

Report - Annual Tour 2016

Since this was my first tour with the children and SBT, I was both excited and slightly over-awed by the whole thing. Taking so many children out for a sojourn is no cake walk. The staff is limited, the duty hours unending and the children and their antics far too many. All in all, the proposition is intimidating. But, the Manali that I got to see through the lens of SBT and 78 young girls was beautiful and colorful. The unending chatter, the pleasant weather in complete contrast to Delhi's sedative sultry heat, the lush green valleys and hills, with the pitter-patter of raindrops making our days warm and introspective.



We left Delhi around noon on the 19th of June. The hours we spent travelling were long but interesting with short tea, snacks and bathroom breaks in-between keeping us busy. We reached our hotel 'Mountainvilla' in Manali (Nehru Kund) at 8 a.m. on the morning of 20th. It took a while for the whole settling down to happen. With around 15 rooms, 6-7 girls in each room and us having bathed and all, we went for a walk to an army cantonment area 15 minutes away from our hotel. Post-lunch, we arranged evening nutrition for the girls, which itself was a task as there was no confectionary nearby and we – a couple of staff members and 2-3 girls – walked 1.5 kilometres up to fetch bottles of flavoured milk for the girls. The girls danced, played badminton, ludo and chatted their heart out in the evening, with new friendships being formed and the old being rekindled. And yes, we had two Labradors for company as well.



On June 21, Ms. Parvati Patni, our Executive Director, pleasantly surprised us when she reached at around 10 in the morning and spent the entire day with us. Our plan was to go for a dip in the hot medicinal spring, an idea which we had to forego in favour of Jogni Falls. But, before we headed to Jogni Falls, we decided to satiate our appetite and ordered Maggi, one plate for two people, with soft drink. The girls loved gorging on it and since Manali looked cloudy on this particular day, the backdrop for such a meal was perfect. The water at Jogni was ice-cold and the girls splashed themselves wet. The only concern was that most of the girls had not brought an extra set of clothes with them and it was already raining, with there being a high possibility of the girls falling sick by the time we walked all the way back to our bus and then reached our hotel. So, we decided to take another break on the way and sipped some tea to keep us warm. We had a quick lunch once back and then headed to Mall Road minus the little ones who stayed back at the hotel with a couple of staff members. Each one of the girls was given Rs. 100 to spend at their leisure with each staff member having been put in charge of 9-10 girls for the next one hour.



Since we had Parvati ma'm with us till 3:30 p.m. June 22, we made the most of the opportunity and went to Solang Valley after having our breakfast. The weather was lovely, the scenic beauty of the place indescribable and we were set to devour every bit of it. Some of us donned the 'pahadi' dresses and got our pictures clicked, before taking shelter as it had started pouring already. Everybody wanted a Cable Car ride, but as it was too expensive, we couldn't guarantee one. Since I was made in charge of finances, I kept negotiating with the authorities to reduce per person cost so that the girls could experience this unforgettable moment, which we eventually did. The girls were all smiles and our day was made. Rain

did become a dampener but we still made lovely memories. Parvati ma'm left for Delhi in the evening. The rest of the evening was spent having lunch (which itself was a big project), having fun and all. The staff also conducted separate sessions for the girls – an educative one for the elder lot and a drawing competition for those up to the age of 10. A visit to Manikaran Sahib was planned for the next day, which could not happen because of the long distance we would have had to travel and the bus drivers refusing to comply with us, which I believe proved to be a blessing in disguise because Manikaran Sahib would have drained us out completely.



The next day was the hardest. As if we had not walked enough in the last three days, we walked and walked and walked to reach Roerich Art Museum and Gallery. It was 25 kilometers from our hotel via bus. But we were in for a harsh surprise when the last 3 kilometers of utter and absolute steepness, in the blaring sun, had to be chased on foot. That Mr. Roerich's novel ideas and exquisite works took our breath away and made our troubles lighter would not be an understatement. Plus, the fact that the girls were being inquisitive and appreciative of the works and legacy of Mr. Roerich, put us at ease. We spent the evening gorging on ice-creams and chocolates, before heading back to the hotel and gorging on our favourite dishes.



The fifth day in Manali was spent having a late breakfast, heading off to the Mall Road, since the girls were keen on shopping and exploring the place a little more. We also ordered momos and soft-drinks as an afternoon snack for them. After having shopped and eaten and feeling ourselves up to the task of walking to Hadimba Temple, we set forth. The walk was not long but it was definitely steep; regardless, we made it, paid our obeisance at the beautiful temple, bought our cob-corns and more and left for our hotel. Once back, we had a long lunch, chit-chatted with the girls, sorted out their little-big issues, packed our bags to leave for Delhi that very night.

We reached Delhi the next day at around 6 in the evening before stopping at a dhaba in Panipat to have our lunch and munch on our favourite Panjabi dishes. We had already made arrangements for the girls' breakfast by buying bananas and flavoured milk.

Manali will remain etched in our hearts forever.

~ **Amol Kaur**