also forgot to take down the name).

I was strolling around the marketplace at Akhalsike. Everybody I met came forward and took me by the hand. Someone gave me a pot of thick honey, someone else gave me a bunch of grapes. Others gave me radish, carrots and turnips.

Maya let me on to a little secret. Just like in erstwhile Soviet Union, at Georgia too people were fond of Indian filmstar Raj Kapoor. They were quite familiar with his films. I had come from Raj Kapoor's country, probably the first Indian visitor to independent Georgia. So it was quite natural that everybody welcomed me.

Radish, cabbages, banana were heaped on us as gifts. It was impossible to hold so many items in our cupped hands. At last, Maya managed to get a big plastic bag and when anybody offered us anything as a gift, she would hold out the bag.

This was followed by a lengthy discussion on what and where to eat. It was decided that we would have a light meal at a wayside cafe. After choosing our seats in a cafe, Maya asked me in Georgian (Tina translating it into English) if I liked **Hachapuri**? A very popular dish in Georgia, Hachapuris come in various ways. I know of four different kinds. The main ingredients of Hachapuri are butter and cheese. Shaped like a brick, the 'parathas' are fried in butter and layered with thick cheese. There are several layer of cheese and paratha in one Hachapuri. It was quite frightening for me. There were some Hachapuris shaped like a boat. Seeing me hesitate, Tina translated a few of the other items on the menu. I chose a 'paratha'-like dish without any cheese and butter. Maya had meanwhile gone off somewhere with the bag full of gifted goodies. Now she came back with the proprietress of the cafe. She had neatly cut the carrots, radish and turnips and brought them over in a plate. The fresh appearance of the vegetables was really very heartening.

Conversation flowed easily. Maya spoke little, Tina was the main speaker.

While Maya was a student of veterinary medicine, she fell in love with a senior medical student, a Russian. The Russian doctor earned a gold medal and set his heart on becoming a highly successful professional. Their marriage was being constantly postponed. Meanwhile, Maya completed her studies and returned home. At last, after many tries, when Maya and her Russian doctor fixed a date for their marriage, Georgia broke away from Russia. Maya was forced to stay back in her homeland. The Russian doctor was also unwilling to leave his country. Tina added, you have seen the doctor's picture yesterday. I recalled that last night, before dinner, Maya had shown me an album by candlelight that contained pictures of herself and the doctor.

Maya and Tina will lunch at home. We had dropped in at the cafe for me to have lunch.

Soon the 'paratha' without cheese and butter arrived. I ran the knife through it. Some kind of liquid spilled from within it. Was it melted butter? Tina consoled me by saying it was lard (fat of cow) sealed inside the bread. Without expressing any kind of doubt about the excellence of the taste, I replied that the people in the market had lovingly gifted us with so many fruits and vegetables and it would be wrong to throw them away. And after I have had the vegetables it would not be possible to eat the lard-filled bread. So I happily feasted on the carrots, radish, turnips, etc. After that Maya went in search of Manana while Tina began to roam the streets and park of the town with me.

In the street, I noticed young girls staring at Tina- some straightaway, some with a sidelong glance. I asked the reason for it. She replied quickly- they are looking at you and not me, my dear.

We caught up with Manana at the appointed place. The condition of the road to the hill top was very bad and so the plan to go there was abandoned. Instead, a grand dinner was being organised at a famous restaurant in Akhaltsikhe.

I was once again reinstated in the car while Maya and Tina returned home. Tina, before going home, added, 'please return while there is daylight, I want to have a few photographs taken of us.'

'I have taken a few pictures of yours. Wait a minute, I will take another one.' 'I want it with you.' 'I have spoken to Mindia. He is a photographer, he will do it.' 'I will go home and change my dress. I want a photograph in that dress.'

Here, sometimes, dinner gets over while there is some daylight left. So I assured Tina about coming back on time.

Yesterday when we had arrived it was decided that we would only stay overnight. I was to deliver a speech at the Tbilisi Technical University the following day. This morning Manana had said that it won't be possible to return today and the return trip was being postponed. We would start early next morning and drive straight to the Technical University.

It was not quite dark when we reached the house. On the way, we had decided to return to Tbilisi immediately. So I packed my bag and prepared to leave. But I could not find Tina anywhere. As I came down the stairs, I found Tina attired in a beautiful dress and standing in front of the house. It was dusk. Manana wanted me to hurry up. We had a long way to go.

Suddenly Ethery came and said, "You are not going today, you have to stay for two more days." Manana told her that I had a packed schedule at Tbilisi for the next two days, Ethery replied, "You go ahead and postpone them for two days."

Tina too smiled sweetly and added, 'you stay on. I will tell you the history of Akhaltsikhe.'

Even I wanted to stay on but what was Manana's opinion on the issue? Manana was absolutely against my staying on. More people had called up Manana on her cellphone and requested an appointment with me. Manana had already promised them. There was no way Manana could go back on her word.

Just as I was getting inside the car, Maya ran to me with a paper-wrapped object in her hand. She offered it to me saying- this is a gift from us. Then she showed me a costly royal edition of the epic of Rustaveli in Georgian and said that I will be very happy if you take this with you.

But the book was in Georgian language and I did not take it. I unwrapped the gift and found a beautifully carved silver spoon. Georgians always gift their important guests with such silver spoons, Manana informed me. It was an old tradition here.

Salt from Ukraine

Manana's husband Vadik was waiting for us at home. He opened the door for us, hugged and kissed Manana, then hugged and kissed me on one cheek. Unlike European custom where you kissed both cheeks, it was usual to kiss you on one cheek. I too kissed Vadik on one of his creased cheeks. Vadik had returned from Russia that very day. It is his dream to ride a hot air balloon along the Silk Route. He had gone to a tourism fair in Russia to know the nitty-gritties of ballooning.

Vadik spread out a large map over the dinner table and eagerly explained the route of his dream expedition. About five or six years ago, my friend, our award-winning film director, a famous cinematographer, Gautam Ghose too, had taken part in a difficult trek along the Silk Route in Central Asia. Ghose's experience and pictures were published in our 'Bhraman' magazine. The five-hour documentary was shown on the Discovery Channel. So I was easily able to immerse myself in Vadik's enthusiasm.

In a way, it was good for me. Because dinner consisted of the first evening's leftovers although the quantity was not small. So I had no way but to chew on 'Jonjoli'.

My plight did not escape my hostess. But now late at night and with everybody so tired, there was little that she could do.

Probably to compensate for last night's dinner, Manana made a stuffed omelette for me with onion, tomato and cheese and served it with Georgian bread. She said that she had made the omelette with the special salt that Vadik had brought from Ukraine. I was quite hungry and so took a bite. But the Ukrainian salt tasted more like grit than anything else. Quite a special variety, no doubt about it. Probably very good for Manana's high blood pressure. Never before had I read about or tasted such a special kind of salt.

I am not sure exactly how my face had contorted but Manana took one look at me, picked up a piece of the omelette with her fork and put it in her mouth. Within a trice, she rushed over to the sink, spat it out and rinsed her face. 'Are you crazy? You have been quietly chewing the sand filled omellete?' she remarked.

She hollered at Vadik too- why did you bring this bottle full of sand from Ukraine?

