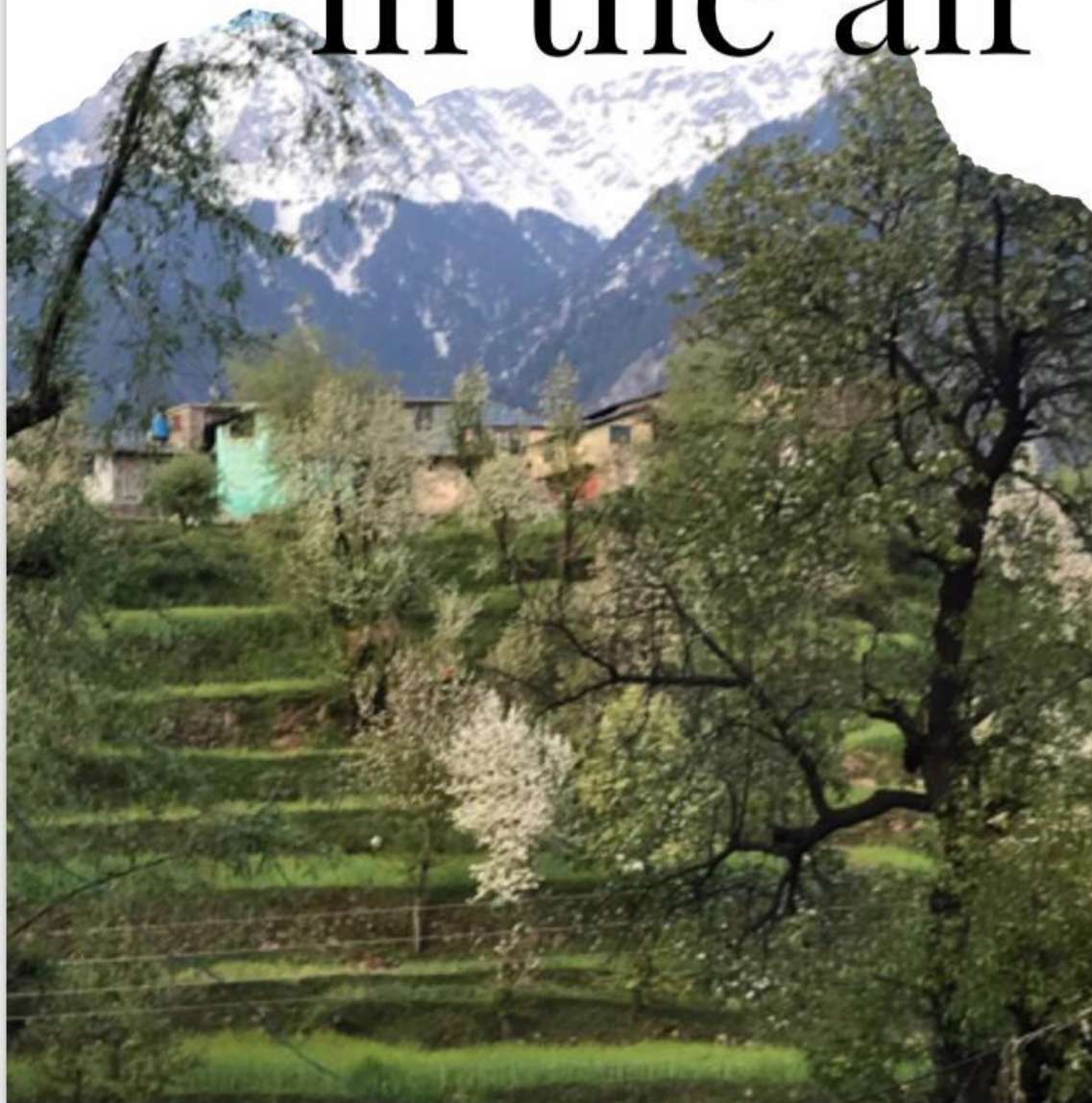


*Spellbound by her recent sojourn at the scenic and spiritual retreat of Dharamshala, DR. KETNA L MEHTA, Founder Trustee, Nina Foundation, shares her happy experience and the reverberating reflections that the trip set off.*



# Kindness in the air



**The** magnificent Dhauladhar range of snow-capped mountains seem to have a language of their own – mysterious, mystical, and magical.

