

An abode in the hills

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My first visit to IIT Mandi was in March 2010 when my colleague Shankar and I landed up in Mandi to help the newly appointed director, who everyone calls TAG, shortlist the first set of candidates for computer science. TAG was our colleague from IIT Madras and we were only too willing to come to Himachal. The other two members Manoj Mishra and Rajdeep Niyogi were from the mentoring institute, IIT Roorkee.

IIT Mandi had started in 2009, and the first batch was still in Roorkee. But the director moved to Mandi town to set up the new IIT in earnest, taking up residence in Mandav. The four of us were put up in a hotel up the Beas river, since the guesthouse was not yet set up. Our journey from Chandigarh was exciting, if not a little hair raising. The driver, who went by the name Sunny, claimed his blood pressure went up if he saw another car driving ahead of him. Another driver who ferried us frequently was Shastri ji, not his real name, with a penchant for religious music and a tendency to let other drivers go past us on both sides on the wide roads of Chandigarh, while we worried about catching our flight. Later, on a frosty morning in Jan 2011 I joined PTG, the better half of TAG, to pick him up from Bhuntar airport. It was a misty cloudy morning, and a drive through the steep rocky valley along the Beas, for me after thirty years, was fantastic. We decided to return via the Kandi pass, driving through the unspoilt countryside. However, as we approached the pass, the colour white started appearing on the hillsides, and just before the pass itself we found ourselves in a queue waiting to negotiate the snow. After a feeble attempt, Shastri ji declared it unsafe and decided to turn back. TAG, however, had other ideas, and the three of us got out of the car and decided to leg it. Again after thirty years I had the experience of walking through snow. It was a very long walk though, and we were lucky to run into a local who showed us a shortcut descending directly to Kataula. Even so, it was approaching lunchtime, and a plate of rajma rice at the dhaba overlooking the khad was very welcome! It was one I have often visited since.

Coming back to shortlisting, we managed to squeeze an afternoon off from the weekend assignment, and PTG graciously became a guide on a trip to view the campus site at Kamand. We stopped, as people often do, at the point half way down from Katindi, and got our very first view of the South Campus, dotted with a few old buildings, and then onto the North and the customary view from the peepul tree. Also our first sight of the red bus which still plies the route. And the day was also our first introduction to Rajmahal hotel, a constant now in the lives of many IIT folk. I took extensive photos of Mandi and the Kamand valley, and sent out a link to everyone I knew, in the hope of attracting good people. One of the persons who did get enticed was our football coach from IIT Bombay, S N Jha, who is still there, even as we speak, after retirement from Mumbai. An epitome of gregariousness, he was instrumental in finding homes to rent for many of the new faculty who were the first to join.

I made a couple of more visits, once to interview the first batch of research students, and we had an extensive CS curriculum design meet in Chennai, before I landed up in Mandi to spend a year in

the end of December. Joining on the same day was a young mathematician, Rajendra Ray¹, a post doc from France who loved the mountains and claimed to know contract bridge. My idea was to settle into the cradle of Beas in the Shivaliks, help out with teaching, finish my book, and have a lark. It was not to be.

In the summer of 2010 the first batch of students moved from Roorkee to Mandi. And the second batch was set to join. Accommodation was to be found for them. As luck would have it, Samuel, a Tamilian with a liking for the mountains, who was running a youth hostel in Dalhousie, landed up to help. With a never say die attitude, the man who travelled only by motorcycle to avoid travel sickness in cars and buses, set about looking for hostels. Vallabh College had given us a sizeable one, but others had to be found. When the time came for the third batch to join in the summer of 2011, I remember going out with him to all nooks and corners of Mandi. Yes, small a town as it is, Mandi does have nooks and corners, and we visited any prospective building on offer if it had more than a few rooms. How did I get involved in this? Because quietly the office of the Dean of Students had crept upon me. Even now when I look back I marvel at the tireless work put in by the first wardens, Subrata Ghosh, Anil Sao, Anil Kishan, Rajendra Ray, and Nitu Kumari. Without them I don't know how IIT Mandi would have survived. When the time came for me to leave we all had a fine dinner at Rajmahal to celebrate their efforts.

