

Stranded

A short, description of Chikhaldara – Semadoah trip in end December. Don't get tensed at confusion of tenses. Past and present jumbles up whenever you go on a trip like this!

Everybody's attention is onto his watch. It's already almost one hour late! Though tomorrow is a holiday, people have some appointments or other which can't be missed. If the beginning is such sluggish, don't know when we will reach the destination. We are all standing on the by-pass of Amravati waiting for the bus to come from Nagpur to take us to Pune. Almost fifteen to twenty people stranded on the stand on the verge of losing their patience on the evening of Christmas Eve. Two couples – seemingly newly married, a family of four, a group of friends, an old lady accompanied by another ... I think I am the only one who is alone here. It's a mixed feeling! But the problem is there is no toilet or even a little secluded you-can-pee type of place where you can relieve yourself! The day had been a day of waiting for me. I started at around noon and reached Amravati at around three-o'clock; its half past six now. I'm loitering since three!

Amravati is a big town; lots of greenery and less traffic and comparatively cleaner and clearer than Pune. The good thing is that traffic load of long-distance buses and trucks are never allowed to enter the city. The by-pass is the only way for them. This is the city where I saw for the first time after coming to Maharashtra the man pulled rickshaw. The same old one we used to ride in WB. All of the rickshaws have got something metallic attached to their axles. So they go on making *jhing-jhang-cling* or *tung-tang* as they move. No need of horns for them. Nice. Traffic is comparatively less. The city is quite old. Sometime one or two roadside building hidden behind the glossy shopping malls will remind you of its age. It's trying to make a balance between its heritage and ultra-modern consumerism.

The darkness has set in. The headlights of high speed vehicles scorching through the dark are adding to our impatience. Each time a headlight is seen everybody looks up expectantly – is it this? It's really good to be alone in this moment. You can study the reactions and responses of others! Through the whole trip I enjoyed this! And this was refreshing. It's hard to think that I've spent five days since I began my journey. It seems just like yesterday when I reached *Chikhaldara*.

By VOLVO bus you need to spend almost Rs. 500/- to get to Amravati; and by Azad Hind Express, which goes through Badnera – a town 15 km away from Amravati, it costs Rs. 523/- to reach Howrah. So when I managed a RAC ticket of Pune to Howrah on rail, I was not at all bothered to pay the full amount and travel only the half. The Azad Hind Express will reach Badnera at seven in the morning, a good time to start the journey for Chikhaldara. So I boarded the train.

The Azad Hind Express is always crowded by students. Pune is an education hub and this is the only train that directly connects the Eastern India to Pune. End of December is marked by the end semester exams in Pune University. No wonder that the train is full of chattering boys and girls mostly

from North-East, Bengal and Bihar. Amidst a lot of 'bye-bye', '*phone koris*' & '*aate time rasgullaa le ke aanaa*' the train started. I was supposed to share berth with someone who had got his friends somewhere else and so 'gave' his berth to someone else who, along with a friend, had missed a train that morning and had got a waitlisted ticket. Pretty convoluted! The point is I am going to share my berth with two other boys. No problem, it's just a one night journey and then ... the very thought of the trip makes me excited!

The scheduled time at Badnera is quarter past seven in the morning. Neglecting the standard deviations the train was on time! There are three ways one can go to Amravati from Badnera; local train, bus and auto rickshaw. I preferred the third as the *autowalah* asked for only Rs. 50/- which for a man coming from Pune is damn cheap for a distance of 15 km. The Auto drove me through the almost empty roads on the chilly winter morning. It was Rahman Tailor's auto. He was curious about me – a lonely traveler during Christmas, that too in Amravati! He was my first guide who showed the Rajkamal Chowk as we passed through it and informed that Semadoah is his father-in-law's village. His father-in-law, Sheikh Faku runs a hotel there and he'll be pleased to arrange a vehicle for me for local sight seeing there. I entered the central bust stop assuring Rahman to visit his father-in-law.

It was half past eight then. Next bus to Chikhaldara would start at nine-thirty. The enquiry clerk told me to go to Paratwada by nine o'clock bus to catch a bus to Chikhaldara from there. Paratwada is the centre from where all buses to Chikhaldara, Semadoah, Berhanpur, Dharni, etc passes. I was in hurry to reach there, not to waste any time. I took the Paratwada bus. The 50 km long journey took almost one hour. There were no sign of hill or jungle during this course of road; only villages, fields of wheat and pastures. I was determined to enjoy the trip and the roadside scenic beauties but dozed off on the bus, due to lack of sleep on the train!

