

स्वागत SWAGAT

जुलाई JULY 1992

विमान में पढ़ने के लिए
FOR INFLIGHT READING





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MOODS

BY THE BANKS OF LAKE PICHOLA

Text and Pix: Nihal Mathur

The view from my balcony was incredible. I can never forget the greenish-blue waters of Pichola spread out in front of me with its many islands, the Lake Palace, ghats, temples and other medieval buildings by the waterfront like a miniature Varanasi in a Rajput painting. The many moods of the lake, intertwined with the life of the people, the activity of water birds and the

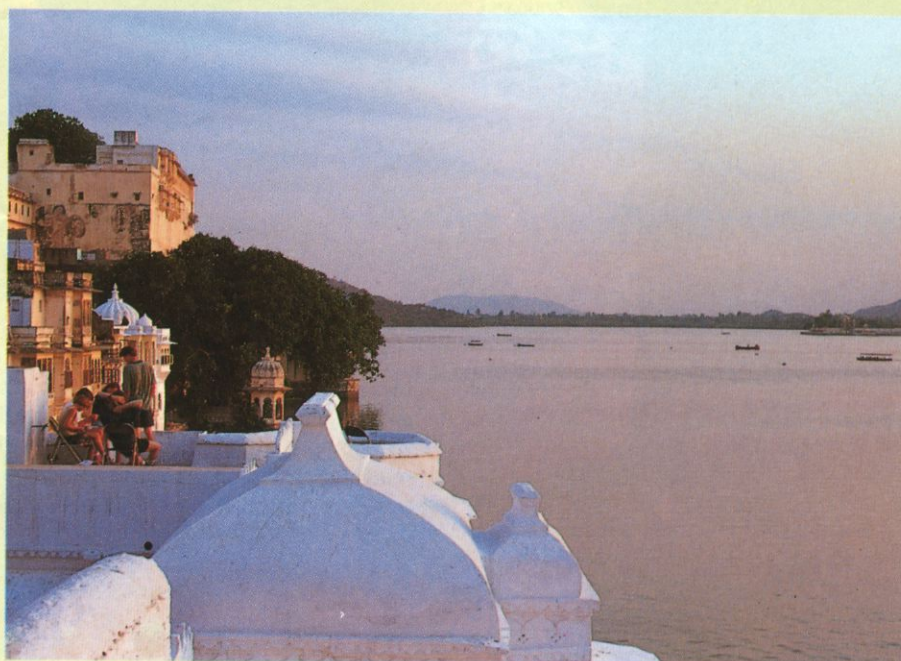
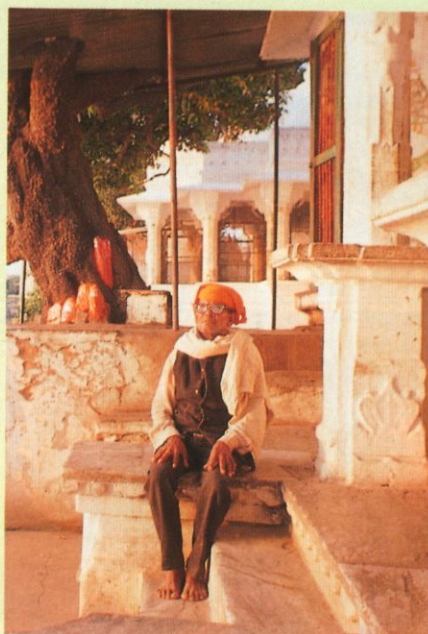


magnificence of the architecture, forever remain engraved in my memory with a timeless quality of their own. Living by the banks of Lake Pichola in Udaipur, I shall always recount my times as memorable, of vivid colors, rich in images and sounds.