One of the earliest matters I had to attend to in January 2011 as Dean Students was a call I received from my counterpart in Roorkee saying that one of their students was missing, and that they suspected that he had come to Mandi in quest of an IIT Mandi student who had moved along with her batch. Fortunately, we found him lurking near the academic block, given to us by Vallabh college, and we managed to feed him and convince him that the best course of action for him was to head back to Roorkee, and his studies, specially since the subject of his amour was disinclined to meet him.

I had a tiny flat just behind Mandav, meant originally for the hotel staff, but with a splendid view of the Suketi brook, ideal for a relaxed evening as the sun set, and the lights on the opposite hillside started glimmering, as my friends Sushmita and Barun Banerjee would vouch for. Barun had just taken voluntary retirement from IIT Kanpur, and was, willingly, plucked out from Calcutta into the Beas valley. Along with Pranav Deshmukh, from IIT Madras, he contributed to raising the average age of faculty to respectable levels. Pranav was a stickler for discipline, and I remember a story about him keeping an entire class waiting for hours till the the culprit of some misdemeanour, what I do not remember, confessed by sending an sms anonymously to him.

The road going up from Mandav to the water treatment plant was a frequent strolling haunt for research students and staff alike, all of us staying in Mandav. TAG once told me that the the road led to a nice long hike through the interiors with vistas not imaginable in the congested town, and on one afternoon Subrata Ghosh, Suman Kalyan Pal, Rajendra Ray and I set out despite a drizzle. The rain fizzled out thankfully, and the fourteen kilometre walk was an afternoon very well spent. Rajendra displayed an hitherto unknown interest in birds, when he excitedly point to one scurrying across the road a little ahead. "It tastes excellent", he said! This walk was to become a favourite

¹ I have taken the liberty of naming my colleagues without their titles, and seek their indulgence. Many of them have since then done their stints as Deans and Chairs.

amongst some of us, also because at the other end where we joined back on NH21, the Chandigarh Manali highway, on the outskirts of Mandi, was right opposite the Black Pepper restaurant, which was to become the second favourite eating place after Rajmahal, specially for the students whose hostel was next door.

Mandav was also home to the girl students and the faculty who chose to stay in the tiny surrounding flats. The registrar Ramesh Chand Sawhney had a slight bigger house next to the gate. He had a liking for *paneer*, which he constantly instructed the common mess staff to make, while the girls had a marked preference for Maggi. The ensuing push and pull was interesting to watch. Prem Felix and Rajendra Ray chose to run their own mess, with frequent non-veg food.

There was a considerable amount of camaraderie amongst the small set of faculty members first to join. About 25 or 30 in all, including visitors. In particular our young colleagues from Bengal and Kerala, led by the enterprising Prem Felix, he was later to become the Dean sponsored research, would organise a barbecue for fish at the drop of a hat. Once we hired three cars and carried a load of fish looking for a suitable picnic spot all the way to Manikaran. However, on spotting the resort Sanjha Chulha in the Parvati valley, we took the easier way out for a sumptuous lunch. They refused to cook our fish for us, and in the end the barbecue had to be held on the premises of the academic block after our return in the evening. On another occasion we hired three cars and headed for an IPL game in Dharamshala, organised by Chayan Nandi and Rajendra Ray, who knew cricket much better than he knew bridge. One car was full of research students, and we all stayed in a small resort in the outskirts. The day before we spent the evening in McLeod Ganj, as did the Punjab and Delhi IPL teams, and my daughter who was visiting me during school vacation was quite thrilled to get some photos with her favourite cricketers. Security was strict at the entrance the next day, not even coins allowed in our wallets, but Chayan managed to sneak in a camera while carrying Pablo into the stadium.

