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This language is meant for roadside romances with a short vocabulary and not IT professionals with a long resume. Girls especially should refrain from using it or they will be stuck with a beard, bad luck and in some cases, debt. Despite all these frequent warnings, at least 400 Indians will tell you, through experience, that it is a good idea to whistle. Among these are people who have managed to whistle their way through heavy traffic, boring meetings and unnerving job interviews, without losing money or gaining unnatural facial hair.

For over six years now, the members of the Indian Whistlers Association (IWA), a registered forum comprising former bathroom whistlers from all over India, have been insisting that whistling is more than a mating call. Over years of practise, these members have now graduated to uninhibited outdoor whistling renditions of entire songs, ranging from Western classical to fast Bollywood numbers, depending on which style their

annual worldwide competition of whistlers which was pre-dominantly held in the whistling capital of the USA, Louisburg. "But when we heard that it was coming closer home to China this year, we didn't want to miss the opportunity to represent India," says 22-year-old Rigveda Deshpandey, founder of the IWA, referring to the foursome, who will be paying from their own pockets to attend the convention. "We are hoping to put India on the global whistling map and increase awareness regarding whistling as an art form," says Deshpandey, a sound engineer, whose career choice itself was prompted by this childhood passion.

In some countries, says Mumbai's Manoj Karam, there are schools dedicated to whistling. "It is even a legitimate profession," muses Karam, who heads an IT company and — besides attracting strange glances on his way to work — whistles in ad jingles. At the convention, Karam will present classical Hindi numbers like *Kuhu Kuhu* and *Mere Dolna*. "Whistling is now almost like breathing to me," confesses Karam, who has won numerous trophies for his gift that unflinchingly makes for great living room conversations with visitors. To the uninitiated, Karam explains the importance of 'mouth chemistry' and 'breath control.' It's a tough art form, which requires the mouth to be moist, lips supple, throat hydrated and lungs pumped up, he tells them. In his various shows, the 45-year-old, who is also the west zone head of the IWA, actively encourages the audience to participate by exercising their lung power.

In a recent TV talent show, in fact, Karam recalls members of the IWA presenting a small



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C SURESH KUMAR



LIP SERVICE
(From left) Rigveda Deshpandey, Jagat Tarkas and Dhivya Soundari will whistle both classical and western songs in China

lungs support. As compulsive whistle-blowers, it is in the nature of these passionate members to constantly lament the negative perception of whistling in their country, talk fondly of places like Oaxaca in Mexico where whistling is a language and dream of the day when their hobby will be recognised as an art form, part of the wind section of the orchestra perhaps.

To fulfill this longstanding dream, four members — Dhivya Soundari, Rigveda Deshpandey, Jagat Tarkas and Manoj Karam — will fly to China next week. Recently, they blew into their respective computer mikes and uploaded the resulting rhythm on a website. It was their audition for the International Whistlers Convention, an

skit, where whistling was described as a "dangerous stunt that should be tried at home". It was a conscious effort to change the popular perception of the hobby — a change, which according to Jagat Tarkas of Chennai, is inevitable. "Just like the movies. People used to think the industry was bad, but now everyone wants to act," says Tarkas, who has recently released his album of whistling renditions of his idol Mohammed Rafi's songs titled *Flute Without Bamboo*. Even in the International convention at Qindgdao in China, which has three parts to it — allied (where participants can showcase whistling along with other talents), classical and popular, Tarkas will whistle classical Mohammed Rafi

songs. Chennai's Dhivya Soundari, the only woman in the entourage going to China, will be coaxing her lungs to do something they're not used to — reach the crescendo of an opera singer. The Tamilian, who practises the blow-in method of whistling, the toughest among all the forms — including the blow-out, teeth, finger, roof and warble methods — has mostly whistled Tamil songs of her idol A R Rahman in her various shows. But a piece from Rossini's *Largo-Al-Factotum*, she believes, challenging as it is, will help mark her presence in the midst of established international whistlers with years of professional training.

