

Even for a person from Delhi, the traffic is horrendous; and this in the middle of the day on a weekend. One can only imagine what it must be like at rush hour on weekdays. The super highway from the airport of course lulls you into complacency about the absence of chaos and clutter which are hallmarks of any metro in India. But as soon as one enters Bangalore, the road clogs up. The airport itself is very impressive. Modern, functional, and most importantly, unlike the humongous monstrosity in Delhi, pretty human in scale.

It takes us about an hour and half to get out from the city. We are on our way to Mysore and then onwards to Coorg. Our driver is a local Kannadiga whose defining characteristic is his amazing ability to neither listen nor understand what one is telling him in English or Hindi. Plus he has a very serious demeanor. Since I could not get his name despite several attempts, and given his personality, let us call him Rajnikant.

The road to Mysore is pretty decent and there seems to be continuous habitation all along the way. We try to tell Rajnikant that we need to stop for some tea but he continues driving assuring us by sign language and some sort of English that there is a very good place just a few miles down the road.

Finally after stopping at this recommended place, which turns out to have rude waiters, dirty loos, lousy service and bad food, we are on our way. Trying to avoid any further "misinterpretations" of what we want, I lay out the plan for the next few days. I casually ask the driver if he is familiar with the area where we intend to go and the route etc. Though he doesn't say anything, his manner suggests that he thinks I am an idiot if I can even think of asking such a stupid question!

We would be staying the night at Mysore and since Brindavan Gardens are on the way to Mysore, we decide to go there. Adjoining the Krishnarajsagar dam on the river Cauvery, these are supposed to be truly stupendous, especially at night. The road to the gardens from the main highway is pretty awful. After about 10 kilometers we finally spot the lights of the famous terraced garden. However, the road, which by now is only an undivided two laned, is completely blocked with literally hundreds of vehicles. Shri Rajnikant though seems to know another way and soon we are in the parking lot.

The entrance to the garden is a zoo! Thousands of children on school trips, forming two lines are trooping in. Add to that the hordes of tourists (this being the long Christmas weekend) from various parts of Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala. Getting into the gardens turns out to be a breeze compared with what one encounters inside. There is no place to walk, leave alone sit back and enjoy the spectacular lights and fountains etc. Thinking that maybe taking a boat ride would be less claustrophobic, I manage to get to a roadside vendor selling some corn and ask him if this is the place from where one gets the boat. Without even looking up from his phone to answer this simple yes/no question, he angrily tells me that I should ask at the enquiry counter! So much for the stereotype of the non-aggressive, polite and docile "madraasi" that is prevalent in our parts of the country!

However, driving out from the parking lot is not a simple affair either. The two lane entrance road to the garden is blocked with traffic coming from both sides plus the hundreds of parked busses! And I had always thought that it is only the brash North Indians who have a proclivity (and stupidity) to block both the lanes while waiting for a railway crossing to open!

After inching our way out for about an hour, we are back on the road to Mysore. I tell Rajnikant about the hotel we need to go to and ask him if he knows the way. Once again, his manner conveys that it is too trivial for him. Sure enough on reaching the outskirts, it becomes evident that he has no clue and is totally lost. Since the phones have no signal, I suggest to him that he might want to stop and ask the way. This is totally ignored.

Finally, at a red light, Rajnikant does lower his window and asks for directions from a motorcyclist and we are on our way. But wait- the motorcyclist had mentioned that we need to turn right while here we are turning left?! My telling him that he needs to turn right is also totally ignored till we encounter a dead-end about 3 kilometers ahead. At which point the car is sheepishly turned around and we proceed in the correct direction.

The hotel, a small heritage hotel is in what seems like the center of town on JLB road. JLB as in Jhansi Laxmi Bai road! Why the usual order is reversed I never found out. The rooms are nice- old fashioned, large and comfortable. The only other guests in the place seem to be a large party of retired Europeans who are having a leisurely dinner in the open air courtyard restaurant.

Next morning, the thought of once again encountering the thousands of school kids at the Mysore Palace makes us decide that we will proceed directly to Coorg. Our final destination is a small homestay in South Coorg, but we decide to first go to North Coorg to visit Beylkuppa, a small hamlet near Kushalnagar. Beylkuppa is the site of a large Tibetan settlement.

The place to visit is the Namdroling Monastery. The road leading to the settlement is a narrow single lane one which is flanked by large tracts of land with social forestry. The road has large flags and festoons welcoming the Dalai Lama to the hamlet. He had been there a couple of days earlier.

Beylkuppa is the largest Tibetan settlement in the country apart from Dharamsala. Tibetans were first settled here when they came from Tibet in the early sixties, attracted no doubt by the salubrious climate of the place. The market has the standard Tibetan curio and Art shops and small restaurants selling Tibetan food. Interestingly though, unlike Mcleodganj, the place is not crawling with new Age Buddhists from the West in their quest for spiritual enlightenment. Nevertheless, there are many tourists as is evident from the mini buses and cars in the parking lot.