I woke up each morning to the loud thumpings that I instantly recognised as clothes being pounded on the stony steps of the *ghats* by hundreds of women who came to wash and bathe in the lake. Beginning as early as four in the morning, this activity continued all day till almost nightfall. Perhaps it was the proximity of the old walled city to Pichola that drew people to its banks not only for their daily ablutions but also for ritual, ceremony and festival. That is why Gangaur ghat, above which I lived, took its name from the festival of *Gangaur* in Rajasthan.

From outside my room on the second floor, I literally had a 'balcony seat' viewing of this beautiful festival and of the women that came to its grand finale amidst singing and dancing. But on many occasions, I also saw a quiet ceremony being performed by an individual or his family with the help of a *pandit*. Though I had never stopped to ask, I knew these private *pujas* were the rites of passage of a Hindu, making his or her own peace with the gods.

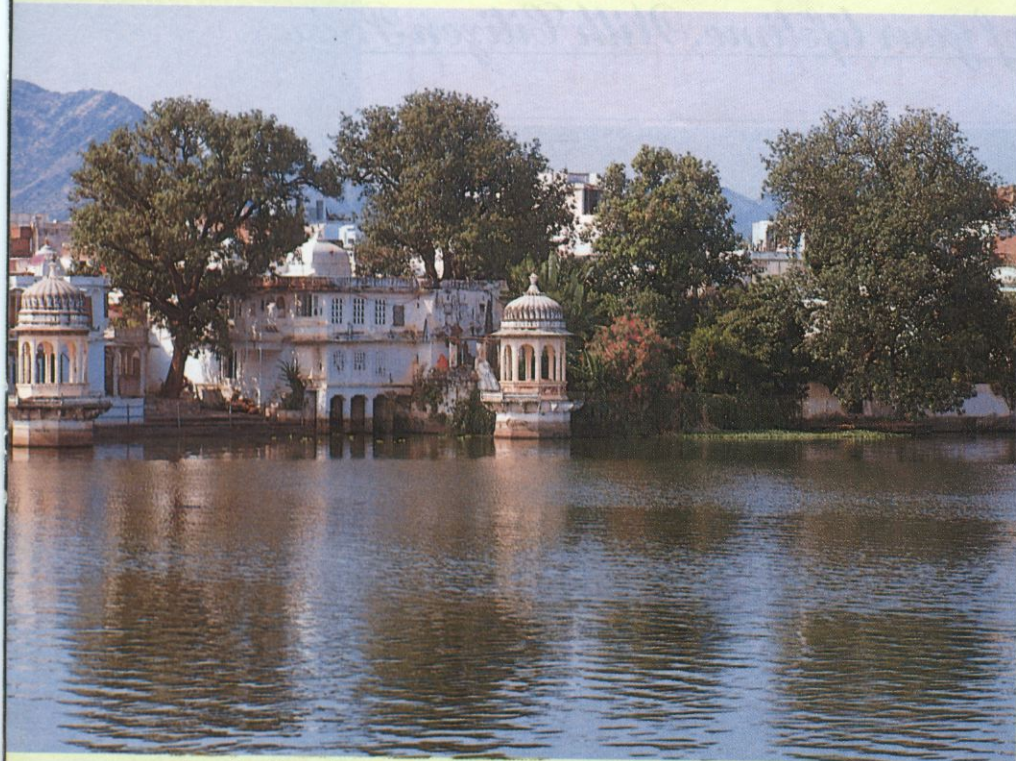
And going by the pantheon, all the important Hindu gods had their own temples by the banks of Pichola. I enjoyed walking through the *ghats* and paved pathways leading from one temple of Shiva to another of Vishnu, past homes with traditional murals of



elephants and tigers painted on either side of the main doorway. My favourite place was near the tree shrine where I sat for hours watching people come and go. Close by, cows and buffaloes, with egrets riding piggyback, always scattered the pond herons and bitterns as they came down to the water. Occasionally an elephant turned up for a dip in the Pichola, his mahout astride. And all afternoon long, children swung on the hanging roots of the banyan tree over the still waters.

