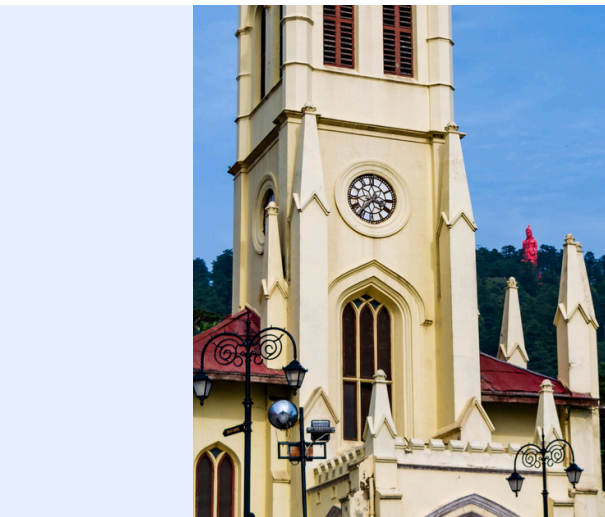




SORRY FOR TELLING YOU NOTHING

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Nothing comes to mind. It happens. Many times, I cannot write for several days. No ideas pop up; if they do, they come from different topics and subjects. It is hard to remember all of them and put them together. I can write very well when I walk on these hilly roads. Walking makes me creative and thoughts come to me on their own. I have to keep them quietly in a corner of my mind and record them later. Many of them leave me immediately but most of them remain with me. Just now, when I was typing this page of my diary, a thought came and vanished away, before I could put it here. I don't know what that was about, and I am sure it won't return now.

So many times, I have walked through these roads and have written many stories. Some were published and received much appreciation from my readers, but some are still lying in my diary, waiting to see the sunlight. Every time the same shops, same shopkeepers but different people on the roads are found. Shimla is a tourist place. Every day we have so many people coming here and going back. We see these tourists coming from the Indian plains, struggling to climb up to Mall Road at the slowest pace, negotiating with the inclines.



Husbands can be seen pushing up their wives and children trying to give up. Here comes the weekend and Shimla is invaded by these tourists. Summer months are the worst months of the year due to the increasing number of traffic and water crises.

Some of the shops in Lakkar Bazaar are the oldest in this region whereas many old ones, which used to sell traditional items, have now been replaced by the latest stuff. Those who sold books have shifted their business to mobile phones & computers. And those who sold walking sticks now moved to the business of selling fast food and bubbly drinks.

One shop which has changed its hands several times is located on the slope near Lakkar Bazaar. Twenty years ago, when I arrived to live in this area, the owner sold confectionary items. Later he rented it out to someone who introduced a new quality of footwear.

Later, the seller realized that it was not the right place to sell footwear, and he left. Now a Muslim boy from Yamuna Nagar has taken it and runs a saloon here. I go to him for my haircut. I go to him only because he knows his job but if he continues with his unpleasant way of speaking then the days are not far when the shop will see some new owner.

Sunil, the vegetable seller has not made any changes to his shop. I have been buying my vegetables from him for the last 20 years. He still sits on a wooden platform and puts his vegetables in gunny bags, some in front of him and some beside him. He uses a tarpaulin sheet to save himself from scorching sun or torrential rains. In winter he packs all his vegetables in boxes, wraps those boxes in old tarpaulin sheets, and ties ropes around them, before he goes to his village in Uttar Pradesh. Another person who has not changed his way of selling ever is the nut seller, who sits under the horse chestnut tree, at the Ridge. His small iron box is his creation. This box is fitted with tiny containers around it, with a lid on them. The nut seller makes conical-shaped paper packs with a variety of nuts and puts them in those containers. The whole box is painted green, and the big chamber remains filled with nuts. No weather has ever been able to prevent him from coming to his place. His total business depends upon the arrival of tourists in Shimla.

This is the first week of May. In the plains, people are sleeping under the whirling fans but here in the hills, it is still cold. The north wind keeps the weather cold and crispy. I am in a sweater, without sleeves but I can see some tourists wearing jackets and woollens. The wind is pushing everyone to find shelter. Soon it is going to rain.

On this ridge, in the last twenty years so many times, I have taken my tourists around. People from all over the world have been to me as my clients. They love to be around a local resident, who can share the knowledge of his beloved town with them. Many of them are still in touch but most of them have disappeared in the crowd of this world. I remember one Mr. and Mrs. Montague who came to Shimla, nearly 15 years ago. They stayed in a luxury resort up in the mountains and that year a heavy snowfall had blocked all the roads. They were stuck and had to delay their departure by one day. Mr. Montague gave me a sticker of his postal address, which I pasted on an old book on Shimla. It is still there with me. Later when I planned to write a book on my beloved town, I wrote him a letter asking for his opinion about the book, which he denied. It didn't stop with my thoughts, and I carried on with plans of writing my book. Three years later when the book found its place on the shelves of bookstores, after a few months I heard from him through a postcard. He had purchased a copy of my book in London and appreciated my efforts.

Another British couple that I remember is Mr and Mrs Abbott. Mr. Abbot was here looking for his ancestral trail. His father was born here and lived here in five different houses. I traced all of them, before they came to Shimla, and took them to all those houses. He remembered two of them that his father talked most about. His mother, 12 years ago, who was 92 at that time, always talked about her kitchen in a house called Yates Cottage, located in Chhota Shimla. Abbot clicked several photos of the kitchen to show it to his mother. God knows if she is still alive or not.

Nick Lahey Bean was also in Shimla for the same purpose. We visited the cemetery to look for his grandfather's grave. We found it in the new cemetery in Sanjauli. Mr. Bean's great-grandfather was the manager of Alliance Bank in Shimla, which was housed in Woodville Palace, now a heritage hotel.

This Ridge of Shimla holds a great attraction for everyone. Once you are here you feel like somewhere in a European town. That is why it has been named Little England. I was surprised to hear from a British tourist who was born and brought up here - England is my country, London is my city but Shimla is my village. I have to go to the post office to pick up a packet of books that was sent by my publisher. I must rush before they close the Post Office. Sorry my dear readers, today nothing came to my mind, and I couldn't tell you any story. See you later