



Interview: Twelve Questions for Shivaji Das

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Shivaji Das was born and brought up in Assam, India. He is a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He is currently a management consultant in Singapore. Shivaji's writings have been published in numerous magazines, including *TIME*, *Asian Geographic*, *Venture Mag*, *Jakarta Post*, *Conscious Magazine*, *PanaJournal*, *Freethinker*, and *Outlook Traveller*. He has presented talks in Singapore, Morocco, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brazil. His interviews have been featured on BBC, CNBC, Channel News Asia, Travel Radio Australia, Around the World TV, Radio Roaming, and Singapore Discovery Centre's IFD Exhibition. His photographs, taken together with his wife Yolanda Yu, have been exhibited in the Darkroom Gallery, (Vermont, USA), Kuala Lumpur International Photography Festival (Malaysia), the Arts House (Singapore), and the National Library (Singapore). Shivaji also takes an active interest in migrant issues. He is a key figure behind the annual "Migrant Worker Poetry Competition", which showcases the literary talent of migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia. Shivaji's books include *Sacred Love: Erotic Art in the Temples of Nepal* (2013), *Journeys with the Caterpillar: Travelling through the islands of Flores and Sumba, Indonesia* (2014) and *Angels by the Murky River* (2016).

This interview was conducted on 2 June 2017 and is based on the author's early life in India, his thoughts on travel and travel writing, and his latest book, *Angels by the Murky River*, which documents his journeys across sixteen countries in six years.

1. You were born in Assam, India. Describe some of your memories of your childhood and youth. What inspired your wanderlust?

I was born in a town called Lumding in Assam. It was then a small railway junction inhabited by ten thousand families that had somehow created a space between the deep gorges and the hills covered with foreboding forests. I loved walking through the narrow road that passed between these hills, though I was scared when walking over the small bridges that stretched over the gorges. I went deep into the forest once to hunt, with a toy gun. I made much fuss about it, took homeopathic medicines to kill my fear, and told everyone who would care to listen that I was aiming for big game. In the end, I turned back without seeing anything much, chased by a bunch of mosquitoes. Mosquitoes were the original rulers of Lumding. Nowhere else have I seen them in such densities. They came every evening in Lumding, like monsoon clouds to cover the fluorescent lights, and flew back at dawn carrying a few people under their wings. During the monsoons, it would rain like missiles and the sun would not be seen for months. The courtyard of my house would get flooded, first with murky water that would then form a crystal-clear lake. Snakes would be seen regularly. I still dream of snakes swimming gracefully through those clear reflections in my house and up and down the surviving trees in the garden.

Lumding was also a violent town with more than its fair share of gangsters. I remember stories of bloodied bodies left from overnight killings. As a child, I imagined solving those murder cases even though everyone seemed to know the culprits already. When I was eight, there were tensions between the Bengali and Assamese communities. Our town, a predominantly Bengali one, had to routinely make war-like preparations. Every household including mine bought big machetes and stocked up on sand and chilli powder for defence. One night there were cries going around, "They are coming!" We were petrified. My eldest sister stood against

the door to act as a shield. She tried to comfort us with her brave words, “Don’t worry, don’t worry at all. Can’t you see how I am shivering!”

The attackers never came, but incidents such as these as well as my parents’ stories of their painful migration from East Pakistan to India, which subjected them to harassment and threats from the local majority population, generally left me wary of ‘others’. So, for much of my youth, even though I moved around a fair bit in India and overseas for my studies and work, I preferred to only limit myself to places that I couldn’t avoid – my home, school or college, and office. I hated travelling. I found talking to strangers onerous and something to be avoided by all means.

But when I was working in the United States, the weekend boredom won over my reluctance to move around. I began taking public buses: both intra- and inter-city buses. In the USA, the profile of people who take public buses is rather distinct. They are typically the poorer sections of society. In these buses and bus stops, strangers would talk to me without any provocation, sharing their life stories, offering their food, inviting me home. Over the two years I spent there, I met migrant families who had just crossed over from Honduras, heavily tattooed drug abusers recently out of prison, ageing green activists who took part in protest marches despite their ailing hearts, and an elderly black man who always dressed like a dapper so that his only son, who had died in the war in Iraq, would be happy seeing him from heaven. I began relishing such encounters and since then, I have always looked out for opportunities to hit the road and meet the ‘other.’