The monastery is absolutely stupendous. The main prayer hall has three large, 40 feet tall statues of the Buddha and other figures of the Buddhist pantheon. The golden statues are awe inspiring in their size and exquisite detail. The walls and the ceiling are decorated with extremely intricate paintings depicting the life of Buddha. The paintings, in the traditional Tibetan style and colours, are truly magnificent. However, the hordes of visitors of all ages, inspired by our tech savvy Prime Minister seem to be the brand ambassadors of the “Selfie with the Buddha” campaign. The statues and the wall paintings are nothing more than a pretty backdrop for their selfies. It is amazing how everyone, from teenagers to young couples with toddlers is only interested in finding interesting backdrops for their selfies to be posted promptly on Facebook or Instagram. Some have even come armed with that magnificently irritating contraption, the selfie stick!

We proceed to the parking lot to go and find a place to eat. In one corner of the lot, there is a small Tibetan shop selling tea and soft drinks. However, the important thing for most visitors is that the portly shopkeeper is also running a paid toilet! The ladies toilet has three rates prominently displayed: Toilet- Rs 2/, Toilet with face wash and dress change-Rs 5/-, Bath-Rs 10/-! The gents toilet for some reason has only three- the face wash is missing. Not for nothing is Karnataka known as a market friendly state! Even the person taking care of the shoes inside the Monastery has a fixed rate of Rs 2/- per pair of shoes. There is another interesting sign posted next to the rate list on the toilet wall- “Cooking in the toilet is not allowed”! This I find absolutely amazing since given the strict religious injunctions in our country, I cannot imagine anyone even thinking of cooking inside a toilet!

After some lunch at a Tibetan restaurant, we are on our way to our destination in South Coorg. Rajnikant suggests that we go to the District headquarters of Kodagu (Coorg) district Madikeri, some 30 kilometers to the West since that has an Onkareshwar temple which is good. However, we are in no mood to brave the hustle bustle of the largest town in the district. The weather is gorgeous and the landscape enthralling- rolling hills and atleast in some parts, dense forests.

There is however, a minor problem- Rajnikant, once again has no clue where he is going and despite my requesting him, he refuses to stop and ask for directions. We take a narrow forest road for about 5 kilometers till he realizes that this is not leading anywhere. He turns around and then stops at a tea stall to get some directions and we are finally on our way.

We are heading to a small coffee estate almost on the Kerala border in the south of Coorg, some 120 kilometers from Madikeri. This region of Coorg is relatively less well known as most of the tourists head for North Coorg in the region around Madikeri and Taalkaveri (the source of the river Kaveri). The drive from Kushalnagar is very scenic. Coorg is on the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats and the rolling hills and greenery has given it the moniker “Scotland of the East”.

The forest that we are driving through is dense and we pass small hamlets on the way. Apart from the state highways which are well maintained, the other roads are not terribly good. The road meanders through the forest and after that through coffee estates. The sight of bright red coffee fruit as well as many wild flowers on both sides of the roads is a memorable experience.

After a 3 hour drive and several instances of getting lost courtesy the supreme though misplaced self-confidence of Rajnikant, we reach the Turtle Pond. Set on a hill, the homestay is a small coffee estate- about 24 acres, which is considered small in these parts- the neighbouring estate is more than a thousand acres. The staying arrangements are fairly basic though very comfortable.

The estate is basically a coffee plantation together with a few trees of oranges, areca nut (supari), and cardamom. On the tall and thin supari trees are climbing vines of black pepper. It is coffee harvesting season and I see men, women and children picking coffee amongst the bushes. It is difficult to imagine how this is done since the height of the bushes is barely 4 feet from the ground.

The homestay has two log cabins as well as two modern constructed rooms. We choose to stay in the cabin which turns out to be a mistake since the sloping roof is so low that either you lie down or sit- standing is not an option!

The estate, like almost all others, is on an incline in the valley. The Brahmagiri range forms the backdrop and it is refreshing to see that the hillsides are still green unlike those in Garhwal which have been denuded. The greenery, not just on the estates or the hills but also the wild growth next to the roads, is quite amazing. The soil in Coorg is red sandy loam soil, a combination of sand, clay and silt is considered to be very fertile. Couple that with the fact that it rains heavily. The average annual rainfall in Coorg is around 300 cm - just to put that in perspective, the figure for Delhi is around 60cm. And in Coorg, all the rain essentially falls in the months of July and August. In fact, the caretaker of the homestay tells me that during those months, it is impossible to even get out of the house and in fact all the soil on the inclines which are not planted washes away. The coffee bushes and the trees of course prevent the erosion.

