

M.S. GILL

Over The Ridge

IN mid-19th century, Capt Charles Kennedy rode up to the deodar-covered Shimla Ridge from the hot Ambala cantonment, liked what he saw and put down a Scottish loghouse. Others followed. And soon the High Ridge was dotted with houses named Peter Hoff, Ivanhoe, Dane's Folly, Barnes Court, to name a few. A little Scotland was created. In 1884, the Governor-General, Lord Dufferin, built himself a stone castle. The governments of India and Punjab began to spend the long summers on the cool ridge. While ICS collectors toiled in Balliah and Bankipur in the summer loos, their memsahibs fled to the hills. Lockwood Kipling, the head of the Lahore School of Art, also came by with his son, Rudyard. The grass widows passed the summer days in flirtatious romances with Lord Kitchener's aides-de-camp. Scandal Point on the Ridge was born and Kipling's salacious gossip lady created.

The '40s came. Nehru rode a white horse to confabulate with Lord Wavell and Jinnah. Come August 1947 and a patchwork government of the new, mangled Punjab took over the sahib's kothis. Pratap Singh Kairon soon drove them down to the dusty plains of Chandigarh to build Punjab's new capital. Still, in the summers, the Punjab government pretended to work in camp offices in Shimla. The newly minted IAS sahibs were allotted furnished kothis, and strolled about in ill-fitting tweed coats while the files driven up the hill in groaning Ambassadors awaited their pleasure. The evenings were spent by the burra sahibs in gossip-sipping Solan No. 1. In November 1966, all that changed: the hills became Himachal; Chandigarh now belonged to many, and everybody lived with their grievances. All this and more I have seen. I had not been to Shimla for a long time. Now I was going to.

Landing Gears

THE morning was cloudy, the flight delayed. Finally, we took off in a packed turbo plane, the seats so squeezed that I had to fold away my legs and put them in the lockers above. The pilot immediately announced the pleasure of a bumpy ride. We had a big load of Tamil tourists going to the Himalayas for a first look. Excited, taking photographs. As we got near the hills, the plane began to bounce in the murky atmosphere. Belts on. Everyone turned a bit green, but we still smiled nervously. Over Chandigarh, we turned north, keeping left of the Kasauli and Kandaghat ridges. I realised that flying to the new Shimla airport in this weather was not the best idea, but I also understood that a full



flight is a great commercial encouragement. Many decades ago, I had flown in a Dakota down the narrow Beas valley to the Kullu air strip on the river bank with no margin for error. The same happened here. I said to myself, whatever will be, will be. Suddenly, we were committed to a landing, went down rapidly, luckily hit the deck, rolled and came to a screeching halt, fifty yards from the wall where we might have had our nose smashed. A good landing, but just.

Stirred, Not Shaken

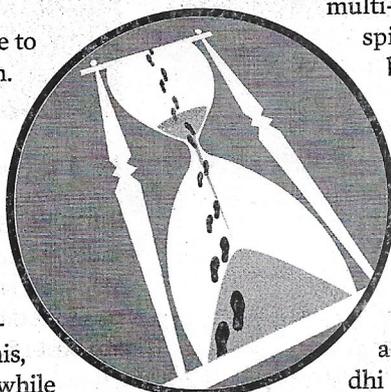
DECADES ago, I had written of the crowded chaos of Shimla, spread in an arc, creeping down the Ridge in messy, cheek-by-jowl proximities. Independence had become licence and the British restraints to keep this sanctuary safe had vanished. Building restrictions were given the go-by and any slope was buildable now with multi-storeyed concrete horrors standing on spindly legs of iron bars, plastered over with bits of sand-cement. The stork-like legs were dug into the mud slopes that are the nature of the Himalayas, which have no rocks to give a solid foundation.

Now, in the new century, I could not believe what I saw. Sanjauli has become an even greater arc of continuous cement chaos on a steep ridge. It is bigger than Shimla. I went to Narkhanda to inaugurate a hockey turf at the high-altitude Rajiv Gandhi Sports Training Centre. The construction

was continuous all up the road towards Wildflower Hall and beyond. One continuous crowded hill with vehicles, crowds, noise and anything but the lovely Kipling's Shimla. I got peace and quiet only at the government bungalow in Narkhanda, perched at 9,000 feet. In 1904, the great Kangra earthquake took place. While Kangra was destroyed, even Shimla felt the effect. The Viceroy's lodge had cracked walls, riveted together after the disaster. The Himalayas are earthquake-prone. It does not need great imagination to see that even a small earthquake will shake all these cement spindles down into the khud.

Bagheera Was Here

IN Shimla, I stayed with Governor Urmila Singh in 'Barnes Court', once the Punjab governor's house, used by Indira Gandhi to host Bhutto and his bell-bottomed young daughter Benazir, in 1972. Urmila is a charming soul from MP. I was thrilled to know that her in-laws are from Seoni—Kipling's and Mowgli's Seoni hills. My thoughts went to Mowgli, Bagheera and the Great Kaa. I felt serene and peaceful. Urmila promised to take me to Seoni. I live in hope.



SORIT