Paratwada is a not-too-small town with plenty of hotels for lodging. A huge ground is marked for the bus stand. It's a busy bus stand indeed. Buses from various routes are coming and going. It seems like a junction of all the important routes. All kind of people roaming around, some office-goers, some college-goers, some villagers, few families ... but never too crowded. People are pouring in by Amravati buses which are quite frequent. But nobody is in hurry. Children are playing on their way to school; waiting passengers are chewing green gram leisurely; few are gossiping in a tea stall which is nothing but a huge hall room with a small stove and a cupboard in a corner. Some are in front of local news paper stand, chatting with the stand owner. There is a television set hanging on the wall of the stand. A student is trying to tune it to pass his time. I am just watching with a backpack on my back. Suddenly I remember a song

Balloons flying,
Children sighing,
What a day to go kite flying.
Breezes cool,
Away from school
Cowboys fighting out a duel.
Time seems to stand quite still,
In a child's world it always will.

Fish is biting
So exciting!
Lunchtime sounds so inviting.
At the bill
He gets a thrill
Sitting, watching bobbing quill
Time seems to stand quite still,
In a child's world it always will.

Yesterday's dreams
Are tomorrow's sighs.
Watch children playing,
They seem so wise.

Mary Green
Today's a queen
One thousand dollies are her dream.
In cotton frocks
And golden locks,
Her palace is an orange box

Time seems to stand quite still,
In a child's world it always will.

Time is a slave of lifestyle here whereas we in the cities are slave to time, always rushing to cope up with the Almighty Time! Finally I sight a bus for Chikhaldara; and lo, it's the same bus that was supposed to get started from Amravati at nine-thirty! Paratwada is at least a fifteen minutes halt for any bus. Lazily we got into the bus and it started at eleven. Chikhaldara is only 30 km from Paratwada and I am even more determined this time not to miss the roadsides.

The scenes started to change from the very moment the bus crossed Paratwada. Only a few passengers were there in the bus. I was wondering. There are only few buses that fly to Chikhaldara daily which means there should be rush to and from Paratwada since it's the nearest town to it. Anyway, I gladly located a SBI ATM before the bus left the premises of the town and was assured that in emergency I'll be able to draw cash!

The first stop beyond the town was an unnamed village cross road and all of a sudden a whole bunch of teenage school girls rushed in the bus. The bus is now full to the extent of having difficulty in closing the door. As usual the chattering of girls subdued the noise of the old bus. On the road side the nature is turning greener and greener every moment. There are occasional plantations of some grown up trees. I did not notice them very carefully. Suddenly I notice some orange colored fruit is hanging from the trees; and I realized they are the plantations of Oranges. Quite a lot of them are on the roadside. The next stop comes. Almost all of the girls got down leaving behind a few who'd travel till further to reach their destination. But that doesn't leave the bus empty as earlier because a whole new set of girls have come in. this time they are little younger, clad in white blouse and blue skirt school dress. The conductor doesn't seem to be interested in taking tickets from them. In fact he did not at all. The whole gang of uniform clad girls gets down after few stops. The bus is now full of commoners.

The road has now undergone a changeover. The hills have appeared in the horizon. The curvature of road and their appearance frequency have increased. The speed of the bus has decreased as it started to climb up long winding road to the hilltop. Already forty minutes have passed after we started. Milestone shows we are still 20 km away from destination. The view from the bus is becoming more and more beautiful. And the very thought of ending this bus trip is a bit saddening. The hilly curvy roads, a hairpin turn at every half a mile, winding already-passed-roads down below, glimpse of yet-to-conquer roads at the height through the trees ... enchanting. Sometimes all of a sudden a plateau-like plain land comes in front; the bus changes gear, we pass through the grazing cows, roaming cowboys and land up in an even higher, even curvier roads. It's a great sight from the top. You can see your past through the window very clearly the black pitch road is shining in sun, but the road ahead is unknown; A whole new perspective of journey. But is the view from top really so picturesque all the time?

The primary precaution one should take while going up is to hold the support of the seats very tightly, otherwise the turn may throw him out of the seats. After a one-and-half hour of enthralling journey we reach Chikhaldara – greeted by picturesque Hotel *Harshabardhana* at the very entrance of the hill station. Suddenly it flashes to me; it's the journey we enjoy, not the destination. Everything's over at the moment you reach your destination. It's like life, the journey to the destination – death.

It was half past noon. Sun is shining bright, but not hot at all. Cool breezes greet me the moment I get down from the bus. A small, lazy town on hill – is the best way Chikhaldara can be described. Taking a left turn from the main road, the bus stopped just at the entrance of the terminus beside a ground where some elderly school boys along with other fellows are playing cricket. On the other side of the road is the village hospital and a narrow lane disappears beside the hospital to the interiors of the

town. The straight road goes through the upper plate of Chikhaldara to Bairat, the highest point of region.

I had a pre-imagined picture of Chikhaldara. I imagined it'll be desolate hilly forest with only few hotels and tourist bungalows with few tourists. But it is a self-sustaining town and busy as well! There are a number of schools, colleges, Govt. offices, a hospital ... everything is there.