Eventually, of course, the plan of the Indian Whistlers Association, which already has a *Limca Book of Records* entry to its credit, is to "hold such a convention in India", Dhivya reveals. But till then, this 28-year-old woman who has dealt with enough raised eyebrows in conservative Chennai, is happy busting myths about the art form. Recently, while browsing through an electronics store for headphones, Dhivya's prowess at whistling stunned a salesman. "I didn't know girls could whistle," he said, cheekily. "Well they can," Dhivya shot back. "And that's why I am going to China next week," she added, blowing her own, well, whistle. ■

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The whistlers

For over six years, they have been playing an invisible flute with their lungs and fighting for its status as an art form in the country. Next week, four of these compulsive whistlers will show off their version of mouth organs in a global whistling competition in China

The budding brigade

Their love for flowers goes beyond the ordinary. This floral community doesn't just discuss buds and blossoms — it has launched India's first all-flower website

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Flower children would be an apt name for them. But they aren't anything like the wild communes of doped-out hippies from the 60s with whom you may try to find a link. They are a group of enthusiastic individuals from different corners of the country and diverse walks of life who have just one thing in common — they are all anthomaniacs, or to put it simply, crazy about flowers. And their one-of-its-kind website on flowers in India — flowersofindia.net — is proof of their obsession for nature's beautiful creations.

It all started when Tabish Qureshi, a physicist at the Jamia Millia Islamia with a moderate interest in flowers and trees, met Thingnam Girija, a flower enthusiast from Manipur and a student of psychology at the same university. Says Qureshi, "In Manipur, most kids know the names of flowers and can tell you which ones smell good, which ones are poisonous... Girija too could name a number of flowers, both the wild and the garden variety. As we got talking, we found that there were no good books on Indian flowers, and information on the web was abysmal. So we decided that the only way to ensure that adequate information was available on the net was to create something on our own." Consequently, they created a site in 2005.

Today, the Flowers of India (FOI) community is indeed a 'caravan of flower-crazy people'. Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi's couplet on the site best describes the group's effort — *Mein akela hi chala tha, jaanibe manzil magar, log*



HIGH AMBITION: (Above) Prashant Awale tries to get a perfect shot of a flower cluster; (right) Tabish Qureshi and Thingnam Girija on a flower-hunting excursion in the Valley of Flowers

saath aate gaye aur kaarvaan banta gaya (I started alone towards the goal/ but people kept joining and it slowly turned into a caravan). And the numbers have since been growing. There are flower-hunters who travel to various parts of the country and photograph the local flora, which is then posted on the site. Then there are assorted groups of enthusiasts like IT professionals, physicists, school students, engineers, botanists, and even a bureaucrat. Many of them are avid trekkers and, surprisingly, entire families who often turn their hill-station vacations into a flower-hunting trip. So caught up are they with their passion that it is not uncommon to find a lady hollering at her husband to stop the car in the middle of nowhere because she's spotted a peony flower somewhere!

For some, the decision to join the community was a



coincidence. Dinesh Valke, who works with IBM, stumbled upon the site while searching for the name of a flower. He loved the idea that just one click of the mouse could give him access to a mini-encyclopaedia on such a niche topic. "My interest in flowers has often spurred me to explore the area within a radius of 100-200 km from Mumbai.

Once I found this site, I also started contributing my research work to it. Now, whenever I get the time, I drive out in search of flowers," says Valke. Needless to say, his hobby has now turned into an all-consuming passion.

Joining this blossoming bandwagon of like-minded individuals is Shaista Ahmad, a student pursuing her PhD in statistical physics. Physics and botany would make for an unlikely partnership, but for Ahmad, her new-found association with flowers has given her its own spinoffs.

Nobody gets paid for any contribution. Yet photographers and researchers are keen to update the site whenever they can

Apart from getting instant knowledge about a flower's vital stats, the self-appointed PR for the website has been busy creating flower communities on social networking sites so that other people can locate it too. "I have made so many friends, many of them botanists, who now help me identify flowers," says Ahmad, whose weekends are reserved for flower-hunting 'excursions' with friends.

Then there is Prashant Awale, an instrumentation engineer, who has been trekking in the Sahyadri hills for the past 20 years. "Dinesh (Valke) told me about the site and later introduced me to Tabish. Since I had such a vast stock of photographs of flowers, I felt I should share it with others," he says.

So, what drives this community? Not money. Funds, the mainstay of all such sites, are refused. FOI does not even accept advertisements. Explains Qureshi, "You can't put value on knowledge, so a website imparting such information must come free as well." Nobody gets paid for any contribution. Yet photographers and researchers are keen to update the site whenever they can. All they seek is a credit line for their photographs and the right caption to identify the flowers. With their numbers growing, the passionate anthomaniacs certainly have reason to cheer. ■

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