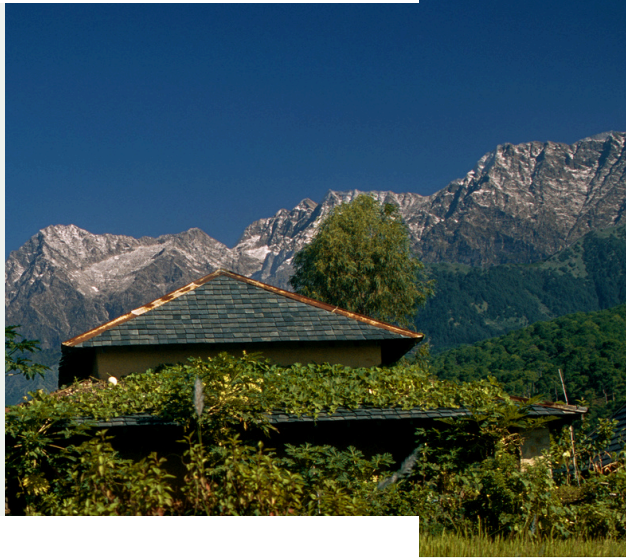


COLOURFUL AND VIBRANT COUNTRY-SIDE

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The usual sightseeing landmarks that one wishes to frequent during a trip to a tourist place are all common knowledge; beautifully worded and enticingly illustrated tourist brochures say it all – routes, climate, places to see in the vicinity. The “fact files” are there to guide you briefly. But there is more to a journey than sight-seeing; it is the colour, the rhythm of life, and the beauty on roadsides that can be a part of your being. The joys as well as hassles of travelling on Indian roads tell much more and stay longer in memory. It was the beauty of a simple farmer woman’s visage that started me on my search for the varied aspects of life during my travels in Kangra this December.

Whenever I think of Kangra, the towering, silvery Dhauladhar stands distinctly before my mind’s eye. Add to the scene an azure sky above, the lush green fields, the gurgling khads or the kuhls (whatever remains of them). This is my idyllic world. This can be the reason enough to send you into Wordsworthian bliss.

If William Wordsworth’s heart could dance with joy at the sight of the golden daffodils beside the lake, I was no less exultant with the indigenous golden-yellow mustard fields beside a tiny well with a petite traditional pulley. It was mid-December, and we were driving through the Kangra Valley bubbling with life and colours.

By and large, winter is a bleak season – grey and brown -- particularly at the high altitudes of Himachal Pradesh with the vegetation gone dry and the snow yet to come; but not so when you are travelling in the mid-hills of Kangra valley, vibrant with life, only that one needs to be receptive to it –twittering birds roosting at the Pong Dam, chirping children at play, the leisurely pace of life and the beauty of humans and nature. It is all so poetic! So, inebriating!

The valley unfolds its mystery with a slow rhythm, reserving the best secrets for those who venture further. I am an ardent admirer of Kangra’s enigmatic appeal, its art, culture and history, the sacred awe of its temples, its deep, unfathomable valleys and the crowning Dhauladhar. Sharing it with family allowed me to encounter and savour it all over again with a bagful of experiences of life.

At one bend we were not certain of the route we had taken; so we stopped to enquire about the road to our destination. A farmer woman working in her field adjacent to the roadside lifted her head when we addressed her. God, what beauty in simplicity, said I, mesmerized. It was a simple face, with a buttery complexion, large black eyes and a large red 'bindi' on her forehead. We marvelled at the confidence with which she gave the required directions.

On another occasion, taking a village road, we enquired of a gentleman, "How is the road?" "Oh, *ticham tich. Ekdam tich!*" (टीचम टीच्च). That was his rustic humour to convey briefly that the road was "A-one". Such jovial people make the drive happy as you tend to enjoy the jokes for a long till you stumble upon something new.

With scanty traffic en route, you are the 'master' of the road. The steering moves effortlessly while you savour the magic of the flat valleys and green fields. But one has to be careful on curves and blow horn sharply because there may be a group of tiny "would-be cricketers," unmindful of the traffic, slamming a ball to a sixer or rushing to catch a soaring ball to triumph. At one isolated spot, we came across a few youngsters playing "*gulli-danda*", an indigenous game that our city-bred kids are now unaware of.

We were now nearing Pong Dam. As the sunset smouldered into its amber glory, a yellow and blue bird, blazing in the golden light of the sun darted from nowhere and perched on a nearby tree just visible enough to give us a glimpse. It was then that I started thinking of colours of life – here was a bazaar, a minuscule bazaar of a minuscule village but it was not dull or drab; it had verve, a life of its own. Rather it was all aglow with the colourful packets of namkeens, pan masala and so on. Near the temples, the shops were stacked with red and yellow – the red of the chunnis and the golden of the tassels, the red of vermilion and the yellow of turmeric.

Crossing bigger bazaars, like those of Kangra town or Mataur bifurcation (which we baptized Mataur Junction) is undiluted fun. The colour of the season seems to be red magenta and orange. Here is a fruit vendor his cart (*rehri*) stacked up to the brim with red apples, golden guavas, green papaya, orange oranges, yellow bananas and brown dates; the clothiers display their variety by hanging the suit pieces. We were intrigued by the ingenuity of one particular shopkeeper whose shop was on the first floor and he had limited scope of decorating his mannequins. He hung it, all decked with the latest attire, from the roof of his shop. Poor mannequin, it dangled in a suicide pose and became a source of mirth.

As if to add more colours to the existing ones, there were the local buses -- deep red, mauve, green and yellow. Some had fancy names – a bus was named "Rajdhani Express with *sadharan kiraya*"; a "Superfast Express" stopped at every nook and corner hailing passengers; another was "New-Luk Bus" which rattled miserably. But that is life in the countryside, and one has to have a subtle sensibility to feel it, to laugh at it and to board the "Express of Life"!

We had taken a temple circuit of Kangra – a pilgrimage of sorts; but the amusing part of life around caught my fancy endlessly: the trifles of life, the trinkets, the colours and the happy-go-lucky people. To spirituality, later – till then, let us hail life as it is – a glorious testimony to the shining moment of Truth!