Unlike the staccatto sounds of the women doing their enormous loads of laundry, the splashing of waters was a continuous affair as kids had fun in the lake. On the far *ghat*, in the territory of the teals, children of all ages came in the mornings and evenings to practice swimming under the guidance of coaches with sights set on the State championships. I came to know that the water event prizes in the desert State of Rajasthan were all swept away by the Udaipur boys, some of whom swam out to the small deserted island of Mohan Mandir, where cormorants basked all day long in the winters. Using it as a high board, the kids climbed the parapets of the abandoned structure on the island to dive into the deep end of the lake.

It is hard to imagine the Pichola without the Lake Palace though I must confess I had the chance to see the Lake Palace without the Pichola! In 1988, the lake dried up completely after several years of drought and then miraculously filled up again with the following monsoon rains. Sitting on my balcony, I often

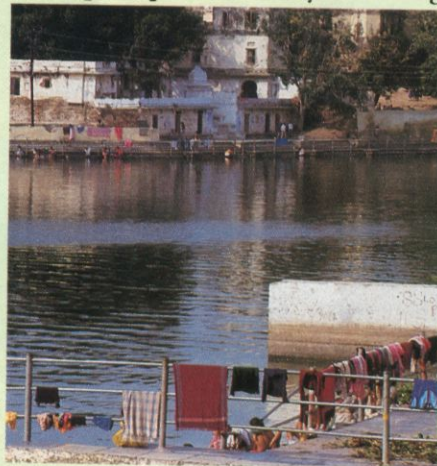


wondered what the scenario would be like without the Lake Palace hogging all the attention. But the constant drone of the motor boats ferrying tourists from the landing at Bansi Ghat, all day long, denied me the luxury of that thought.

Personally, I preferred the silent old wooden boat, the property of the former Maharana, which was sparingly used. Sadly, most of the year round, I saw it anchored along with the other smaller speed-boats, not far from the abandoned island of Jag Mandir. Set

against the take-offs and landings of migratory mallards, storks and other water birds that roosted on the far side of the lake, Jag Mandir for me remains an infinitely romantic image, imprinted on that part of my mind which weaves imagination into dreams.

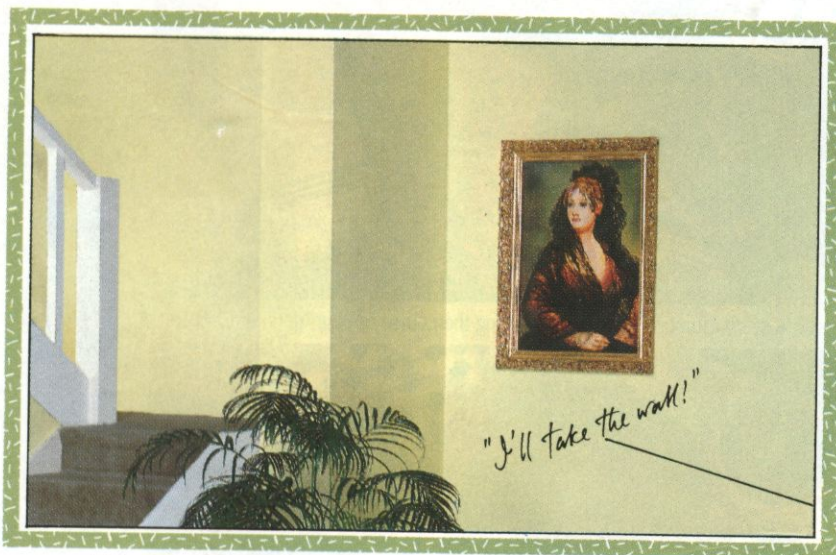
No less the stuff of dreams was the stunning City Palace that had its imposing presence on the lake front. I guess, when it was constructed it was perhaps the only building



overlooking the lake, along with the Jagdish temple, now only partially visible from the banks. Also built on the rising hillside and in sharp contrast to the enormous City Palace is the dense cluster of houses of the old city, in 'Mediterranean' white, arranged haphazardly with narrow winding lanes running between them. I often walked along these back lanes to the *Bagore ki Haveli* where I lived and worked for the West Zone Cultural Centre.