The first thing I need to do at Chikhaldara is to have a cup of tea. So I entered in the hotel just at the entrance of the market and grab a cup. The next thing is to find an accommodation. I asked the shop owner. He utters in an emotionless tone names of hotels – *Harshabardhana*, *Surya*, *Utkarsh*, *Satpuda* Resort, blah, blah. Suddenly realizing my aloneness he suggests Mahabir Lodge as it'll be cheap and suitable for a single traveler. Hotels are for luxury only.

I walked out of the shop, walk half a kilometer down the road just to have a glimpse of the town when I reach the office of Melghat Tiger Project. Walking into it, I was greeted by Punjab Gaur (if I remember the name correctly). On my enquiries he reacted in the same way as the shop owner and finally lands on Mahabir Lodge! I decide at that very moment to stay at Mahabir Lodge only. Then we had a discussion on my travel plan. He was bit astonished to see me alone. He lists out few points at Chikhaldara namely *Bhimkund*, *Malviy Point*, *Devi Point*, *Gawilgarh Fort*, *Mojhri Point*, *Shivsagar Point*, *Hurricane Point*, etc. He then immediately jots down a route plan for me since I won't be able to hire a vehicle like other tourists and I'll have travel on foot. And from him I get the valuable information regarding Melghat Tiger Reserve. The huts of Tiger Project at Semadoah have to be booked from Amravati or Paratwada. I took down the phone number of office at Paratwada and came out of his office. Next destination is Mahabir Lodge.



Pic 1: Mahabir Lodge

Mahabir Lodge is a building just at the point where the bus stopped. There is a saloon and a BJP party office in the same building. I got confused, where to enter ... the party office is closed and there is no one in the saloon. I got to the other side, one door is open, but it seems to be someone's private room; I walked into the room to find a man covered from-toe-to-head in an old blanket lying on one of the two cots. It certainly is someone's private room. I came out silently, and asked a jeep driver nearby. He insisted that the room I just came out from is indeed the *office* of the lodge. Once again I walked in the same room and this time I called up, 'hello!' The man in the bed woke up and yes, he is the owner-manager of the lodge. I book the room just beside. The manager, Mr. Shribas lives with his family in the same house. As a matter of fact, he just lends out his three extra rooms to occasional visitors who don't want to go to the hotels.

I rested for awhile in the room, get freshened, wash my self and try hard to bathe in the chilly water! It's one-thirty; the water is still as chilly as it used to be in early winter morning in Pune. My room is on the roadside. The window lets me a good glimpse of the road. There are pupils returning from schools for tiffin in the lunch break, three – four tourist-like girls and a boy buying something from a variety shop, a family – probably tourist, taking lunch at the *Bhojanalay*, some jeep drivers are gossiping sitting on the bonnets of their jeeps parked on the roadside awaiting for tourists to hire and enjoying the shining Sun, some *localites* are waiting for bus to go to Paratwada or somewhere else and

lots of young boys and girls probably college students roaming and chatting in the road while waiting for friends or bus or for nothing.

Having my lunch at Bhojanalay, I started for *Bhimkund* – a four kilometer away spot. It's on the way back! I walked down for a couple of kilometers by the way I came up in bus before I took the diversion towards *Bhimkund*. Walking down slope is never a problem; but coming back would be! The windmills can be seen at the horizon. Nobody's around on the road, not even a tourist car. Few cows are grazing on the fields beside. Almost half an hour's walk took me to a u turn where a tourist car crossed me. Till then I was walking on the road. Now I took off and started walking across the slopes of the hill. I could see the long winding road going down spirally to some point. That must be the point I am going for. Finally from the edge of the cliff I could see the point where the road ends. I climb down. The road stops all of sudden at a cliff, beyond which a deep valley runs through. This is *Bhimkund* – the valley or rather canyon (I don't know what features makes a canyon a canyon, but to me it is a canyon).



Pic 2: Bhimkund

Legends say Bhim of Mahabharata killed the mischievous Kichaka, the commander of king of Birat at this point. There fight had resulted in this huge, deep canyon. Its depth is around 1100 m. this explains why it's called *Bhimkund* and why this place is called Chikhaldara which is nothing but a mispronounced form of *Kichakdara*!

It was three-o'clock when I reached *Bhimkund*. I calculated a stay of half an hour at *Bhimkund* then I'll be off to next point – *Malviy Point* before finishing today's sight seeing.

