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RANIKHET REVISITED

Gitanjali Prasad weaves a spell of nostalgia around Ranikhet, which, while it lacks the picture postcard prettiness of Kashmir, offers the simple pleasures of an untouristy town.

Every morning we awoke to the most spectacular view in the world, for in Ranikhet, one only has to open one's bedroom door to see the magnificent Himalayas. There are 80 jagged snowcapped peaks, and as a child I knew them by name - the sprawling Panch Chuli, the rectangular Nanda Devi, the Trishul. Today, when I observe the concrete jungle all around my flat in Napean Sea Road, my childhood in Ranikhet seems a bit unreal. And yet, Ranikhet itself has changed little.

While it is the loveliest hill station I have ever seen, Ranikhet lacks the picture-post-card prettiness of Kashmir. But what it does have is charm and character. It has a tingling freshness in the air, a freshness, which only a multitude of pine trees and an unpolluted environment can offer.

Saved perhaps by its proximity to the more 'touristy' Nainital (a few hours away by road) Ranikhet has compromised little with the modern world. There are no discotheques, no skating rinks, no pony rides. The hotel industry - or at least the five star hotel industry - is conspicuous by its absence.

Ranikhet is for those who are at peace with themselves. Nothing but the twittering of birds and the sound of the wind whistling in the trees disturbs the quiet. Darkness falls early, and then people retire to hearth and home and, in winter, a cheerful fire.

The Kumaon regiment centre located in Ranikhet is also the lifeblood of the town. I spent the first four years of my life in Ranikhet, following which there were two more 'postings.' These years were enough to forge a lasting emotional bond. Cantonment life, and the fact that Ranikhet is in the Kumaon hills, contribute to subtle differences in the local customs and behaviour. Honour and izzat in Ranikhet is a real, palpable and all-encompassing thing. In 1969, my father retired and we left the town. In 1983 we returned, driven by a spell of nostalgia. We were given accommodation in the VIP guest house. And last year, on the occasion of its bicentenary celebrations, the Kumaon regimental centre erected a gate in my father's honour. In which other part of the country, and which other profession, is a man so remembered 20 years after he retires?

This preoccupation with honour had, in our childhood, a more amusing manifestation. In the 50s and 60s, in Ranikhet, or at least in the cantonment area, it was considered infra-dig to lock one's front door. People resented the implication that there was a thief in their midst. There was, however, one doctor from Bombay who found this difficult to practice. The first time he went out, he put a big padlock on his door. When he returned, he was shocked to find that some one had unscrewed the hinges of the latch. He replaced the latch and the lock, only to have it subjected to the same treatment the next day. However, since nothing was missing, he came to terms with his new environment and learnt to live without locks. Interestingly in 1983 my husband was equally worried about leaving our room and our suitcases unlocked when we went out of town for a tree-day trip to Badrinath. Fortunately for us, the Kumaonis did not betray our trust.

Ranikhet is one of the oldest cantonments in the country. Traces of its British history can still be found in the old British cemeteries and in the lovely houses facing the mountains. Also to be found are a few surviving British-trained cooks who can make mouth-watering chocolate eclairs, succulent barbecued suckling pig and the finest puff pastry. Somehow Shri Ram and Umaid Ram managed to produce all these without the help of a refrigerator, mixer or oven. A sturdy tin base covered with coals of various degrees of heat was all they needed.

Interestingly, even on our most recent visit in 1983, no cake was available off the rack in any of the shops or 'hotels' in Ranikhet. For my son's birthday, we scoured the market in vain, but then, in typical old Ranikhet tradition, the Kumaon regimental centre mess cook baked us an excellent cake, and a

friend brought along fruit tart made from wild berries.

During the season, apples, cherries, plums, strawberries and apricots are freely available. There is a fruit preservation centre in town which will, if you give them the fruit, make jams and jellies, and even can them for you. But most delicious of all is the jelly and syrup of the rhododendron flower with its unusual slightly tart flavour and attractive deep red colour. The most popular mithai is ball-a chocolate brown preparation of khoya studded with white sugar granules.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that while in English magazines, one reads of the rhododendron 'bush,' in Ranikhet, the rhododendron is a magnificent tree, its brilliant crimson flowers making it a truly eye-catching sight. There is in fact a profusion of English flowers in Ranikhet - daisies, anemones, trefoil, and portulaca - growing in gardens, in window boxes all along the road. And even all over the hill side.

There are also deodars (the Indian fir trees) chestnut, oak and pine trees. It is encouraging to note that there are more pine trees now than there were earlier. I have seen whole mountains planted with young pines. Some things inevitably have changed for the worse. Twenty years ago, the forests were full of wild animals, and even within Ranikhet town, people had to be careful about their pets, as panthers were prone to attack them. Indeed, there was a British resident who twice successfully chased a panther with a stick, to recover her beloved dog. But today few wild animals remain.

The few distractions that Ranikhet does offer to the casual visitor include golfing. There is a 9 hole golf course at Upat and Kalika (six km away) and an artificial lake, the Bhalu Dam (three kms away). Then there is Chaubatia, which literally means 'the meeting point of our routes.' This is where the government gardens and orchards are situated. There is also the Jhula Devi temple, festooned with thousands of bells by devotees in thanksgiving of wishes granted.

But what is most precious in Ranikhet is the quiet. Take a walk through a wooded mountain path and you will not see another soul from start to finish. In today's overcrowded world, that is my idea of bliss.

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