Over the two and half years that I was there, I witnessed the gradual resurrection of the *Bagore ki Haveli*, once in a state of decay. Extensive restoration work was gradually carried out there and today it presents a pretty picture by the banks of Lake Pichola.

One early morning while sipping tea on my balcony I heard a bird call that I couldn't identify. Leaning out on the railings, I scanned the waters and spotted it only when it called again. I was pleasantly surprised to see a pheasant tailed jacana sitting on a water hyacinth. For the next half hour I sat and watched the bird while a pied wagtail joined the jacana for company. But the more enthralling act was always provided by the pied kingfisher that so often hovered, maybe 10 feet away from my balcony, at eye level. Of the many times I witnessed its proverbial prowess at fishing, the pied kingfisher

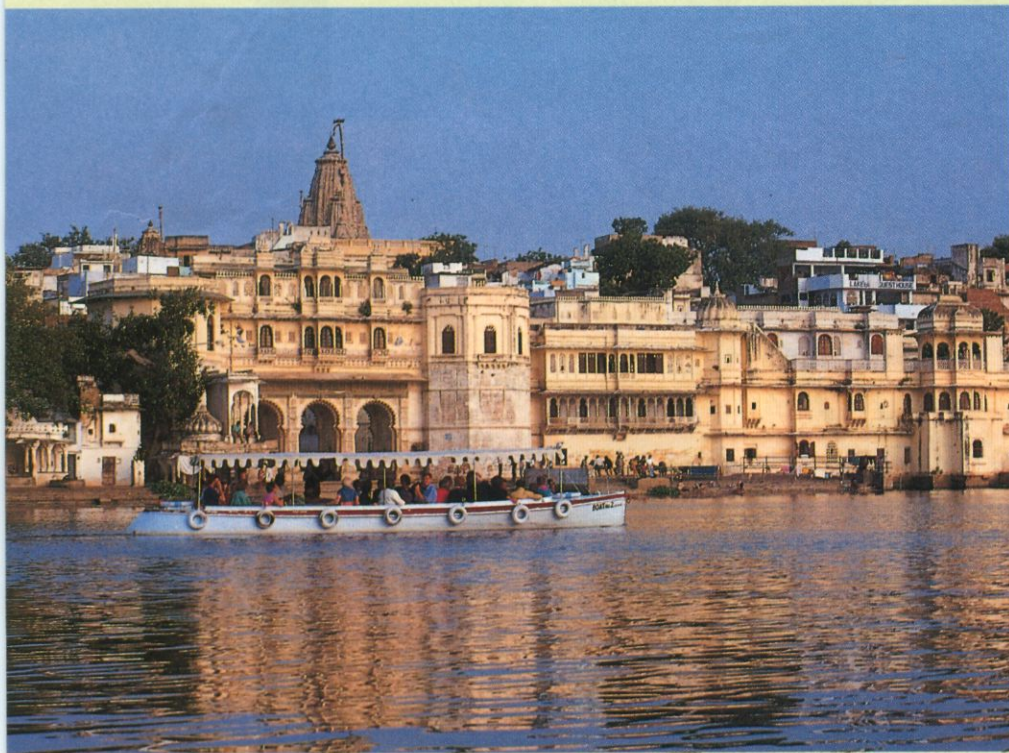


Doña Isabel de Porcel Francisco de Goya 1746-1828

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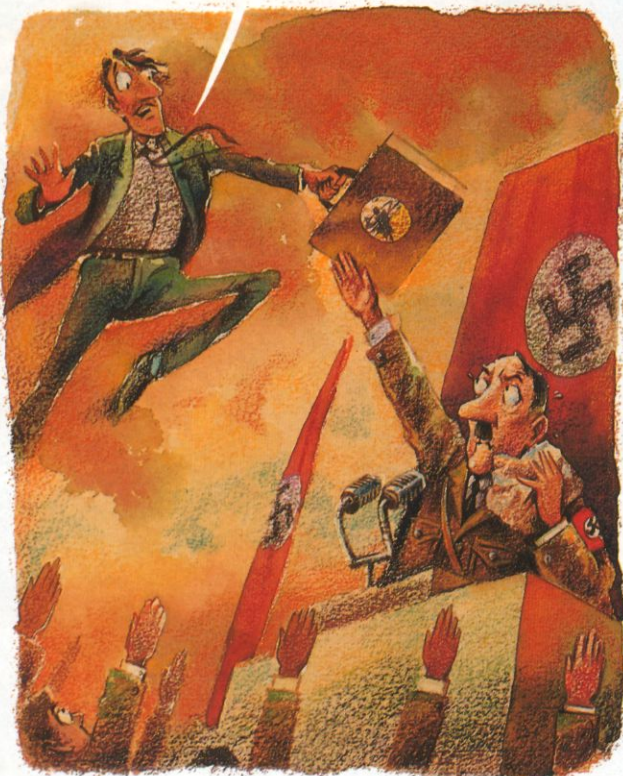
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sadly failed to impress me with a catch. Judging by their numbers, it seemed that the little crimson-breasted kingfishers, that perched on the ledges below my balcony, did well for themselves though of course, the same could not

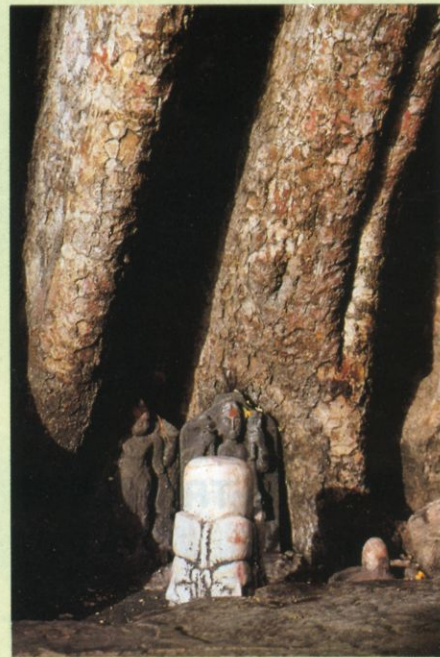
be said, for the solitary great blue heron that made its appearance once in a while and posed majestically against the background of the Ganesh temple. However, it was the green bee-eaters that were the unquestioned master hunters, snapping up airborne