The *Bhimkund* point ends in the cliff cordoned by a steel and concrete railing. I stood at the edge for minutes. On my left the plateau has two windmills rotating tirelessly to provide electricity to Chikhaldara. On my right another plateau runs through. And on my front in between the two plateaus far below is the hazy plain land. Small fountains of water coming out of the rocks are falling down lazily and contributing to the river that comes through piercing the windmill plateau. My flow of thoughts was broken by human voice from far off. I turn to right to find out a group of people on the right plateau collecting grass for their cattle. They must've gone there from the other side of the plateau. But soon I find a small sign of lane marked by occasional footprints of villagers going down to the right. I took the path, and go on. The more I go on the more the canyon opens its beautiful canvas for me. A narrow stream of water comes from nowhere in the rocks. The water is cool and tasty! Some red grass has grown over the stream. Beyond the stream the right plateau begins. I keep on going by the edges; a step to the left will take me down. Suddenly a hullabaloo stops me. I turn around and watch a group of noisy tourists get down from their vehicle. I stop, look at my watch. Its quarter to four. I have to return now. I sit on an edgy rock for few minutes before I start moving back.



Pic 3: Red Grass over stream

But when I came back to the fenced tourist spot at the end of the pitch-road, I discover another walking path goes to the left. I thought for a moment and then stepped to the left. This path climbs down in a more organized way, seems to be a more frequently used path. Then suddenly I found some stair beneath my foot. I go on. The rubbles beneath my feet led me to the river that was flowing down the canyon. It's way down the point. I see upwards to find another group of tourist there. They look very small.

The river runs through as if cutting the hills I came from and the hill with windmills and then falls of directly below to the depth of the canyon. There is a small barrage on the river just before it falls down. I watch a solitary monkey staring at me, and then make its way through the rocks to the edge beyond the barrage from where the river runs down. Inspired, I climb up and down and reach on the top of the barrage. But there is no water after the barrage. The flow has suddenly vanished! I move towards the cliff, few yards from the barrage, to find the stream reappearing between the cracks of the rocks. I am standing over a waterfall, which falls down from the beneath of the rock I am standing on to the depth of 1100 meters and water particles are from below rushing up to wet me. Amazing! I cover the lens of my camera, turn left and watch that lonely monkey staring absentmindedly towards up couple of feet away from me.



Pic 4: The River



Pic 5: The lonely monkey

Few minutes, I start moving back and try to trace the river back beyond the hills. She has taken a U-turn and has hidden herself behind the windmill-hill. I walk by her side, backwards. And the moment I took the U-turn with her, darkness engulfs me. The sun has concealed him behind the hill. I realize its quarter to five and if I don't start retreating now, by the time I'll reach the original *Bhimkund* point it'll be dark. But the river still allures. Scared of darkness, I let her enjoy her privacy and start coming back.



Pic 6: My way back from Bhimkund

Going up is always more difficult than going down. I had to skip *Maliviy* Point. When I reached Chikhaldara the street lights were yet to start their work. I thought of going to my room, and then did not go. I sat on the chair of the hotel – cum – tea stall, where I had my first cup of tea at Chikhaldara. Having a cup of tea I bought a torch and started for an evening stroll through the town. There is ground on the roadside, children are playing cricket. Its getting dark but the momentum of play is unputdownable. The lake beside the ground is glittering in the vanishing light of the vanishing sun. The road straight ahead goes to upper plate of Chikhaldara. There is a forest office and a government garden where the road bifurcates. One way goes to Bairat, the highest point of this region and the other merges with State Highway 6 at Semadoah.

When I reached at the bifurcation point, it was completely dark. I noticed a signboard at the forest office issued by the forest authority advising to avoid lone walk through the roads after dark to avoid the sloth bears. I returned.

My dinner was over by eight – thirty. The streets were empty. The shops started closing. I came back to my room. It's very cold now. Nine – o'clock is very late night at Chikhaldara. All the shops are closed. Children of the shop owners are plying cricket on the road side. During day time these boys are either off to school or helping their parents in the shop. Now at this night time only the sound of their game is keeping the place awake. I reclined to the bed.

The morning after was even chillier! All my sensations were frozen at the moment I touched the water. Last night I had to use both the blankets of the double bed. But the morning is difficult. Guarded by the heavy jacket, I walked out for a cup of tea. At half past eight Mr. Shribas supplied a bucketful of hot water with which I completed my daily washings including bathing and set out for the morning session of the trip. The day was cloudy.

As per the instructions of the local shop owners and my lodge owner I went to *Devi* Point and then proceeded to *Gawilgarh* Fort. *Devi* point is a temple of Goddess *Durga* on the way to the fort. It gives a commanding view of the plains. At the farthest point on the hill seen from the *Devi* point one can locate the fort. Points like *Devi* Point are common in all hill stations.



