



Lakeside dreams On our left and on our right lies a lake. It is on this bridge that I tell you, dramatic and matter-of-fact, “Welcome to Hazaribagh.” MIHIR VATSA

HOME SPUN

Moderating extravagance

Hazaribagh’s influence on a writer is visceral, going beyond the aesthetic



MIHIR VATSA

I have come to pick you up at Koderma station. I have woken up at four in the morning and I have come to pick you up, because I don’t trust your journey to my hometown with someone who is not me. It’s a ritual you cannot say no to. Unless you are coming from Ranchi. Then, forget about it. I am not going through the trouble. You take a Pammi and come to Hazaribagh. Or a Hemkunt. Or a Shanu Sudhanshu. Many options. All Volvo. All Swift Dzire. All A/C. All with windows open.

But since you have come to Koderma, I have come to pick you up. I identify your silhouette, you identify mine, and I take you to the Alto, our Alto. My mother’s and mine. I put your luggage in the dicky and exchange pleasantries. How is Delhi? Kolkata? Mumbai? Wherever it is that you are coming from. I exchange pleasantries because I am brimming with excitement and want to hide it. I am excited because in the next half hour we are going to see something incredible. You have no idea about it. It’s sweet.

We drive off, slowly at first, through Jhumri Tilaiya. The shops are closed, shutters down, and a dog crosses the road under the Alto’s headlights. Soon, we are on NH 33, ‘the lifeline of Jharkhand’. The new nomenclature has changed the number to 20, but I find it hard to imagine Jharkhand without NH 33. So, I keep this bit of history in the present. We drive through a flatland, the landscape unremarkable. When we cross Urwan Mor, I exhale.

The direction where you look to is left. For the trees begin to appear and behind the trees the first glimpse of water. The highway abandons its straightness and follows a curve. We curve with it; the water curves with us. Then it disappears and there are trees again. We have entered a valley.

You think you just saw the water. But before you can verify your sight, it’s the trees. Then, water. Then, trees. A play of elements in the

plateau. The road turns and straightens, then turns again. Finally, it opens on a bridge, and I know you cannot take your eyes off the spectacle in front of you. For on our left and on our right lies stretched out to the horizon a lake. A reservoir. Ahead of us, the humble hills; through them the road winding up to invisibility. It is here, on this bridge, that I tell you, dramatic and matter-of-fact, “Welcome to Hazaribagh.”

My town is known for its *gulabi thand*, the pink chill, and I am happy that you have experienced it. We follow up the valley and cut through the last hill to arrive at Barhi. Here, I make a joke that if you put Hazaribagh town in the centre, 35 km north is Barhi and 25 km south is Charhi. The place knows its rhyming scheme.

In a plateau, extravagance is moderated. Unlike sublime mountains and enormous seas, the plateau lives through its broken topography. Fragility is normal. Like the worn-out signpost that welcomes you, much against my wishes, in uninspiring administrative words: Welcome to Hazaribagh, the headquarters of the North Chhotanagpur Division. Like its unfortunate airport which we now approach. Dusty, encroached upon, dug up, in a place called Sindoor. Honeymoon destination for dystopian marriages. Kanhari Hill appears into view, so do the houses. We pass through deserted bungalows, their roofs heavy with the past. Weeds grow on porches, their iron gates ajar at wayward angles.

Once upon a time, the town teemed with Bengali settlers who were charmed by its pleasant climate. The word travelled wide. So wide that when it reached Rabindranath Tagore in Kolkata, it told him that even Bengalis do not quarrel here. So wide that it

leaped across centuries. Three years ago at Delhi University, while submitting a paper to my teacher, she asked me where I was from. When I told her “Hazaribagh”, she instinctively uttered, “wow!”

Have you been there?

No, but I’ve heard about it.

And that was good enough. One should always hear about Hazaribagh.

I take a right from the CRPF cut. You see the concrete dinosaurs of Nirmal Mahto Park, Sohrai motifs on the boundary wall. Where the road we are on meets another, I show you the second spectacle: the *jheel* (pond), and sunlight nascent on its surface. We drive through the isthmus, past morning walkers, up to my mother’s school. We stop here if sunrise is imminent; else, we head home.

A honk, and Krishna-ji opens the gate. If there is electricity, we take the lift to third floor. Mother welcomes us, expectant, cheerful. I keep your luggage in a corner and take you directly to the balcony. Here, we breathe. Here, we watch the sunrise. I tell you there is beauty conserved in pockets of my town. That despite everything, even with its share of

litter, the place is resilient. I don’t explain how it affects me, let alone my writing — a derivative of myself — simply because I cannot. I can only show, and hope that you understand. This former ‘health resort’, once a ‘hill-station’, once ‘the land of a thousand tigers’, now ‘the land of a thousand gardens’ and forever this broken but interesting highland that I call home.

(In this monthly column, authors chronicle the places they call home)

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