

21 – 22 Sept 2015

By the time this chronicle becomes public some of its contents that were held for propriety will already be known. Beats me why women want inane things to be kept secret till they happen. I am not designed to decipher such things...

To begin with the beginning, the plans for this tour were made immediately after Renate's visit to Mahabaleshwar in April 2015. Renate Deuring went back to California after a stop for Sunday-darshan in Mumbai. Those who know her, and know Sunday-darshan, will also know why...

On May 3, she booked a seat on Lufthansa 455 to land on 21 September at IGI Delhi. An itinerary was drawn for a tour from 22 September to 7 October 2015; We planned to cover the areas in Uttaranchal that were missed in the previous two visits – Badkot, Janaki Chetti, Yamunotri, Tehri, Kirti Nagar, Guptakashi, Kedarnath, Chopta, Tungnath, Nainital (Sherwood) and Raamnagar (Corbett).

Preparations happened between May 3, and September 21, 2015 – including purchases of several items like jackets, sweaters, backpacks etc. A shawl for AB for his birthday was shipped from Bengaluru to California. Renate wanted to embroider it by herself. It reached her after a little hiccup due to the weekend traffic of Silicon Valley. After exchange of some polite mails the executive of the courier service promised to place a facility over Santa Cruz to avoid similar instances.

There was her trip to Germany – and a biking expedition in scenic Bodensee, upstream of the Rhine - and back to California; and again within three weeks she was on a flight from San Francisco to Delhi via Frankfurt. Sometimes I feel Renate has an extra travel gene that defies logic.

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On 21 September 2015, my AI 404 landed at Delhi from Bengaluru at 2330 hrs, an hour before her Lufthansa 455 flew in from Frankfurt; if mine had delayed a bit we might have met in the air.

We had planned to take the Shatabdi Express rail way from Delhi to Haridwar leaving at 0645, but eventually dropped the idea after seeing images of the crowds in it on the net. With what seemed like a few tons of luggage that we were carrying, it was unlikely that we would make it in a crowded train with all of it intact. So Happy Singh was called from Haridwar to pick us up at Delhi - (His real name is Sandeep Kumar Thakur; he is neither Singh nor happy; and he is not from Uttaranchal, he is from a town in Himachal Pradesh. I trust him because I know more about him than what many do not; also because he has legal commercial permits to drive tourists in Uttaranchal. Nonetheless, I had made a deal with a registered travel agency and hired Happy through them, just to be on the safer side).

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I came out of the domestic arrivals and stepped into a sweltering Delhi night. The transition from a chill Ooty to a humid Delhi was stifling, to say the least. I felt like a jelly fish embraced by an unusually romantic octopus.

I bought a bottle of refrigerated mineral water and poured it all over my head. The sudden cold threw me into a dizzying orbit; I was not sure if my soul and body were still in contact. I took a deep breath to confirm and opened my eyes in relief.

I walked back to the international exit to wait for Renate. There were some pleasant faces appearing in the usually dull exit; so the interval was not as trying as could have been otherwise. Renate was delayed at her port to get her Visa at the counters and also lug two large suitcases off the belt.

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From the time when she saw me at the Pune Railway station in April, my appearance has undergone a radical change. I now look like a bewildered bear that forgot to shave last summer.

If I sprang my hairy head out of the crowd suddenly, she was likely to rise towards the ceiling. Airport ceilings are quite high in general; she wouldn't hit it at one going but there was a fair chance she could. A safer way, I figured, was to wave from a distance before she was out of the exit; that would also give her a chance to turn back and run.

All was well though; apparently she decided to take it in her stride and walked out of the port smiling, without showing any sign of trepidation.

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After the customary greetings, we loaded our baggage in the car, a Toyota Innova, UK 3762 and settled in the back for a four hour road journey to Haridwar. I have heard of jet lag on many occasions. This was the first time I was able to see the actual impact. Renate was wide awake at midnight like a nocturnal spirit looking for breakfast, while I was drowsy dim like a foggy night lamp.

Unlike my previous journeys on this road, this one did not have the same appeal. The night may have been one of the reasons. The rows of eucalyptus and banyans, the sugarcane farms, the ruminating buffaloes and the fresh air of the wet plains were wrapped in a placid ubiquitous darkness. Or perhaps I am getting too old to find them romantic anymore.

Familiarity breeds contempt, said someone. I hope that is not true. I hope my romance with the Himalayan ranges lasts till my senses can savour.

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We reached Hotel Park Grand, Haridwar, at sunrise, checked into separate rooms, and after a bit of TV which works on me like a sedative, I fell asleep.

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After freshening up and a snack we went for a walk to the city. Renate wanted to activate her SIM card, top it up and also test her credit card for instant cash. The weather was hot and I was restless in my canvas shoes. A few more minutes in the package and my feet would have broken out into pink blisters.

We took a bicycle rickshaw to the Ganga ghat. I got a pair of airy flip-flops from a hawker on the walkway. We went down the steps to immerse our feet in the water. Ganga flows at the speed of rapids in full flow, except that she is several times wider and deeper.

Renate forgot to remove her shoes. Someone pointed out; she removed her shoes and sat beside me with our feet in the flowing icy water. It is customary to remove shoes before stepping into Ganga. But I was amused no less. It seemed like devotion had lost its bearings.

We returned to the hotel in another bicycle rickshaw. After another nap, we went to the center of the town on the banks of Ganga. The rickshaw dropped us by the footbridge. We had tea at a roadside stall.

A beat constable was staring at Renate as if she was a spectre from one of the parables. I asked the cop if he would have tea with us. He blinked and shook his head.

Renate called her friend Magdalena and spoke in fluent German, which hurts the ear if you are eavesdropping and cannot catch a word sideways.

The tea seller said that the evening prayers at Ganga were about to commence and we should hurry. We walked across the bridge to the temple premises.

We stopped at one of the shops to buy a large leaf-vessel of flowers with a small wick lamp in it for the pooja and archana.

As we approach the temple, on the right are pedestals for those who wish to offer prayers for departed souls. Further up is the temple of King Bhagiratha. We chose to go to the stepped railing near the temple.

Renate lighted the lamp and released it in the leaf-vessel in Ganga. I don't know if she prays or not, but she has her own solemn moment when she does this thing. I have seen her do it before in Hrishikesh during a previous visit.

We returned through the narrow and crowded shopping lane. I bought some Janevu and a better print of Ved Vyasa's Kedar Khand of the Skand Puraan. Renate didn't buy anything. Her plan was to shop in Hirshikesh tomorrow. Besides, she was trying to stay awake. The jet lag was showing up at odd moments. I wonder how it feels to walk upright in a hazy daze; the body doing all the right moves on auto-pilot without communicating upstairs.

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We had a roadside paani-puri and chaat, and returned to the hotel.

The plan for tomorrow was to go to a local dress designer in the morning and give Renate's measures to make a Garhwali dress. They could courier it to Nainital or Corbett where we would pick it up in the last segment of the tour. Renate has quite a collection of Indian outfits now from Punjab, Mysore, Gujarat, Maharashtra, to now Uttaranchal.