Pic 7: From Devi Point



Pic 8: On the way to the fort

The *Gawilgarh Kella* is almost three kilometer from *Devi Point*. I reached at the entrance of the fort at ten – o'clock. There is a huge entrance at the fort and I spotted a Tata Sumo parked there. Some tourists must be inside. The outer periphery of the fort is enclosed by a water trench on one side and steep hill on other side. Reaching at the entrance of the fort I was down spirited. People said this is a very good place to see, but this seems to be just an entrance or reminiscent of the entrance. It did not allure me. Instead of going through the entrance, I climbed through the walls of the fort and entered in its premises. It's nothing there. From the top a very good view of all the sides are seen. The wall seems to run for some distance and then have been destroyed and merged with the hill. The entrance is good

but there is nothing special in it. But where are the tourists, whose vehicle is parked outside. I watched carefully on all the sides and then suddenly spotted movements. At a very far away place few human beings as small as ants are moving slowly towards a structure which seems to be another entrance. I gave another careful look over the entire place and realized that I am at the entry point of the fort which encompasses the entire plateau with an approximate radius of four to five kilometers. The reminiscent of walls, gates, buildings are scattered everywhere and hints of paths are leading to them. The farthest point I could see was the gate towards which the tourists were marching. I started walking to that direction. It's certainly not possible to go to the end of the fort. It's a huge area; I decided to go as far as I can before returning back to Chikhaldara at lunch. Soon I landed on a road, the hint of stairs gave me the idea that I am on the correct path, and the fort started to unfold its beauty in front of me. The path goes straight through the woods, climbing up and down. The day was cloudy and density of the woods made it even darker. On the left side of the path there is nothing but slope of the hill going down to an unknown depth. There is a water body on the down slope and a herd of cattle is grazing there. I kept on going still I reached the point which I saw from the top of the first gate. It's a beautiful gate. I entered through it; the road became even steeper and took me to another gate. This was the farthest point I could see from the first entrance. But now a whole new spectacle opened in front of me, two lakes, few buildings, and a temple like structure and at the farthest point a structure with a monument. It's like the more you keep on going the more you keep on discovering. There is no end to it. I was expecting an end at this turn, but it opened a new world to plunge into in front of me; and I plunged

Walking through the bushes, rocks, reminiscent of walls, I finally reached to the magnificent structure with monument. It's a *jharokha* and the monument is just an outpost kind of structure. From the sides of the *jharokha* the entire land of plain is seen. It gives a feel of command over the region. Indeed, it must have been a place for a ruler who watches his state from the top..



Pic 9: The main entrance



Pic 10: From top of the walls of fort



Pic 11: Another gate



Pic 12: The main gate



Pic 13: One of the three lakes inside the fort



Pic 14: Jharokha



Pic 15: Jharokha

As a matter of fact, there is no architectural marvel, no great historic value, no great scenic beauty; but the total ambience is great. The greatness of this fort is in one's toil explore it. Just like *Bhimkund*, one has to make his own road to explore the whole region; and that is what makes it different from other tourist points. The journey, the exploration, the toil is the greatness of the trip.

I came back to Chikhaldara bazaar at two-o'clock and had my lunch. The next two hours were spent to make bookings at Semadoah tourist complex. Mr. Shribas and other shop owners were continuously telling that there is nothing to see at Semadoah, it not worth staying there, there is no amenities available, a day's trip to Semadoah and coming back by evening will suffice. But I was keen on staying there and have an experience.

Just before the sunset I went to *Mojhri* point. It's a cliff offering a good view of the plains below and hills on the right and left. Sunset is also a good view from here. This point is basically a helipad.



Pic 16: Sunset at Mojhri Point



Pic 17: Monkey convention at Mojhri Point

In the evening I fixed a car for next day's trip to Semadoah. It is 25 km from Chikhaldara. Soon night came down, the street was empty, shops were closed and children were playing cricket and I faded in to sleep.

The next day was a sunny day. I completed my breakfast, cleared the bill and promised Mr. Shribas to come back if I don't like Semadoah. The vehicle was ready. I set out for the days travel. My first destination was Bairat, the highest point of the region.

Is there any end of a road? At Chikhaldara the answer is yes. Roads don't always keep on going and meeting with some other road, sometime it's a dead end. Bairat is one such dead end. The road passes through villages *Pashtale*, *Pandhri*, *Churni*, Bairat and ends at the edge of the hill beyond which the deep valley separates Madhya Pradesh from *Bidarbha*. This edge is the highest point of Chikhaldara. A small temple of goddess Santoshi Ma looks after the whole region from the top. On the far west, other hills of *Satpuda* range make a fascinating sight. The sun goes down in between those hills making an unforgettable spectacle. This is the Sunset point of Chikhaldara. But at ten in the morning I had to only imagine what it might be to experience a sunset from here.



Pic 18: Way to Bairat



Pic 19: From the topmost point of Chikhaldara



Pic 20: The village Bairat

From Sunset point to *Panchbol*. The car retraced its path through the villages. These villages are isolated from the town at a distance of 20 – 25 km. some day some buses come to Bairat, some day no other transport. People are bound to walk down the path. There are schools but the teacher stay at Paratwada and comes to the school once in a fortnight. The monsoon and winter is not very troublesome, but during summer villagers have to climb down 10 – 15 km to get water. The name Bairat has come from the King Birat of Mahabharata. His kingdom was around this place. *Bhimkund* also share the same myth.

