Travelogue, Winter Study Tour, IAS 2016 Batch

The best of the Travelogues are written in the form of diary. The aim of a travelogue should be to present the actual emotions we felt at that particular point of journey, and not a later introspection with shaky memory and addled imaginations. What follows below is an account of the 50 days of my Bharat Darshan journey and the entries I made in my diary.

The LBSNAA Academy informed us of our Bharat Darshan route around a week before the actual journey began. We had to stay with the Indian Army at Kupwara in Kashmir for the first one week, and after 7 weeks the study tour had to end with National Museum visit in New Delhi.

Diary Entry 1:

And the Bharat Darshan begins 😊
50 days long Winter Study Tour.
Getting "Attached" with mighty Indian Army at North-Western Border is just the start!

Even though our flight has been rescheduled due to bad weather, and we have been waiting on New Delhi Airport for last two days, there is hope and hope that snowfall will recede today, and the Air India will take us today to the heaven on earth- Kashmir.
Diary Entry 2

Returned from Army attachment today. What an experience! Went to as near the LoC border as we dared, and were permitted to go. Stayed at Pharkian Gali Brigade where temperature freezed to 20 DEGrees BELOW ZERO; saw how Rashtriya Rifle captures the terrorists, participated with Ghatak1 (घातक1) team in Night-time AMBUSH, Road-Opening-Party, Area Domination Exercise...and a lot more.

And more importantly I got to understand the GROUND REALITY of how Army is administered and how they beat harsh weather and annoying infiltrators indomitably.

I return from here CONVINCED that my country is safe as long as our brave soldiers stand guard at our borders with same dedication, concern and care. Salutes! But a question tingles: HOW MUCH do we civilians care for our armymen?
The pillar in the pic is a tribute to Indian tolerance and coexistence. It is the central piece of Diwan-e-khas of Shahenshah AKBAR, and also the place where Akbar famously tried to create a syncretism of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Jesuits. (Ibadat Khana and Din-e-ilahi)

The highly sculptured pillar itself gives a peek into Akbar's mind. The carvings on it has SYMBOLS from all these religions. And it is topped by a massive lotus throne on which Akbar sat and held his court with equal eye to all the religions. Hail Akbar!

Also visited Saleem Chisti's Dargah, Buland Darwaza, Panch Mehal and Jodha Bai's palace.

A quick fact which may SURPRISE many: Unlike Jodha-Akbar MOVIE, Akbar was not really handsome, and he was hardly above 5ft3inch in height! (But with that realism, movie would not have been such a hit 😜)

I am also reminded of the "The Empire of Moghul" book series by Alex Rutherford I read some years back. Fantastic historical fiction, reads like novel, and deep insights! 😊
Diary Entry 4

Visited Satish Dhawan Space center (SHAR) today at Sriharikota. Sitting on the Bay of Bengal this is a barrier island and the main location from which most of Indian satellites are launched.

Pictures are:
1. Inside the Mission Control Center. This is the center from which our मंगलयान (Mars Orbiter Mission) launch was monitored. And the place I am standing is the small platform from which our honourable prime minister made the congratulatory SPEECH after the successful launch of Mangalyaan. Reveries of jubilance and EUPHORIA that day!! 😄😎

2. Our initial launchers for sounding rockets; 1970s. ISRO and SHAR are giants today... BUT every GIANT was once a KID!

3. First Launch Vehicle. Almost straining our credulity, this massive structure of approximately 4000 tonnes weight and over 80 meters height moves smoothly on iron rail tracks at the time of satellite launch.
4. Second Launch Vehicle. State of the art technology, it was used to launch our Mangalyaan.
Visiting famous Temples of South India; a quest to understand religious places’ Administration. Visited so far the Sriranganatham Temple, Mallikarjun Kamakhya temple, Jwalamukhi temple, NarasimhaSwamy temple, met their priests and administrators. Dravid style temples, huge Gopurams and Vimanas..

The Colours of Gods and Goddesses are different here, so are their Shapes. And the worshipping Rituals are vastly Different, and beautiful in their own ways.

For example, deities’ flower Garlands is taken and placed on the shoulders of worshippers...and considered a Grace! Prasadam is at times Salty. And Lemons are frequently offered to Goddesses, specially to Kamakhya. 😊😊😊

Even worshippers are honored by priests by wrapping Shawls across their shoulders. Too many shawls already, but refusing gifts would be discourteous. (Is it a tradition, or just a special arrangement for us three.. No idea.)

And when no one is looking…we Fly like Superman! 😊
Diary Entry 6

Mypadu beach. APTDC resort. A glimpse into Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation.