2. In your talks and book promotions you label the kind of journeying in *Angels by the Murky River* as “non-required travel”. Could you elaborate on this? What is the importance of this type of travel?

I have been asking myself whether travelling has much meaning today when we have Google Image Search, Facebook and Instagram. Is there anything ‘new’ left for the traveller to find while travelling that he can’t achieve from the comfort of his home and mobile screen? Aren’t all places in the world converging on the same idea of material development, their appearances and culture becoming ever more homogenous (though under the abstract non-material ideas of nationalism and religion that seem to divide us even more everyday)? In this context, I believe that there is yet scope for insightful travel by engaging in ‘Non-Required Travel’ – exploring the lives of locals typically unheard of or bypassed by visitors, thereby encouraging travellers to seek more meaningful experiences while fostering greater mutual understanding.

For me, non-required travel is about getting down from the bus halfway; a chance encounter with an elderly lady who scribbles love poems on the walls of small-town China in response to those of an elderly widower, both not daring to meet each other; an invitation to play soccer with a group of car mechanics in Brazil and accidentally scoring the only goal in the game; overhearing the conversations of great migratory creatures such as a group of mothers-in-law from India who travel to Singapore every year following their own rhythm; or perhaps catching an ageing anarchist in Melbourne hurling endless expletives, frustrated at getting beaten in an online game.

Non-required travel is all about missing the big picture, about getting enamoured with the small. What else can better counter cynicism than the unexpected offer of a cup of tea by a homeless girl in Mumbai? Incidentally, my coinage of the term “non-required travel” is influenced by the collection titled *Nonrequired Readings* (2002) by the great Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska.

3. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, often seen as a champion of alterity, talks about the profound importance of the dialogue between self and other (both the cultural and geographical other). His dialogic vision insists that dynamic encounter only takes place when there is a balance between the self and its other. In your own travel writings, how do you manage this delicate, sometimes precarious, balance between yourself and the people and place you are writing about?

In my writings, I try to de-emphasise myself as much as possible and let my experience and encounters take centre stage. So, I deliberately let the people I meet inhabit the pages I write and speak in their own voices. Yet, my biases would inevitably be discovered in as simple a matter as the people I decide to spend more time with and the stories that I select for publishing.

4. Name a few travel writers who have inspired you. What do you admire about their writings and how have they influenced your own creativity?

Often travel writers end up focusing too much on their own experience and mental state when traveling through a place or when describing a place and culture through their interactions with a highly unrepresentative set of locals (those linked to the tourism and interpretation industry, or other tourists and long-term expatriates). In this context, V.S. Naipaul's early works (his travels in India and Muslim majority countries) and Ryszard Kapuscinski's accounts of big events in history (part travel, part journalism) have inspired me the most. I admire their books for their focus on the local, their sharp analysis and elegant structuring. I find the open mind with which Kapuscinski (not Naipaul!) explores any new context and culture truly admirable.

5. The stories in *Angels by the Murky River* depict different groups of people in various conditions of life and often they invoke the great disparity between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless. Yet you often talk about the notions of common humanity and universal human values amidst diversity. Could you comment on this and give a few illustrations from the collection?

The stories in *Angels by the Murky River* have a few common narratives: human resilience in the face of adversity, our passion for upholding cherished ideals, and our capacity for creativity, kindness, and humour, irrespective of our backgrounds.

In Indonesia, I found diamond miners who toiled in the hot sun day after day, barely making a living on most days. Only last month, two miners died in a pit accident. Yet the miners remain rather sanguine about the challenges that life throws at them, carrying on with hope for that one big find.

In the Philippines, I met women boxers who shared the same story – everyone trained extremely hard, lived away from loved ones most of the time, and put up with the austere discipline of the training camp, all so that they could use their meagre salaries and rewards to lift their families out of desperate poverty.

In both Morocco and China, I found petty farmers who had learnt to paint without any formal training. In their works of childlike simplicity, both these groups, so geographically distant from each other, gave expression to their common aspirations and dreams.

