

I HAD a morning flight to Hyderabad. About two hours later we were in Hyderabad. This airport, like most other Indian airports, has changed dramatically during the last few years. It is now bigger and convenient. I had to board a flight to Vishakhapatnam six hours later. I thought it appropriate to walk into the 'reserved' lounge to pass my time.

But I was told in clear terms that 'lowly' me could not enter the lounge which although completely deserted was reserved for the VIPs. I reached Vishakhapatnam at around 4:00 p.m. My destination was Damanjodi, about 180 km from Vishakhapatnam. After the usual haggling with a taxi driver and having ensured that there were no uncertainties left, we proceeded.

On the way, I had a fairly good time drinking beer and watching the lush green forests. It was after I reached the guest house of the National Aluminium Company Limited that I realised that I was a bit drunk, having had only beer. The next day I was busy at a few meetings which ran late into the night but by next morning I was ready for some travel.

There is some fun and adventure in travelling and exploring alone. From Damanjodi, I was off to the small city of Koraput where I went to the local tourist office.

After an hour's discussion with the officials, I decided to go to Gupteswar for a day and to a Bonda tribal village, Mudlipuda.

On the way to Gupteswar is the region's commercial hub, Jeypore, where I stopped over to have lunch at Hotel Princess. This is one of the best hotels in the city but the lunch cost me just about Rs 50. Jeypore looks more like a big slum - the tribes having been dumped seemingly half way on the road to 'urban development'.

Gupteswar is about 58 km from Jeypore.

It has a very famous cave called Shivling. The shivling itself is big and round. A couple from a local bank of Jeypore recited pleasant 'puja' songs. I stayed back to listen to it before I went about exploring the cave a bit more and talked to the people about the 'marvel' of the shivling.

There are no more than one score people living in Gupteswar - an old couple that sells flowers at the foot of the mountain and the guest house caretaker's family besides a few tea vendors among whom there was a relatively urbanised Das Babu.

Gupteswar has a muddy river. There was a gushing sound coming from upstream which sounded like a fall. I thought of seeing the river but a steep cliff prevented me. I then decided to take the other way through the forest.

The forest was dense and rough with no beaten path. I was soon covered with spider webs. After about an hour, I reached the top of another cliff which stopped me from going further. I was lost. The sun didn't help me much in finding the directions. Climbing from one cliff to another, I started getting tense.

Eventually, I managed to hit the road just before the sunset, walking in the direction opposite to that from where the sound of river was coming.

Forest forces you to keep your cool, it tells you that hurrying, getting scared, losing heart does nothing to its scheme of

things. It forces you to keep struggling and then it tells you that this is the only way it can get better.

I was then back to my guest house where

I was to stay overnight. This government guest house is hardly ever used. I was given a suite which the caretaker believed was the best because it had a cleaner toilet. I

don't think I agreed with it as the 'western' styled toilet had no seat.

From Gupteswar, I was to leave early next morning for my final destination, Mudlipuda. My chauffeur, the usual cheerful Mani, looked particularly scared. This was so because Mudlipuda is inhabited by Bonda tribal.

To say the least, Bondas do not cover most of their body, wearing thick neck rings and sporting bows and arrows. There are stories of their being slightly wild. I talked to a policeman at the village, Govindpalli, about 30 kms, before Mudlipuda. He tried to make me feel guilty about my voyeuristic intentions. It didn't work.

He then tried to scare me off with the report that Bondas had recently killed two men and the area was therefore sealed. I anyway got into the car and headed for Mudlipuda.

The road to Mudlipuda is very narrow and steep and is about 14 km from another village, Khairapur. Mani did not exchange a word with me on the way. Even I had by then started questioning my rationale of going to such a place.

At Mudlipuda, I met a person who seemed to have had drunk a bit too much it being just 10 a.m. He didn't know Hindi but I somehow managed to convey my message to him. He took me to an urbane Bonda who could speak little Hindi. The first village I was taken to was beautifully laid down with

mud houses. But the tin sheds on top of them were very unaesthetic.

Later, I was to discover that the tribals resented all government efforts to 'civilise' them. Although the government gives them some freebies - clothes, tin sheds and other consumable items, this attempt is seen by the Bondas as an interference in their way of life and is resisted, although the temptation of freebies also runs strong.

Before coming back to Vishakhapatnam, I struck friendship with the Bondas. I hope to be their guest during a spring festival in March. Mani's fear evaporated and we were once again friends. I agreed to pay Mani some money when he dropped me at my hotel in Vishakhapatnam.

On the flight to Hyderabad, I had the privilege of flying with a few sportsmen. A couple of kids who recognized them stood in rapt attention and although they were just two it was a long wait before the children got their autographs.

Further, despite the objection raised by the hostesses, they insisted that their luggage be kept at the emergency exit gate. Later they blocked the path as they wanted to hold a 'conference'. They stayed there even when the 'seat belt' signs were given for landing.

Another highlight of the return journey was the Maine Pyar Kiya heroine shouting at her servant at the Hyderabad departure lounge. The reason was soon known to everyone.

The servant had apparently misplaced the baggage tag and to hide this mistake, he fished out another from a bin. One sentence still rings in my ears, "Do I have to insult you before all at the airport to get the truth out?" And the stay with the Bonda tribes still is a cherished memory.

(Illustration by Anindya Kanti Biswas)

A tribal safari

He lost his way but did not lose heart. JAYANT BHANDARI spent time with the Bondas in the forests of Gupteswar



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