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23 Sept 2015

Woke up before sunrise as usual and got ready; the breakfast in the restaurant was mixed Indian, continental and western. I ordered masala dosa, tea and idli. Renate tasted a bit of each and settled for Xoffee.

We checked out and drove to the dress designers. They were waiting for us already. The girls in the shop showed a variety of designs that had a mix of Garhwarli, Kumaoni and other pahaadi styles. I let Renate tango with the girls and went out for a walk.

It was too early for the town to open. There were a few tea stalls for early risers. I had a special tea made in fresh buffalo milk while testing the net connection on my mobile. It was a bit dodgy but chalega.

Returned to the shop and found that Renate had picked a good Uttaraanchali design and the girls offered to provide traditional jewellery that goes with it. I requested another casual wear for her in the same budget. They agreed so quickly that I thought my negotiating skills were too generous; Surely it was not my charm, I know my limits.

I conceded anyway; it is not polite to discuss money with beautiful girls. They promised to dispatch the finished dress to Raamnagar (Corbett), in time for us to receive it when we reached there on 5th October.

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We drove out of Haridwar after a brief stop to buy a SIM card for Magdalena. This was not on my checklist and in the mix-up I forgot to buy the Rudraksha sapling for Kedar.

We checked into our hotel at Hrishikesh around noon, freshened up and walked to the German Bakery for lunch and then to the Lakshman Jhula, the suspension bridge where Renate's extended family of rhesus monkeys dwell.

The menu of the German Bakery said they do not serve meat. The world knows that they serve the best meat anywhere in Uttaraanchal. Well, so much for laws and lawmakers. I don't eat meat anyway, so it was merely a curious thought, nothing missionary. There are too many happenings in the world that have nothing to do with me. I use my individuality more to distance myself than associate.

I ordered a soup, rice, curry and tea. Renate asked for something that sounded Italian or German with tea. The service at the German Bakery was embarrassing. The boy served everything in the reverse order - Tea, soup, curry and rice. I was annoyed but you can't do much when you are sitting with a German in a joint that is called German Bakery. And besides, Renate paid the bill. I am trained to accept free with a smile.

After the quick meal, we sauntered to the bridge where some real action awaited.

Dense low clouds hovered above us, preparing to shed their contents. There were no monkeys at first sight. The icy breeze over Ganga was a signal to all naked creatures to seek shelter. We were well-dressed, so we ignored the omen.

We ambled across towards the other end. Renate, disregarding a nagging jet lag asking her to go to bed, moved on with determination.

On our left at the other end was a little palm-sized monkey holding the cable of the bridge with its feet, the arms were folded on its chest either from the cold or an injury.

Renate always carries a red jholi hanging from her shoulder that contains all her immediate needs. Now it also had biscuits for the monkeys along with her iPhone. I dropped back a few steps as we came near the monkey. I am averse to socializing with most animals except canines.

Renate gave the monkey a biscuit, which it tried to bite but couldn't and threw away. She offered it another and at the same time asking me to take a snap.

I was so distracted that instead of using my own camera I asked her for hers. She took her phone from the bag with her right hand and offered me a biscuit with her left. Before she offered the phone to the monkey, I asked her to give me the phone.

Then she stretched her left hand to pat the monkey and I began to take snaps. If she had patted it a little harder, it would have lost balance and landed in the rapid Ganga below.

Things are never as they seem. A second later, two adult monkeys swung from the top of the anchor block, sliding down the cable and lurching on Renate from either side. The mother monkey grabbed at her left hand, the other one hung on her right. My instant response was to slap the mother with my own left. But it didn't work. As I swiped across, she ducked in time and I hit Renate on her upper arm. Renate squared her elbow in reaction and the mother monkey bit her, pulling the hand away from the baby on the cable.

It all happened in a blink. The monkeys and Renate stepped away from each other like contestants in a boxing ring. I pulled Renate back and we withdrew. The monkeys seemed to approve that and a truce was agreed by both parties.

As if on cue, announcing the end of the scene, it began to rain...

We walked back drenched to the hotel, changed into dry clothes and went out again in search of a doctor to examine the monkey's teeth marks on her elbow. The doctors did what is mandated in their code. They prescribed a full course of anti-rabies vaccine beginning with an immediate shot.

We went from there to the ancient Bharat temple. This was one of the highlights of this visit to Hrishikesh for me. Bharat, brother of Lord Raam, is the original name of our nation before it was renamed Hindustan by Moghuls and later India by the Brits. There is a small enclave in it with idols from

the sixth century on display. Photography is allowed as all of them are carved in stone and there is no risk of damage.

We spent a little time inside. There is a rare artwork depicting the definition of heaven as per the scriptures. It is based on Ved Vyasa's writings. It is too elaborate to describe here. I'll save it for a spiritual version of this visit some other time.

We shopped for kurtas in a shop that Renate liked, in the lane towards Raam Jhula. She chose a few and we returned to our hotel.

Renate skipped dinner that night. Her faith in the docility of Indian rhesus monkeys was a bit shaken after the encounter today. But she wouldn't let that dampen her noble spirit. She was going to try the same later with Langurs and Macaques.

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24 Sept 2015

We had no particular plans for the day other than shopping. Our actual tour was to begin tomorrow after we left Hrishikesh. These three days were mainly to get her acclimatized and get over the jet lag.

We walked across the bridge after breakfast and went to the clothes store where she had got some fancy pants last time. They didn't have any more of the same. However, I got a couple of monk shirts.

Renate went by herself in search of an ATM machine and a recharge for her SIM card. This lane has mostly foreigners who come for learning yoga. She was quite safe on her own.

We purchased some kurtas and shawls from another shop and went to the boat station. We hired a motor boat to take us to the white sands upstream of the rapids, where Ganga appears from behind the Neelkanth range for the first time into the plains.

The boatman sped across a strong current and pulled up near the sand. Several rafts with young enthusiasts were drifting with the flow, delighted and thrilled by the experience.

A lone pilgrim was drying his clothes on rocks after a ritual bath. A couple of canines ran up to us hoping for a quick feed. I cuddled one of them. I love dogs; they seem to read my mind. Renate gave them some biscuits which were meant for her beloved monkeys yesterday.

The pilgrim came to me with a medical report in English. He wanted to know what it said. It showed that he was well and fit. I explained to him and he was glad. He was living on forest berries and wild fruits for some time. He had walked all the way from Himachal and walk further to Badri and Kedar. I wished him well and we boarded the boat again.

Renate was weak and uneasy. She requested the boatman to drop us as close to the hotel as possible. She didn't have the energy to walk back from the bridge. We got off by the riverside of the hotel,

climbed up two storeys and took the lift to the ground floor. It is an eight storeyed building with the top floor at the ground level on the side of the mountain.

After a small break, we drove for lunch to a traditional vegetarian restaurant. I ordered a full meal for both. Renate tasted a few dishes and finished with the special dessert called Baasundi.

The view outside from the table was amusing. On a vast patch of open land, the latest Euro IV tourist buses were parked, and large number of domestic animals were grazing around them – horses, buffaloes, cows, pigs, goats and a variety of birds flirting with them; a curious blend of the traditional and innovative.

