



A Passage to India

India is home alike to the tribal lifestyle and to the sophisticated urban jetsetter. It is the land where temple elephants co-exist amicably with the microchip. **Karitas Mitrogogos** finds out why and how



As I got ready to write this article I remembered a friend's letter from India which said: "India will sideswipe you with its size, clamor and diversity... but if you enjoy multifaceted cosmologies and thrive on sensual overload... it will offer you one of the most rewarding experiences of your lifetime! India is truly a land that tears at your heart and feeds your soul and you will quickly develop an abiding passion for it!"

Well, since I met H.E. Ambassador Bhaskar Balakrishnan and his charismatic wife, Shobhana, just over a year ago, I have begun to understand my friend's words. Through their friendship, hospitality and guidance I have slowly begun to learn to rejoice, not only in India's rather sensual cuisine, but in its rich and diverse cultural and spiritual heritage.

This past year I was very fortunate to experience with our hosts one of India's most important festivals called DIWALI, or the festival of lights. This festival, which takes place during the harvest time in October, is celebrated by everybody in India, irrespective of religion and economic background. The celebrations include the lighting of candles and lamps called Vallaku (see photo), the bursting of fire crackers and the exchange of special sweets. Actually, this special celebration which symbolizes the victory of knowledge over ignorance, light over darkness and good over evil, reminded me a bit of the Nordic Advent and indeed, I soon learnt that DIWALI is considered as the Indian equivalent to the Christmas in the West.

I participated in the Indian Spice and Food Festival that was organized by the Indian Spice Board and the Indian Embassy here in Greece at one of the top hotels in Athens and learnt about India's more than 50 varieties of spices which are grown in its fifteen agroclimatic zones ranging from the tropical to the temperate. I attended a very special Indian dance performance by Greece's top Indian dance expert, Ms. Leda Shantala who runs

the Indian dance school Shanthom in Marousi and last but not least, I attended one of Shobhana's special showing of exquisite textiles and Indian Saris and learnt a lot about the traditional Indian woman's apparel that makes a woman look graceful, stylish, elegant and sensuous.

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- 1 A view of the dining room table set with the exquisite Indian tableware called Thalís. On the wall, beautiful replicas of a wooden panel and wooden carvings framed on silk from temples in Southern India
- 2 H.E. Ambassador Bhaskar Balakrishnan and his charismatic wife Shobhana. In the background a beautiful tapestry from the State of Gujrat with hand embroidered stitch, mirror work and geometric design





The Indian Sari is an outer garment which consists of a single untailored length of cloth. Shobana, who wears a Sari every day, told me that the fabric, very often cotton or silk, is 5 1/2 meters long. One end is usually wrapped around the waist to form a skirt and the other end piece, which is called the Pallav, is draped over the shoulder and left to hang over the back or front. It is worn over a short, tight top called Choli (blouse) with short arms and a thin underskirt of plain cotton.

On this visit to the Indian Embassy residence in Athens, Shobhana showed me some of the fabulous fabrics that she used during an Indian costume show at a fundraising event she hosted at the Indian Embassy residence for the rehabilitation center for children with cerebral palsy of the Social Work Foundation.

The fabrics were truly fabulous and I loved their vibrant colors and sophisticated design. Shobhana told me that the fabric for the Sari is "highly structured and its design whether woven, embroidered, painted or block printed, needs to maintain the proportion between the actual field of the Sari, the borders and the Pallav."

I can only describe the Sari as an ingenious piece of art. An amazing woman's apparel that covers all... yet , as some say... reveals all!

For my interview with H.E. Ambassador Bhaskar Balakrishnan, we sat down in the living room, just in front of SHIVA NATARAJA, which is a typical dance posture with a figure with many arms. Ambassador Balakrishnan told me that this special art object is a representation of God (SHIVA) as the King of Dance (NATARAJA). He said "the figure is very vigorous. The hair is flying, the arms are in motion but the face is absolutely calm. The arms that are in motion and holding a drum and a fire signify creation, destruction and peace. The raised leg signifies upliftment and the lower leg which is on a demon signifies the destruction of ignorance. This shows us that in the

middle of the whole business of creation, destruction and life that goes on in the universe, the almighty is absolutely calm and peaceful. He is at the center of it all, absolutely calm, despite the enormous activity that goes on in the Universe."

As we all know, India is a country of staggering topographical variations and great cultural diversity. India is home alike to the tribal lifestyle and to the sophisticated urban jetsetter. It is the land where temple elephants exist amicably with the microchip. I asked H.E. Ambassador Balakrishnan how he feels representing a country with such enormous diversity and traditions and he answered as follows:

"The single most important thing about India is its complexity and its diversity. Representing a country as complex and diverse as India with 22 major languages 9 major religions, 28 provinces and people in various stages of development, from the people in the villages to the people involved in sophisticated technology, is really a challenge.