Vadik was not disturbed at all. He said that while he was boarding the train at Kiev, his elder brother had come to say goodbye. Vadik had heard him saying that it was salt. Then how can it be sand? Why on earth would his elder brother give him a bottle of sand? It could not be anything but salt.

Manana poured out the entire content of the bottle on her table- it was nothing but sand.

Manana was getting late for office. The driver had already called on her cellphone to say that he had arrived. So Manana apologised for the mixup and ordered Vadik not only to show me around Tbilisi but also to take me to lunch at a good restaurant. Turning to me, she said- Vadik's homeland in Ukraine but he knows more about Georgia than I do. He is also a very good guide.

Vadik spent the whole afternoon showing me around Tbilisi's many attractions. We started off with a visit to a Georgian shop where I had my fill of a sweet Georgian drink. I was also quite impressed by the mosaic across the ceiling and walls of the shop as well as the smiling countenance of the saleswoman.

Didi Madloba

The full name of Manana's husband is Vladimir Malovichko- in Russian, Vadik for short and in Georgian Vajik. Just like a professional guide, he took me around the town, told me about the good and bad times faced by the town during the Soviet rule.

We rounded up our city sightseeing tour with a visit to the local market. Once again my Indian-ness was a cause for rejoicing. The shopkeepers dipped their knives in honey and smeared it in my palm for me to taste. Some rolled cheese and sausage inside breads and offered it to me. I had successfully resisted the shopkeepers at Akhaltsikhe but here I had to give in to their requests. I had to pour out honey on bread and eat it. I had never tasted such wonderful honey (along with honeycombs) before. I had no idea that one could also eat the honeycombs! By the time I was through, I was so full that Manana's instructions to Vajik about taking me to a good restaurant had to be disobeyed.

Almost everybody I met there said- Nobody comes here from India, please come to Georgia again and again. They referred to their own country as **Sakartvelo**.

Madloba, didi madloba. Nakhvamdis! (Thanks, many thanks! Goodbye).

Even though the words had been memorised, sincere feelings welled from my heart.

From my travels at home and abroad, I have found that in countries where agriculture and livestock rearing are the main occupations, the people speak straight from their heart.

What are the three things that I would always want to remain unblemished in this world? The green forest, the blue sky and the heart of gold. That was my answer to a question from the students of the Tbilisi Technical University.

My lecture of the day and the post-lecture question-answers were published in the following day's Georgian newspaper. Manana translated it for me in English. I was really surprised with my own speech, not the content but with the length of it.

I wondered how I was able to talk at such a length. Probably I was encouraged by the presence of the large crowd and their appreciation. The audience had broken into a loud applause as I began my speech with the words, 'Megobrebo, Gamarjoba!' (Friends, victory to you all!). The newspaper had quoted me almost verbatim. In the introduction they wrote that 'this Indian author cum journalist cum traveller was roaming in the jungles of Amazon sometime ago. Now he is in Georgia, going round our country and its many attractions to learn more about our culture, tradition and society. We have spoken to him about various issues concerning Georgia and India. Manana Dumbadze working was the interpreter.

The couple of hours long lecture session was followed by an interactive question-answer session. Literature, politics, religion, Kargil, Pokhran, our bachelor Prime Minister- almost any topic under the sun was discussed here. In the couple of hours involving the interactive session, there was one particular question that haunted me- in this hour of crisis, how will the Georgian youth preserve their own literature, tradition and culture?

The words that I could not say aloud in my own country now popped out of my mouth in Georgia- 'through powers gained from your dreams and determination.' I could hear myself saying- 'is there any country in the world where there is no problem? is there any age where there was no crisis? Keep nurturing your dreams around Sakartvelo and cling to your tradition, you are sure to find your roots again someday.'

My lecture session and the question-answer session were also shown on television.

Such undue publicity in a foreign land made me feel more thrilled than hesitant. Throughout my entire Georgian trip, I received much publicity through news and interviews of mine published in newspapers or broadcast over television. Guests are always treated with high respect here.

Rezo's Grandmother's house

Dramatist **Rezo Cldiashvsvili** had arranged for the lecture at the University. It would be difficult to find such a genuine philanthropist today. We became fast friends in two days. On the first day, Manana acted as our interpreter and on the second day it was the turn of Rezo's English-knowing daughter.

Rezo took me out to see Tbilisi on two days- first day by taxi, second day in a friend's car. This year, the annual Tbilisi Festival or the Tbilisoba was to be held on 29 October. It is held on the last Sunday of October. But I would be leaving Tbilisi on 27 October. So Rezo took me to an area of the city that looked more like a village. This is where the Tbilisi Festival is held. Georgian household with their

regional characteristics were built here. Rezo took me to his grandmother's house that she built in keeping with the region she belonged to. Gigantic earthen vessels, scattered over the courtyard, were partly sunk in the ground. These were traditionally used to make wine in their village. An old wooden bowl in which grapes used to be pressed for juice was also lying in a corner.

I was very delighted to find such a big, rural area in a corner of the capital city that was a miniature version of the entire nation.

Rezo and I went up a worn-out flight of stairs and entered a damp room in the dilapidated house. It was here that Rezo opened his heart to me. He was very keen to renovate the house within the next two years and then organise a literary meet here. He would bring together Georgia's poets, authors and dramatists at this meet. He requested me to attend it too. Then I would have to stay for at least two weeks.

Meanwhile, a young boy and a girl from a television channel came to take my interview. Probably Rezo had asked them to. Rezo also took a few photographs of mine. There were a few interesting collages on the wall done by Rezo. He had used plenty of photographs of two to three famous people to make the collage. His daughter translated for me- Rezo will also use my photograph in the collage. Somehow I did not like the idea at all. But Rezo does not understand a word of English and I did not want to disappoint him by asking his daughter to translate my dislike.

Manana acted as my interpreter during the interviews over television. Throughout my stay in Georgia I was really lucky to have someone as famous as Manana offering to be my interpreter at all the meetings, interviews, parties and discussions. Without her as my interpreter, I could have never ventured so deeply into the Georgian society.

Soon after the television interview was over, Manana left in a hurry to attend to some other important work. So Rezo took me to visit the mixed neighbourhood of Jews and Turks in old Tbilisi. I went down flight of stairs and took a look at a Turkish bath or 'hamam'. Rezo was well known to people working at the 'hamam'. Learning that I was an Indian, they asked Rezo if I was interested in taking a bath. Rezo looked at me and the woman repeated the question to me in broken English. It is not that I was unwilling to try this ancient Turkish bath but somehow the anonymity of the surrounding did not quite encourage me.

Rezo then took me to a small two-storeyed building nearby. It was a very old building. The interior looked quite strange too. Puppets were stuck on the walls of the small room and the passage. Carefully, without hurting our heads, we climbed the stairs to reach a moderately sized room. Inside the room, there were some old stools on one side, a stage like projection in front and a bank of lights along the wall. Some people were repairing the lights. Rezo introduced me to a lanky person and said something in Georgian. The lanky gentleman explained to me in English- he was a friend of Rezo, a director and owner of this mini theatre

hall. They only host new, experimental theatres here. But such theatres are few and far between. Hence the theatre hall is often rented out for television shootings for the sake of upkeep.