We decided to go on a long drive to Vashishtha Ashram, about 25 Kms on the road to Badrinath. The last time we had been there, Renate had dozed off on the sands of Ganga listening to my somnolent narration of Vashistha's history. There was a novelty and sparkle about Ganga that were unfamiliar then. I didn't feel the same zest this time.

This time I felt she was there but also somewhere else. Probably jet lag makes you feel in two places at the same time. Or perhaps the Indian rhesus monkey who captured her heart once had returned it in pieces. I am not good at pragmatic diagnosis. So, I let go.

We sat with our feet in the cold running water. Renate took a few snaps, made calls and sent messages on her phone. We discussed something about molecular biology, which not being my subject of choice, I can't recall what it was about.

We went back to the vehicle and drove ahead to a restaurant that we had been to last time. I remember the day because it was the first day of the last cricket match of Sachin Tendulkar at Wankhede, and that remote roadside stall had a radio playing the match. Renate had flown back to Mumbai then and attended the match at Wankhede on the fourth day.

After a quick tea and refreshments, we left to go back to Hrishikesh.

A bit of shopping was still left. We went across the Raam Jhula to look into some of the shops in the ashram lanes. I purchased a crystal ball and a sapatik shivling for friends in Pune. Renate complained of pain in the bowels. We returned by boat to the car park and rushed back to the hotel. Her health deteriorated by the hour; by nightfall she was barely able to stand upright.

But the show had to go on. We went to a well-known joint called Chellaram for dinner. I had a full meal. Renate had a soft drink and a dessert.

We had a long eight hour drive next day to Badkot, our first segment of the tour plan. There were location stops in between. I was hoping that Renate would be well in the morning.

We went to bed all packed to move after sunrise.

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25 Sept 2015

We checked out of the hotel early and headed towards Mussorie via the Dehradun bypass. We climbed across the mountains today and travelled along Yamuna on the other side, meeting Ganga only once more, a few days later, at Tehri on our way to Kedar.

Renate began to nod off almost immediately as we began. It was barely 0900 am. I saw that she was not going to make it up the Yamuna trail in this state. I began to work on plan B. If she collapsed I could medevac her to Delhi from a chopper at Dehradun or Guptakashi. I didn't have many choices.

As we entered the dense forests of the National Park, I suggested that she should sit in front, next to driver's seat. She would get a better view than from the seat behind. I was hoping it would keep her awake somehow.

But it didn't quite work for me. Not only did she sleep all the way till Lakha Mandal, except for lunch and a tea break on the way, but she never came back to the seat in the rear for the rest of the tour. I spent all my time staring out of the car at sights that I had already seen three times earlier and could tell each one before they appeared in my small window.

And ofcourse, in the small breaks that we took every few hours, the conversation would begin with my addiction for smoking and tea.

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We stopped for lunch at a remote dhaba on the top of a hill. The food was excellent, cooked fresh on order by the lady at the stove. I took rotis, rice, vegetable and yoghurt. Renate ate a bite of each. The vegetable was too spicy for her and she doesn't mix yoghurt with it like I do.

We went back to the car and she fell asleep within seconds. I mulled over plan B. There are emergency helipads in all the places, just in case we needed. I decided to wait till tomorrow's visit to Yamunotri and see if her health improved. The next dose of the vaccine was due tomorrow. We had to find a pharmacy and a qualified doctor to administer it.

We stopped a few hours later at a place called Gangnani. A striking feature of this place is the crystal clear water that comes out of the mountain and falls into Yamuna below. Locals believe the water is of Ganga within the body of the range, and hence worshipped so.

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An hour later we entered the old town of Naugaon. I have described it in my chronicle of the earlier visit; the Lakha Mandal, the ruins of the old palace and the cave of tunnels.

We gave a lift to two school kids. The boy's name was Dakshvaan and girl's name was Aashika; both about 8-9 years old, studying in the local school. On my request, the boy recited a shloka in fluent flawless Sanskrit. In my joy, I gave them two of the best Himalayan apples that were meant for Renate.

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We spent over an hour in Lakha Mandal. Renate had another mishap with the animal kingdom; her reflexes were not active enough yet. A rather sturdy male goat with wide horns was following us around the temple. After a photo op with it, I had moved forward with the priest who was guiding us. Renate was lagging a few steps behind. I didn't see what happened exactly but Renate shrieked a moment later. The goat had rammed into her, putting all its weight in the effort. Her left thigh was badly bruised.

It is difficult to say what drew the goat's ire. But the encounter kept Renate awake for the rest of the journey to the tent-camp at Badkot.

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I tried a bit of kabaddi with the young boys in the ancient courtyard of the Pandav brothers; but my muscles are not the same as they were 40 years ago. I gave up after one attempt.

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We reached the Nirvana tent-camp in Badkot by dusk. The camp is located right on the bank of Yamuna, so close to the edge that if the river was in full flood we could float on it with our tents and reach Delhi. I enjoy these tents, surrounded by the humming roll of the river and the shrill chatter of nocturnal insects in the bushes.

I woke up several times in the night. The whole ambience – the mountains, the valley, the river, the calm understanding silence of the forests, the seemingly everlasting life in the air, and the awareness of my own limited existence, wouldn't let me sleep. I didn't want to live these moments to recall them from the past or remember them in the future. I was just there in the present as if there was no tomorrow.

I guess it is a kind of meditation that Buddha did; and in the right setting it happens without any effort.

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26 Sept 2015

Tea, coffee and breakfast were served in the tents by the camp staff. Renate looked in good spirits and I was relieved. We decided that the vaccine could be taken in the evening. We would get to Yamunotri first which takes about 6 to 8 hours.

We drove up to Janaki Chetti, left our vehicle in the parking, and hired two mules for the uphill track of 7 KM. We would return downhill on foot.

Ved Vyasa's Kedar Khand of the Skand Puraan gives a very detailed account of the location. Every peak and dale has a name and particular characteristics.

Yamuna emerges from the glacier further up, through about 25 KM of inaccessible jungle. The range is called Yamuna Uttari Shrinkhalaa, (meaning, North Yamuna range), in the book. On its East is the range that leads to Gomukh, Kedar and Nanda. On its West is the range that leads to Kashmir.

Our mules trudged up along the trail on the right bank of Yamuna. The mountains on the left bank, covered by dense forests, show no signs of men or beasts.

The mules left us a few yards before the hot spring at 7 KM where the temple of Yamunotri is built. We marched up to the spot.

I took a bath in the hot water pond. I am not sure it is a natural hot-water spring like the one at Badri. It doesn't seem like one. The temperature in the rice cooking pit is much higher than the bathing pond which is just a couple of feet away. But there is no point in getting into the technical aspects. Faith overrules everything in pilgrimage sites.

There is a separate pond for women. But Renate was the only westerner in the whole town and was already getting more attention than she could handle. She waited for me to finish and after the usual ritual which is expected of all visitors, we went across to the cascades of the river.

We had a quick snack at a temporary cafe next to the temple and started back on the 7 KM downhill trek.

The walk down was quite uneventful, except that everyone wished Renate 'Jai Maataa Di'; a sense of bonhomie exists among all the pilgrims, and it seemed like a natural instinct to greet Renate who was obviously not a native.