In Melbourne, I met both elderly and young anarchists who had no qualms about the failure or insignificance of their movements in the current context, proudly claiming that if future generations were to ask them, they could at least say that they had tried to do something to make our societies better.

So, the theme of small hopes, small defiance, and small brilliance continues across the human stories I encountered, despite their inopportune situations. This is what made me believe in the existence of angels in every murky river.

6. You have stated that you take an objective stance in your travel accounts, moving away from personal bias and perspective to allow the people you meet to articulate their own life circumstances. This is reminiscent of what Syed Manzurul Islam says in his insightful book *The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka*, which, in a nutshell, is that the transience that underscores movement in travel should also be the metaphor for examining and representing the cultural and spatial other. Would this describe your own approach when writing about travel?

You could say that to some extent. Firstly, I believe that travel writing is primarily about the other and not about the self. Otherwise, it would be better written as a memoir or a diary. At the same time, it is impossible for a travel writer to claim to be canvassing the socio-economic realities of an entire society just through his or her own encounters in travel. But the transience of travel perhaps needs to be set in the wider socio-economic context, an element that can be brought in through thorough research. This could validate or contradict the subjectivity as well as the transience. Yet, such detailed research at least makes the traveller and the travel-writer more aware of the context of the transience whether in its conformity or its peculiarity. For example, my recent book has a long article about Madura – an island well known in Indonesia for its violence. Yet, my encounters with the locals in Madura revealed them to be one of the most humble and polite peoples I have met, who were craving to break out of their reputation for hot-headedness and to interact with the outside world. At the same time, the violence in Madura in the form of the attacks against the Shia population as well as the penchant among some of the Madurese to take the law into their own hands was real as revealed by the island's troubled history. Placed in this context, I came to the realisation that in essence I was encountering a deeply conservative culture that was finding it difficult to adjust to the laws of the modern world. The politeness I encountered was natural, for respecting and honouring a stranger was a matter of great pride. As an old saying goes in the Caucasus Mountains, 'If your enemy comes to your home with the head of your son in a platter, feed him your best food and house him in your best bed.'

7. Take us through your working day. You are a busy management consultant. How do you juggle work, personal life, and your writing? Do you keep regular hours when it comes to writing and what do you find distracting? What would you say is the best thing about being a writer?

I am often asked this question. My work involves a lot of travel and meetings. In a way, since I am yet to be a parent myself, I have a lot more time outside office hours than people of my age. But my way to manage time is to be very disciplined about it. I reserve 30 minutes or 300 words every day for my writing and keep to that without fail. Over time, these minutes add up to a book. Also, I can write anywhere. I can write in airport lounges, hospital cafes, or wet-markets. When I am writing, everything else gets blacked out from my mind.

For me, the best thing about being a writer is to see a stranger browsing through the pages of my book. That builds a connection between me and him or her, my ideas and experiences the bridge between us. The worst thing as a writer is to see discounts offered on my books – to see my ideas and experiences ON SALE!

8. Your travel stories are mostly about those living on the margins, often desperately poor and forgotten communities who face great hardship even to just survive. Are you conflicted when you write about these groups of people, i.e., that your stories could easily turn into what has been described as “poverty porn”?

I don't face much of a conflict during the actual writing as I compare the act of writing about people on the margins to the act of not writing about them (which would be tantamount to ignoring the existence of people at the fringes). Also, I don't deliberately seek out poverty. Since a lot of my travels are to developing or poor countries, I find poverty and misery everywhere. It is the norm. To deny this aspect in my writing would be the equivalent of mistaking the Eiffel Tower for a piece of industrial junk by just looking at a small cross-section of it. What I am careful about is not to glorify poverty as that would be denying the bitter realities of poverty and the marginalisation that people are forced to live with. At the same time, it is not all about their poverty. So, while writing about the homeless, I have also found space to talk about their superstitions (in Mumbai) and their delusions (in Korea). Similarly, when I wrote about Nepalese security guards in Malaysia, I drew attention to their role as members of the armed forces in the brutal civil war in Nepal.