They would be staging a home production next Saturday. After that, they would stage a new play written by Rezo. They had a TV shoot that evening. Hence the lights were being repaired. May be such a small place was adequate for a television shooting but how they managed to stage a play was beyond my comprehension.

Rezo once again let out a burst of Georgian. He was saying something about me because I could make out my name and the word **Indoeli** (meaning 'Indian').

Hearing the introduction, the gentleman came across and gave me a big hug. He asked- how is Vijay Tendulkar? I was really happy to find that people in far away Georgia were acquainted with the name of a modern Indian dramatist. I told him that Tendulkar had won the Saraswati Award a couple of years ago.

Raj Kapoor vs Rabindranath

When Rezo and I returned to Manana's flat in the evening, Manana had not returned. Rezo knew that the keys were kept with the people staying in the flat opposite Manana's. The door opened as soon as he rung the bell. A little boy invited us to go inside. Seeing me hesitate, a woman- probably the boy's mother- came and asked us to go in. As we were crossing a narrow passage and going towards the drawing room, a good looking old gentlemen offered me an effusive welcome. Meanwhile, the boy's mother had quickly cleared the table of the boy's school books.

Everywhere in Georgia, I had seen that mentioning the name of Raj Kapoor breaks the ice. People's faces light up with recognition as soon as I say the magic words. Sitting quietly in front of this unknown gentleman, I blurted out, have you seen Raj Kapoor?

The old gentleman almost shot out of his seat and disappeared inside. He returned with several bound volumes of books. On the cover of every volume was written 'Tagore'. His body language itself explained to me what India meant to him.

Trying to get out of the situation, I said that since Raj Kapoor is so popular here that I spoke about him. Otherwise, educated Bengalis were not very keen followers of commercial Hindi films. The gentleman's teenage daughter was slowly interpreting for me in English.

I was relieved to find Manana coming into the room. She spoke to me in a loud voice- 'thank God I was late. Do you know who he is? Taniel Chanturia- a very powerful poet. You can say that he is one of the best of the living poets of Georgia. The poem that so moved you a few days ago was written by him. I was hoping to introduce you to him.'

The word 'Tariel' immediately reminded me that in the epic poem written by Rustaveli, the national poet of Georgia, there was also a character by the same name.

The name of the poem was also interesting- A Disappointed Thought- there were about 50 lines in the poem and the first four lines were lilting enough to be remembered easily-

A poem needs a heart

A poem needs a liver

A poem needs a tear

And plenty of your blood.

I tried my best to answer Tariel's sharp-witted questions about Bengali poem, poets of Bengal and the new genres of poetry writing in my country. After hearing me out, Tariel asked if I could send him about 500 lines of new poetry? He would translate the same into Georgian. It would be the first Bengali book of poems translated into Georgian, he said.

The lady who had invited us to come inside was the poet's daughter-in-law. Later, I found her dropping by at Manana's flat after supper for a cigarette.

We took leave of the poet's family after having a cup of tea.

On the morrow, we would be leaving for Georgia's old capital Mtskheta to see the locally organised Mtskhetoba or Mtskheta Festival. 'Dilis Gazeti' was not only sponsoring my visit but would also host a dinner in my honour at the house of a local correspondent.

White River and Black River

It was decided that we would leave at 8 am tomorrow. If we did not cross the police checkpost by 9 am we would not be allowed to take our car right up to the festival ground. In that case we would have to walk a long distance. It is a very popular festival and a large crowd gathers to see it.

Next day, I woke up to find that it was raining. The sky was dark and everything felt damp. I opened the window a wee bit even without getting out of the bed and was immediately hit on the face by a burst of spray. It was around quarter to eight in the morning. Would we make it to the Mtskheta Festival in this weather?

On my way to the bathroom, I came across Vajik. He had just come back from his morning jog and was cleaning his shoes of mud. Everyday he goes jogging in a vast open ground just below the hill. I also accompanied him everyday. But I had informed him that I would not be going today. According to Vajik, that mountain is not part of the Caucasus range, not even Little Caucasus. This piece of information has also lessened my interest in the morning walk. Manana claimed that it was a part of the Caucasus range and then added, 'although Vajik is Russian, no, Ukrainian, his knowledge of Georgian geography is far better than mine.'

Through the wide open door in front I caught a glimpse of Manana in deep slumber. The weather was foul and my hostess was not up yet even though it was time to leave. With a twinkle in his eye, Vajik muttered an old proverb in Russian. It meant that in such a foul weather, one must begin the day with vodka, end it with vodka and in between drink more vodka. So I was pretty sure that we were not leaving for anywhere and went back to sleep.

Hardly ten minutes had passed and I was just going back to sleep when I heard Manana calling me in a loud voice. I jumped out of bed and found Manana scowling at me, 'why aren't you ready?'

I saw that it was exactly 8 am by my watch. Manana was fully dressed and ready to leave.

It was because of me that we made a delayed start. Vajik would not come with us because he had 'very many works' to attend. I wanted to request him to join us but Manana added sarcastically,- 'don't you know that he has to attend 'very many' works everyday? Even on the day of Mtskhetoba- dont you know he has to work even when others are enjoying a holiday?'

The escalator was out of operation, so as we climbed down the stairs, Manana said,- last year he was bent on making an aquarium for the park at Tbilisi. Now it is the world tour by balloon!

A balloon expedition along the Silk Route may sound like a crazy idea but it is a big dream of Vajik's. It is his life's mission now. He has also solicited help from the President of the country to make his dream come true. President has asked his ministers to consider the plea with due importance. Vajik has shown me the President's comments and signature on the request letter. He has also made Manana translate it. Vajik used to pour his heart out to me regarding the expedition. I had to promise him that I would also travel with him for part of the journey.

Manana's fears came true. After a little while police stopped our car from going further. But we would have to walk quite a distance. So we turned into a side street and first went to a place called Jvari. At probably 12,000 feet. There is an old church here. The place is very windy and so cold that I felt chilled to the bones. In my hurry to get ready, I had not put on much warm clothes. Manana was very embarrassed to see me shivering. She herself was dressed from head to toe. The car kept on climbing uphill till at last we reached the 6th century church.

We entered through a huge wooden door. I was glad to escape into the warmth of the church. While Manana, the reporter from Daily Gazette and our driver joined the congregation for prayer, I went around the church admiring the paintings on the walls, ceiling and the floor.

Outside, I was once again at the mercy of the cold and the wind. We walked up to a guard railed spot higher up. Down below we could see two rivers coming from two different directions to join a third river. The rivers were called Tetri (white) Aragri, Shavi (black) Aragri and Mtkvari ('Kura' in Turkish). 'Aragri' means 'river'. The Kura River originates from Turkey, flows through Georgia and

Azerbaijan to join the Caspian Sea. About three months ago, I had seen the rivers Negro (black) and Solimois (yellow) join the Amazon river and now it was the white and black rivers in Georgia.

