

## IT DOES NOT RAIN IN NORTHERN KENYA

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My earliest memories of East Africa are those of when as a child, I saw a Hindi film known for its extravagant dances in which a vamp (during those days it was always the cabaret dancer, Helen) would be singing to a loud tune which would go as “Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika” and suddenly from the wings 10-15 Negroes would jump out shouting “Mombassa, Mombassa, Mombassa” in as hoary a voice as possible. These countries on the shores of East Africa had a large population of Asians, particularly of Gujaratis from Western India, speaking the language that I spoke.

Later as I went to college there were many East African students who came to Mumbai to study. We always got along well with them for we spoke the same language. The only difficulty that we faced was that they spoke very very slowly. So as a result, if one of the East African student would say, “Let us rush to catch this train”, by the time he would finish his sentence, the train would have departed. The same applied to his tone. He could never express anger for he spoke very slowly. For example, if he said “If I am angry, I will break your teeth”, the other guy had enough time and opportunity to go back, brush his teeth, come back and smile.

Then for many years my contact with East Africans was lost as I plunged into college and later into business. I took to mountaineering in the Himalaya. But I re-established contact again when as Editor of the *Himalayan Journal*, a very wonderful relationship developed with Mrs. Mavis Heath who lived on a farmland in Kenya. She wrote me wonderful letters recalling her only visit to the Himalaya and the fond memories of it. When she came to know that my young son, Sonam collected postal stamps, she became even his pen-pal, sent him postal stamps from the world over. In later years, as time rolled by, she lost much of her vision, but would always write; “I am allowed a limited use of my vision, and I reserve it all for your letters and the *Himalayan Journal*, which I read thoroughly.” As the time went by her husband passed away, but she continued to live in Kenya and our correspondence went on for many years. And one day, I received a short note from her son, who had come from England to wind up her affairs, which said that ‘My mother, Mavis Heath has passed away and I found some of your letters in her belongings, so I thought of informing you’.

After this there were hardly any connections with that country, until one day, late in evening at about 10.30 p.m. our house door bell rang and in walked a very pleasant looking gentleman, who introduced himself as Jayant Ruparel from Nairobi. Now Jayantbhai, as we called him later, was in a bit of a dilemma. When he asked his son-in-law, what gift he would like from Mumbai, the son-in-law jumped and said, ‘Get me books on mountaineering’, and he listed some of the books written by me and requested for a signed copy. As per as Gujarati tradition goes, a father-in-law, could not ever refuse or deny the wishes of the son-in-law, so in a remarkable series of enquiries, Jayantbhai not only located my books but also got my address and after searching for a long time, finally landed in our house. That was beginning of a very fond and long relationship. Whenever he came to Mumbai with wife and his two lovely daughters we always met over dinner or attended programmes and chatted for a long

time. He made me aware of recent events in East Africa, particularly in Kenya and suddenly all memories were revived. In fact long ago, when I was young, my Parsi friend Boga and myself had planned to visit Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika to climb several mountains. Plans fell through as Idi Amin took over Uganda and there was no way, we as Asians, could peacefully climb there.

Years rolled by again and suddenly we received the sad news that Jayant Ruparel was killed in a road accident. They were travelling in Ethiopia in a bus and only Mr. Ruparel was killed in the highway accident.