Panchbol is on the way to Semadoah. The roads are descending now. The driver, Suresh, shut off the engine and we slide down the road. We went past the coffee estate (Chikhaldara is the only Coffee producing area in *Bidarva*), the churches of *Mariampur* - a Christian village and reached at *Panchbol*. *Panchbol* is again a cliff, but the edges are much steeper. There is no way to climb down the hill. All the sides are surrounded by other hills. Thick forest on the hills and the valley is inhabited by wild animals of Melghat Tiger Project. This point is famous for echo. Shout here and five distinct echoes can be heard from this point. That makes it *Panchbol*, the point of five echoes.



Pic 21: Panchbol

We return back to road from *Panchbol* and proceed to Semadoah. We pass through a village, *Memna*, situated just at the middle of the jungle on the hills - an isolated village where no amenity of life is available except the right to vote!

Finally the bus came. It was parked on the side of the bypass. Passengers boarded the bus. All luggages were dumped on the roof of the bus. And everything was done in a hurry to compensate for the late running. The bus started to move. The trip is coming to an end. 'Bye-bye Amravati', I bode farewell, and suddenly a sound like thunder, a huge sparking flash and the bus stopped with a jerk. Passengers inside are not settled yet. The crowd outside the bus, excited, rushed to it. Again some sparks flashed. The loads dumped on the roof of the bus have hit the overhead electric wire. A panic started to grow among the passengers; they rushed to the door to the driver's cabin. But the door of the driver's cabin was locked from outside. Some people from outside started guiding the bus avoiding the overhead wires. Sparks continued.

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The car I hired was marked with the PRESS sign. At the check post of Semadoah the guard didn't stop us for the tax. Suresh drove the jeep smoothly down the slope taking a U-turn at every couple of minutes. The engine was put to neutral, no need of fuel now. The gravity is driving us through. The road goes through the dense forest. One side of the road is the hill, other side goes deep below. Both

the sides are covered by woods. The journey was beautiful. New spectacles at every turn kept entertaining us. I wished let the road never end.



Pic 22: On the bridge over Sipna in way to Semadoah

On our midway, river Sipna greeted with her cold water. She flows to Semadoah and beyond to meet with Tapti. Unknown flowers grown on the road side, unnamed stream of fountains, unpredictable turns kept flowing in. We reached Semadoah at noon. We entered the tourist complex first. The office cum interpretation center is at the entrance. My booking was made over wireless; and the noise of wireless has changed my name from SP Roy to AB Roy. There are ten huts and two dormitories in the complex. I was allotted hut number five.



Pic 23: The entrance of tourist complex



Pic 24: My hut

I had heard the forest authorities run a jungle safari from the tourist complex. The timing of that safari is three –o’clock in afternoon. The officer in charge, Mr. Mahpal disappointed me. The safari won’t be there for next couple of days as one of the two vans they are having is out of order and the other is busy in taking the students of a nature camp to Amravati. There are almost twenty students who have come for the nature camp. I saw them playing cricket in the complex. I thought of taking my own vehicle to the safari. But Suresh was short of diesel. Mahpal advised to go the bazaar and search for diesel at the tea stalls. Tea and pan stalls often keep some bottles of diesel with them to help vehicles of the highway as there are no filling stations nearby.

Sipna separates the tourist complex from the village Semadoah. In local native language *Korku* the word Sipna means teak. This jungle is full of teak and bamboo. And Sipna flows through a dense forest of teak. The village accompanied by a small bazaar on the side of the highway (State Highway 6) is on the other bank of Sipna. Few tea stalls, variety stores and some *dhabas*. We searched for Sheikh Faku. The last *dhaba* is his. But he was not there then. We had our lunch there and went to Kolkhas. Kolkhas is the spot beside river Sipna where there is another forest complex. But this place is prohibited for us without prior booking and DFO is residing there that day. We came back and searched for diesel at the Semadoah bazaar. But somehow the day was not ours. There was no diesel with any one. Suresh went on search for diesel again and I came back to my hut.

At three-o’clock I went to the office of the complex in search of Suresh. There were many people, two groups of tourists, few local guides, Mahpal and associates, but no trace of Suresh or my jeep. The rule of the safari is anybody can take his vehicle with a local guide and safari tax of Rs. 60/-. The

guides are waiting in queue for their turn to earn. The tourists were preparing to go out on safari with the guides. I was anxious to know about the status of diesel. My anxiety was true, Suresh returned from bazaar empty handed. Sheikh Mustak was with him. He is also a forest employee. Both of them had searched for diesel but no hope. No truck is also available to siphon some diesel into our vehicle. I realized the hope of safari is fading very soon. One group of tourist had already left for their safari. Desperately I went to the other group and asked for a lift. But there was no place.