Mtskheta Festival

We had a long drive from Jvari to Mtskheta. But once more the police stopped us from going ahead. They were very, very strict and we could also see people streaming by. While we were in two minds- whether to go back or to walk on- and Manana was busy conversing with the policemen on duty- our shaven-headed photographer got down from the car, walked up to a police officer and said something in his ears. The officer took a look inside the car and waved us to continue ahead. We were at a loss. Later, we learned that he let us go after seeing for himself that Manana Dumbadze, daughter of Nodar Dumbadze was really travelling in the car. The love and respect shown to a litterateur by the Georgian people also upped my respect for them.

At Mtskheta, a huge crowd was making its way towards the Cathedral. We could hardly move an inch, let alone walk forward. The President had come down to attend the festival but even his progress was slow. The procession was moving at a snail's pace. Every minute I felt that the people would start pushing each other. Beggars, candle-sellers and vendors selling food had queued up along the street. People forced to stand long were now getting angry and irritated, Manana was explaining everything to me.

On the following day, an account of my participation in the Mtskheta Festival was published in the Dilis Gazeti newspaper under the heading 'Indian Wisdom and Love for Georgia'.

On Oct 14 Amarendra C visited in old capital of Georgia Mtskheta for the occasion of the religious festival Mtskhetoba. The patriarch of Georgia Ilia The II was giving the service in the main Cathedral of Georgia and Mtskheta Svetitskhoveli and the thousands of people took part in the festival of Christian Georgian. And there was a great crowd in front of the Cathedral and AC was with them listening. People were claiming about their unbearable poverty and the life conditions and Manana D translated every word from him. AC said that people are everywhere people and they are similar in joy and sorrow. After the ceremony he was invited at a traditional Georgian dinner which was organized by The Dilis Gazeti newspaper staff. During the dinner AC found out that three generations of the family were present at this occasion and he felt happy b'cos it is similar for his country.

It would have been difficult to remember such small details if these were not mentioned in the newspaper report. I will never forget some very interesting incidents that had taken place at dinner. And still blazing in my memory is the 10 hour fasting that was forced on me before sitting down to a five hour lavish dinner.

In our hurry to leave, I had no breakfast in the morning. On the way and probably out of guilt, Manana kept repeating to me that a dinner was arranged at Mtskheta in my honour. Standing at the highest point in Georgia, with my bones rattling in the cold, even then Manana had reminded me of the dinner.

I thought that there was a mix up somewhere and probably Manana was confused about lunch and dinner. I had not breakfasted and there was no news about lunch. Would we go straight do dinner?

The festival over, we reached the place where dinner was being organised. It was around 3 pm and I was simply dying of hunger. We entered a house that had branches of black grapes hanging over the door way. The sight itself was pacifying enough. Our host and hostess came forward, exchanged the customary kisses with Manana. Our hostess propelled me inside the house. We climbed to the first floor and entered a room where there was a table full of books and albums of paintings.

Now, in Georgia, almost every family possessed Rustavelli's book 'The Knight in Tiger Skin' and Pirosmeni's paintings. All the time I was looking wholeheartedly at the pictures done by Georgia's national artist, women of various ages were carrying various kinds of wooden, ceramic and silver pots and pans into the next room. I could smell the heavenly aroma of food being carried by them. It also made me hopeful about being called to lunch.

By the time I was had gone through a couple of books and there was no call for lunch despite more women carrying pots of food, I realized that preparations were on for dinner.

Around 5 pm our host and hostess ushered us into a large dining hall. A lavish spread of food and drinks were laid out across a long table. The pangs of hunger were nothing compared to the spread in front of me.

Making a 'toast' in such a gathering too becomes an event by itself. Each guest broke into a long speech in my honour with an equally large wine glass in hand. I was literally bowled over by the show.

Some of them muttered inaudibly, some spoke loud and clear. Some applied fine adjectives to my name while others hoped for a long lasting and friendly relationship between our two countries and drained his glass in one long sip. After each speech, Manana would give me a hurried translation and then I would make an appropriate reply which again Manana would translate into Georgian.

Occasionally, a speaker would remember that he had failed to say something earlier and there would be a repeat toast. After several honoured guests gave several repeat performances, I began to feel a trifle frightened. Because every time a toast was made, the guest of honour was also supposed to finish his drink at one go. In the beginning, awed by the fine speeches, I was forgetting to finish my wine and Manana had to remind me of the custom. But I was no match for Georgian drinkers and so chose to battle it out with a small liqueur glass.

Most of the guests invited to dinner were newspaper employees so they would walk in to the dining room as soon as their work was over. And then the whole process of 'toasting' in my honour would begin anew.

Large jugs full of various drinks were loaded on the table alongside an array of bowls of food. The variety itself was puzzling enough, let alone the display of colour and aroma. It had taken nearly a couple of hours to first lay the table. After that I lost count of the number of refills and additions of more new dishes.

Alazani, Mukuzani

I was in Georgia for two weeks now. Today was 22 October. I was travelling to the **Kakheti** region along with a bus load of Georgian poets and writers. We were going to join the Rustaveli Festival in Ikhaltso, Telavi.

The Kakheti region is in eastern Georgia. Traditionally, the region is famous for its wine. We went past the Alazani Valley along the Alazani River, the Iori Valley along the Iori River, past quaintly named villages- **Tsinandali, Mukuzani, Gurjaani**- flush with cultivation of grapes. These grapes were used to make the famous Georgian wines. The wines were named after the villages from where the grapes came.

In my country I am not much used to seeing people celebrate Valmiki Festival or Vyas Festival or Krittibas Festival for that matter. Hence I was pretty awed by the gathering that was taking place in honour of the Georgian poet. Nearly 200 km from the country's capital, poets and writers were gathering at the place where the great poet had spent his childhood over a thousand years ago. People from nearby villages too were coming to attend the Festival in large numbers. Georgians were truly appreciative of literature. There were crowds atop boundary walls, even in tree tops- something that would occur in my country only during some sports event.

So far things were moving at its own pace and I was happily observing the festive gathering. Suddenly, I heard my name being announced. 'They are asking you to say something', Manana whispered in my ears. A microphone was thrust in front of me and another in front of Manana.

I said exactly what I felt- I am speechless, overawed. Because not even in my wildest dreams I imagined that I would be able to pay my respects to the great poet in his own homeland. My visit has been a great success. I have also come from the land of two great epic poets- But this was only the beginning. I was not even aware what was to come.

Soon after I was called to attend a huge lunch with almost 200 literateurs and local VIPs. High and low benches were arranged like a school classroom and was piled high with food and drinks. I was not only the sole Indian representative but was also able to recite a few lines from the Georgian epic poem. So almost everybody rose up and toasted in my honour. One poet wrote something in Georgian and began to recite it in front of me. Manana said, he is a poet and written the poem in your honour. He wants to give it to you.

After completing recitation, he said 'let poetry of both countries win, poets of both countries win, Gaumarjos' and in one long sip drained his one and a half litre glass. The word 'Gaumarjos' means 'Victory to us'.

Here they had not kept any liqueur glass. No sooner than I had taken a sip from my glass, somebody would come and refill it. No matter how hard I tried, it was very hard to beat the system. Gradually, under the infectious spell of making a toast, I too stood up glass in hand and declared in a loud voice- Sad Aris shvagan Aseti Lamazi Sakartvelo- it is a popular and favourite song of the Georgians. It means- you will not find a country more beautiful than Georgia.

The crowd was taken aback at first. Then there was a loud applause. Then almost every one and half litre glass in the room was empty.