On the way down, Renate showed me a few crows picking food thrown by people, implying that Vyasa's story of Yama and Yami could not be too factually correct. I pointed out to her that there was also no tree or plant which was as old as Vyaas, and neither was the water in Yamuna the same. I was not going to judge Vyaas for love or loathing.

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We returned to the parking in about two hours. I got dropped at the camp and Renate went on to the local hospital to get her vaccine shot. Apparently there was some trouble there. The doctor was not too confident and made the nurse give the injection. The electricity had tripped, there was no generator backup and Renate got the injection in the LED of her mobile phone.

I was way too tired for anything. I had not slept well last night and wanted to rest as soon as possible. We were leaving for Kirti Nagar tomorrow, a stop over before Guptakashi from where we would fly to Kedar two days later.

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I took a chair outside the tent, sat watching the river for a while and nodded off. I was glad Renate had recovered and we could look forward to Kedar in the right spirit. The altitude of Kedar is not as high as Badrinath which she has already visited twice. Kedar is like a small bowl in the high mountains which doesn't circulate the air as much as it does in Badri. The oxygen levels fall rather quickly. We had an

Oxygen cylinder, just in case. Personally I can't stand oxygen from a cylinder, have never needed one; more of this later when we get there.

Renate came back from the hospital in a good mood. She complained about the doctor and the nurse, but it was more in a tone of tolerance than pathos.

We had a sumptuous dinner, she choosing a sweet dish and I hogging the rest on behalf of both of us.

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27 Sept 2015

Renate said I snored last night. I am not sure about that but I slept well. The day was going to be leisurely. We had just one stop at Tehri, and then the night halt at a regular resort hotel in Kirti Nagar where we had separate rooms and WiFi.

We went through an interesting pass in the mountains at a place called Raadi, crossing over from the valley of Yamuna to the valley of Ganga; a common mountain range between them. With two perennial glacial rivers on either side, the mountain is a Shaiva paradise. However, the two rivers do not meet here. Yamuna turns West-South-West towards Himachal, Haryana and enters Delhi, while Ganga goes East-South-East towards Tehri, Hrishikesh and Haridwar. They meet much later in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. So near yet so far.

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We stopped at a restaurant we had been earlier during the last trip on the way to Joshimath. We picked a parcel of lunch, checked our mails and messages and moved on.

We could have taken a shorter route across a suspension bridge, but that would mean missing the Tehri dam, the largest man-made structure on Ganga, and also the most precariously placed in a high risk earthquake zone. At least we have some evidence for future generations that such a thing was actually built once by 21st century engineers. Given the frequency of earthquakes and the sheer height of 1000 meters blocking Ganga, it is unlikely to last long.

Nevertheless, it is a massive structure. Unlike the bearably spread sores of cement houses on the vast green mountain sides, this mammoth pour of concrete stands up like an artificial implant on a surgically amputated lifeline called Ganga.

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We crossed the dam by the wide blacktop road over it, curving away southward from the rising backwaters and turning back again by the mountain side towards North. We took a small stop for me to have tea and Renate to take snaps. The safety and security is pretty good in the area.

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We reached the hotel at Kirti Nagar just in time for dinner. Changed into comfortable clothes, had a light dinner and retired to our rooms. I watched the TV while the phone charged and fell asleep with the lights and everything on.

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28 Sept 2015

After a bit of breakfast we were back on the road towards Agastya Ashram in Rudraprayag. This spot has a particular significance in the history of the proliferation of Aryan settlements in the subcontinent. Agastya was Vashishtha's brother, and a close associate of Vishwamitra who was an intellectual rival of Vashishtha.

Vashishtha was Lord Raam's high priest, and also the first one who wrote a constitution based on the caste system. It is called Dharmasutra. The caste system was designed to phase out races by dividing the population into four castes on the basis of their birth and occupation. This allowed races to mingle and marry into castes instead of the same race. It is introduced as an addendum in the last constellatory of the Rig Ved as a poetic vision in the Purush Sukta. The idea was originally offered by Hrishish Shaunak who was the convener of the 12 yearly meeting of all Hrishis in the Naimisharanya, a forest called Naimish.

Agastya objected to formalising the system; he had married a princess of a tribe in today's Nagpur. Her name was Lopamudra. A conversation between Agastya and Lopamudra is in the very first constellatory of the Rig Ved. She was as brilliant as any of the other Hrishis who envisioned the hymns in the Ved. One of her other names is Kaveri, later given to a river in Karnataka, which is worshipped every year on her day.

The mythical narrative is as follows:

Agastya comes to Rudraprayag with the intention of opening a school. He is surprised to see that there are no Brahmins in the area. He is told by a surviving Brahmin woman and her child that the Rakshas and Pischach in the jungles eat the Brahmins on every no-moon night. Agastya is horrified and furious.

He marches up the mountains and builds a hut in the middle of their colony. The demons decide to teach him a lesson. One of them is made to hide in Agastya's food. After he swallows the food the demon would tear open his stomach and come out, thus killing him in pain.

For rationalists this demon could be any kind of poison.

However, Agastya manages to digest the demon and impresses all the wild folks. He is allowed to stay, open his school and work on his research in the area.

Later, Agastya moved South to Tamilnadu where he wrote the grammar of the Tamil language and also invented many gadgets including an herbal battery to generate electricity. The details are in a book called Agastya Samhita.

To cut a long story short, Agastya did not rest on his work. He returned with armies of Parshuraam and Vishwamitra to attack Vashishtha's forts. Vashishtha eventually killed himself. Nonetheless, his Dharmasutra, constitutions of caste based divisions, continued to be administered by subsequent rulers. There are also constitutions written by Hrishikesh Gautam and Apastambha among others that were an improvement, but the core glossary was retained.

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Renate and I walked up to the temple, which was originally Agastya's home. There is now a Shivling in the room where he lived. Remind me to tell you more about the significance of a Shivling in a departed person's house when I reach Kedar.

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Renate was in a fairly even mood. The jet lag had now caught up with real-time and she was able to see daylight as daylight. The only cause for a possible concern was the monkey bite. I kept an eye on the signs. I mean, she wasn't behaving like a monkey yet. But I don't know much about these things. Maybe the symptoms didn't show till it was too late. You can't tell, can you?

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We left the banks of Ganga and moved to Mandakini, the river that emerges from Kedarnath.

On the way, we stopped at a temple built in the middle of the river; or rather, one that is being re-built now after the catastrophic floods in 2013.

The temple was built as part of an astronomical and astrological exercise. It is one of the three vertices of a geodic equilateral triangle with Kedar at another end and the Nanda peak on the third.

The idol of the temple is that of a goddess. There are many heads of the idol with different expressions. Each head is placed on the idol according to the predictions of the hour; quite an experiment in the days of no GPS imagery.

*

The banks of the Mandakini are now being repaired after she devastated everything in her wake in 2013. I was in Kedar on 13 June 2013. Her glacier at Kedar broke with a cloudburst three days later on 16th June, destroying everything and killing many between Kedarnath and Gauri Kund. Shiva probably decided to clean up after I left.

*

There is a mandatory health check before one is permitted to go to Kedar. We went to the medical center. I was cleared for all routes and manner with a minor recommendation of ORS against my low BP which runs in our family. I am perfectly normal at a BP of 55-80.

