

22 December 2000  
The Statesman

steps of the Viennese Waltz.

The location for the dance sequence was

scheduled to be filmed the following week. But here the director had come up with a

film, providing a magnificent backdrop for a *Jungle Book*

# Hello Uttaranchal!

JAYANT BHANDARI, who spent a week in the new state, reports

A HUGE circle of mysterious light engulfed the western sky behind my room in the guest house in Joshimath, the base city for trips to Badrinath. The feeling was sublime, after all, this is the gateway to the abode of gods.

The morning was an anti-climax. The light the-night earlier was nothing but a fire on the tall mountain facing the city. It was now charred and still polluting the whole area with smoke.

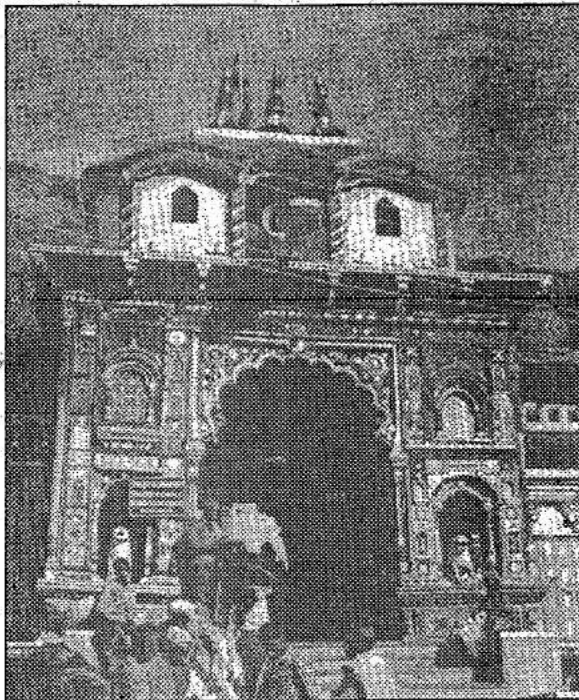
The villagers, I later discovered, start fires on the mountains as this apparently creates conditions for the growth of better grass. The fire is also believed to cause snowfall and consequently better farming yield. While the fire would certainly kill the weeds, it would also kill the trees and other vegetation. The surrounding area is barren and during my three-day stay there a major landslide was active on the outskirts of Joshimath. Otherwise, this is one of the most heavenly places on earth.

We were on a week's trip to eastern Uttaranchal during the first week of its existence.

We left from Delhi for Jim Corbett Park. As we entered Kashipur we were greeted with lights saying 'Jai Uttaranchal'. We spent the night in a vacant hotel in the city. A large hotel, it hasn't been occupied much since its inception a decade ago. The new owner of the hotel, a young woman in her early 20s, was full of enthusiasm. Kashipur is near Ramnagar, the usual halting place for visitors to the park. The owner hoped to develop her hotel as a resting place for them.

Early morning we left for Ramnagar to make a reservation at the Jim Corbett Park office. The office which was to open at 8 a.m. had no-one there until after 10 a.m. When he did come the reservation officer told us to wait as the register was with the boss. After another couple of hours, it was still not there and the tobacco-chewing officer was not helpful. We dropped our plan to visit the park, and headed for Ranikhet.

Few places offer a view of snow-clad mountains as good as Ranikhet does. There was a festival going on and the people's easy-going attitude told us that we were now in relative peace — away from Delhi and Uttar



A view of the Badrinath shrine.

Pradesh. However, in recent years, the main road of Ranikhet has grown in terms of crowd, noise and pollution. The vehicles prefer to honk using pressure horns non-stop all the way through the bazaar.

Our next destination was Karnaprayag. On the way we stopped at Gairsain, which was among the cities being considered for the capital of the state, before Dehradun was selected. The roads of Uttaranchal run like rivers to the plains, without being much inter-connected. So usually for a small distance, you have to go south and then return.

Many believe that the new state will create substantial government jobs. They would, in fact, prefer to be ruled directly by Delhi! This, they believe, would bring them a lot of money. A poster with Sonia Gandhi's picture said a lot: it asked the Centre to provide Uttaranchal Rs 50,000 crore, full control over the water originating here, and so on. It seemed a shame that people had wanted a separate state not for democracy or more self-management, but for 'freebies'.

And politicians behaved irresponsibly in convincing them that this was possible, that money grows on trees!

We were now on our way to Badrinath.

Regularly, we encountered the cars of politicians (returning after thanking God for their having become ministers). That newly-acquired power had gone to their heads was evident even on this narrow road to Badrinath. Their cars were going at a reckless speed, expecting us to get flagged off the cliff in deference!

We reached Badrinath just an hour before the closure of the temple. The fresh snow gave a pleasant look to the rather deserted city. We learnt that this was the closure not only of the shrine but of the entire city! Most people had already left after sealing their houses. The military band was playing the marching band outside the shrine.

Heard interesting stories about the shrine, including that the lamp lit before closure is still alight when the shrine opens six months later. Only the possessive priests of the temple can verify this: the way they treated people, pushing and abusing them, without regard for age or women left me skeptical!

We couldn't stay overnight as everyone was required to leave by sunset. Before returning via Joshimath, we decided to visit the next village, Mana which was, however, already closed with the smart ITBP personnel manning the gate. After a day in Joshimath, we stopped at Rudraprayag. The pleasant setting of the guest house and the wonderful food it offered ended the trip nicely.

The next day we were back to the razzamatazz of the valley, in Hardwar. Before we left, we were coerced into paying Rs 30 instead of the stipulated rate of Rs 10 in the only parking place. Reported this to the police, wished best luck to the new state and made our way to Delhi.

THE AFRO Club of India (ACI) recently organised 'Aerosperts-2000' at Sardar Vallabhbhai Airport in the city. It in-

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