Then I added, in English, this beautiful Sakartvelo belongs to Shota Rustaveli, Shota Rustaveli belongs to Sakartvelo. After Manana translated it for me and people began to applaud, I said loudly- Sad aris Shvagan Aseti Mshvidoba! Mshvidoba means peace. Nobody had expected me to change a word of the song- Mshvidoba in place of beautiful Sakhartvelo. They were very very surprised, even Manana was staring at me. The line when translated meant- Where can you find such peace? There was no end to applause, embraces and 'toast'. It was difficult to realize that just two weeks ago the country, the people, the language was unknown to me!

The writer who would throw away governments.

I have to tell you about two writers. One was Chabua Amiredjibi- tall, slender, 80 years old and somehow related with the Georgian royal family. I had met him at the beginning of my trip and then yesterday at the annual meeting of Writers' Union.

His visiting card was in two folds. He signed on one and gave it to me. It was printed in Georgian on one side and in English on the other. Besides containing the man's address, it also contained the following on the inside left-

Overthrower of Rulers

Best Tenor of All

Times and Peoples

and on inside right-hand page-

A Maecenas of Homeless Dogs

Capacity- 1 litre (of Wine)

Inmate of Red Cork

I was told that a few years ago, the year Gunter Grass won the Nobel Prize in literature, Chabua was also one of those who made it to the nominated list. He was suffering from cancer of the throat, was operated upon a few years ago and talks in a hoarse voice yet merrily smokes 10-15 cigarettes a day. He had to spend 16 years in hiding. Chabua had visited Kolkata in 1990. He was staying with a Russian artist named Rerikh near Park Circus. Hearing that we did not even

know about his visit, he said that even he had wanted to meet the authors in Kolkata but somehow nobody could be informed.

As Manana and I was returning from the meeting at Writers' Union, Chabua was also coming with us. Suddenly he stopped short in front of the stairs and introduced us to a lady. She was Ana **Kalandadze**. Manana said she was one of the most renowned poets of Georgia. Her name was included in the nomination list of the Noble Prize year 2000 list.

It is one of my biggest problems abroad. Since I do not know the language of the poet of the country I am visiting, I am not able to read his or her works.

After coming back to Tbilisi, once again I was pouring over a map of Georgia along with Vajik. He was telling me all about the vineyards of the Kakheti region. He also remarked that the **Kakheti** region in eastern Georgia was also full of opportunities for promoting adventure tourism. **Gudauri** in northern Georgia was a heaven for skiers. He had himself trained almost 1500 children to ski at Gudauri. He goes there twice a year- in January and March. He said- I spent two weeks everytime. Stay with the children. Teach them to ski, share stories, etc. While talking to children, you can both teach them and learn from them.

Folding away the map, Vajik asked me- 'cant there be a two week long student exchange programme arranged between India and Georgia? They will learn how to ski, enjoy adventure holidays and more?'

Kutaisi

Kutaisi lies to the far west, a little towards the north of Tbilisi. The regional capital of Imereti area, Kutaisi was known for its cuisine. There were four kinds of cottage cheese made here of which one tasted simply out of this world. I have no words to describe it. I am neither too fond of cheese nor quite a gourmet but the culinary art of Kutaisi will always remain a pleasant memory with me. However Kutaisi's history, sculpture and literature was no less important.

I was invited to the Kutaisi Regional Department of the Georgian Writers' Union. We reached Kutaisi in the afternoon and was welcomed by the Chairman of the Regional Department, Teimuraz Lanchava, a famous and much awarded writer of Georgia. Then two reporters arrived from the local daily paper to take my interview.

After a fruit-lunch at the Writers' Union, Lanchava took us for a sightseeing tour of Kutaisi. We visited a Wax Museum where I met with the likenesses of Stalin, Hitler and Napoleon. I was told all about the history of Kutaisi as I was taken around the Bagrathi monastery and fort as well as the Gelati monastery and academy.

After dinner, we put up at a family-run hotel in Kutaisi. Three rooms were already booked for us.

The hotel was quite small, run by a husband-wife duo. They took due care of everything from the making of the bed to providing some reading material

before we went off to sleep as well as our morning breakfast. Everything was very homely and comfortable except that the bath was outside the bedroom.

From Kutaisi, we would be travelling to Grigoleti on the shores of the Black sea. On the way, we would stop at Sataplia to see the footprints of dinosaurs and visit some prehistoric caves.

I will first tell you about two days in Tbilisi and then continue with my visit to the Black sea from Kutaisi.

The Prisoner of Caucasus

After many days, it dawned bright and sunny. The sky was a clear blue colour. Manana was not at home since morning. She had gone to attend the funeral of her son Nodar's uncle. This uncle was an influential mafia don. He lived in Russia but his network spread over Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Russia, Belarus and other places. His followers had flown in their leader's body to Tbilisi in Georgia as per his wishes. Apparently they had paid thousands of dollars as bribes to the Russian security services so that they would be allowed to fly out of Russia and would not be arrested. They had also, probably, paid an equal amount of bribe to the Georgian police and security service so that they were allowed to visit Tbilisi and attend their leader's funeral unhindered.

Manana had said that the funeral would be over by afternoon and she would come back and cook a special dish for lunch.

It was past 2 pm and no sight of Manana. Nobody had gone to the market and so there was not much food in the larder except for half a bowl of honey and a bowl of jonjoli.

Vajik is not easily disappointed. According to him, you cannot survive in Georgia if you are easily disappointed.

It was only once that he admitted that in the decade after the breaking up of USSR, Georgia is going through bad times and there is no hope for improvement in the next 10 years. 'So I feel that if my dream expedition of ballooning across the silk route does not come true, what will I live for at this age?'

Vajik asked me to get dressed while he put on his coat. In the street, we found a woman carrying two stacks loaves in both hands. The loaves were thick and round and the woman was carrying them carelessly, all uncovered. There was a hole in the middle of the loaf. Vajik told me that it was a Greek loaf. The woman had baked them at home and now taking it to the market to sell.

Wayside stalls were also selling food. One was a long bunch of tamarind like thing with nuts within. People would buy a bunch or two and have the nuts.

We bought a couple of bananas. It cost us around Rs. 25.

Vajik also took me to a wine shop. It was not quite a shop but a cottage industry centre kind of a place. We went down a flight of stairs to enter the shop. It doubled up as the owner's residence too. There were small glasses kept on the

table. Several casks and plastic jars containing red & white wine were lined against the wall.

Earlier Nodar had told me that these home-grown wines were quite cheap. You could get a litre for a lari. Over here, they were selling good wine for two to three lari.

Vajik put a small glass in my hand and took one himself. The shopkeeper would dip a ladle in the kegs and pour out the wine in our glasses. Vajik would take a small sip, sometimes roll it along his tongue to judge the colour and taste. Even I had to give my opinion. But I chose to sniff it. Because I had seen the residue of the drinks served to earlier customers still lying in the bottom of the glass as well as a few flies. I changed my glass everytime I was given a new wine to drink but each glass had its own residue.