However, Renate was given permission to go only by helicopter; no trekking. The doctor said she was showing signs of hypertension, which he thought was perhaps due to travel and sleep deprivation.

I was amused at the irony. Here I was, an incurable smoker and probably one of the main causes of global warming, cleared for all terrain and traffic; and Renate, ever-alert about her fitness, was asked to fly or stay put. A bit unfair, na?

*

We reached the Nirvana tent-camp at Guptakashi near sunset.

The view from the camp is divine. North-North-East is a line of snow-covered peaks of Kedar, glowing off the setting sunshine in the West. A cluster of densely forested valleys and peaks reign below. Mandakini meanders through the mountains like the lifeline of an organic paradise.

A full moon began to ascend before us, smiling and adding more life to the harmony...

Renate asked me to activate the altimeter she had brought from home. We got it started after some trials.

We were at about 2800 meters above MSL. Kedar is at 3400. We had another 600 odd to climb tomorrow, though it wasn't a big deal as there was a helicopter service to do the honors.

There was a family of monkeys in the yard. Renate got her packets of biscuits and ventured out. I sat in my garden chair and watched. She was careful this time. She didn't hand the biscuits to them as she did earlier. Now she threw the biscuits at them just before they could reach her; which was rather reassuring, if you can guess what I was observing.

*

We had a bit of repacking to do. The chopper allows just one bag of about 6 Kgs. The rest of the luggage had to stay in the car till we came back. We packed the minimum requirements including medications.

The night was so serene, peaceful and lively that I was in no mood to sleep. I woke up again within a few hours and sat outside watching the exotic interfaces of natural harmony...

*

29 Sept 2015

At around 0430 past mid-night, I tried to wake up Renate to show her that the snow peaks start shining long before the sunrise. But for those who do not know let me tell you, Renate does not wake up. She is re-born every day.

She came alive at around 0500 am and took a look. One side of the peaks was lighted by the setting moon, the other was blushing pink from the sunrays coming out of somewhere beyond the horizon. The rest of the entire terrain was still dark. She appreciated the view after the first cup of xoffee.

*

We checked out of the camp early and drove to a local clinic to pick up the anti-rabies vaccine which was due tomorrow. We were not sure it was available in the temporary clinics at Kedar. The vaccine was ice-packed to preserve it in transport till we reached.

We reached the port of the Himalayan Heli Services at Guptakashi around 07:15 am. The additional luggage was kept in a hired room nearby and the car parked by the roadside.

At the terminal we were asked to weigh ourselves for the flight master to decide who would sit where in the chopper. I weighed a modest 75 Kgs. Renate was last heard adding and subtracting the weights of her shoes, clothes etc.

*

The ride, though only 6 minutes, was over an impressive view of the valleys of Mandakini. The chopper climbed and veered through the ravines, about a thousand feet above the trekking route below. Kedarnath came in full view as soon as the first mountain was passed.

Straight ahead, spread across the windscreen of the pilot was the Kedar range, dressed in snow and shaped like a sitting Nandi. On the left were the Vasuki peaks and on the right was the Bhairav Mountain.

The Kedar temple is in the middle of the small basin in the mountains. Mandakini flows out of the glacial line behind and splits into two, passing from either side of the temple and becoming one again as she cascades down towards Gauri Kund.

*

The helicopter landed as quickly as it had taken off. We were out in seconds.

I was staggered. This was not the Kedarnath I had seen in 2013. This was a new place.

Hundreds of tents are now erected for pilgrims. There are catering services and bio-something toilets.

But that was not the thing that caught my attention. In 2013, the approach to the temple was a steep climb of about hundred steps through a congested lane. The facade of the temple was barely visible from a distance.

Now, it is at ground level and in full view from far and there are no lanes. The debris from the landslides in 2013 has filled the place by several meters. The boulders that have rolled down are about 2 meters wide and tall.

*

Many thousand people were buried alive in the earth on which I walked. This was a test of my faith. Either I face the truth and live the reality of Shiva in real-time or fake a make-believe divinity unaffected by universal values.

I fall back on my trust in Ved Vyaas. His Kedar Khand describes the principle of Shiv and Shiva in a story format.

Parvati asks Shiva to tell her about Kedarnath.

Shiva says, "Listen, beloved. Kedar is dearer to me than even you are. I shall never leave Kedar. It is a pre-historic as I am; older than the time I imbued Brahma to create life forms and conceive the natural orders. Kedar is where I began the exercise. The most devout of deities find my mystery difficult to unravel. Yet the simplest spirit can easily witness the phenomenon. Nandi and Bhringi stand by my doors, yet even Brahma cannot locate my existence. Why, even you have lived with me in Kedar. Have you forgotten? It is only proper that this divine mystery be kept from Brahma's creations. All those who perish in my presence attain my form. I am Shiv, so is every thing. Like Vishnu among the deities, like Ganga among rivers, like Narad among devotees, like Badri among forests, like a cow among cattle, like knowledgeable Brahmins among humans, like a virtuous wife among women, like a beloved son, like gold among metals, like shuka among munis, like Vyaas among the wise, like Bharat among all nations, like Indra among Kings, like Kuber among the subjects, like Kashi among towns, like Rambha among nymphs, thus is Kedar among all holy sites.

'I'll tell you a parable of the hunter which will imply to you why it is so. A fierce and able hunter traversed the jungles killing several animals and wandered into the forests of Kedar. What he saw amazed him. A snake attacked and killed a frog. The frog instantly turned into Shiv. A tiger killed a deer. The deer turned into Shiv. The hunter thought he was going mad. He struggled to keep his senses. Was he hallucinating? Every animal was turning into Shiv instantly on death. The hunter feared for his own life. He rushed to Narad and asked for help. Narad explained the truth of Shiv to the hunter. Kedar is the illustration of my truth and the reality of life and death.'

*

The pre-vedic period had a custom of burying the dead. The cremation of the dead begins in the latter half of the Rig Ved. The practice was to place a Shivling at the spot where the person departs or his memory is placed. You will find such Shivlings at the Sitavani temple in the Raamnagar forest where Sita delivered the twins Luv and Kush in Valmiki's ashram.

*

And here I was today at Kedar, walking on the corpses of thousands of unaccounted people in the earth under my feet. Where is Shiva; inside the temple in front of me or under my feet amidst the buried? What am I worshipping; a principle, a divinity, a deity or a God?

*

We deposited Renate's vaccine in the clinic for refrigeration. The male-nurse and doctor agreed to administer it tomorrow. Renate had to oblige them later in the evening, when we met the two on the pathway. They took snaps with her for their memoirs.

*

Instead of the tents with common toilets and catering, I opted for rooms with attached toilets in a broken building near the temple. I took separate rooms, but my room had a squatting type toilet while Renate got one with a western commode.

Now, this is something I am particular about. I cannot squat for relieving myself. I know, I know. What did we do before the commode was invented? I have no idea, my dears. I was not born then. I was told by my father that even Kings and Queens in the past had to use squatting type toilets with an attendant holding a bucket of water. Quite embarrassing I think, being watched by someone even if only an attendant. Never mind Kings and Queens. I refuse to squat. And I want my commode where I can sit quietly and brood like a civilised man.

