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M.S. Gill

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I was recently in Gwalior and Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh. As the Shatabdi wended its way south, we passed a continuous landscape of dusty fields with dispirited men and cattle, all wandering in search of food and water. The pitiless landscape of empty, unsown fields extended all the way to Agra, Dholpur, Morena and Gwalior. I was told there had been no rain.

I stayed at my farm. After many decades I slept out in the garden. Shivpuri is always cool, a breeze all day long, and a soothing gentle zephyr at night. Sleeping out I needed a blanket. I naturally followed the time-cycle of the universe. Sleep came early and instantly. Once the moon went down, the sky shimmered with a billion little lights, Venus the most prominent. One cannot see these in Delhi's murky atmosphere. We woke early with the dawn of the rising sun still below the horizon. But we woke fresh because of the clean, oxygen-laden atmosphere. I could not have slept because the birds were up and about, chattering away. I've never seen such a profusion of bulbuls, mynahs, parrots, black drongos, garden tits, seven sisters, pigeons and doves. But what pleased me most was the sight of house sparrows, the male with a panther back, the female more dusty-coloured. They flitted about as they always did in our homes in the Punjab. Sadly they have disappeared from Delhi. The jacaranda, in bloom, had a nest full of mynah babies. The parents flitted about, picking the most luscious worms from the cattle waste in the yard.

In Tiger Country

Sipping my tea and looking towards Tiger Hill I felt at peace, a million miles away from Delhi and government. Tiger Hill, a beautifully forested cone, brought back memories of my youth. We went to Shivpuri in 1950. It was a heavily forested land of hills and lakes well preserved by the maharaja. It was the greatest tiger land in India. King George V was to hunt there when he came to lay the foundation of Delhi.

Tigers roamed the countryside. Every night a male would roar, his enticements to his lady love. In the cold December nights, I have slept out in the fields guarding a heap of new rice. In the morning, we once found huge pugmarks in the moist water course of a tiger gone by. The tiger, a gentleman, never bothered

us. Sadly the forest began to disappear and so did the tigers. The hills were denuded and illegal stone quarries vandalised them. I was delighted to hear that once again a tigress with two cubs has managed to come from Ranthambhore through Sheopur to the Game park of Shivpuri. We all pray for its safety and sustenance.

Inches of Progress

Shivpuri is a tribal area. One morning, about 15 women came to me with their tale of woe. Living below the poverty line, in fact, totally destitute, they had lost their husbands in the cruel stone quarries. Apparently, the men inhale so much stone dust that they die young. A goi scheme allows the widows a pension of Rs 150. Petty officials were denying them this meagre amount. For once, I felt blessed with the power of Delhi. I intervened and got them the pensions and felt sad they must think me some kind of a demigod. I was heartened that these illiterate forest women were aware of the bpl (below poverty line). They had their cards and knew their rights. A tiny ray of hope.

Save the Palaces

Long before Chandigarh, about the same time as New Delhi, Shivpuri too was born as a designed city laid out by an English engineer for the then maharaja, who lived there most of the time and declared it the summer capital of Gwalior state. His palace had a separate mahal for his English wife, Betty. The palace is now with a central police agency. It has superb tiles and deserves heritage protection. Could be a heritage hotel, certainly not a police establishment. I have long argued for Shivpuri. It still has hills, forests, lakes and an equable climate. The area is dotted with ancient temples and ruins.

Four Hours to Eden

Shivpuri should be developed as a tourist centre. The rich but over-wrought population of Delhi, Mathura, Agra and Gwalior, all want open breathing space. Corbett, north of Delhi, and Shivpuri in the south will give relief to the rich of Karol Bagh. All Shivpuri needs is a fast train from Delhi. The broad gauge has been built and it goes to Indore and Mumbai. A morning Shatabdi will take tourists four hours to a great outdoor. It will also bring employment and income to this poor tribal area. The Delhi Punjabis will give business to hotels, dhabas, taxis and

touts. I have pleaded with many railway ministers to help with one fast train, but sadly their thoughts always turn eastwards.

(The writer is Union minister of youth affairs and sports).

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