At last Vajik bought two bottles of red wine. The lady emptied two bottles of 'Borjomi' mineral water and put the wine in them. I peeped inside the room she had gone on to fill up the bottles and saw that it was a large room, full of more kegs and plastic jars. It was not quite clean or well arranged. It also contained a dining table and a bed. A teenage girl, probably the lady's daughter, was reading a book in the dim candle light.

On our way back, we bought two of the Greek loaves and two of the Georgian loaves. The difference being that the Georgian loaf did not have a hole in the middle. We also bought some sausage and cheese. Manana had not returned yet and so we began to make preparation for lunch.

Vajik poured the wine into two beautiful glasses. Both the glass and the bottle were full of froth. We clinked our glasses, uttered 'Gaumarjos' and gave a small sip. It was as sweet as honey.

Vajik noticed that I was not taking any more sips of the frothing wine. I could not catch the name of the class of wine mumbled by him. It seemed that the wine was still young and had to undergo a little more of the ageing process. But Vajik was very fond of this wine.

After having two or three glasses, Vajik began to explain his expedition to me in detail. He promised to translate and send me copies of the letter that they had written to the President and the copy of the note that the President had given to his ministers – he would send them all without fail. And of course, I would have to join the expedition as his guest, at least for the last part of the Osaka-Tbilisi stretch when I would be sharing the balloon ride with him. I had to promise him once again that I will join him.

The content of the letter was something like this:

To Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze, President of Georgia

Dear Mr. President,

It is well known, that you are one of the main initiators of great silk road regeneration and author of the following words: 'This road unites the Road of Budha, Road of Judaism, Road of Islam and Road of Jesus Christ– It is a humanity connecting road of tolerance'.

The great silk road idea is so much varied, that we have found our place in its area. Since the beginning of 2000 our initiative group 'Silk air road', has been working on project of 'Overcoming Great silk road by air-balloons'. It will be the expedition, which flies over the continents of Asia and Europe by motor balloons from Japan to Spain.

Great Silk road expedition will start in Osaka in Japan, pass Korea and China, republics of middle Asia and then cross the Caspian Sea, enter Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

The expedition will pass the Black sea, cross the European countries and will reach Spain. After that, the meeting of expedition members, special guests and all interested persons will be held in Tbilisi, in order to sum up Great silk road overcoming results. It will become the celebration of cultures unity.

Our group consists of high-qualified specialists of culture, sport, science and technical fields.

We would like to ask for your patronage for our expedition and apply to the authorities of other countries passed through by the expedition concerning the above mentioned. We are sure that due to your great international reputation and celebrity, all your colleges in these countries will catch up this idea, which will create friendly chain from Japan to Spain, not only during the flight, but also in the process of projecting.

We intend to create a realistic- feature film about our expedition. Besides that, it is planned to create a photo- album that will reflect and show the course of the expedition to the whole world.

The financial side of the expedition depends on the contributions from private firms and organizations advertisements, foreign members, sponsorships and contributions from interested individuals and organizations.

We expect visa supporting, air space security provision and specific problem solution from those countries over which expedition will pass.

In our point of view, shot film, created photo-albums, TV reports about our flight, will bring us considerable profits.

We hope for your reputable support.

With great respect,

The letter was signed by Zaza Abzianidze, the President of the Georgian Geographical Society, Vladimir Malovichko, the Vice President of the Georgian Mountain Amateur Union and many others.

Vladimir Malovichko was Vajik's surname.

The Georgian President had sent a note to his Foreign Minister, Tourism Minister, Cultural Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. It read-

To: Mr. I. Menagarishvili, Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Mr. V. Shubladze, Head of Tourism Department,

K. Asatiani, Head of Sport Department,

Ms. S. Gogiberidze, Minister of Culture

It is an interesting initiative.

Please, help them maximally.

Please consider all the details.

To: Mr. T. Isakadze, Deputy Prime Minister

Signature

E. Shevardnadze

Vajik was very excited as he described his plans to me. He noticed that I was unwilling to eat the sausage and cheese. So he gave his share of the banana to me and ate the sausage and cheese himself. Even by my standards, a couple of bananas and half of the Greek loaf was quite a meal for me too. Although Vajik did not quite agree with me.

We had simply wasted such a beautiful day by staying indoors while lunch was a fiasco. Vajik could sense my disappointment and asked me, 'Would you like to go to Russia? I can take you by road, across the Caucasus region and Chechnya, till we come to Russia.'

The conviction with which he said that he could arrange a car the very next day. I felt he was not bluffing me.

Frankly speaking, the very idea of crossing the Caucasus mountains thrilled me. As a little boy, I was deeply moved by Tolstoy's book called 'The Prisoner of Caucasus' and Vajik's plans made me visualise that unknown route in my mind's eye.

The biggest drawback was that I did not possess a Russian visa. Vajik felt that we could make arrangements for a two to three day temporary visa through some officials he knew at the border.

But I was not so excited about trying to make an adventure in a foreign land in the hope of getting an apparently elusive visa. Also I remembered something else.

It was tentatively decided earlier that the I would be introduced to President Shevardnadze of Georgia when he would come to attend the Writers' Union annual meeting. But on the very day of the meeting, the President's office informed us that two Chechnya rebel guerilla had entered Georgia after being chased by the Russian army. The Russian government was mighty displeased over the issue. So President Shevardnadze was unable to attend the function as more pressing matters like the capture of the rebels kept him busy.

I had to cross the Caucasus region to reach Chechnya. I have been reading in the paper about their war of independence. Hence it would not be wise to land up in the middle of a warring nation in an attempt to see a new country.

It was nearly evening when Manana returned. Nodar was accompanying him. Both of them looked dishevelled, tired and famished - what had kept them so long?

According to Nodar, despite receiving their share of the bribe in dollars, the Georgian Police did not keep to their side of the bargain. The whole day they tried to disrupt the funeral ceremony of the departed Mafia leader by imposing various regulations. Hence it took them so long. Nodar was not angry because they did not have anything to eat the whole day but for the disruptions in the traditional ceremonial rites. A very angry and distressed Nodar expressed his

feelings by saying that every community had its own set of rites and ritual and nobody had the power to disrupt them.

There was no stopping Nodar today. Sipping at the wine that Vajik had bought earlier in the day, he said 'my uncle may be a mafia don to the governments of five countries but you cannot also deny that many people in various countries are shedding tears at his death. The members of his group had tears in their eyes while they negotiated the new demands of the police.'

I had never imagined that I would be able to get such a deep insight into another country as a foreigner.

Nodar is mighty proud of his racial identity. May be because of this pride, Nodar does not like to abandon his decrepit family house in an orthodox area of Georgia and come and stay at his mother's house.

A cultural evening in Tbilisi

A big surprise awaited me the next day.

Manana had taken me to one end of the city and as we stood in front of a large garden with a palatial gate, two young men rushed out and asked the gate keeper to open up while Manana had just begun to talk to the gate keeper. They ushered us inside with much fanfare and took us to a large hall in a building located in the centre of the garden. A little later, a tall and handsome but aged gentleman entered the room. Merab Berdzenishvili, was the most renowned among the contemporary sculptors of Georgia. Most of the sculptures displayed in the Park Square at Tbilisi were his creations. In a way, the whole city was his gallery. He had a permanent exhibition set up at home. The sculptures were not only kept in a big hall but were also scattered all over the house. Some were even kept in the open in the garden. The renowned scuoptor was a friend of Manana's father. The statue of her father in the park was also his work of art. He embraced Manana and kissed her on the cheek. Then we too embraced. After that we took our seats side by side and began to converse with Manana interpreting. Meanwhile, a young man had come, served us Georgian brandy and placed a fruit basket next to us.

