



AT THE MALL ROAD IN NAINITAL,
YOU CAN SEE A GURUDWARA
AND NAINA DEVI TEMPLE ON
ONE SIDE, AND A MOSQUE AND
CHURCH ON THE OTHER SIDE

SERENITY, SORROW, AND A LAKE



PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA



Nature, history, and mythology came together to create Nainital. It would be tragic to lose the lake town to negligence, pollution, and encroachment, believes SOMEN SENGUPTA

In 1839, a rich British businessman from the sugar industry of Saharanpur town was hunting in the deep jungles of Kumaon near the Himalayan foothills of Kathgodam. Soon, he lost his track and started moving in the wrong direction. Little did he know that this messy navigation will fetch him a place in history as the founding father of India's unique lake town, Nainital. What was even more unimaginable was that in the next 150 years, that town would be where European ruling and trading will find their retreat and Indian rich, their new home.

Barron, the sugar tycoon of East India Company, had instantly fallen in love with a landscape where he happened to have arrived. It had several lakes bordered with deep dark forests. Its horizons were decorated with snow-capped Himalayan peaks. It took him three years to shift his base to this lake district and into his new house, which he called the "Pilgrim Cottage".

After the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1816, Kumaon came under the control of East India Company. The British sought to expand their territory. So, soon the pristine lake town which was once full of forests and was frequented by the Himalayan bear, deer and leopard, turned into a human settlement.

British traders developed it as an escape from Delhi's and central India's heat, dust and fume. So, a long promenade circulating the entire lake was developed. The road was again decorated with deep pine that created a beautiful, shadow-covered road around the lake and various meeting points facing the pristine beauty of the lake. On the banks

of the lake, slowly came up establishments that were truly English. Luxury hotels, cafés, cinema halls, churches, book shops, boat clubs, football grounds, etc gradually developed there and gave a finishing touch to a newly-formed British hill retreat. From its inception to the 1920s, Nainital was solely a British lake town. Soon after that, rich Indians started to buy property and settled here.

The first church of Nainital was the St John Wilderness Church. It was set up in 1852 and was named by the Bishop of Calcutta. The second oldest church here is Central Methodist Church that came up in 1858. The biggest church is St Francis church or lake church, built in 1868. It was badly damaged in the 1880s landslide and was rebuilt in 1909.

On the bank of the lake, there is Capitol Cinema Hall, which was set up in 1941. Europeans and Indian royals used to meet there for watching movie or for any other social gathering. The cinema hall was in running condition until recently. Near the cinema hall is Boat House Club, another relic of British aris-

tracy. The 19th century club that is still very particular about its membership, is decorated with vintage furniture and game equipment. It was founded in 1897 as one of the oldest boat clubs of India.

Even Indian mythology mentions this lake town. It's believed that when Lord Shiva had lost his wife Sati, he had danced in rage ie put up *rudra tandava*, the dance of destruction, with the dead body of Sati on his shoulders. Unable to bear with the destruction any longer, the rest of the Gods approached Lord Vishnu. He, in turn, used the *sudarshan chakra* to dismember Sati's lifeless body and force Lord Shiva to stop. In the process, Sati's beautiful eyes fell at the spot where Nainital (from *naini* or *nayan*, meaning eyes) stands today. Considered as one of the top Shakti Peetha pilgrimage spots for Hindus, Nainital is heaven for those who seek solitude in nature.

It's heartbreaking to know, however, that a massive landslide in the area on September 18, 1880, killed around 151 people and reduced almost all



houses to rubble. It also changed the sizes and shapes of its all lakes, overnight. The main lake was reduced to one third and now measures only 1,370 m long and 360 m wide. The north part of the lake is known as Talital while the south part is known as Mallital. A person called Motiram Shah was believed to have set up a temple of Nayanmata in Nainital in 1824. Even that was reduced to rubble in 1880.

Other significant lakes near the towns are Bhimtal, Naukuchiatal and Sattal. These are much smaller in size compared to Nainital. Bhimtal, which is 22 km far from the town, also has a place in mythology. It is believed that Bhima, the middle Pandava, created this lake for the sake of sustaining Draupadi's thirst. There is a Shiva temple here named Bhimeshwar Shiva. As for Sattal, as the name suggests, it was once home to seven beautiful lakes. But today, two of them are dried up, so only five remain.

Nainital still has enough to amaze its visitors, though. One such legend is China peak, one of the spots that hundreds rush to to enjoy nature. It is believed that from China peak, one can see the Great Wall of China. It is also

believed that on a clear day, the Kumaon range of the Himalayas can be seen from here. If luck permits, one can even see Nanda Devi, Trishul, Nanda Ghunti and Nandakot from here.

There is no dearth of colonial buildings in Nainital. From Raj Bhavan to old hotels, all still remind one of the colonial era. The Raj Bhavan building is for anyone who loves colonial architecture. Once the summer retreat for the Governor of the United Provinces of British India, the building now houses the Uttarakhand Governor. The palace has 113 rooms. It also has a museum that is open to the public. There is also a golf course with eighteen holes. It can be used by public against subscription.

The heritage trail of Nainital will remain incomplete if a visit to Gurney House is not planned. The most famous citizen of this lake town used to live here. Jim Corbett, the legendary hunter, author, and environment protector made this town his home till he left India and went to Kenya. In 1947, this house was sold to an Indian named Sharada Prasad Verma by Jim's sister Margaret Winifred Corbett. Today, that heritage house built in 1881 has been converted into a museum that displays some of the rarest photos and articles of a living legend named Jim Corbett. The house is still under private ownership.

However, one can't help but fear that Nainital might lose its sheen. In the summer of 2016, the Government was compelled to stop people from visiting Nainital as there was no space to park any cars. Reportedly, there is massive encroachment on its lake-side road and even the water has been polluted. Let's hope that that fear remains only a fear.