*

After a bit of reluctance, Renate agreed to let me sleep in the extra single bed in one corner of her room. She was probably cursing my quirkiness. But I ignored the moment. There are some things where I draw the line. Stubborn ass, I am. So be it.

*

We dumped our bags in the room and went out for a stroll around the temple to see the aftermath. I checked the altimeter. We were 3384 m above MSL near the temple. Temperature was a pleasant 24 C.

We had a plan to either trek up to the Vasuki Taal tomorrow, which is about 4 KM of steep climb up on the West or climb to the glacier that had collapsed in 2013. The lower ends of the glacial pools are visible from the temple site, but the route is now blocked by a hill of rubble that is left by the landslide. A constable on duty said we could make an escorted trek tomorrow after getting permission from the local station.

*

I took her around the temple where Adi Shankara's Sphatik temple was located before the catastrophe. There is nothing but a mound of rubble now. The large boulder that had blocked the cascading debris from hitting the main temple is about 20 feet from the edge of the platform. It is almost exactly the width of the temple, about six feet high and five feet thick. It must have left a hole the size of a cave in the mountains. However, not all is well with the structure of the temple. Some of the blocks on the right are clearly displaced by the blitz.

A team of artisans were working on the reconstruction of the platform and part of the walls. They worked on the stones with chisels, hammers and threads with amazing accuracy. All the stones were cut to the same size and at perfect right angles. No one needed Pythagoras to teach them the 3:4:5 rule.

*

A priest followed us, offering his services. I promised him that we would do the Sunday darshan tomorrow. However, he was quite persuasive. I agreed for an asthadhyayi pooja which is a short 8 verse worship that is limited to admiration of Shiva.

Goswami Tuslidas says,

न जानामि योगं जपं नैव पूजां, ततोहं सदा सर्वदा शंभु तुभ्यं ॥

[I know not the yoga, nor pooja, but I revere thee Shiva always... (Interpretation mine)]

*

Renate and I did the pooja together. She sat on my right and mimicked my actions. We walked out covered with haldi, kumkum, gandha and flowers. The priest tied threads of the service on our wrists. I purchased some sandalwood ash from another Sadhu, confirming that it did not contain human ash.

A couple of dishevelled Sadhus were offering ash from cremations. Renate wanted to give them something. I said, "No, let's go." She didn't know why till I explained to her over a cup of tea later. I didn't want human ash on me.

*

After paying off the shopkeeper who sold us the pooja material, we went down to the common catering facility for a meal.

The food was good, unlimited and very cheap. Something like that in a five star hotel would have cost 100 Rupees per gram excluding taxes.

There was a dining hall large enough to occupy about 100 persons at a time. A big LED TV was playing satellite TV channels.

*

We spent a few minutes on the make-shift bridge over the Mandakini stream coming from the East of the temple and flowing into the westside stream. The crystal clear ice water deceived the eye. It was impossible to guess the depth of the water.

The weather in the basin changes by the hour. The cold, snow-clad mountains gather clouds like a glass of ice condenses vapor on its surface. As the Sun dipped in the West, the clouds began to float in circles around the steep slopes. Oxygen levels drop quickly in the basin.

*

We returned to our room to rest. Renate was uneasy. The temperature inside the room was a damp 18 C. There was little or no circulation. I opened the window to stabilize the room. Renate pulled her comforters and tried to sleep. Her breath was heavy. Something alike apnoea or altitude sickness, I thought.

By dinner time, she was determined that she could not stand it longer. Her breathing slowed down as she fell asleep and the body forced a deep breath, waking her up. We decided to return to Guptakashi by the first chopper in the morning. It was going to be a long night.

*

30 Sept 2015

I was up in a few hours. At around 0330 past mid-night, I went out for a walk.

The small temple town of a few hundred was fast asleep. A few lights glowed on the pathway to the Bhairav temple. Strings of serial lights draped the facade of the temple like a curtain.

I stepped up on a piece of boulder and almost instantly jumped off. Huge burrowing rodents sprang out from underneath and scurried away to the edge of a small pool of stagnant water.

This was a clear signal for me to leave the place. Unaccounted corpses, rodents and stagnant water in a suffocating low-oxygen atmosphere are a recipe for serious health risk. I walked up to the temple once more and returned to the room to pack up. The service boy brought tea and coffee.

*

The bags were packed. Renate tested the oxygen cylinder. She found it soothing. I took one breath and coughed it out. We smokers' lungs are programmed differently.

*

We paid our dues and walked back to the helipad. On the way, Renate stopped at the clinic and took her vaccine shot.

The chopper ride back to Guptakashi was quick and refreshing. We flew down from 3380 m to ~2800 m in 6 minutes. The morning Sun was warm. Renate instantly felt better and was back to her iPhone checking mails and messages. We had an extra day and night on our hands before our next destination of the snow leopard park in Chopta. We decided to halt in a town called Sitapur at Sonprayag and visit an ancient ritual space called Triyugi Narayan where Shiva and Parvati wedded.

*

We checked into a lodging that is open only for the four months of Kedar season. Pilgrims halt overnight and trek the 22 KM through the valleys to Kedar and return the 22 KM on the same day. They carry their own supplies and cooking aids on their heads. Faith can do wonders.

*

We drove up through the forest to the Triyugi Narayan temple. We got a litre of fresh buffalo milk from a vendor near the access to the temple.

The temple is unlike any other I have seen before. It is a regular ritual spot. The main temple is not a residence. It is too small for an accommodation unlike the homes built by the pandavs during their 14 years of itinerant lives in the forests. The mandaps in the yard are just enough to house the idols in them. Considering the era in which these were built, there was no shortage of space or government ceiling on the size of structures in the high mountains. Yet they limited it to the purpose of performing marriage rituals.

Shiva was married here to Parvati in an elaborate function presided over by Vishnu and Laxmi. The moment is described in many Puraanas and also eulogized by Tulsidas in the Ramcharitmanas.

*

On the mountain opposite is the place called 'Sar-kataa-Ganapati', meaning, 'head-cut-Ganapati'. The story of Ganapati's head being severed by Shiva and replaced by an elephant's is located there.

*

The weather was sunny and warm. We returned to our lodge, rested after lunch and went for a short walk by the road.

The road in the stretch is quite level for about a kilometer, which is uncommon in this part. If you were to ask for directions, the locals would not say turn right or left, they say go up or down the forks. There is no flat surface for rights and lefts.

As we walked the road, I asked Renate why she did not go to the regular tourist spots like Taj Mahal and Goa. In all the last three tours with me, except Hrishikesh, she has visited places where there are either no tourists or barely two or three. In both Yamunotri and Kedar, the entire administration and the inhabitants were conscious of her presence. They were ofcourse proud of her visit and expressed it in various ways.

Besides, I expect it is common in the West to ask anyone who has been to India if they have seen the Taj. They don't seem to know anything more. The Himalayas, in their tourist maps, are facing Nepal and Tibet, and usually refer to the Everest, Yeti and Dalai Lama. Perhaps I am stuck in a time warp and things have changed since the '80s.

Well, Renate didn't respond quite clearly. So I didn't pursue that further.