It had been decided that we would come early and Manana had made appointments accordingly. But we were late because of me. I had gone for a stroll along the Dkubari River and lost my way. The Mtkvari river is a great favourite with the Georgians. When I asked many Georgian youths about three of their favourite thing, most replied - great **poet Shota Rustaveli, 19th century painter Pirosmiani and Mtkvari.**

We were quite late. Daylight was fading away. Using the camera's flash gun to take pictures of the sculpture was not a desirable idea. So we minimised our conservation and went to see the sculptures kept inside the house and in the garden. I had to use the flash-gun, although unwillingly, to take pictures of the sculptures kept inside.

I have, never before, met with such a renowned sculptor and at the same time see his work. So I was very happy now. The sculptor's pleasant behaviour too made me want to go back to his house.

Then we travelled to the old quarters of Tbilisi to see an exhibition by a young sculptor. I was delighted to find a great similarity between the works of the 28 year old Georgian sculptor and the works of the Dokra artists of Bankura and Bastar in our country. It may not have been a conscious effort but there was a distinct similarity between his mixed alloy sculptures and our Dokra art. I recalled the works of my favourite sculptor, Mira Mukhopadhyay, who was a great follower of Dokra art. The name of the Georgian artist was Iracli Suladje.

From the sculpture exhibition we went to the 'Mini Gallery' located in old Tbilisi. Exhibitions of new artists are held here in a smaller scale. On the day of our visit, an exhibition of the works of a young women was being held there. We saw the exhibition and heard the views of a new generation Georgian artist.

The afternoon was spent by the river, the dusk in the company of sculptures. After visiting the painting exhibition late in the evening, we went to the Tbilisi Central Philharmonia. Here too, located at the crossing of four avenues was a large sculpture made by Berdzenishvili - Mousse. We met with the manager, Socrat Salukvadze, in the corridor of the Philharmonia. I was surprised to hear that this gentleman has been waiting in this corridor everyday for me ever since the first day I had visited the Philharmonia to see a Georgian folk dance and music programme. He was also a research scholar of the history of Georgian Pharmacology. He was waiting for me with his research notebooks. It seemed he had collected information like the cultivation of medicinal herbs that used to take place 3,300 years ago.

Socrat Salukvadze had made a gist (nearly 15-20 pages) of his research work and gave it to me. Holding my hands in his, he requested me to write about Georgia's glorious past in the 'Bhraman' magazine. Manana had given him a copy of the English 'Bhraman' magazine along with the Bengali issue.

It would have been terribly cruel if I did not promise to Socrat. He also requested to visit the Philharmonia once again to see a demonstration of Georgian folk music. He was very proud of Georgian culture. He said, 'You will not be able to see such lively dance or hear such beautiful music anywhere else. Not even in Russia. Of course, I have not seen Indian dance or heard Indian music.'

The folk music and dance of Georgia is really great. Even now their memory lives on with me.

Vajik was supposed to take us to dinner tonight. Since morning, he has been out with his 'very many works' regarding the balloon expeditions. It was decided that we would all meet at a particular restaurant in the restaurant avenue.

By the time we reached the restaurant, Vajik had downed several bottles. He had left the empty bottles on the table, probably to keep a tab on them. Because

Manana was coming with her Indian guest, the owner of the restaurant had kept a nicely arranged table for us in the best corner.

As soon as Manana and I reached the restaurant, the owner got up and welcomed us. He was an old friend of Vajik's.

I have noticed that in spite of being a hard drinker, Vajik never gets drunk and unruly.

Suddenly, it started raining. Our party carried on till late at night. Oven food and drinks, we shared ideas about both countries and swapped stories. Coming back home. Vajik and Manana sang a few duets. But I am no singer and so could not join them despite their requests.

I came back to my room and sat down to read. I could still hear the duet of Vajik and Manana. I heard them singing as I prepared to go to bed.

The footprints of dinosaurs

We were travelling from Kutaisi, the capital of the Imerethi region in Western Georgia to Grigolethi on the bank of the Black Sea. On the way, we stopped at the Sataplia forest and I had a look at the footprints of dinosaurs for the first time in my life. No matter how much one gets to see, there is no end to surprises. The idea that the now extinct giant creatures used to roam here millions of years ago or think that how deep and large was the forest when these animals lived here, was an overwhelming feeling. I wondered what the world looked like then.

There was a cave hundred of millions of years old inside the forest. Quite like the caves of Boragohalu in Andhra but bigger in size. The cave was dimly lit with electric bulbs. We could see strange looking huge natural sculptures. Sometimes we stood in the middle of narrow stream to see them.

A couple of hours later we came out of the cave to find a police van waiting outside. Two police officers were also standing next to it. Were they waiting to arrest us?

Actually today was the weekly closing day of the cave. The guards had refused entry. As we were coming back, we met with a high official from the maintenance department. It was he who had bent the rules for us. In spite of power shortage, the lights inside had been switched on. It was all an expression of love and respect of the people of Georgia to author Nodar Dumbadze. The officer was loathe to the idea that Nodar Dumbadze's daughter would have to go back without showing the cave to her Indian guest.

So far everything had gone off smoothly. But probably the police did not like the idea of our visiting the caves on its day of closure. Somehow they must have got wind of it and come over. The presence of the policemen in a place like this did not appear quite right. Even Manana looked taken aback.

The police officers came forward and welcomed me with a broad smile. They had seen me on television. They had also heard that a Georgian journalist was taking me around- was Manana the said journalist?

While translating the policemen's words for me, she added with a smile, 'They have recognised you from the television programmes but even though I was in all the programme with you, they did not recognise me.'

'The reason was that many Georgian women are being shown on television everyday while I was the only Indian.

I was absolutely dumbfounded to hear the policemen. They were going by this way when they heard about my visit and had stopped to meet me.

On the Black Sea Coast

We left Sataplia around afternoon and were now travelling across a desolate road in the dark when the driver admitted that he had lost his way.

The next few hours found us very worried and frightened. We would follow a road for about 50-100 kms and then finding there was no more road ahead, would again come back all the way till we reached another road to meet with the same fate. There was no habitation nearby. The driver sounded the car's horn as loudly as he could, cupping his hands together called high and low. But to no avail. I was really very frightened. Robberies took place here often because the country was going through an economic crisis. Manana could not take the tension any more and although her cell phone was not able to connect to any network, I found her dialling several numbers.

It was almost midnight when we reached the Black Sea coast. I was quite disappointed. The sea coast and the resort next to it was very dark. It was off-season and with the ensuing power crisis, the generators were also switched off. After many tries, Manana and our driver managed to awaken two lady staff of the resort and switch on the generator for half an hour. Tent like wooden cottages were set apart from each other in the middle of a verdant area. The driver opened one of the room and put my suitcase there. Manana kept her suitcase in another. After sympathising with me about the troublesome journey and assuring me about the opportunity to listen to the song of the Black Sea from my room, she too vanished in the dark.