Our first excursion is to Irupu falls which is a waterfall in the Brahmagiri hills. This fresh water cascade is reached after a short trek up the trail in the Brahmagiri nature reserve. At the entry, next to the parking lot is a Shiva temple and a shop selling offerings for the temple. The parking lot also has a post office- Kurchi Post office PIN 571217! I am very impressed since there doesn't seem to be much of custom here, either of the local folk from Kurchi village or tourists around. I venture in to see a lone woman busy filling some registers. She tells me that she has another colleague in this one room post office. I found similar one room post offices in Nagarhole and Wayanad National Parks. One can't but be impressed with the reach and the penetration of the Indian state- and wonder what the

purveyors of cutting back of the state would say about the presence of these utterly unprofitable and yet crucial operations in remote places.

The falls are pretty spectacular- water plunging into a 170 meter rock gorge. A crowd of high school girls are enjoying sitting on the rocks and dipping their feet in the cold water while another bunch of testosterone driven teenagers try to impress them by climbing on very slippery rocks. The jungle is dense and as the signs tell us, has several animal species including the tiger and the leopard. It is also the home to the endangered lion tailed macaque of which, the sign says, only about 3000 survive in the world.

Nagarhole National Park is about 5 kilometers away and we arrive there at 2.30 for the 3.00 bus safari. The word safari of course brings to mind images (courtesy National Geographic and Animal Planet) of a vehicle with glass roofs and large glass windows where animals frolic on top of the vehicle etc. Alas this was not to be- we get the last seats on the safari bus which seems to be a discarded state transport bus. We are about to depart on the hour long adventure when another gentleman appropriately attired for the jungle safari with a hat and a large protruding camera lens comes and sits with us. I politely inform him that the bus has no more capacity and he needs to wait for the next bus and it would be uncomfortable for us to share our cramped seats with him for an hour. To this, one gets a response which is familiar to anyone who has travelled during the day on a train in India, "please adjust"!

The bus is rickety, hugely polluting, makes an awful racket, has broken windows, and broken seats. The hour long ride through the jungle is extremely uncomfortable and when one is not avoiding getting hurt by the sharp broken seat-back or the window glass, one notices a few deer, a couple of peacocks and one langur.

The next day we go for the safari at the neighbouring Wayanad wildlife sanctuary. This seems more organized and not knowing what to expect, I line up for the tickets an hour in advance. There are already about 10 people ahead of me- mostly foreign tourists and that ubiquitous breed of migratory species, the NRI who migrates every December to his homeland. The NRIs can be easily spotted- most of the males, irrespective of their age will be wearing T-shirts and shorts with the all-important waist band with a pouch carrying their passports and credit cards. The counter opens and the line starts moving. And then it stops for a long time. It turns out that the NRI ahead of me has got into an argument with the ticket seller. The entry fees for the sanctuary are different for Indians and foreigners. The NRI looks no different than any one of us, modulo the shorts and T-shirt. However, in a spirit of Honest-Abe, he volunteers to the ticket counter the information that he not a foreigner but has an Overseas Indian Card. This, as expected, throws the official at the counter into a tizzy- the rules talk about Indians and foreigners but make no mention of OICs! There follows a long discussion of who is an Indian and whether it means an Indian passport holder etc. This goes on for about 15 minutes before it is resolved that the OIC is an Indian and things move on.

Inside the toilet at the ticket counter, I see a very unusual sight- the urinals each have a mug next to them. And then I realize that I am now in Kerala and this area has a large Muslim population. The religious injunctions about personal hygiene make it incumbent to have these contraptions. Interestingly public toilets in North India, even in areas with a majority Muslim population, don't have this convenience.

The lungi wearing driver of our vehicle, a new Mahindra jeep, is not very talkative. The drive through the jungle this time is a little more comfortable though we don't seem many animals because of the afternoon heat. I notice an amazing example of appropriate technology- in the back of the jeep are two sub-woofers for the music system. The sub-woofers are basically 2, 10 liter plastic jars of Fevicol in which the driver had fitted two ordinary speakers!

On our way back to the estate, we stop at the small hamlet of Kutta to pick up some bread etc. The bazaar has the standard collection of shops as in any local bazaar which caters to a rural hinterland- plastic utensils, small eating shops, grocery stores and cloth merchants. And here for the first time I see a booze shop being advertised as a Brandy Shop!

The ride back to Bangalore the following day is uneventful. Wise from our earlier experience, we are carrying a packed lunch which we eat at a roadside eatery where Rajnikant eats his lunch. For some reason, most of the eateries on the way advertise themselves as Tiffanies as in Tiffin and not Tiffany's!

The drive from the outskirts to our hotel in Bangalore is as expected horrendous. The sheer density of traffic and the metro construction have created so many bottlenecks that it takes us around 90 minutes to cover the last 20 kilometers into Bangalore. Maybe after the sylvan surroundings of Coorg, this is a good reminder of the reality which awaits us in Delhi.