*

We returned for dinner; the kitchen crew made a special sweet dish from the buffalo milk we had brought. After a light meal we returned to the sitting area, browsed a few channels on the TV, watching AB on a few. That is not unusual. AB gets prime time on almost all the local movie channels.

We planned to leave a bit late tomorrow as the drive to Chopta was not very long but lunch was uncertain after crossing the town enroute which was just about an hour away. We would have lunch in the town, stop at Ukhimath to meet the priest there who is part of the Kedar Committee, and then drive to the camp at Chopta.

*

1 Oct 2015

We left the lodge at noon, had a quick meal in the town and reached Ukhimath by 1500 hrs. The priest turned out to be someone else. The one I was looking for was posted to a location called Madhmeshwar, another location in the Kedar Mandal. It is an old traditional setup. Priests of temples are a part of the local administration and keep a vigil on the law and order in addition to their routine duty of maintaining social harmony.

*

We had a tea break in a small shed. The owner was particularly thrilled to have a foreigner in his shop. One of his sons is in the Garhwal regiment of the Indian army. I didn't find it unusual. At least one member of each family in the mountains serves in the armed forces. Only people in crowded cities believe that peace can be negotiated by merchant trading.

*

We drove into Chopta well before sunset. There were tent-camps and also a permanent building with rooms on the first floor. I switched our deal and took two rooms in the building. We had a stay of two nights here, and Renate had just recovered from health scares at Hirshikesh and Kedar. There was a 7 KM drive and 3 KM trek to Tungnath tomorrow which was almost at ~3300 m, a few less than Kedar. There is an optional climb further up to 3680 m, a spot called Chandra Shila from where all the pilgrimage sites in Uttaranchal are visible.

*

The place where we stayed is called an herbal resort. I don't understand herbs but Renate was able to recognize many of them in the bushes. It is a haven for a variety of jungle birds. We saw one with a bright blue tail longer than its body. It didn't look like a magpie though someone said it was.

We had an early dinner and retired to our rooms.

*

2 Oct 2015

Tung means high. Tungnath is the highest peak among the top five in the Kedar cluster, followed by Kedarnath, Madhmaheswar, Kalpeshwar and Rudranath. The temple is located on a terrace several meters below the actual peak called Chandra Shila.

There is a new herbal research station close to the temple where students can stay during the four months of summer and monsoons. The place is inaccessible during winter.

*

There is one thing about timing that I have learnt from these visits. The highlands have the clearest visibility between Sunrise and noon. The clouds begin to form around mid-day and within a few hours the entire region is enclosed by clouds.

I reached the temple around 1100 hrs on a mule. Renate was feeling good and trekked all the way up from ~2880 to 3280 m. The altitude is the same as where the heli landed in Kedar, but unlike Kedar, Tungnath has open skies and is right on top of the earth with plenty of breathing space. Renate was physically tired but not ill.

*

We did the formal rituals in the temple. The priest was particularly well trained. He recited rare verses from the Atharva and Yaju Ved – the twelve types of fears, their strengths and weaknesses, the remedies, commands and controls. I appreciated his proficiency and donated a little extra. I liked his response.

He said, “We are priests. We recite these for the benefit of those who do not know. I hope they take away the learning and use it in their lives. But that rarely happens. They bring devotion and take back the same devotion. That is good too.”

I said, “Dev Hrishi Narad has placed devotion above all. A few perish in knowledge, most perish in devotion.”

“Are you a priest?” he asked.

I shook my head and said, “No. I’ll perish in this confusion.”

He laughed.

*

Renate took some photographs with the Nandi and the bell. There is always a Nandi guarding the access to Shiva’s temples. No one can worship Shiva without paying respects to Nandi. It is quite symbolic in a way. The Nandis in real life are quite bullish.

*

Chandra Shila was completely covered by clouds and there was no point going further up. Nothing would be visible. After a brief meal of hot noodles and fresh vegetables, we trekked downhill to the car park.

*

We met a few pilgrims from Pune in the hotel. The lady in the group was 83 years old and this was her fifth visit to Kedarnath. She was still able to trek the 22 kms from Gauri Kund to Kedar and the 3 kms of Tungnath. I admired her tenacity.

We discussed some of the legacies that have survived for thousands of years since Vyaas wrote them. She was a good listener and you know I like to talk. So it was more of a discourse than a discussion. The subjects being too vast, we exchanged our phone numbers and agreed to meet in Pune some other time. I left her the copy of Kedar Khand that I had got from Haridwar.

*

The night was a bit noisy. Apart from tourists like us, the resort is also favored by holiday revellers from the plains. A college group of boys and girls partied most of the night. In the morning, although the girls looked quite high, the boys were crawling like zombies.

*

3 Oct 2015

We had one last look at the Himalayan region. This was the end of the tour of the Shivaliks. Our next destination tonight was the Ex-British colonial town of Nainital, which is about 1350 m above MSL, amidst hills; much less than my home in Ooty.

*

Enroute, we stopped to see the Adi Badri shrines; these are the oldest evidence of Vishnu's followers getting access to the Shivalik region. It is a collage of small mandaps with idols of key figures in Vishnu's circle including one for Garud, his vehicle.

*

When the travel bug caught Renate after her retirement, she chose India against all others because of Amitabh Bachchan. From the blog to his gates to his office and inside his house, one thing lead to another till India, and in particular Mumbai and some parts thereof like Juhu, Colaba and Andheri, have become a regular part of her itinerary.

There was no reason to visit Nainital except for visiting the Sherwood school where Amitabh had studied once. I didn't expect it to take as long as it did.

*

We had booked a room of a swanky hotel in the middle of the town. But due to the weekend rush, we were unable to get a second room. So I asked for another hotel with two independent rooms. This was a mistake. The second joint was a new outfit and turned out to be honeymooner's lodge. They did not have a laundry to wash their linen, the housekeeping was shabby and there was no restaurant.

Things were set right after a bit of educated though illiterate altercation. Trust is the first thing that goes out of the window when you step into a town or city. Fresh bed sheets were provided and the rooms cleaned up. I decided to do my laundry at the jungle resort in Corbett where we were assured of better facilities.

*

4 Oct 2015

We freshened up, had breakfast, and went straight to Sherwood not realizing that it was a Sunday. We were politely told by the man at the gates that it was a holiday and there was no staff member to show us around.

We juggled our plans for tomorrow. We could come to the school in the morning and then reach Corbett by lunch or just after. There was no rush. Corbett is a tiger reserve, which is actually a misnomer. Majority of the tigers were killed by Corbett long ago. People now search for non-existent tigers and live on rumoured sightings. We had planned to go on a safari in the evening; so there was enough time to visit Sherwood and still make it to the resort.

*

We decided to walk down the mall road and do some shopping and ATM transactions. This took more than three hours. We got into a bookshop; purchased a few books. My choice for her Renate was Richard Bach's Jonathan Livingstone Seagull.

I wanted to buy a hard copy of the Mein Kempf myself. It is one of those from my collection that was borrowed by a friend in Muscat and never returned. I have read it ofcourse. But Renate objected and I let go. She wondered why it is still selling in India; not accepting that a reader like me reads everything from Aristotle to Hitler and still continues with my own traditions.

