



Sangla Valley : Dream destination

By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

Till the time our car was running on the dusty road of Sutlej valley almost everything was looking ordinary. Forget any cold hilly wind, it was so hot that we had to switch on the car AC. The flying dust of NH - 22 was not easily settling around our car that was making a tough negotiation with poor road conditions of Kinnaur, the second least populated district of Himachal Pradesh.

The car reaches a small town named Karcham where the national highway ends and from there suddenly magic moment of Sangla valley starts. The landscape changes. Even look of people changed and the weather too underwent a change.

In the month of May the road is free from snow but a strong wave of chill is ruling the air. The one way road that runs at the height of 8700 mt is every driver's nightmare. The heart-stopping bent of the roads and sharp edge of ridge are inviting danger every other moment. An unseen cloud of panic is slowly camping in every heart among my co-passengers. It is Kinnaur of Himachal under the shadow of great Himalaya. It is that part of world where beauty peacefully co-exists with death if one is not attentive while driving.

Immodest it may sound but the fact remains that my plan to visit this region of Himachal was more for its people than its splendid beauty. I was tempted to look how polyandry works in modern era. We Indians love to superimpose mythology, legends with people and that often dominates

our thought while thinking about a place. Before packing my travel bag I had read that Kinnaur is the land of demi-Gods. People here are half God and half human. People here are considered the most beautiful in their physical beauty. That might be a truth ages ago but now thanks to various cross sectional relations with many other tribes of hill a touch of Aryan-Mongoloid feature is presently prominent in their face. Many reference of our epic say that people here are cursed citizens of heaven and they roam here in form of humans ! A reference like this is enough to make one thrilled.

Known as Kinnaur and Kinnari habitant here are not only exceptional but also bold in their social customs. Claiming themselves connected with Draupadi of Mahabharata a section of these people still have kept the cult of polyandry where a single girl gets married to multiple husbands who are bonded by blood as brother. Their social structure is such that a baby born out of any such relation is accepted as child of all men married to his or her mother unless the mother herself reveals any name as father of her child. With advent of modern education this revolutionary cult is now limited with few tribes.

When one is in a land like that, it is sure of him to take notes of the landscape, stone and wood made huts and people who are simple by their nature but colourful in their culture.

My driver gives a tea break on the bank of Baspa, one of the most beautiful mountain river of the world. We all got the chance to get down from the car that we had boarded a few hours back in morning. The haze before our vision is slowly diminishing and the Himalayas with an extraordinary shape and appeal appears like a mammoth structure. We are still few kms away from Rakcham, a picture post card village of Sangla valley in Kinnaur. Our first night in this valley of endless beauty will be spent there.

Situated on the bank of river Baspa, this small village of Rakcham seems cut off from the modern world. However the hotel that I booked was simply the gateway to Eden. The modest accommodation stands almost over the river. It is just bang on the bank of Baspa and the running sound of flowing water is so loud that we have to shout to be heard. It is more of sleeping with the river than sleeping with your room mate in Rakcham.

I removed the curtain of the window for some sunlight and what I saw was breathtaking. The

panorama over the widow gave a feel that I am in a theatre where wings are slowly parting on both sides revealing the decorated stage ready to mesmerize spectators. The grand show of Sangla is on.

It is late afternoon now. A day in Sangla valley is slowly passing into history. Over the iron bridge that is visible from my hotel room I could see workers returning from apple orchards and a young girl trying to organize her herd of sheep to go back home with her. Sangla valley is Himachal's one of the biggest apple producing pockets. One of the finest apple of Himachal named 'Golden Delicious' is grown here.

Soon sun sets over the mountain. It is twilight and the setting is just too romantic here in Rakcham.

I have finished the steaming cup of coffee and have taken a walk on the stony bank of river. It is evening though it is softly lighted. Soon darkness invades the sky and in that dark it is never suggested to go alone in this remotest part of India. So we returned to hotel and sat on balcony to enjoy the symphony of water.

The small common balcony of my hotel offered another spectacular view of the valley.

From here view of snow topped mountains was enlarged. Soon darkness makes a gentle entry. Plethora of stars started blinking in the sky. It is splendid now. The star crowded sky and a moon almost full in size give us company. The river without any break is playing an unknown yet loud symphony. Soon in village someone puts off the last burning lamp. Rakcham the village on the lap of Sangla is sleeping like a child.