Some new insights. And too much fun. 😊😊😊

The direction I am showing leads to Andaman Nicobar islands. Was explaining to someone how we can deduce that using the position of sun at the sunset. Simple geography really, nothing much. (and certainly no umpiring in the sea 😁)
Learning the ropes on Grievance Redressal from District Collector Sri Revu Mutyala Raju, Nellore Collectorate Building.

Digitisation of Public Grievance Redressal here is an experiment worth studying. In 2015, AP administration launched a Meekosam portal. Meekosam literally means आपके लिए. Every complaint received at Collectorate or otherwise is put in writing, scanned and uploaded at this portal. It ensures that no complaint gets lost, and every complaint is acted upon. Using the Aadhar id, the complainants themselves can see the scanned copy of complaints, track the progress on their complaints, and even request an appeal to District Collector. Every Monday, from 10 AM to 2 PM, all departmental heads at district level hear complaints, and the district collector hears appeal against district officials’ orders.
Visited Krishnapatnam Port today. Spread over 6800 acres, it started only in 2008, and within 8 years has become one of the star ports of Eastern Coast.

The pace with which land was acquired, people rehabilitated, and infrastructure was created is a record in itself.

I got the opportunity to see cargo loading unloading of coal, edible oils and containers. I also went on the deck and Navigation Bridge, Wheel House of the ship United Liberty, and tried understanding the engine system, radars and other navigational tools. Many thanks to KPCL port authorities for hosting us there and giving detailed answers to our mundane queries. 😊
It was almost a miracle that we were able to spot the rare Greater Flamingo birds..even in this off season.

Pulicat Lake, India's second largest lagoon, spreads about 60 km along the coast. So large that after about 3 hours of boating we crossed from Andhra Pradesh to Tamilnadu.

It is not deep though, and the survival level swimming knowledge gives me courage to stand at the bow railings of the boat, without life jacket, ..facing the cool wind laden with salty smell, and watching the beautiful birds. I saw red winged Greater Flamingos, Pelicans and Spoonbills etc for the first time in life. Many of these birds in Pulicat migrate thousands of kilometers from Russia and Magnolia every winter!

Also waved at the Fisher community and took a peek into their lives. Around 12,000 fishermen depend for their livelihoods on Pulicat Lake alone. I learned boating too; though not fishing.

Haritha Flamingo Resort here is also very nice; further new insights into Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation. I’m falling in love with India more and more ...with every passing day.
Today Irrigation Department of Andhra Pradesh took us to the sites of 1. Kandaleru Dam, which is a part of Telugu Ganga project, and 2. Somasila High Level Canal project.

While our stay at Kandaleru was brief, we spent hours understanding the Lift Irrigation system of Somasila. The Somasila Dam was built one year before my birth, but its High Level Canal project is only 4 years old MEGA-PROJECT and aims at irrigating 90,000 acres!

We even went underground to the bottom of the dam wall to see how inspection of water seepage at French level is done. It was fascinating to think that just across the wall dam water stands to 100 meters in height! SCARY, as well as a fresh respect for Civil Engineering. 😂

On the sidelines, there is also a small Somalisa Power Plant of of 6 MW. But the smallness helps in understanding as we can take the overview of water flow, turbines, generator etc simultaneously. This is the first time I have seen any water based power plant, and I am quite amused by it.
Diary Entry 12

Honourable Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Sri Chandrababu Naidu inaugurated Gamesa's WIND turbine MANUFACTURING plant today. We were invited to be part of this ceremony.

Having seen wind mills only in documentaries till now, I had little idea that the blades of a wind turbine are so big, each blade measuring up to even 100m in length!!

Gamesa is not only at number ONE in Indian wind turbine market, it is also a leading company worldwide, and is well respected for its R&D. Thus, a tour to turbine manufacturing plant became a very enriching experience for us. I also got to see their under-construction manufacturing plant for SOLAR inverters.

It is amazing to realize that such a large manufacturing plant was erected from scratch in just SIX MONTHS. Insights into #MakeInIndia, SEZ operations and future of Renewable Energy.

A special thanks to its General Manager Sri Madhu Boppana for gifting us each a model of wind mill as #Memento of our visit to the plant. I will cherish this always. Thank you Gamesa.
Blades of wind turbine. A wind turbine generally has 3 blades. Each of the blades is around 50-100 metres in length.
Bara Shaheed Dargah of Nellore is famous specially for its Rotiyon ki Idd (रोटियों की ईद). This is a three days festival during which around 30 thousands people from all religions come to this dargah. People whose wishes have been granted by God pass the grace symbolically attached with रोटी (bread) to those who are still praying for something. Nice tradition. Perhaps this evolved from mixing of rituals from different religions around this place.

