

## NAINITAL

The Ranikhet Express arrives at Kathgodam early. So before setting out for Nainital, I thought I would have a cup of coffee. Of course, I should have known better! I was given Nescafe instant coffee in a kullad! The diktat of the Rail Mantri is absolute and immediate! There are no plastic cups to be seen anywhere.

The "shared" taxi to Nainital has two honeymooning couples. One from Modiland and the other from Jaipur. The 35-kilometer journey begins and the taxi driver, obviously in a hurry to complete the trip is racing on roads that are narrow and winding. But the condition of the roads is fairly good. I have always wondered why the roads in the Kumaon region are always well maintained while those in the Garhwal regions are in a pathetic state.

The very-much-in-love couples are busy with themselves while I admire the hills to save them and myself embarrassment! This must be the MTV effect because they seem to be having no problems exhibiting intimacy! A few years ago, the most one could expect of honeymooners was holding hands on the Mall Road!

The hills are fabulous- lush green and huge. The fecundity of nature is really seen in the hills right after the rains. There are flowers and plants growing out of nowhere! The colors of the small flowers on the hillside, the tall pine and silver oak giving way to oak as one climbs- the effect is heavenly.

The taxi driver after some haggling agrees to leave me at the University Guest House. I have come to Nainital for a meeting. The Guest House is scenically set in the middle of a forest. It is a new and hence horrendous structure of concrete. The chowkidar, a sleepy looking guy who as I found out, never knocks before entering your room and is a terrible cook, lets me into a VIP room!

The room is typical- the worst colored curtains and bedspreads and horrendous sofas. The sofas, I soon discovered had been ordered by the dozen because I saw about 40 of them in the lobby! Maybe some official's relative had a furniture shop that needed some Keynesian assistance! No expense had been spared and yet the geyser and the flush were non-functional.

Since the meeting was in the late morning, I decided to take a walk. The forest around the guesthouse was beautiful and the staff quarters are scattered in the forest clearings. The main building of the University is a drab looking one. Like almost any similar building anywhere, the corridors have no light, the loos are non functional and stinking while the files are scattered all over the corridors. The corridors are crowded with students trying to get a duplicate marksheet, roll number etc.

The meeting is over and I go for some sightseeing. The lake is overflowing and has a fair number of boats with honeymooners. I try to spot my co-travelers but soon realize that all of them look alike! The women with heavy jewelry and make-up and the mandatory sindoor while the men are wearing new clothes, new shoes and sporting a new watch!

I take a taxi to take me to Kilbury, a place about 10 km above Nainital. The driver Anwar is a pretty well informed guy. He gives us a running commentary on everything- In the manner of a guide who knows everything, he tells us how the hill of Kilbury fell down some 50 years ago and filled up the northern end of the lake. Mid way up, there are two people with telescopes and a gun. I could understand the telescope for a better view of the hills but an air gun? Then I spotted two rows of Bisleri bottles hanging between trees. Apparently you could practice marksmanship here at the side of the road at 7500 ft!

Anwar then takes us to another lake called Khurpatal on the way to Kaladungi. On the way he points out a village on the hill far away and tells us that all of Nainital's sewage goes there. And for good measure adds that the same village also supplies all of Nainital's vegetables. Sewage is good for vegetables and last year there was a cauliflower that weighed 150 kgs! When someone expresses disbelief, Anwar takes offence and avers that it was in the newspapers!

It is time for me to head back to Kathgodam. Anwar puts me on a "shared" Sumo this time. 10 people packed into a Sumo, with very loud music of T-series Kishore Kumar clones and a driver wearing a New York Yankees cap. The driver stops at a wayside dhaba and I spot a strange looking tree. When I ask the owner what it is called, he yells to an old man sitting and smoking a bidi on the roadside. The old man tells me it is called Mariposa Acacia and goes on to name all the other trees on the hillside! I am completely floored! It turns out that he is the man who had planted these trees 35 years ago when he worked in the Forest Dept.

The Kathgodam station is deserted. It is still some time before the train comes in. I notice the passenger train being shunted. The effect of Godhra on Indian Railways is evident- every bogie now has an emergency window, clearly marked and without the bars. I wander to the tea stall wanting to have a cold drink. And guess what I got? Fountain Pepsi in a kullad!