"Now can you believe this? I wasted precious time because I thought you were calling me."



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insects while they rode the late afternoon monsoon winds.

The changing lights of an August evening created an extraordinary ambience in the Pichola, flooding it in shades of yellow and gold on one day, or hues of pink and purple on another, often I sat through an evening and watched the colours change while the far hills in the west, along with the hilltop fort of Sajjangarh lit up in varying depths of light. As the sun sank behind the silhouetted hills, the temple bells rang and *sandhya* prayers came wafting with the distant playing of drums. A devout on the *ghat* opposite where I lived began his rhythmic chanting of "Ram, Ram, Ram..." calling out for his lord. And in the twilight skies of summer, thousands of fruit bats emerged from behind the City Palace and winged their way over the lake towards their nocturnal feeding grounds beyond.

At night, I often saw flash bulbs pop off intermittently in the Lake Palace, indicating perhaps a party in progress or tourists getting their memento shots. Hard to capture on film was the extraordinary starlit sky and on many moonless nights I sat up on the balcony counting the satellites trace their trajectories while the owlets communicated across the lake. I may not perhaps be as successful in communicating the sense of joy of living by the banks of the Lake Pichola but then, that is probably because there is no continuity to my thoughts which are now like fast moving snapshots. But whenever I think of the Pichola I see my own reflection on its water....