Jha sir, as he was called, had made a badminton court in the premises of Mandav, and a volleyball court and cricket nets outside the academic block, along with a badminton court on the second floor. I was to join him eventually in an effort to get the Joginder Nagar club next door to let us use their then defunct tennis courts. This was not only in line with my work as DoS but, as we shall see below, imperative for my passing on another responsibility. We were lucky to hire Kaul Singh, a national level cricket player, as a coach on contract, and it was tremendously beneficial for the students. Eventually he got a much deserved permanent position. On my second stint to IIT Mandi he got some passes in March 2017 for us to watch a test match against Australia in Dharamshala, and B Subramanian, more on him below, Suguna his spouse, and I went for a Sunday, accompanied by a visitor from the US. Sitting in prime seats in the pavilion area we were often on television, and I got quite a few calls from Chennai asking if it was me on their screens. Meanwhile, one of our earliest MS students, Vijay Chauhan, was making the most of the IIT in his home state, passionately working on thermal power while at the same time trying learn French from PTG. You never know, he said, whether he would take up a job as a trekking guide, and languages always help. He took me on a hike to Kheer Ganga, changing buses at Bhuntar, and eating in his favourite dhaba. The climb is steep but exhilarating. That is the kind of stuff Hmachel is an attraction for many of us. He also introduced a qualified mountaineering trainer to us. Barun and I interviewed him, but somehow a deal could not be worked out.

When we talk of Mandi we cannot but talk of Parashar. My first visit to the lake and temple was in February, or was it March, when a bus was arranged to take some students, some visitors, and some of us faculty members up to the revered spot. The bus we had hired was not a small one, and half way up we ran into a small landslide, which it could not negotiate, despite some valiant efforts by the students. Just then one of those white Thakur tempo transporters so common in the region happened to come by, and agreed to help us out. So there we were standing in the semi open truck, bracing the cool air. The weather took a turn for the worse when we were up there and, much to the joy of the students, it snowed for a short while covering everything with a white blanket. It melted away in a matter of minutes though. On the way back Suman Kalyan Pal guided some of us on a walk part of the way down through a rhododendron forest in full bloom.

In March, for the Institute day, we hired buses and everyone landed up in the South Campus, all students, staff and faculty. Kaul Singh kept us all occupied by organising tug of war competitions between different groups. I am not sure whether my memory serves me right, but I think the Director's team won. Maybe I should check with Kaul Singh. There were other fun events too, and snacks, and everyone had a jolly good time followed by speeches.

One more hat I wore concurrently, for a while, was that of Chair, School of Humanities & Social Sciences! The other two members were Shewta Rao Garg, who taught English, and Sumit Majumdar, who taught economics. Both decided to quit at short notice following their, respective, better halves to other parts of the country. The semester was about to begin. But help was thankfully on the way. On an earlier visit to IIT Madras I had run into B Subramanian, a man of many refined tastes and more German than most natives, enjoying his retired life playing tennis in the staff club. I had then invited him to come to Mandi and mentioned the possibility of playing tennis there too. That is how Jha sir, Chayan the sports advisor, and I landed up in Joginder Nagar club, where we got a taste of the Mandyali language. We met a local person who was doing some repair work and he assured us that one could renovate the hard court. He said he would give us his number, and as young Chayan got ready to punch it in, he said "*thanave jero bunja, bae sae kunja*". We looked at him quizzically and he looked at us in wonderment. No doubt he could not believe that these city folk could not understand a ten digit phone number. After shaking his head a bit he went off to get a paper to write it down. You figure it out.

Anyway BS agreed to visit us. The job talk he gave went over everyone's head, being largely about German philosophy, peppered with multilingual quotes. Meanwhile Lalit Malhotra had used his good offices to persuade Vallabh College to loan us an economics teacher, Ramna Thakur, and the college ended up one short eventually. I was hugely relieved when BS came and took over the Chair responsibility, and so the School had someone who actually knew humanities. He also brought along two young instructors. One, Ashok Kumar, who had just submitted his PhD at IIT Bombay, and the other, Shivam Mishra a young graduate from JNU to help teach German, a language that has been taught at IIT Mandi ever since.