Finally, my trip to Kenya began to materialise with an invitation from Charles Rathman, then President of Mountain Club of Kenya. I had 'jumped' at this invitation. I had to let it 'jump' for almost 2 years, before I could visit this great country. No sooner than I arrived in Nairobi, I was greeted by Rajal Upadhyaya, Jayantbhai's son-in-law who had now finally charmed me to his mountains. He talked with great enthusiasm about his mountains. "You know, we will go round Mt. Kenya, ours is the only country to be name after a peak, Kenya". I just murmured India being named as the 'Republic of Himalaya'. With enthusiasm he had planned everything, a trip to rare terrains of the Northern Kenya, which even they had not visited for a while. It being a five-day week, with the Easter weekend, many of his other friends from the Mountain Club of India, were to join us. Geeta, my wife, and I prepared for the trip with enthusiasm. We started off on a hot April day for our long 400+km journey, towards Northern Kenya. We first halted at Nanyuki for a cup of tea and the countryside looked beautiful, though poor. Isiolo, where we stopped to fill in fuel, had a gathering of people of different cultures. Many of Somalian origin were selling knives, really big knives, which were carved out, but looked extremely dangerous to me. We were now entering into a different countryside and the road roughed up as we passed Lolokwe a mountain of about 2000 m and looked up at wonderful peaks simply called 'Cat and Mouse'.

I was in the car with Denzyl who was driving with great gusto. He had his origins in Goa, India and as a result there was lot to chat about. He showed us many beauties of the countryside around. The talk in the car revolved around Kenyan mountains, politics, people, history, gossip and even a bit of philosophy. He showed us that water revolved clockwise above the Equator and anti-clockwise below the Equator. I would really like to try this out some day whenever I am back around there. As we proceeded towards the northern areas, the roads were very dry and far from being in excellent condition. Denzyl talked about rough roads and how they could drive for hours on such roads in their car. I queried, "What if these roads become wet, wouldn't it be very difficult to drive?" "It does not rain in Northern Kenya", Denzyl said with authority, stating almost like Hemingway's discovery of a carcass found on Kilimanjaro, on which he wrote his famous book *Snows of Kilimanjaro*. We all believed him; looking at all the dry land, but wondered how people living in these villages lived or what did they drink.

We passed Archer's Post and roads became rougher and our troubles began. Immediately our cars began getting stuck in little wet patches and we suffered three punctures within 45 minutes. We could not proceed far due to time limitations so our leader Rajal decided to camp on barren lands. Up went tents and we soon got inside. Until now our group was travelling in five different cars so we had got to know each other only briefly. But now we chatted. There was a German girl, Katherine, who had double PhD's but had opted to work in United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) in Kenya. There was a yoga expert who danced with yoga and Eric who talked of his lovely peaks in Sweden and Philips who had almost climbed Kangchenjunga and several others, apart from the Ruparel family led by Radha and Rajal and well supported by Sita. Among them was Ravi Ruparel who worked for the World Bank and had decided to join us for this little venture.

Next day we started early, and our caravan of five cars started with Christo going towards the peak Baio which was our original aim, when a culvert which only the brave could cross, stopped us. But we trekkers and mountaineers are brave, so in a rush each car crossed it in a different style like riders on a variety of horses, as one can see in a horse show. Some cars jumped so high in the air, that we thought it would disappear. We continued but within a kilometre was the Malgis river which was in flood, and here only fools would cross it. We carefully remembered that 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread' and luckily stopped. But as we returned, aha, it must be mentioned here, that a day earlier it must have rained heavily, otherwise where could all this water have come from! Denzyl again assured us that it was unusual. "Only a small flash flood, very unusual. It never rains in Northern Kenya".

By evening a very huge altocumulus cloud had built up and it rained reminding me of my dear old Mumbai rains, which had us all scrambling around for umbrellas and shelters. As we sat inside tents, wet and singing in chorus, the now great anthem of Kenya; "It never rains in the Northern Kenya". Only poor Denzyl seemed to be singing out of tune! We had to push our cars out of mud several times (both pushing and pulling techniques had to be employed) and of course all the time light banter kept our spirits high. As Ravi Ruparel of the World Bank plunged himself into mud and was digging out with hands in knee deep water, somebody shouted, "That's the World Bank dirtying his hands in service of Kenya!" Ravi looked at the ladies standing outside and responded, "with the donor countries watching how the World Bank is operating.' Then he looked at me and said, "Well the Indians would always say, give us the money and we will look after ourselves". All these people had devoted several days and months to work here. In fact Kenya, unlike India, seems to have no infrastructural facilities of its own. Christian influences in these remote northern areas on education, medical, social structures were completely evident and these institutions were in charge, not the Kenyan government. The foreign donors and workers were helping Kenya to live. Possibly without their help, these barely clothed natives may find it difficult to survive.

