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An ex-journalist retraces the steps of a Chinese pilgrim's 7th century AD trek to India in a bid to make sense of her own peripatetic life, reports **PARVATHI NAYAR**

“... CHINA had ensnared me. I fell for it like a teenage girl falls for an older man,” writes Indian-born author and former journalist Mishi Saran in her book *Chasing the Monk's Shadow: A Journey in the Footsteps of Xuanzang*.

Being caught between the twin cultures of India and China is an issue that comes up during our interview as well. While Saran, dressed in a lovely cotton sari, looks every inch an Indian, you are quite aware that her bubbly sharing of ideas could easily have been done in Mandarin, a language she reads and writes as well.

Born in India in 1968, Saran left 10 years later to live in Switzerland and Indonesia, then studied in the United States where she was so captivated by the Chinese language and culture that she moved to Hong Kong. There, she freelanced for publications like the *Financial Times* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and worked for Reuters news agency. “I was reporting on commodities and getting bored with the tyranny of news reporting. You realise that after a point markets go up and guess what, they come down again.”

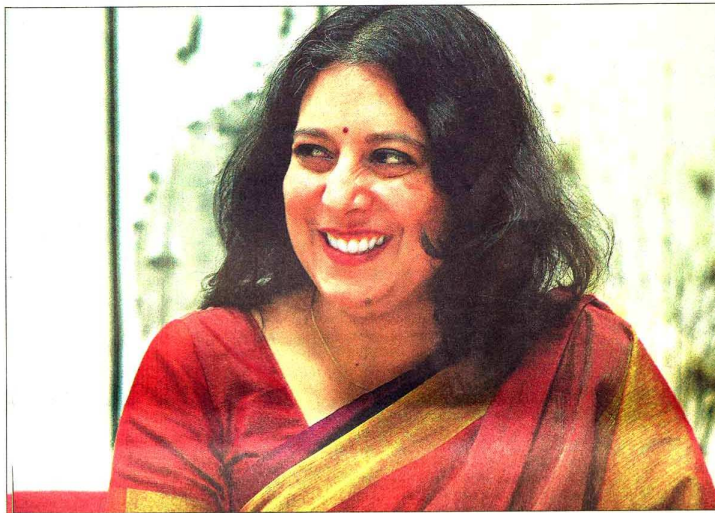
She felt restless and torn in many directions, but eventually, this very need to make sense of a dual identity was responsible for the creation of *Monk's Shadow*.

On January 19, 1999 – she remembers the date – over drinks with friends at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong, she had this brainwave of retracing the steps of someone in history who was her opposite, in that he came from China but was deeply interested in India.

This would be Chinese monk Xuanzang who, in the seventh century AD, undertook an epic journey to India and back that lasted 18 years. Some 1,400 years later, Saran decided to retrace Xuanzang's footsteps through China and Central Asia, through the Buddhist sites and now-vanished kingdoms in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Xuanzang's aim was to study Buddhist philosophy from the Indian masters; Saran's goal was to make sense of her own peripatetic life.

The planning took a while, and luckily she won travel fellowships from her *alma mater* Wellesley College and the Hong Kong Government Arts Development Council. Saran started her travels in May 2000 at the city of Luoyang where Xuanzang grew up; her journey ended in August 2001 when she returned home to Hong Kong.



JOHN HENG



Epic tale: Saran's journey took her to China and Central Asia, through Buddhist sites and now-vanished kingdoms in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where she saw ancient artworks. (Left) Limestone stele depicting Buddha, Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya

for the true teachings of Buddha took him on an amazing journey to his ultimate destination – Nalanda.

Saran adds, in turn: “Nalanda was the goal – and fulcrum – of Xuanzang's travels. The great university at Nalanda was a centre of high learning, a magnet for scholars from all over the world.” She also shares how a statue of Buddha from the Wei dynasty – one of the many rare sculptures and artefacts at the exhibition – reminds her of the cave statues at Luoyang, and transports her back to the beginning of her journey.

The adventurous aspect of these travels, no doubt, inspired Saran to write parts of *Monk's Shadow* as – fact-based – fiction, where she allows her imagination to picture what the monk was feeling and thinking. No surprise then, that Saran, who currently lives in Shanghai with her husband Scott Keller, is working on a novel, a modern story set in India. Her adventurous travels may be over for now, but as she writes at the end of her book: “My journey in the steps of the monk lived in me ... coating the insides of my mind.”

On The Nalanda Trail, till Mar 23 at ACM, 1 Empress Place; admission charges \$10 (adult)/\$5 (concession)

Interaction & Practice, a conference in conjunction with the exhibition is on Jan 19 – 20 at ACM. For more information, call 6332 3284 or email nhb_acm@nhb.gov.sg

En route, she had as her travelling companions “Xuanzang's own travelogue as well as a biography about him. I always intended to write a book about my travels and had a framework in mind, of moving back and forth in time between Xuanzang's journey and mine.”

Part of the reason Saran is in town was to give a talk at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) –

where our interview is being conducted – as her book ties in perfectly with an ongoing exhibition there on Buddhist art titled *On the Nalanda Trail*. ACM director Dr Kenson Kwok explains that the exhibition “traces the spread of Buddhism from India to China and South-east Asia through the travels of famous Chinese pilgrims. One such key figure was Xuanzang, whose quest