



# On a journey...

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By Susan Griffith-Jones, Exclusive

Varanasi is so quintessentially Indian. Everything that one new to India would expect to finding this country, you can find here! Cows wandering the streets, naked yogis, cremations by the river, temples, tuk-tuks, rickshaws, cars hooting, bells chiming, chickens squawking and goats clucking. Not having time to follow the 5 traditional pilgrim routes around the city, we do however, visit a number of temples and kundas (holy ponds), not to mention passing a multitude of offering shrines. It's inside these little roadside enclosures that you find dregs of religious thought spanning thousands of years of domination by one or another group passing through the ages, muddled together into a melee of objects that are still worshipped today. Rakesh, from our hotel, is acting as our tour guide and takes us into the Muslim quarter where workers are clacking away at hand looms, spinning the purest silk into cloth and then stitching fine details onto it by hand. Nearby a workshop with a machine loom chugs away at a huge reel of cloth, part synthetic, part silk, starting up at midday as the work goes on into the night here.

This amalgamation of history, culture and religion is not limited to Varanasi of course and we find obvious layers of it in Patnato, our next major destination along the river. The Golghar, engineered by a

British officer to store grain after a massive famine in the 18th Century, looks more like an attempt at making a huge sculptured object with spiralling staircases and the gardens of Patliputra from where Chandragupta ruled his massive kingdom and later, his grandson Ashoka was to spread Buddhism across India, more like a lovers "meeting place". Indeed, the Buddha himself wandered around these parts, gathering disciples and giving teachings to all who came into his presence. The river widens here, to over 5km as 3 huge tributaries have joined her flow since Varanasi, one from the south and two from the Nepalese Himalayas. To get the best view of the river, we head for the ghats, stepped promontories reaching slightly beyond her shore with temples flanking



Shrine by the roadside, Varanasi, India



Susan at Gurdwara of Guru Gorbind Singh, Patna, Bihar, India



Ajgaibinath temple, Sultanganj, Bihar, India

either side, largely hidden between patches of village-like communes and old warehouses in which the British once stored opium on its way to China. Near the edge of town, there's a huge Gurdwara on the main road, a little inland from a ghat named after the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gorbind Singh, who was born and grew up here. With a background of kids playing, women washing clothes, men banging together boats and picking weeds out of the fields, from here I can see the 5.7km long, Mahatma Gandhi Setu spanning the entire width of Ganga and later, standing under the concrete pillars at one end of this bridge, marvel at how man can engineer such massive structures.

Samuel's on his way to China, where he'll spend a few days before returning to London. We hear from him before he takes off from Delhi and later imagine that he must be passing over us here in Patna in the plane to reach his first port of call at Guangzhou, which is practically due east of here, from where he'll route on to Beijing. His gap year is over and he'll soon be starting his BA course in Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London.

I find that in each broader area I visit on the river, another prominent aspect arises and it's in Patna that I target in on the Gangetic dolphin, hailed as the oldest cetacean creature in the world, evidence of its fossils being found in Kashmir from 50 million years ago! Around 200km downstream from Patna, is a 50km stretch of river, an officially protected area known as the Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary, not sectioned off as such, but demarcated by natural features in the landscape. To get a good idea of the overall parameters of the subject, we meet Professor of Zoology, Dr R.K. Sinha from the University of Patna, who's also Vice-Chancellor at the Nalanda Open University. He's positive about the situation; dolphins are being sighted from as far up as the waters below Haridwar and to the opposite extent, in the Bay of Bengal, where at this time of year they swim around its shoreline waters, whose salinity is currently reduced due to the flushing of fresh water emerging out of bulging monsoon rivers. Here the dolphins enter into other rivers in Orissa, Bangladesh and Burma, making this many thousands of kms of water for them to live and breed in. Due to over damming on the Indo-Nepalese border, they cannot swim between various river systems, so there are only pockets of them left in Nepal, with in-breeding taking place. Sinha says there are further warning signs, as the same kind of dolphin has recently become extinct in China.



Golghar structure, Patna, Bihar, India



Susan at gardens of 'Patliputra', Patna, Bihar, India

Since the dolphin is a flagship species of the river, which means that its healthy presence in it indicates that the whole river is well, it is a key to the survival of the eco system. Its long nose forages for food in the murky muddy depths of the river, stirring up various bacteria that little fish need for their diet, itself eating the larger fish that are otherwise a threat to smaller ones etc..., a perfect system, when it's in working order.

Sinha sends us on our way with the number of a fellow in Bhagalpur, a town that's situated in the heart of the Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary. It's the middle of the day, and on the 5-hour train ride there, we get to see a lot of countryside and villages. The Ganges is never that far from the track, but semi-invisible, a line of trees often blocking it in the far distance of this flat and wide land, huge fields of lakes, flooded out by the rain, tall green shoots of rice poking out in patches. Chaudhery is the head of the department of Botany at the University of Bhagalpur and carries us deeper inside the issues strongly embedded into the question of the survival of the dolphin. Here we learn that the rights to the river are affecting the situation right to the core. Before Independence (1947), the river was free for all to use, but subsequently leased to contractors by the emerging State government, to get revenue. As it was difficult to regulate such a large stretch of river, the contractors sub-let it to local warlords, whose 'control' of

the river was tough, but still legal at this point. Poor fishermen, subsiding from the river suffered, as they had to pay dues simply to fish in it for their own food. In the 1980s, local people formed the 'Free Ganga Movement' to oppose the lease system that was subsequently abolished in 1990. But, in 1991, the Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary was set up and along with it, again an element of state control, as according to the principles of what a 'wildlife sanctuary' constitutes, there are defined restrictions over activities within its boundaries. The river, itself bounded by sandbanks and islands, thus became a safe haven for goondas as it was much too difficult to access for bodies of civil security. Various factions of 'Mafia' divided up segments of the river between them, the police force both ill equipped and unwilling to deal with these anti-social elements.

We're supposedly unlikely to see any dolphins at this time of year, as they tend to swim in tributary channels where the flow is less strong, but Chaudhery arranges for us to meet some fishermen at the town of Sultanganj where the famous Ajgaibinath temple perches on an island in the river at this time of year, bulging to extreme due to the monsoon rains. Traditionally from here, pilgrims take Ganga jal (water) on foot to a Shiva temple over 100km away in Jharkhand.

To be continued...

Susan's website may be found at [www.pyramidkey.com](http://www.pyramidkey.com)