The next morning starts with an unbelievable experience. Just over my window three huge snow capped peaks are smiling. None of this was visible last evening. Now with no fog and cloud cover they have made their presence felt in giant form. On the snow bed of the mountains, sun light was beaming and there was a magnificent interplay of colours - blue from the sky, green from the valley and white from the snow.

Only thing that one must do at this moment is a walk following the alpine meadows leading towards the mountain. So I put my jacket on and hit the road.

Early morning Rakcham is not that deserted. There are men opening their tea stalls and women already have started their daily work. Students are getting ready to go to school and village seniors are enjoying an early morning sun on their back. Even with all these activities, serenity prevails in milieu and with every passing minute snow peaks over the horizon are turning brighter. A gate proudly announces that in 2008 this village was awarded by President of India as an ideal village. All around and specially on the bank of Baspa colour red and orange are dominating. It is the colour of opla, a local crop.

Have I seen a better mornings than this before? Does the meaning of 'Good Morning' really hold a morning like this?

We finished our breakfast as fast as possible to take a ride to Chitkul, a famed village just 26 km from Rakcham.

One can hire a sports bike with gear and cycle down to Chitkul from here. Most of the foreigners do that. Considering my physical fitness I have given up the idea to cycle 6 km. So a lazy me rather has managed the best window seat of a SUV.

The criss cross road that goes to Chitkul from Rakcham is a fairy tale road to travel. Passing over the rocky landscape of Kinnaur the road is shadowed by deep deodar and pine nut trees. Stream after stream crisscross the road and every single frame is giving an award winning photo opportunity to one who knows how to operate a camera.

Chitkul is another village of Sangla, but it is no ordinary village in any sense. This tiny village is the last village on Indian soil before Tibet and from here the borderline mountain that cuts India from China can be seen. In ancient times this was the trade route to then forbidden Tibet. For centuries men have walked on the route with bagful of coral, pearls and spices.

Chitkul is nearly 90 km from Indo-Tibet border post. The road is rocky, uneven and shadowed with deep pines but the way is thrilling. Every few minutes from behind the deep dark woods, the snow peaks of Himalaya smile. The sky here is crystal and the water stream that comes down from hill top is turbulent. The road to Chitkul can give any picture post card a run for its reality. It is just what we see in movies or it is just what we see in our dreams.

I park the car on the bank of Baspa the same river who was my partner last night.

In Chitkul, Baspa is like a young princess. She is jubilant and charming, yet elegantly decorated with nature's ornaments. Amazingly free from any pollution it's colour is a blend of blue, green and white. The river runs like a leopard, breaks rocks on the river bed and its bank are lined with colourful pebbles. The water stream is wider than Rakcham. Its stone breaking sound is louder. On its bank there was plethora of pebbles in multiple colour, size and shape. Their variation of colour is flamboyant and looks like a bed of gems from a distance. From here two great Himalayan peaks Kinnaur Kailash of 6050 mt and Jorkanden of 6473 can be seen.

I started walking towards the water and I slowed down only at a point where beating sound of river whispered in my ear to stop. I settled myself and looked over the mountains. Sun is shining and its rays kissing every single piece of pebble which is scattered on the bank of the river. The deep forest on the other bank is slowly spreading a soft shadow on the river. Few slate roof houses, temple and apple orchards are plotted here and there to complete the dream sequence.

Valley of Sangla is a full package of dream. It has all in its basket. The Himalaya, the mountain river, craggy rocks, the stony river bed, plantation of apple, peach and nuts, Hindu and Buddhist temple and overall an exceptional social structure.

As the departure time nears I started to get a feel that Chitkul is engrossing me fast. It is now walking inside of my heart.

Does a dream look more mesmerizing than a break like this?

Travel Logistics :

Rakcham is well connected by road from Shimla via Narkanda.

HPTDC still has no accommodation at Rakcham - so book private hotel.

There is no luxury here - you are to close to an unexposed world.

Carry good walking shoes and jackets - it is cold even in summer.

Take consent before you photograph common people - they are generally very nice to tourists.

Mobile network works.

Night stay is not required at Chitkul though provision is there.

