

# 15th century India comes alive

**Pallavi Smart**

Have you had a hidden desire to travel back in time and understand the roots of this land? Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) – formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India – is showcasing 15th century India at an exhibition of Italian traveller and diarist Ludovico de Varthema's pictorial manuscripts on his exhaustive journey across the Orient.

Titled 'Voyage to India of Ludovico de Varthema (1470 – 1518?)', the exhibition chronicles Varthema's departure from Venice in 1502 and his tour across the entire western coast of India, after crossing Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and Persia. According to information provided by education officer of the museum, Bilwa Kulkarni, Varthema went to places



In his journey across India, Italian traveller and diarist Ludovico de Varthema visited places like Khambat, Chaul, Goa, Mangalore, Calicut, Cochin, Sri Lanka and Burma before finally reaching Java

like Khambat, Chaul, Goa, Mangalore, Calicut, Cochin, Sri Lanka and Burma before finally reaching Java. He returned to Italy in 1508, after which he compiled his writings. The resulting book was published in Rome in 1510.

Kulkarni said, "The singularity of Varthema's work consists not only in its chronological account of

coastal India, but also in the figure of the protagonist who, in his own words, travelled for pleasure without any commercial or military interests."

She continued, "However exclusive and curious be the stories narrated in the book by Varthema, without the help of images, they would not have held the same fas-

ination for viewers."

The CSMVS is presenting this exhibition produced by National Archives in Rome in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute, New Delhi.

*The exhibition will be open to the public from October 8 to October 22, between 10.15am and 6pm. There is no extra fee for the exhibition*

# A Roman exhibition in Mumbai

HT Correspondent

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**MUMBAI:** In December last year, Dr Ishrat Syed, a city-based surgeon, captured the silhouette of a woman carrying firewood on his camera early one morning.

On returning to the city, Dr Syed realised that the photograph taken along the coastline of Diu, bore striking resemblances to the description of the Indian coastline in Italian travel writer, Ludovico de Varthema's book, *Itinerary*. The book, which recorded Varthema's extensive travels across India, was published in Rome in 1510.

Dr Syed maintains that the scenic beauty of the Diu coastline has not changed over the past five centuries.

"According to Varthema's book, Indian women ventured out of their homes to collect firewood for cooking even then," said Dr Syed, who is exhibiting his photographs at a fortnight-



■ Pages of the illuminated manuscript, *Itinerary*, written by 16th century Italian writer Ludovico de Varthema. The book talks about his experiences in India. CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ VASTU SANGRAHALAYA

long exhibition, 'Persistence of Memory: How Travel Bookends History', in the Premchand Roychand gallery at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya starting on Saturday. The exhibition has been curated by Dr Kalpana Swaminathan and Dr Syed.

Across the exhibition hall, there will be another exhibition of passages and photographs

produced by the National Archives in Rome when Ludovico de Varthema's book. The second exhibition is titled *Voyage to India of Ludovico de Varthema (1470 - 1518)*. "Varthema visited India between 1502 and 1508. The book (*Itinerary*) talks about Varthema's experiences in India," said Roberto Bertilaccio, cultural attaché with the Italian embassy

## WHAT'S ON DISPLAY

**VOYAGE TO INDIA OF LUDOVICO DE VARTHEMA (1470 - 1518) AND PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY: HOW TRAVEL BOOKENDS HISTORY'**

**DATE:** October 8 to 23

**VENUE:** Premchand Roychand gallery, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya



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The movies being screened include the French animated movie KiriKou, Wild Beasts and The Kid.  
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# A MODERN JOURNEY BACK IN TIME



Catch a glimpse of life in 16th century India through Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema's illustrated manuscript and re-trace the journey in the present through Dr Ishrat Syed's photographs

## EXHIBITION

**SOMA DAS**

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The concept of time travel has inspired countless novels and films but rarely has it actually been practised. The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya attempts to do that by juxtaposing two exhibitions — Voyage to India of Ludovico de Varthema and Persistence of Memory by Dr Ishrat Syed.

### A first look of India

Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema's book, Itinerary, was published in Rome in 1510 and featured an account of his travels through 'Oriental lands'. Varthema had visited the continent at a time when the Portuguese were carrying out expansion plans in the Indian Ocean. After leaving Venice in 1502, he crossed Egypt and Persia to come to India where he traversed the western coast from Khambat, Chaul, Goa, Mangalore and Cochin to Sri Lanka, Burma (present-day Myanmar) and Java (in Indonesia). He published Itinerary in 1510.

His account is colourful and unique, especially since he was a traveller who roamed for pleasure without commercial or military interest. His works are considered to be a meeting point of two distinct cultures with barely any connection to each other as

India was yet untouched by European presence.

While there were no images in the book, an illustrated manuscript describing the same places Varthema visited was found conserved in the Casanatense Library of Rome, in a book entitled *Figurae variae Asiae et Africae*. The book was a success and was translated into 50 languages including Latin, German, Dutch, Spanish and French.

According to Dr Roberto Bertilaccio, a lecturer of Italian at the University of Mumbai, "Itinerary was a landmark book. It offered Europeans a glimpse of life in India; the popular occupations, common habits and lifestyle of its people. Varthema also has a certain purity of insight since he was unattached to any particular sect or community and would spend time in cities to actually understand the people. Interestingly, the illustrations are believed to have been made by an anonymous Portuguese artist though some historians believe it was done by an Italian. The manuscript's imagery is precise and beautiful; there is so much detailing in each image which makes it fascinating."

The De Varthema exhibition is produced by National Archives in Rome under the aegis of the SpiceRoute initiative of UNESCO.

### Old meets new

If you want a present-day perspective of the same events, you can check out The Persistence of Memory: How Travel Bookends



An illustration of Ludovico de Varthema's narrative



The Portal and The Girl (Right) by Ishrat Syed

History. Curated by Dr Ishrat Syed and Kalpana Swaminathan (who jointly write under the name Kalpish Ratna), it features photographs of Varthema's route as taken by Dr Syed.

"Being a medical historian I was researching manuscripts about the rise of Mahamari (epidemic) in Bombay which happened after the arrival of foreigners (Vasco da Gama arrived in 1498). That's when I came across these narrative accounts. I wanted to show the difference between de

Varthema's times and how modern industrial development has brought about changes," he says.

As a small part of the research for his book *Palimpsest*, Dr Syed re-traced the journey and went from Mumbai to Goa, Diu and Daman to Dadra Nagar Haveli and back to Mumbai. "History is almost always through the western eye; they came, saw and wrote. But I wanted to add an Indian voice to the narrative," he adds. Strangely, it was often easily possible for Dr Syed to recognise the places depicted in the 500-year-old accounts as rural areas had been left relatively untouched over the centuries.

Summing up the exhibition, Swaminathan says, "While there may be a change in landscape, the land remains as a witness and helps recover memories that may have been wiped out."

**FROM** October 8 to October 22,  
10.15 pm to 6 pm  
**AT** Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj  
Vastu Sangrahalaya, Fort.  
**CALL** 22844484