The dargah also has a lake and ostrich habitation attached to it.
I had the good fortune of seeing the Integrated Commands Center of Nellore SP office today. This is one of the FINEST EXAMPLES of how technology is aiding Law and Order administration.

Using highly sophisticated satellite technologies and cameras public places have been put under Round the clock vigilance, and every public place can be viewed in HD quality video live in Command Centre screens. There is a loudspeaker phone connected with every camera. Thus, sitting in Command Centre office, senior police officers can direct and assist personnel at the field in traffic administration, monitoring suspicious persons, preventing theft, quick response to road accidents, responding to kidnapping, tracking missing person etc.

Not only this, these video recordings help them to produce in courts undeniable EVIDENCES, thus ensuring that people causing accidents or nuisance can be convicted speedily.

Beyond this, through Command Centre, complaints are registered and responded to through Whatsapp and Facebook page of SP Nellore. A Big step towards making Police people-FRIENDLY!
We were overcome with excitement when we came to know that famous SriKalahasti temple is on our way to next destination. So we informed the temple administrators and took a detour.

SriKalahasti temple is more than 1500 years old, first established by Pallavas in 5th century and then embellished by Chola kings in 12th century. As per the legends, the VayuSivaLingam is one of the five manifestations of God Shiva.

A new central attraction of Gold-plated pillar (ध्वजस्तंभ) has been recently added, which is due to be inaugurated on 8th this month. The beautiful white RajGopuram is also under renovation having collapsed some years back. We also took Annaprasadam (अन्नप्रसादम्) which is a unique tradition in this region of offering lunch as prasad.

Although not as rich as Tirupati temple, it still has 300 crore revenue from donation every year. Temple administrators shared that they are also demanding from government that an IAS should be made its executive officer just like Tirupati to properly channelise its funds.
With 2500 crore annual donation and revenue, Balaji Tirupati temple is easily the richest temple of India, and probably the 2nd richest religious institute in the world. Despite running over 3 dozen colleges and hospitals, much of its annual revenue gets accumulated, and to that amassed wealth, perhaps only Vatican Pope can surpass among religious institutions. From selling the tonsured hair (a religious practice here) itself, Tirupati temple gets revenue of over 250 crores every year!!

What is more well known is that around 70,000 to 100,000 pilgrims visit this place every day! The challenge of crowd management, providing accommodation to them, and feeding them is expectedly immense. Interesting insights!

Because of spiritual significance and also for the serene beauty it offers, some of us (including of course Me) decided to brave the 9.5 km long staircase and climb our way to Tirupati. The area adjacent to stairway is full with beautiful deers, Neelgaay etc.

We also met D Sambasiva Rao, IAS who is presently the Executive Officer of Tirumala Tirupati Devdarshanam. It was not without his help and the blessings of Lord Venkateswara that we could get Darshan without hassle through what is popularly known as VIP Break darshan. Darshan, by the way, is allowed only in traditional Indian dresses here. That's why wearing Dhoti for the first time in life. 😃.

And as to the spiritual experience of standing in front of Lord Venkateswara, all my words will remain inadequate. Lifetime memory.
The canal in which I am standing is part of Handri-Neeva Sujala Sravanthi (HNSS) project.

Although it is part of HNSS phase 3 and is still under construction, it feels amazing to think that within 6 months the entire tunnel will be full with water, connecting rivers like Krishna, Penna, Mandavya, Vedavati, Handri (Over 10 Rivers!!) and distributing their waters in full fledge to drought prone areas of Rayalseema.
Diary Entry 18

Exploring Ernakulam backwaters, The "Queen of Arabian Sea". Some beautiful islands on Lake Vembanad on the way..

Let the journey with The Queen begin in God's own Country...Kerala!
As part of our NGO attachment, we visited today the famous DHAN Foundation (Development of Humane Action). DHAN goes beyond the traditional concept of NGO delivering various services. It aims at being the catalyst of development and trains thousands of youth in designing new models and establishing new institutions for social change.

They have successfully pulled more than 1.5 million people above poverty line. Its one branch Tata-Dhan Academy even has Post Graduate degree course in Development Management. The casestudies compilation of 'Transforming Practices in Development Management' is a marvelous work. (Volume 2 they gifted me, Volume1 I purchased.)

The pic with Mahatma Gandhi and his famous quote is of Dhan Academy's front gate. We also visited Kallikudi Block to meet villagers and see the social change they have undergone using DHAN’s Community Banking model and Water Conservation. Monumental lessons!
From Ernakulam, we moved to Cochin for Navy attachment. We had seen the Indian army for a week at Kupwara in Srinagar, we had also visited Hakimpet Airforce Station to see the many kinds of aeroplanes of Indian Air Force.