Lo and behold, one day I spotted a ‘heart’ on one of them as the white clouds drifted, and I instantly knew that these mountains conveyed love – abundant love for each and every one – suffused with spirituality. These mountains have the power to heal, its communion with the beholder conveying assurance, peace, faith and belief – forming a protective canopy all around this wonderful hill station in Himachal Pradesh aptly named Dharamshala – spiritual dwelling.

*Kangra Valley Tea Estate*



There was definitely a ‘mystical pull’ for me to visit this cool sanctuary, and to be sure, it was a spiritual experience, from the word go.

Confusion over baggage allowance made us reduce the contents of our bags before we embarked on our journey. My dear friend Balfour Manuel and Garima from Blue Dart were my angels all through this entire trip. God bless them and their entire team!

My interpretation of this development to my friend and co-traveller Anupama was: Empty yourself, travel light, get prepared to face the unknown with a clean slate and shed excess baggage. Let us free ourselves from clutter, free our minds of preparedness and explore the unknown. Let us learn to live with less! This proved to be prophetic.

All through the transit, be it airline staff or co-passengers, the people we met en route... there were angels everywhere. We articulated our wishes and instantly these were fulfilled. We were already experiencing a spiritual, and loving experience.

Our Fortune Park Moksha Hotel, an ITC managed property situated right up in Strawberry Hills, Satobari in McLeodGanj was an hour’s drive from Gagal airport.

*Tenzin Palmo, the first Western Buddhist Nun blessing us at the Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery*



*I love challenges and I love overcoming them too! It feeds my sense of adventure, reassuring me that nothing is impossible.*

We were mesmerised by the landscape of beautiful tall pine trees, green hills, terraced tea gardens and bursts of red wild flowers, 'brar', a species of rhododendron.

The blue skies with white clouds, the bright sunlight minus pollution, and the cool breeze made us smile and cheer gleefully as every bend and turn took us higher and higher towards – a new design crafted by nature. It was absolutely beautiful and Dharamshala was a breathtaking paradise.

The traditional warm welcome was extremely heartening as we had left Mumbai at 5 a.m. and had clocked 12 hours of travel (tiring for a 56-year-old harbouring a spinal cord injury for the last 24 years). Our disabled friendly room was lovely, everything was comfortable and accessible for me – good bed height, wooden flooring without a carpet, sliding door, accessible washroom, and a big terrace with a panoramic view of the blue sky above, and the green carpet below with layers and layers of mountains, as far as our eyes could see.

The entire hotel was kindness personified. Each one of them reached out to us and went out of their way to delight and surprise us with smiles and kind gestures. Here, I must mention that when I announced that I would like to visit