I was stranded at the complex with a jeep short of fuel. Two of guides, Pradeep and Giri were left as they didn't get any tourist. They assured me if any vehicle comes for safari now, they'll take me with them. We waited for almost half an hour but no more tourists came. Giri tried for the last time with Suresh to manage some oil, even kerosene! But the day was really dry. It was getting late for safari now. It was almost half past four. I relieved Suresh by paying him the charge and told him to inform Mr. Shribas about my staying back at Semadoah. Suresh was feeling guilty for not being to able to manage some diesel for the safari. I had to console him!

Then suddenly Giri came with the proposal of safari by walk. I agreed at once and we set out on foot to the jungle. There was not much time left before dark. This is the time animals come to the water bodies for a drink. But in the post monsoon seasons there are plenty of water in the vicinity of the natural habitat of all animals. There is plenty of food, too. So they don't come out during this time. In summer when all the sources of water get dried up, animals start turning up at the outer part of the jungle, near the river. It is easy to spot them then.

We entered the jungle through bushes and unused paths. We could locate few peacocks, even they were hard to locate if they don't move. It needs trained senses to spot them. Giri could locate them easily but I had to try hard. We went deep inside the jungle, passed through water bodies. But there was nothing to spot. We did a complete round of *Gol Tekri*, a small hill. The jungle was dense from outside. But as we moved in, it didn't seem so thick! On the other side of *Gol Tekri* some *Korku* people leave and do farming. They are completely isolated from the main locality. It is like an island of clear land of farm and few huts in the midst of the jungle.



Pic 25: View of Chikhaldara from Semadoah

We returned to the Semadoah bazaar after dark. I was not very tired. In fact I was amazed at my stamina. I hadn't walked such long for quite a long time. Giri and I made a plan of trekking on the jungle at the morning next day. Giri invited me to his house. . Giri's full name is Ganesh Giri Gosain. He is basically from Madhya Pradesh. He is a commerce graduate and is working as a supplier of certain items in this belt. His wife, Shobha, is the foster daughter of a lady from Semadoah. She's been brought up there. Giri and Shobha have got two boys, Dhiraj and Chilli. The names suggest their types! Dhiraj the five year old elder brother is really very quiet and obedient, whereas the three year old Chilli is just the opposite. Giri's brother's daughter Popy also lives with them. She is hardly six years old and she has to take care of Dhiraj and Chilli and help Shobha in home. She is a very lively girl.



Pic 26: Shobha, Chilli and a local girl, Gauri

Shobha was preparing dinner for us. We went out to the bazaar. It was dark outside. Giri was getting late in his quota of drinks. So both of us had a couple of glasses of *Mohua*, a local wine made from the fruits of the *Mohua* tree. The bazaar looked dull in the night. We came back to Giri's home and had the dinner. When I came back to my hut, it was only half past eight. I pumped a bucketful of water from the tube well just outside the hut. It was chilly; chillier than Chikhaldara. I prepared myself to guard against the cold during night and went on to sleep.

The next morning was even chillier. I hardly had any sensation on my hands and face after I completed my washing. I couldn't think of bathing! Just half a bucket of water was sufficient for my all morning duties! Giri came at 08:30. We first went to his home, had a cup of tea, packed our lunch and went out. This time we were on the other side of Sipna.

We climbed up and down, crossed fallen trees, water streams, and bamboo bushes and went inner and inner. I can't describe the experience. We didn't see any animals, only few birds, few hoof-marks of barking deer and spotted deer we could locate. But that is not all. The more we went in more the jungle changed. We could hear a sound, the sound of the jungle. It has its own language. It is a matter of feeling.

We had our lunch beside a stream. Shobha had fast that day, yet she had prepared a delicious food for us. We continued after lunch. On the halfway of our trekking we crossed the highway and the Sipna. We entered in the forest we went yesterday, but this time we went in a different route. Then came the most thrilling part of the trekking.



Pic 27: Sign of leopard eating the skin of *Dhaora*



Pic 28: Leopard/ tiger cleans his claws after a meal



Pic 29: On the bank of Sipna

We were going up a hill; suddenly some sound came from below. Giri was frozen instantly. He listened carefully and instructed me to climb down as silently as possible. I realized the sound must be of some animal that has come to the stream for a drink. When we climbed down to the stream, there was nothing. Instead there were marks of a heavy animal on the grass; they were crushed. No footprint could be located on grass and rocks but there was a bad smell. The smell suddenly reminded me of zoo and in no time I realized it's the familiar smell of tiger. Giri confirmed my assumptions and we started walking by the stream. After couple of yards the smell vanished. We walked little more before we sat down on a rock.



Pic 30: Where we smelt the king!

