

## SIKKIM

The flight to Bagdogra is full. I have been told by a friend to look out for Everest on the left side, just before the descent to Bagdogra. But the distant hills are merging with the clouds and hence, in a Rorschach test of sorts, my wife and I try and discern the peaks! The drive from Bagdogra to Gangtok is nice, climbing along the fast flowing Teesta River from 400 ft to 5800 ft in about 4 hours. The young Sikkimese driving the Tata Sumo seems to be still a high school student. But then, as I found out, looks are deceptive. All the cab drivers in Sikkim look as if they have just finished school!

The next day, we hire a taxi for "10-point local sightseeing". The first stop is the famous Rumtek monastery. As soon as we reach there, we get a preview of things to come- there are more than 100 taxis already parked there! And barring a couple, all of them are carrying Bengali tourists! The Bengalis, as everyone knows, are the people with the most wanderlust- they are everywhere! And the hawkers seem to have understood this. Every single tourist spot in Sikkim has a "jhaal-moori wala" sitting outside catering to the insatiable hunger that the Bengalis have for their favourite snack.

The monastery is heavily guarded by the Army and ITBP- presumably to stop Karmapa Lama to come here from Dharamsala. The novice lamas are playing around the main courtyard, much like children in a school during the lunch break. . The only incongruous thing about the place is the presence of several young women, fashionably dressed in jeans. These women seem to be living there, though that seems hard to believe.

The "10-point local sightseeing" is a sham since there is not that much to see in Gangtok. The next day we go to Tsango lake- a beautiful lake enroute the famous Nathula pass. The lake is crystal clear and as expected, teeming with Bengalis- this time appropriately clad in their monkey caps and jackets! The high point of the trip, apart from the sheer beauty of the place was the yaks! Huge, hirsute creatures with colourful "sweaters" on their horns, in one case advertising, a la Govinda, "Yak No. 1"! Dutifully, everyone takes a picture sitting atop the yaks, though some adventurous tourists take a yak ride around the lake.

We can't go to Nathula and Baba Mandir because it will soon be dark and then it is difficult to drive on these roads. Coming back, we come across an artillery regiment having firing practise with field guns. It is Dusshera today and the wives of the officers are having a "field" day firing the huge guns which make an unbelievable noise, especially at 13000 feet! The shells go and hit the distant mountains and one hears the "boom" about 10 seconds after the initial retort. This kind of field practise is of course, par for the course for the jawans there. Sitting at 13000 feet in biting cold, with a minimum of amenities ( though, there is a UTI bank ATM at the army unit nearby!), one can't grudge them their amusements.

Nathula pass is the place where the Indian and the Chinese army are literally in eyeball contact. Baba Mandir, I am told by an army jawan from Rewari, is the place honouring Baba, a devout Sikh jawan. He was coming back from patrolling duty with his company when he got buried in a landslide. His companions could not find him but a few days later, the subedar had a dream in which Baba enjoined him to go to the exact place where he was buried and construct a memorial for him.

The thing which strikes one is that Gangtok is actually very orderly considering the number of tourists. Everywhere there are signs of how many taxis can park, for how long and so on. Even in front of the roadside tyre repair shop, there is a sign which says "only 2 cars tyre repair at a time- By order, Sikkim Police"!!! And it seems that the people actually respect these signs, unlike say, Mussorie or Shimla!!

The trip to the "Cottage Emporium" which is really the sales outlet of the State Handicraft Board is along expected lines. The shelves are empty, the sales staff not interested in selling you anything, the stuff that is available is overpriced and of shoddy quality. We buy the usual tankhas and wood carvings which come packed in newspapers.

Interestingly, the two things banned in Sikkim are pan masala( gutka) and polythene bags!! This makes the place much cleaner, though sadly, the proliferation of Kurkure and Uncle Chips packets spoils the scene to some extent. But still, it is a relief not to see hillsides littered with blue coloured polythene bags or to find Shikhar gutka packets along every inch of the road.

What is not banned is liquor- there must be more liquor shops in Sikkim per capita (total population 4 lakhs!) than anywhere in the world! They are everywhere- from the main market of Gangtok to a remote hamlet of maybe 100 people. The interesting thing is their timings- 7 am to 8 pm! Why anyone would want to buy alcohol at 7 am is not clear to me, but then I actually saw someone picking up a bottle of Honey Bee brandy at 7 in the morning while returning from my morning walk!

The signage on the trucks is unusual too- they do not have "Horn Please OK Tata" on their rear. Rather, in an interesting nativization, they have "AWAAZ DO"! The Border Road Organisation (BRO) which maintains the National Highway 31A from Siliguri to Gangtok and beyond, has of course loads of signs along the road- most of them are enjoining the reckless driver to be slow and enjoy the scenic beauty("This is not rally, enjoy the valley"(sic)). Some are outright Stalinist- " Roads are National Property- Respect Them" and the interesting " From Kanchenjunga to Kanyakumari- India is one", this one replacing the traditional " From Kashmir to Kanyakumari....." -maybe because of local sentiments (Kanchenjunga is respected here as a goddess) or to be avoid painting the signs again a few years later! But the most interesting sign was on the way to Yumthang, Sikkim's "Mini Switzerland", about 8 hours from Gangtok. Here, the BRO, respecting Bengali sentiments, tells you, "No Horry, No Worry"!