

Notes from Barkagaon

BY MIHIR VATSA

Located about 25 kilometres from Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, Barkagaon was initially a myth to me. I was told that there existed in its forests a cave where it rained if you chanted 'Barso Pani!' A variation of this story had replaced the chanting with clapping of the hands. I was told that the entire region was surrounded by high hills and covered with thick jungles in which it was impossible to walk. Finally, I was told that it was a dangerous place where militants hid in the woods waiting to shoot any outsider who dared to go there.

The thing with myths is that you cannot reason with them. Barkagaon does have a cave in the forest where water, condensed under the cold, stony roof as drops, falls as rain due to vibrations created by sounds. It doesn't really matter whether you chant 'Barso Pani' or whether you clap your hands—though people sometimes do both—for the drops often fall without any external stimulus. The science does its work, and it creates much awe among us visitors.

Because most of my storytellers were plateau-dwelling bards with little experience of seeing a mountain as high as the Himalayas, their perception of 'high hills', as I understood later, was rather underwhelming too.

Barkagaon is a valley town, and to reach there, we descend from the plateau to the level of the rivers that flow below.

Smaller quests

Once we arrive, what we see behind us as hills are in fact the escarpment of the plateau on which Hazaribagh is located. My larger experience of travelling in Barkagaon, therefore, has been a series of smaller quests to understand everything that is fantastical about it.

Barkagaon is remarkably scenic, and in some places painfully so. It is bordered by hills on all sides. The bowl of the valley is an expansive

visual of the town's agricultural economy, thanks to its several small rivers. In the morning, when sunlight is sharp and colours vivid, it is hard not to be charmed by this green valley surrounded by our own 'high hills'.

It was with a friend and a local guide that I climbed my first and so far the only hill in Barkagaon, the southern arm of Mahudi Pahar.

Trekking upstream

With no road going up there, my friend's motorcycle was useless, so we parked it in a village and embarked upon a long trek. Essentially, we were following a river back to its origin. As the water flowed past us, we trekked upstream, crossing boulders, forest, and altitudes.



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Throughout the trek, it felt like we were walking inside a calender with each leaf offering to us a new landscape.

An hour and several photographs later, we arrived at the bed of a waterfall.

It is here that the river meandering over the hill makes a steep drop to create a pool of water. Unfortunately, the stream was dry, so nothing fell from the cliff. Be-

side the pool was a rock-cut cave, the inscription on which said that it was visited in the seventeenth century by Raja Dalel Singh of Ramgarh. Whether the cave too was created on his orders is not yet known.

After returning from the hill, we stopped to look at the ruins of a temple which was indeed constructed by the king. It is called Shivgarh. Weeds and bushes surround its foundation. A tree grows through its shikhara. Here, my friend and I bid goodbye to our guide, and this time, instead of a river, we traced our own route back. Despite my many fatal wishes, we did not meet a militant in the forest and were still alive.

The Hufflepuff wizard is the author of *Painting That Red Circle White*, his first poetry collection for muggles. He lives near a lake with lotuses and cormorants.