But I do have conflicting feelings after an article has been published. My work often draws more attention to me than the people I write about. I get invited to literary festivals and conferences, my profile is published as a 'feature' in newspapers. On the other hand, the homeless, the salt miners I write about are still where they were. To deal with this disparity, I often donate all my royalties to causes that support such communities. For example, all the royalties from my first book are donated to NGOs that work in Flores and Sumba, the Indonesian islands on which the book is based.

9. There is a striking contemporary relevance about *Angels by the Murky River*. These are stories about development, migration, diaspora, displacement, and globalisation. To what extent do you feel these form the primary backdrops of our present world?

Yes, the stories I encounter often deal with migration and displacement, commoditisation of traditional lifestyles, and the fall in the residual value of labour. And while working on the book for the past six years, recent political narratives that espouse extreme nationalism and vitriol towards outsiders made me think of my book as a small attempt at a counter-narrative – that the story of life is essentially a story of migration and that cross-cultural interactions need not be portrayed as a game with the devil.

10. Your writing career has followed an interesting path. Your first two travel books were published online. *Angels by the Murky River* was published in print by Yoda Press, New Delhi, India. What made you decide to take this path? And how would you describe the reception to your latest book?

Actually, all the books are now available in print from different publishers. The second edition of my second book, *Sacred Love: Erotic Art in the Temples of Nepal*, will be released next year by Mandala Publications. I did initially publish the first two as e-books but then I realised that in this part of the world, e-books are yet to be well accepted. All the books will continue to be available online as well.

It is hard for me to comment on the sales of the book as a measure of public reception to the book. My publisher says it's doing well. At the same time, a lot of newspapers, journals, and literary festivals, from Botswana and Kenya to the Philippines and Japan, have been interested in showcasing the book. And I have been invited by some universities to talk about the book as well. I enjoy the discussions in such forums – the openness and curiosity of the audience towards other cultures is exactly what I am seeking to achieve through my book. These discussions also make me take my writing a bit more seriously than I am wont to do.

11. I found many of the stories in the collection humorous. How do you see the role of humour in your writing?

In essence, this is how I see it. In most situations described in the book, the humour was natural. When people from different cultures interacted with me, they and I both found enough reasons to laugh at ourselves and each other – with the way they used my language or I used their language, with the way their customs and behaviours contrasted with what I am used to, or simply from the general niceties extended to one another, for which humour was probably the most accessible outlet. For example, an elderly vendor of Mao-era trinkets in Yan'an, China, pretended to shoot me with a toy pistol to remind me of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. At Kandy's famed Botanical Garden, I found lovers in an epic competition to carve out their names on the ancient trees. In Indonesia, a man tried to show off his English to his neighbours by introducing his wife to me as 'Your wife!' In Xi'an, when a marketing lady approached to enrol me in her network, I mistakenly gave an excuse in my broken Mandarin that 'I am an apple.'

There were so many such humorous experiences during my travel that when it came to writing, I just then had to describe those situations. As an aside to writing, these humorous experiences are a big reason why I get itchy feet and cherish traveling, for somehow, cross-cultural interactions with an open mind lend themselves so easily to humour.

12. Could you talk about your next literary adventure? Do you think you will ever turn to fiction writing and, depending on your response, why so or why not?

I have just signed up with my agent for my next work, *The 'Other' Shangri-La*. It is a work of narrative non-fiction based on my journey through the Sino-Tibetan frontier-land of Western Sichuan. The book describes the rugged landscape of this region, which comprises 7000-meter-high mountains, deep gorges, vast grasslands, and the world's most dangerous roads. The book also details the lives and cultures of the people inhabiting these remote lands, people who are now subject to turbulent socio-economic factors, including the Sinification of Tibetan culture, which is partially being countered by the growing Han patronising of Tibetan Buddhism, the continuing migration of daredevil yet earnest entrepreneurs from coastal China, nomads rejecting government-financed permanent settlements to return to their ancient lifestyles, and the fall and rise in the macho imagery of the local Kham men, considered to be the most eligible in China.

I don't see myself moving into fiction yet. I consider myself first a traveller and then a writer. Travelling is what gives me most joy. Writing, for me, is just an excuse to carve into my consciousness those memories of my travel, and to also let the wider world know of the wonderful people and cultures out there. Fiction will have to wait until I have satiated myself with the wonders of the real world.

Thank you very much for this interview, Shivaji.