Talking of Africa I always remembered the travels of Rev. David Livingston, who had spent many years in these jungles, staying with natives. There was a cartoon in the *Punch Magazine*, which showed a wild party where people with the hair down, wearing wild clothes of the hippy era were dancing to a wild tune, shouting like natives. There in between them sat one gentleman in a proper British suit and tie. Someone walked up to him and asked, "Dr. Livingston, I presume!"

Next day we had bright sun again and very hot weather around, but trekkers cannot be stopped. "Onwards!" shouted, Rajal, our fearless leader and we left for Hallilagam Nder at daybreak, a lovely little peak rising just above our camp. Whatever this peak meaning meant, I would always remember it as the 'Peak of Thorns'. This was my first experience of trekking in Kenya and I had never seen so many thorns, each with a name. Some of our UNDP friends were in shorts and my heart cried out at

those pretty girls' legs and bare hands were scratched by several thorns, particularly the 'Wait a Bit', (*Ngoja Kidogo*) thorn which gets into your flesh like a hook and you have to wait and unhook it, before you move on. There was *Secketet*, a plant which gives you feeling of being 'drunk on a drug', which it literally meant. The sun was out with a vengeance, and though I stopped a little lower, others managed to reach the foot of the final slab. The summit could not be reached, but who cares, by this time we had seen flowers, a green and black snake, had rubbed against rocks and bushes and had sweated. That is what trekking is all about, isn't it. Baio stood tall and seemed far away. That evening we all gathered around the camp. Incidentally all the drinking water that we had, had to be carried in our cars. Nothing is available in the villages or on this terrain. Two defence personnel carrying guns accompanied us -- this was a very different perspective for trekking. A sense of satisfaction had descended on us. Satisfaction, which can only be achieved after driving on rough roads, dehydration amid rains, good company, no bath for four days, sweat and dirt and of course good food. It descended on us as we drove back. And yes, it was still raining as we returned. And the chorus returned, but now even Denzyl was singing in tune!

Back in Nairobi, we plunged into the 'tourist circuit'. We visited the Masai Mara game reserve and Mombassa. The journey by train to the latter allowed us to enjoy the famous British railway (sadly not well maintained now ) and pass through Tsavo to remind us of the 'Man eating lions of Tsavo'. Mombassa with its crowds and narrow street brought back memories of history. Kenya has a lot to offer and we had just tasted our first fruit.

Like everything else in my life, my trip to Kenya ended with two more little walks, the first with Rajal and later with Charles joining us. We went to Elementaita Lake and climbed gentle Longonot. Finally, we did a trek to Asakut. I had met many friends and it was a wonderful experience to see our people as Asian African. Radha Upadhyaya who guided us through a wonderful exhibition of Asian African Pictures and History said very clearly and firmly, "I'm Asian African, I have nothing to do with India except a long association of family ties. And whatever I do, I do for my country here".

All good things come to an end and now it was time for Geeta and me to depart for Mumbai. I presented my passport at the immigration and as I moved on, something tugged at my shirt. It was almost as if it was saying "wait a bit", like the thorn, but it was of course my shirt had got caught in a nail. I could not wait, but promised myself that I would return as I was 'drunk on the drug' of *Secketet*. As I sat in the plane, a Kenya Asian, a Gujarati leaving for India, sat next to me. As it is generally the habit of our community, no sooner had we departed that he started chatting with me. Where do you come from and what do you do and what did you do in Kenya? So I told him, I had a long trek to Northern Kenya. He said that "Oh! That's a very different area, we never go there, in fact it is extremely dry and thorny and that's why we avoid it". And before I could open my mouth to say anything about my trip, he issued the final *diktat*, "You see, it never rains in Northern Kenya".