Mandi was, and still is, a small town with a totally different culture. A feature I could identify with from my younger days was hanging around with friends in the evenings. This is no longer the case in our big cities, but the gardens of the sunken Indira Market were bustling with young people and old alike in the evenings. Situated opposite the palace, it is the *de facto* downtown area, with a large screen music show on Saturday evenings. Apart from Rajmahal there were only a couple of

eating places. One of them, called The Treat, agreed to come and open a canteen in the Academic block and, after some hiccups and many arguments, eventually settled down. They were quick to set up an eating place just outside when the South campus started getting populated, and became the preferred place for treats amongst the students.

Rajmahal was the preferred spot though, and the summer was occupied with a fresh round of recruitment in all disciplines. Lunch would be arranged along with candidates in the academic block, while dinner used to be a carefully choreographed event at Rajmahal, allowing existing faculty to interact with the external experts. And I, almost forgot to mention, was also the Chair, School of Computing and Elec. Engineering. There were only four schools, merging some of the disciplines that would be departments in a larger institute. School of Engineering, and School of Basic Sciences were the other two.

Come July, the third batch of students were all set to arrive, along with their parents and siblings. I received sage advice from Lalit Malhotra for organising day one. "Don't let them worry about their lunch during enrolment. Feed them. It will not cost much." And I took it up in all earnest. The adjoining hostel had a small dining area, and one had to carefully choreograph the event. My young colleagues were quick to respond, and we set up stations on the three floors of the academic block, with small batches of students going to different locations for the different formalities, with the accounts and administrative staff occupying various check points. Chandan Sharma, who had been handling all the Institute hospitality, kept all staff members well nourished throughout, and Samuel and his assistants shepherded the students and their parents to the the next location. Each batch had an allocated twenty minutes to go to the mess and eat their lunch. We were even able to give space to SBI and PNB to set up loan giving desks. They are with IIT Mandi even now in Kamand. A trip was organised to Kamand the next day for interested parents. The meeting with all students and parents was held in the afternoon in the badminton hall on the second floor, and Barun had warned me that he will alert me if I went on and on in my address as Dean Students. I still remember seeing him frantically wave his arms from the back of the crowd.

Space was a crunch. Everything happened in one single block. Labs and classes on the first two floors and faculty offices on the second. Everyone, except a few of us, had shared offices carved out in the big hall, and retaining heat in the partitions without ceilings was a challenge. Eventually the drawing hall had to be converted to offices too. I took the opportunity to move from my North facing Dean Students office to a cosy corner in the drawing hall, with windows on the East and South. The sun was always present and I did not even have to use room heaters. I even got an artistic undergraduate to paint some flowers on my glass door, and got some semblance of privacy. Aniruddha Chakraborty next door, the first full time faculty member at IIT Mandi, achieved the same by means of two stacks of books piled high on his desk.

A little to the north of the Victoria Bridge was a temple perched on a height that always intrigued me. Finally one day Bharat Singh Rajpurohit, Rajendra Ray and I did some research and found to that there was a path going up to the Mahishasurmardini Mata Temple, from the Jogindernagar highway. And off we went. We ran into a bunch of school students with some teachers I knew from my interaction with them involving science popularising. They were having a *dham*, a bit late in the afternoon, and insisted that we join them. The students were thrilled to meet my young colleagues and made me take their pictures with them. These were pre-selfie days, at least in Mandi. Instead

of returning the same way we decided to explore the the path going in the opposite direction along the Beas, but much higher up, giving us panoramic views of Mandi town. Eventually we found our way down beyond Bhiuli, and ended up in Pradeep Parameswaran and Lishma Anand's place, where we were fed a sumptuous dinner with some excellent fish.

The first faculty picnic was organised in the Dhuma Devi temple on the outskirts of Mandi. Situated at a height amongst the forests and the dish antennas linking Mandi to outside world, the location also offers a splendid view of the Pandoh dam from a distance. Cooks prepared a feast while everyone explored the surroundings. I remember Bharat commenting "future dean" when I clicked his photo with Anil Sao. Little did he know then that it was a prophesy. The highpoint of the afternoon was when young Danica Gonsalves produced a couple of bottles of wine, spreading cheer all around. It is a well kept secret.

Soon enough it was December and time for me to go back to Chennai. But not for ever.