By the time, I was getting ready to go to bed, the generator was switched off. Throwing up my hands to protect my head and feeling my way across the room, I at last dropped on the bed.

Next day, I woke up and came outside. I could not see or hear anyone else. Slowly I walked across to the beach. It was so windy that my shirt and the camera was almost being blown away.

I nearly tottered across to reach the mouth of the Supsa river. On the way, I had seen the Supsa River flowing past the forests and hills of Guria region. I was told that the Supse river met the Black Sea at Grigoleti.

I was saddened by what I saw. Was this really the famous Black Sea that I had read in my school geography book? Was this the mouth of a river?

I found Manana and our driver here. I could not see the beauty of the sea at dawn because I was late, said they. Also this was not the best part of the coast.

Then why did we take so much trouble to come here? Manana candidly admitted- I own a resort here. In one of the rows of wooden cottages that you saw earlier. Come I will show you.

Manana had stayed there the night before. She opened the door and took me inside. It was a wooden cottage one and a half storey high. Manana said that she had not bought it herself. A couple of years ago, on her father's 70th birthday, an admirer of his writings had gifted Manana's family one of them. 'We are ordinary middle class citizens. We do not have the financial support to spend holidays by the sea,' she said.

I was not only moved by the forests and rivers of Guria's Hills but also by the simple folks who lived there. The innocent faces of the children of the hilly villages are still etched in my memory. It is sad that I will not get to see them again. Even the old cathedral seemed to have a heart of its own. It looked more like a cottage made of wood and stone in the middle of a lonely forest.

A young teacher from an old but famous school of Guria, who spoke English, was telling me about Guria. He was accompanied by the history teacher from the same school. But he did not know much English and so took the help of his co-teacher. The Church dated back to the 6th century. It was the famous **Shemokmedi** Church of Guria.

Lines from his father's poem was etched on the entrance, so Manana translated it for me in English. It was something like this- My little Guria is the birthplace of the gods.

On another gate, there was a quotation from Ana Kalandadze's poem. Why couldn't we do the same in our villages in Bengal?

Kissed by the Black Sea

As the day of my departure began to near, I began to feel quite sad. I did not regret that I was not able to visit Batumi, the best coastal stretch on the Black Sea. I did not feel bad that I could not visit Gudauri, the breath takingly beautiful spot in the Caucasus range. But the nearing of the day of departure made me feel sad.

We had an exceptional breakfast on the day we were returning from the Black Sea coast. Women were selling sea fish along the road below the mountain. They knew Manana and rushed forward when they saw us. They were simply delighted after being introduced to Manana's Indian guest. A girl repeated my name several times and got to pronounce it correctly. It was decided that we would buy some fish from them, have it fried in a shop across the street and that would be our breakfast. Manana chose some fish, they chose a few more. We bought small trouts, something that looked like pomfrets and a few more. The girls sliced and cleaned the fish and took it to the shop.

The shop was run by two old ladies. They arranged a table for us with loving care. They placed plates of salad, cheese and sauce, a basket of Georgian loaf on the table. Then arrived the fish- whole fried trouts, fried pomfret and other small fish. It was quite a lot for three of us. We polished off with coffee.

Manana bought some more fish to take home. I was behind her. A girl called my name from behind. Looking back, I found she was holding a fish in one hand and with the other she sent a flying kiss in my direction. The smile on her face reflecting the affection in her heart.

It was on this journey that I struck a friendship with a gentleman. It is quite sad that I lost his visiting card and forgot to write down his name.

He would ring Manana every half an hour on her cell and ask how far we have reached. Then he would come and meet us at the crossroad at **Khashuri**. He would direct us to a famous 7th century cathedral in **Tsromi**. The gentleman was the chief editor of a newspaper in Khashuri. We would be his guest for lunch.

Manana introduced us at the crossroad. I joined the gentleman in his car. He told me all about the old flourishing towns of Toromi and Khashuri. Manana was following us with her car.

We reached the cathedral only to find that it was closed. A woman who looked deranged was singing a song in front of the closed cathedral. She broke into hysteric laughter on seeing us. In between, she said something, that the editor translated to me. It seemed there was a gala celebration in a church in another village. So the caretakers had gone there.

We turned back and drove to a nice looking restaurant. I was introduced to two more people there. They were also journalists from the same newspaper. Manana was the only woman here. A huge table was set for the six of us.

A variety of food and drinks were brought to the table. Nobody was ordering anything. So they must have given the order earlier.

A guitarist came and began strumming a tune. A little later, the editor himself took the guitar and started singing. He was quite good looking and warm hearted. Strictly but lovingly he watched over me as I ate. Now his melodious voice really bowled me over.

It was moment of pure joy to meet with such a friendly person on a trip.

We got so engrossed with our conversation that lunch extended to supper. Or may be it was an invitation to supper? It has happened with me before in Georgia.

Suddenly our friend remarked, 'Manana why didn't you introduce me to Amarendra earlier? I will not allow you to leave today.'

Manana was an old friend of his.

He talked to some one over his cell phone in his mother tongue and then said to me, 'my wife is arranging our best room for you.'

We had to reach Tbilisi that night. Almost simultaneously Manana and I said that I was departing on the following afternoon. He quickly solved the problem- 'I will drive you straight to the airport tomorrow. Tbilisi is not more than 150 kms from here.'

We will go via Manana's house. You can pack up everything in 15 minutes tonight, come, we will tell you about our dream about the future of Georgia.' Ever in English, he referred to Georgia as Sakartvelo.

What would be my answer? I took his hands in mine and said, I don't know how long you will keep on dreaming with so many problems, so much poverty around you.

'We will not talk about poverty. Do you what is our biggest enemy today? Even worse than poverty? It is corruption. There is no end to the corruption among the government today. So let us talk about David, sing songs of Queen Tamar, read poems of Rustaveli. I will not let you go tonight.'

Georgians refer to Queen Tamar as King Tamar. She was a 12th Century ruler under whom Georgia was a flourishing country. Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli too belonged to this period. The friendship between the queen and the poet was also a matter of deep pride.

We reached Tbilisi around midnight.

Vajik was awake. He opened the door for us. He said, 'before going to bed give me your air tickets. Tomorrow I will go and change the dates. Cant you leave on 3 or 4 November?'

'Why?' 'The Tbilisoba or the Tbilisi festival would be held two days later. How can you leave Georgia without seeing Gudauri and Batumi? Only Manana can plan such a thing.'

Manana was busy talking to her cat, probably she had not heard Vajik. She just looked up and said, tomorrow I will make 'Ukha' for you. Do you know what is Ukha? It is a famous Russian soup. Fishermen make this soup. That is why I bought the fish from Black sea.

By the time I finished packing and went to bed, I found it was quite impossible to fall asleep. As I woke up next morning at the cry of the female hawker, I realized I must have fallen asleep.

After my first night at Georgia, I was woken by the same female voice.

It was like a sad tune on the flute. The sorrow and agony of Georgia seemed to be reflected in his voice. I cannot say when Georgia will again rise to the heights of glory that they had achieved during the reign of Queen Tamar. As I prepared to leave, I could not fathom why this small country tugged so hard at my heart strings?