And now with this two days long attachment with SOUTHERN NAVAL COMMAND at Cochin, our basic exposure to Indian Armed Forces is complete!

At Naval Command, we saw the Navigation and Direction School, took a round of all the maintenance, stared with admiration at the the aircrafts of Indian Naval Air Branch.

More interestingly, we spent almost an entire day at Sea in the ship INS Sujata, observing the training modules of new recruits in Navy, their lifestyles at sea, take off from and landing of Helicopter on Naval Ship.

A unique experience.
Diary Entry 21

Visited the famous Meenakshi Amman temple yesterday. The temple is at least 1400 years old. Meenakshi is actually one form of Goddess Durga, and God Shiva here is known as Sundareswara.

There is a beautiful legend behind this temple. A girl named Tadaatagai was born here with the abnormality of having three breasts. But undeterred by her abnormality, and unfettered by public opinion, she became a great warrior! She went ahead conquering the three worlds. By the time of coronation she fell in love with God Shiva. Love cured her abnormalities! Through her spirited achievements she acquired the status of Goddess Durga.

Since then Madurai is said to be presided by that girl, now named Meenakshi - {Fish Eyed Lady, 🐟, alluding to her acquired beauty and aura } and Sundareswara - {the handsomest God, Shiva}.

Some interesting angles in this legend:-
1. It is the mark of high standards of civilization that allows in its legends women the role of warriors and rulers. It challenges the social attitude of considering woman the weaker sex.

2. God doesn't cure her abnormalities, LOVE does!

3. God is within every beating heart. One can uplift himself or herself through nobility and realization of this truth.

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We also visited the "Hall of Thousand Pillars", which now contains the temple museum. The bronze Natraja statue is possible from Chola period.

And then as usual ..courtesy call to Collector, dinner hosted by Collector, and farewell. The farewell gift given by Collector Sri K.Veer Raghava Rao and his family is a beautiful photo-frame of Goddess Meenakshi.

An interesting evening!
It was an honour to meet Honourable Chief Minister of Puducherry Sri V. Narayanasamy. He has also been Union Minister of DoPT (Department of Personnel and Training, Delhi), and it was interesting to hear nuggets of wisdom from him on Indian Administrative Service.
Lakshadweep islands attachment. Met the honourable Administrator of Lakshadweep. And the Bangaram Island is easily the most beautiful place I have visited so far in my life. Tried all the water sports there. The Scuba Dive opened new vista, .. Something one can not fathom till he or she has seen the life at the bottom of sea. Mighty proud 😊
Union Territory of Puducherry is really a small Territory. Uniquely Beautiful though it is, administrative challenges in Puducherry includes managing the fender population, and dealing with soft hand the French cultural legacy.

The nearby Auroville for example is a distinct legal entity, and despite Supreme Court verdict permitting government interference, it is not really carried out lest the aura gets robbed off. People from all over the world flock to Puducherry Aurbindo Aashram mainly on the quest of spiritualism, and this give Puducherry the outlook of being most cosmopolitan place in India.

As part of the Bharat Darshan attachment here, we called on on the Chief Secretary of Puducherry and Director General of Puducherry. We also met chief minister about which I have posted earlier. The dinner hosted by Chief Secretary, Puducherry in the beautiful Le Pondy resort is one of the nicest memories of Bharat Darshan.
Diary Entry 25

At National Museum, New Delhi.

The golden casket in background is one of the "most AMAZING part" of Indian history. It contains the bones and other relics of Lord BUDDHA (. It gives me GOOSEBUMPS to think that the most miraculous person of India, the originator of such brilliant philosophies was indeed a real person and walked this earth in muscles and bones 2600 years back!! And his bones...the MOST - SACRED - TREASURE for Buddhism religion is lying there just a few feet away!!

Today, literally,... बुद्धों शरणम् गच्छामि !!! 😊😊
Today with visit of National Museum, the 50 days long Bharat Darshan journey of 2016 batch IAS probationers came to an end. There are many attachments about which I could not maintain diary: National Security Guards, National Disaster Response Force, National Civil Defence College, our visit to National Police Academy, Hyderabad, visit to National Academy of Direct Taxes etc. It’s not that they were any less interesting…simply that, Bharat Darshan becomes hectic at times and even trying to write down the feelings feel like too much of a task.

Anyway, here this beautiful chapter of my life ends!

Bharat Darshan…the journey ends.
Or has it just begun!!??