*

Renate got a Kashmiri dress material that she proposed to get tailored in Mumbai. We walked back all the way to the car park and had lunch at a kiosk. She got her first non-vegetarian dish called momu after two weeks of cattle feed with me. I chose my usual veggie.

*

We went to a nearby Gurudwar covering our heads, and on the way out of the park stopped to watch a schoolboy's basketball match.

*

As the afternoon was free we took a boat ride in the lake and then a cable car up the eastern hill.

Among other things on the hill is a tree that was originally called a Neelkanth tree; it absorbs toxic chemicals in the air.

There is not much to report from the cable car. After the views from Yamunotri, Badkot, Tehri, Kedar and Tungnath, Nainital looks like an unfinished idea.

*

We returned to the hotel after dark. Renate was running out of energy. She withdrew to her room without dinner, and slept a bit listless.

I ordered dinner in the room which they got from a nearby restaurant, watched TV for a while and fell asleep.

*

5 Oct 2015

We checked out of the hotel and reached Sherwood at around 0930 hrs expecting to be there for an hour or so and head for Corbett. But we didn't leave there till 1300 hrs.

There was a sense of déjà vu as I entered the arched gates of the school. I was reminded of my own days in a mission school in the '70s - the old British ambience, the quiet discipline, the courteous students and the over accentuated English speech of the staff. 'Mereat Quesque Palmam' says the motto of the school in Latin.

*

The chapel next to the assembly ground still has traces of old Victorian architecture. The inclined roof is supported by fluted columns. A large brass bell in a stone portal hangs on a pivot and is used even today to call the assembly.

*

The prayer hall has rows of small varnished benches facing the choir pit. The music teacher Mr. AP. Singh was quite proud of his class. He showed us video clips of their recent performances of Spanish and Scandinavian compositions.

*

The Links Room of archives was a new one. Records of some of the famous alumni of the school are kept on display for visitors. Of them, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw occupies pride of place in the armed forces section on the right.

Amitabh Bachchan is foremost in the memorabilia of the performing arts section with some rare photographs of his childhood, his writings and even a photo of his mother.

*

Senior Master Mr. Hem Pande, a scholar in history and well-read in literature, accompanied us through the archives. We left remarks in the Visitor's Book to show our pleasure.

Mr. Pande walked back to the entrance with us and we discussed various subjects over a cup of tea in the garden restaurant at the gates. His knowledge of both European and Indian history was admirable. We thanked him and left Sherwood around 1300 hrs.

*

The drive to Raamnagar, also called Corbett, after Jim Corbett, one of the British colonist settlers in the 19th century, was unsettling for me. I found the weather too warm and sultry. We climbed down from ~1300 m to less than 500 m; even less than Pune. I was feeling feverish.

But before that we had stopped at Jim Corbett's bungalow, now a museum. It is less than half the size of the British bungalow I spent my childhood in Pune but with the usual frills.

A verandah for a sit-out that I thought is rather small. The verandah in my house was long enough to play cricket. There was a 20 feet square drawing room with a gun cabinet, a store room, a dining area and a detached kitchen; the toilet, about 50 feet away from the house, has been rebuilt. There were three servant quarters in a row block about 100 feet behind the house.

There are some records of his work at Raamnagar displayed on the walls of the drawing room and bedroom. He cleared the forests of tigers, mostly by killing them, and started a cast iron foundry which was his main source of income. He must have been a shrewd dealer. The local villagers found him very useful.

Ironically today, we comb the foliage for tigers where the people once ran away from them.

*

We stopped for a supply of paracetamols at Raamnagar.

The resort is about 20 kms after the town across a small stream. We crossed a massive waste-of-steel bridge. Thousands of tonnes of steel for crossing over a 100 feet stream; reminded me of the Eiffel tower for a moment. Then I thought of Jim Corbett. This bridge must have been used by the cantonment to move heavy loads of iron and steel. It was surely not designed for villagers and cattle to cross over.

*

We reached the resort around 1700 hrs. There was a bit of dismay. The WiFi was limited to the reception area, and even there it was not too good. The laundry service was outsourced. The safari had to be negotiated as the forest officers allowed a limited number of vehicles in the core areas. They didn't want to scare the termites, I guess.

*

I spoke to the resort's managers and arranged for an open 4-wheel drive tomorrow morning in exchange of a little extra tip. He obliged without hesitation.

Sometimes I wonder what these rules mean. And to be honest, we saw only macaques, rhesus monkeys and deer in the wilderness. Rest of the animals appeared only in the stories that the driver narrated.

*

Nonetheless, the air-conditioned suite we got was luxurious. The bath had a tub and a shower. Housekeeping was good.

There was a swimming pool with fountains on the far side, and a good restaurant with a musician on call. My only whinge was the stifling, sultry weather. I was sweating like a pig in an oven. I needed a shower or the pool. But that was not to be.

There was another mile to go before I'd sleep. Renate wanted a particular medicine she found on the net. And it was urgent. I went back to Raamnagar, found a lady doctor and got a strip from her. Without reading the fine print I paid 300 for something that cost a mere 80 INR. But I was glad I found what she asked for. The 4-wheel drive through the dirt tracks in the forest tomorrow was not going to be smooth.

*

6 Oct 2015

We left at around 0530 hrs to be able to enter the restricted area before sunrise. The vehicle had no roof for the passengers in the rear. It was designed especially for jungle rides with high seats and cross bars to hold while we bumped over the ungraded routes.

Incidentally, this was the only segment after Dehradun that Renate sat next to me in the tour. Ofcourse she returned to the seat next to the driver on the way back. He drove at breakneck speed and it was difficult for her to hold her hair and the bar at the same time. Also, she was not exactly in good shape. The medications were taking their toll.

*

The safari was quite uneventful except sightings of a few birds, some macaques and spotted deer which we have seen plenty in many places before. The only distinguishing feature of the forest is that it is of Sal and Teakwood trees and the termites hills are quite a handful.

*

At the other end of the two-hour track is the Sitaavani shrine where Sita gave birth to the twins Luv and Kush in Valmiki's shelter as described in the Ramayan.

*

We came back to the hotel just in time for breakfast. The rest of the day was spent in the room watching AB's Trishul on TV.

The Garhwali dresses from Haridwar arrived by courier. Renate tried them on. The fittings were alright. I was hoping she would wear it to AB's birthday meet. But she chose something less conspicuous.

*

The staff at the hotel reception assured me that the laundry would be delivered by night. We had to leave early tomorrow to reach Noida before noon, drop Renate and be at IGI Delhi before 1330 hrs for my return flight to Bengaluru.

I repacked my luggage to distribute it evenly in three bags. I was not sure if AI would allow it without extra charges; they did fortunately.

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7 Oct 2015

We left early, a bit uncertain about the traffic to Noida. As anticipated things did go wrong; the traffic diversions in Noida delayed us by almost an hour. Renate's anti-rabies shot was also due. She would have to find a doctor in Noida.

We reached Vijji's house at around 1200 hrs; I said hi to Magdalena and Vijji, and left immediately for the Delhi airport.

The flight back from Delhi to Bengaluru was comfortable. I checked into my usual hotel at Richmond road. I had made an open booking, not having decided how many days I proposed to stay.

===== End of section =====