

The Kite Flying Festival

Alice Trembour

A Waldorf kindergarten teacher from Takoma Park, Maryland is spending a year in India with her family. She sends beautiful descriptive missives relating the strange and wonderful world in which they are living. This is an excerpt from a recent letter.

On January 14 and 15 the entire state of Gujarat comes to a halt each year for its kite flying festival, called Uttrayin. We learned eventually that this event falls on a Hindu festival day, but everyone was pretty vague about the exact nature of this one because they were paying far more attention to flying kites. People come from all over the world to compete in kite flying in one of the stadiums in town, but we thought that sounded too much like going to see the fireworks on the mall in Washington, D.C. on the 4th of July along with the rest of the country, so we celebrated the day by having lunch with friends instead. Hina's mother had made the meal, which is traditionally built around a hearty stew of eggplant, beans, and lots of masala, or spices and flavorings, called undia. As we arrived, we took off our shoes in the apartment, and I got a tour of the different dishes in the meal from Hina's mother, while everyone else went up on the roof to fly kites. When we went to the roof, we were in the blazing sun with about 15 other young people who were all flying kites to the sound of loud tapes of Indian pop songs playing on a cassette player. All around us close by and as far as our eyes could see there were people flying kites on their roofs and terraces in the sun. You don't need a lot of space. When you get good enough you can loft a kite and fly it from a few square feet of balcony. Kite flying in India is also -as with everything else – extremely competitive, with the kite strings rubbed with neon-colored paint that has glass dust in it. If your kite crosses someone else's kite string, you pull back and forth on your string to cut through the other one before it cuts through yours.

When it was time for lunch, we all sat on the living room floor and ate together with our fingers from large stainless steel plates, drinking Coca Cola and chatting. The food was magnificent. The meal ended with a dessert traditionally served at Uttrayin, called jelebi. It's a saffron-colored translucent coil of deep-fried dough that takes three days to make because it is fermented. It's very sweet, but it has a slight tang, which made me never want to stop eating it. After lunch we went kite flying on the roof terrace again. The sight of all the other 4 million people in this town engaging in the same joyful activity we were doing had greater spiritual significance for me than other festivals I've participated in at home.

At 4 p.m. that day I was taking the train to Bhuj for my trip to Kutch, and Hina's mother packed me a tiffin box with pun and jelebi. As we drove through the city to the station and as the train slowly passed through Ahmedabad on its way west, everyone everywhere was flying kites. All the rooftops were full of people, and the streets, vacant lots, garbage heaps, and slum courtyards were vibrating with small and large bodies, their heads and arms extended skyward, flying kites. Some children ran alongside the train, expertly flying their kites, and waving and shouting to us.