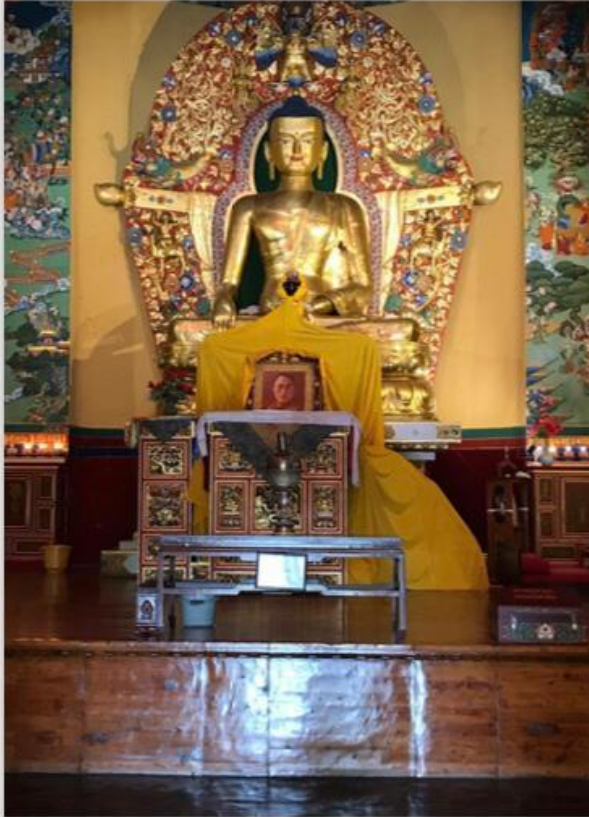
*Dharamshala is kindness personified – people here are happy to give, to make others happy, without any expectations whatsoever. They are happy in your happiness!*



*St. John Church, Forsyth Gunj*



*Rock-cut temples, Masrur*



*Norbulingka Institute -Tibetan art and culture centre*

Dharamshala, a lot of people dissuaded me, saying: “Oh... not for you!” “It’s totally inaccessible”. “You will not be able to access most of the places”. “Don’t go there!”

Once settled, we were ready to explore this ‘Land of Gods and Goddesses’ as the brochures described it – though it offers much more than its temples and monasteries. Well, I love challenges and I love overcoming them too! It feeds my sense of adventure, reassuring me that nothing is impossible. Every challenge makes me more confident and bolder.

Getting back to our Dharamshala sojourn, we set off, armed with a seasoned driver, Rajesh ji, a local young man.

My friend Anu suggested that we also take along a young hotel intern Raman Jeriyal to help with my wheelchair, which turned out to be a brilliant move. Raman was a proactive and willing escort and participated wholeheartedly in unravelling the local folklore, history and beauty of every place enthusiastically, never ever complaining about anything. He manoeuvred my wheelchair like a pro.

We visited several places in Dharamshala, and thanks to the great cooperation from the entire hotel staff, Raman, Rajeshji, locals, and tourists, who voluntarily came forward to lift me or my wheelchair. These gestures made me feel as if our path was strewn with rose petals and the entire universe had converged



## TRAVEL

together to ensure that we were able to visit and enjoy each and every place. Like I said to a kind Sardarji, Ram Rahim Singh Ji, who appeared, as if magically, and lifted me on my wheelchair as we crossed the threshold of the ancient Shiva temple Baijnath, "I am blessed to meet God even before entering the temple."

This was true for every place in Dharamshala. I was never left out and was an active participant. We experienced a beautiful moment when we halted at a tea estate in Palampur. To the right, sunrays were shimmering on the snow-capped mountains and to the left, near the tea gardens, was a rainbow spangled setting sun. There was this wonderful cool nip in the air as we sipped our tea viewing this awesome natural wonder! A perfect, priceless moment. Even today, thinking about it makes me happy and elevates my spirit to a higher gear.

Much later, I chanced upon a hoarding on the road that had these words: Kindness - Be Kind. Let's cultivate Dharamshala as a Kind city!! This brought into perspective all that I was experiencing. Dharamshala is kindness personified - people here are happy to give, to make others happy, without any expectations whatsoever. They are happy in your happiness!

In India, many a times, our family members, our colleagues and our community find it very difficult to take us, our wheelchairs, baggage, etc., to experience a great holiday together. Well, they too need to take a break and enjoy the tour. After my wonderful visit here, I believe people must get to understand the 'art of making everything possible and enjoyable with love, kindness and happiness'. I wish that every child, adult and aged friend on a wheelchair has this kind of experience on a holiday in India. ●

*Empty yourself, travel light, get prepared to face the unknown with a clean slate and shed excess baggage. Let us free ourselves from clutter, free our minds of preparedness and explore the unknown. Let us learn to live with less!*