I would say diversity is the hallmark of India. Diversity can mean both strength and weakness. When diversity means reaching out across the many differences, building bridges and trying to understand people and their many different religions and ways of life, we are talking about a lot of strength. Diversity can be a weakness if it leads to rivalry, suspicion, hatred and conflicts. So we, in India, try to see diversity as a positive asset, as a constructive asset which reaches across the differences and enriches our souls.

Actually, throughout history India has been absorbing influences from abroad. From the time of Alexander the Great thru successive waves of people, who came to India for conquest or trade, we have been absorbing influences and adapting them and making them part of our life. I see diversity as our richness and something that I am truly proud to represent!"



Aubergines in Yoghurt

Yield: 4 servings

- 2 medium-sized aubergines (eggplants)
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1/2 tsp red chili powder (optional)
- Vegetable oil for frying
- 250 g plain yoghurt
- Salt to taste

Method

- Cut the aubergines into thin round slices. Place in a glass bowl and rub the spices all over the aubergine slices. Now if you prefer, cut the aubergine slices into smaller triangle shaped pieces. Leave at room temperature for about 10 – 12 minutes.
- In a deep saucepan heat the oil and fry aubergine

pieces until crisp and cooked. Remove from pan and place on kitchen paper to drain off any excess oil. • Stir yoghurt to ensure a smooth consistency and then add the aubergines. Mix gently and then season with salt to taste. Garnish with a sprinkle of cumin and chili powders. • Place in refrigerator for 2 – 3 hours. • Serve cold.

- 3 Various oil lamps lit for DIWALI, including a large Vallaku lamp in the background. All the lamps on the table are from the private collection of H.E. Ambassador and Mrs. Bhaskar Balakrishnan
- 4 In the living room, Bronzes figures (Krishna, Shiva and Parvati) in different forms
- 5 A view of the Embassy residence garden. On the left two stunning hand appliqué wall hangings from the State of Orissa
- 6 An URLI from Southern India which is used in temples for storage. Shobhana fills it with water, flowers and floating candles with striking results
- 7 Karitas with Shobhana, separated by the NATARAJA. In the background a folk art painting on silk with PACHWAL, the tree of life done with gold leaves
- 8 Sari fabrics in vibrant colors with sophisticated design
- 9 A view of the main living room of the Indian Embassy residence



I wanted to learn more about the economy of the world's largest democracy where atomic energy is generated, computer technology and industrial development have brought the country within the world's top ten nations. H.E. Ambassador obliged me and made the following comments: "India is presently, in purchasing power parity, the 4th largest economy in the world. We are still of course facing many challenges to bring a large number of people out of poverty but in the past ten years we have seen some very encouraging results. Since 1991, when the government introduced economic reforms, India has become a competitive global player. Our development programs, especially in the high tech and informatics sectors have been very successful and we have been able to take advantage of the big numbers of highly skilled young manpower with language skills. Just think about it, India has the second largest reservoir of engineers, scientists and managers and the largest pool of IT manpower in the world. It is estimated that there are 150000 IT professionals in Bangalore alone!

As our economy grows, the relationship with the European Union has become very strong. Today, the EU is our biggest trading and investment partner. With Greece, our trade has been doing quite well and in 2005 our exports to Greece reached almost 320 million Euros. There are of course a lot of opportunities to further build the cooperation between our two countries, especially in the informatics, tourism and shipping fields.

Our contacts with Greece go back thousands of years. Greece is the oldest democracy and India the largest democracy. Both countries are ancient civilizations and we share many cultural similarities as well common elements in our mythology. I truly think we have an excellent basis to improve our relations and widening our cooperation in the near future".

At this time I felt it was time to turn up the heat with a

question on spicy Indian barbecue dishes. Shobhana said that barbecued fish and chicken Tandoori are very popular here in Greece and she suggested we use the wonderful Greek yoghurt with a generous assortment of spices to make a flavorful marinade for our cuts of meat or kebabs. She recommended we start experimenting with pinches of turmeric powder, coriander powder, cumin seeds, black and yellow mustard seeds and different types of cardamom and garam masala!

"Greece is one of the very comfortable countries for us to live in. We can find just about everything we need for our cuisine but I also like to use local seasoning on my Indian style food! In Athens, you can actually find a wide variety of chutneys and pickles and in the Omonia area there are Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan shops that sell almost all the spices and herbs you may need."

For lunch, Shobhana really turned the heat up! Her menu consisted of an array of colorful and flavorful spicy dishes that, I have to admit, made our heads spin a bit! To top it all, the delicious food was served on exquisite traditional Indian silver tableware called THALIS which made it a truly regal experience!

Shobhana said that "traditionally we never use glass or porcelain plates. Actually in some parts of the country fresh banana leaves are used instead of plates... and then she added... think of them as something like disposable plastic plates... something... that I will have a very hard time doing!!!

The menu included Pulao (rice with peas), Shrimp Masala, Aubergines in yoghurt, fried bread with spicy dips and for dessert, Shahi Tukrey (a creamy reduced milk spread served with almonds, pistachios and sheets of silver leaves). My favorite was the Aubergines in yoghurt which really hit the spot on a very, very hot day in Athens!