It certainly was something; a tiger or a leopard. The typical smell is a definite proof that we missed it very closely. The stream flowed between two hills. We were climbing up the right hill when the sound came. Suspecting the animal might climb up the left hill Giri came down to the stream, otherwise we could have been in a better position to locate it. It might have been hiding behind a bush and watching us when we came to the stream. All the animals avoid humans, except the *Reech* – Sloth Bear. Giri had told me earlier, Bear is more dangerous than tiger and it's the bear whom they fear most.

We moved on. At two-o'clock we were back at the complex. Having a rest for half an hour I came back to the office with a hope of finding some helpful tourist party to give me a lift. At the office neither Giri, nor Pradeep were there. But by the time I have been known to all the guides as a lone traveler without a vehicle! There were Raju, Santosh, Ranjit and Hiru, and a party! A minibus was standing at the gate. A team from Nagpur has come for a safari. Santosh was to guide them and I was taken with him. I was glad to have a safari at last. The bus was empty all the team members were at the bridge over Sipna. It seemed to be a team from some college, four – five boys and twenty something girls. They were not very willing to take me as the bus was already overcrowded; but I boarded it as a friend of the guide! The bus started, the safari began. There are four routes in the jungle. Route one is the smallest and nothing can be seen on that route. Route three and four are most attractive and have more chances of locating a herd of bison, the only animal that can be spotted in winter (these information I got from Giri and friends). We entered the jungle through route one and then Santosh guided the bus to route three. Route three begins with crossing a water stream. The driver was afraid to drive through the stream as the slope seemed too high for him. After all he can't take risk with so many ladies onboard! Everybody agreed and we came back to route one again. Santosh gave a smile to me and whispered to me that even the overcrowded forest authority buses go through this in peak time. But we are not responsible for anything, so we completed the safari empty handed in route one. It was over in an hour.

We came back to office at four-o'clock and waited for more tourists to come! By the time Pradeep and Giri had also joined us at the office. Mahpal was not there. Deepak Bhau was there at the office. He is a local man. Last night we had our glass of drink at his house! We all waited in vein for tourists to come. At five-o'clock everybody except Pradeep, Giri, Deepak *Bhau* and me left for bazaar. Five-o'clock is the official time to close the gates of jungle. No safari is allowed after that. We four were gossiping at the office. Actually Pradeep had not gone on guiding for almost a week and he needs a party now! So we were waiting even after the official time if somebody comes, we'll manage to let him enter the jungle. But no effect. At the daybreak we went to the local playground to watch the volleyball. The day after tomorrow some volleyball teams from other villages are coming for a volleyball tournament. Everybody is practicing hard for the tournament. All the dormitories of the complex are booked for the guest teams.



Pic 31: From left - Giri, Pradeep and Dipak Bhau

Semadoah, compared to Chikhaldara is a very small village. There are a post office, two schools, a health centre, an *Anganwadi* centre and an extension counter of SBI. Electricity has reached Semadoah but telephone hasn't. The communication is totally dependent on wireless. I wondered in the village with Giri, had our drinks and dinner together and returned to my bed at half past eight. Tomorrow I have to leave.

Each morning is cooler than the previous morning. The final day, Saturday, I woke up early at 06:30 and went out on the banks of Sipna. Fogs over the river had made her mysterious. The sun hasn't woke up yet. The water vapours are coming from the surface of the river water. I sat on the bridge for some time and came back to office. Today should be busy day for all of the guides. Weekends are full of tourists. But they'll come in the evening. A group of tourists from *Aurangabad* were here from last three days, they'll leave now. There is a good wildlife museum at the complex. I visited the museum, went to the bazaar and came back; clear all the dues to Deepak Bhau. After finishing my packing I left for Giri's home. Today also Shobha has prepared lunch for me. I had the lunch, give toffees to the children and took my backpack on my shoulder. Time to move now. A bus from Semadoah to Amravati through the hilly roads...



Pic 32: Sunset from Sipna bridge



Pic 33: The Sipna bridge

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It is one-o'clock in the morning. The bus is standing off the road. Two – three passengers are smoking outside to throw away their cold and anxiety. My seat is in the first row, and I am watching the mechanic and his helpers working hard under the bonnet in the driver's cabin to get the bus on the track. We are here for almost two hours now. The electronic controller of the accelerator is not working. All other passengers are sleeping in their place. Only few of us are awake.

The return journey had been cumbersome from the beginning. The bus had managed to avoid a big accident at Amravati where it was entangled in overhead wires. And now this breakdown. I keep

watching as the mechanic checks the connections and does some welding. The concert of snoring from the inside of the bus is rising every moment. Let the mechanic work, I try to divulge my thoughts into the thoughts of past five days. Suddenly I feel, I have to come back again. Giri and Pradeep had made me promise to come back in summer to give them a chance to show me the full beauty of Semadoah. I start to plan, can I manage to come ...