



Go on an apple trail in Himachal, the land of the forbidden fruit

Sit in a garden, surrounded by apple trees, and breathtaking landscapes of the mountains and valleys (Banjara Resort)

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PIYA DESAI | Tue, 3 Nov 2015-04:26pm , Mumbai , DNA

Piya Bose goes on a tour in the bosom of Himachal Pradesh, that's blushing red with ripe apples to welcome the snowy winter

Sangla Valley in Kinnaur was the starting point of my three-day apple trail in Himachal Pradesh. Set amidst a sprawling orchard with plump, red apples waiting to be plucked and the milky white Baspa River gushing through the backdrop, my abode at the Banjara Camp truly seemed like the Garden of Eden. Since there was no tempting Adam or conniving Satan into keeping me company, I enjoyed my solitude, sitting on a white boulder on the camp's silver beach overlooking the Baspa, and pairing hot aloo parathas with delicious apple preserves from my picnic hamper.

Later, during an evening trek to the Batseri village, a local pahadi lady adorning a reshta (long, checkered tunic), invited me to her hut for a cup of hot 'chai'. As she lit the firewood, she told me that her community is primarily engaged in apple cultivation. That would be true of several other communities of the state too as Himachal is India's second largest producer

of apples, after Kashmir. It offers three varieties—Royal Delicious, Golden Delicious and their best selling Red Delicious—and the state's economy depends heavily (directly and indirectly) on the fruit through apple-grading houses, processing plants, tourism and so on. But youngsters are now taking up jobs with leading airlines and corporates in cities.



Apple Grading at Kotgarh. Pic: Fruit Bageecha

As I looked around at the beautiful, pahadi architecture of her village, the miles of apple trees were unmissable. They are grown at elevations of 5,000-10,000 ft; the higher the altitude, the later its harvesting season and usually the better is the quality of apples. The local Badrinarayan Temple interestingly has carvings from all religions, which says a lot about these peace-loving people.

The next day, my two-hour drive to Kalpa, noted for its high quality apples, at 9,711 ft. was through winding mountain roads fringed by chilgoza trees. Pine nut and deodar forests abound against a backdrop of deep gorges cut by the gurgling Sutlej. As I sat wrapped in a light shawl, taking in spectacular views of the sun playing hide-and -seek over the Kinner Kailash peak, locals told me that in a few months (I visited in September), winter will set in and temperatures will drop to -20°C. The entire area will be covered in five to seven feet of snow, creating the perfect condition for the next batch of high-quality apples to grow. This is also the time when they brew home made alcohol with apples and apricots for personal consumption, to keep warm through eight long winter months. From here, you can visit Chitkul the last inhabited village on the Indo-China border, earlier part of the ancient silk route.



Anuradha Budhraj co-founded 'Fruit Bageecha'

My trip was nearing its end, but my excitement went up a notch as I headed to Kotgarh, where the glory of the Himachal apple began. In 1882, Captain Lee, an English army officer planted the first apple orchard in Kullu, but his green, Ross Pippin ones didn't gain popularity as they were sour and could only be used for cooking. A few decades later, in 1916, Samuel Evan Stokes—who had come to Shimla to work in a leper colony—on realising that locals were also battling poverty besides the disease, started an economic revolution. He brought seeds of 'Red Delicious' apples from Philadelphia, distributed them free of cost to locals of Thanedar, in Kotgarh and in six to seven years the trees bore fruit. Besides the Kashmiri apples, this variety is what we proudly call Indian apples today. Stokes, who later went by the name Satyanand Stokes, became a leading activist of our freedom movement and married a local lady. I reached the charming Thanedar around sunset and took in its history, apple-scented air and panoramic views of pastoral mountains, while sitting in a garden on a wrought iron chair, a reminder of the colonial times. You can still see Stokes' orchard and visit the pahadi-style Paramjyoti temple he built.

If Captain Lee were alive today, he would be a very happy man. Just a few years ago, entrepreneurs Kartik and Anuradha Budhraj, who quit their media jobs to start 'Fruit Bageecha' here in collaboration with the Mahila Mandal, popularised the Ross Pippins with their 'Green Apple and Ginger Chutney' that is retailed to luxury hotels. Their ambitious hot new preserve will also use the Pippins in combination with Naga chillies. Jams by locals are available in most of these places too and with help from your hotel, you can partake in apple cultivation, fruit plucking and visit a fruit-processing unit.

If Adam's example is anything to go by, don't resist the lure of this crimson beauty. Get off your latest 'app', switch off your phone and succumb to the beauty of this enchanting land of apples.

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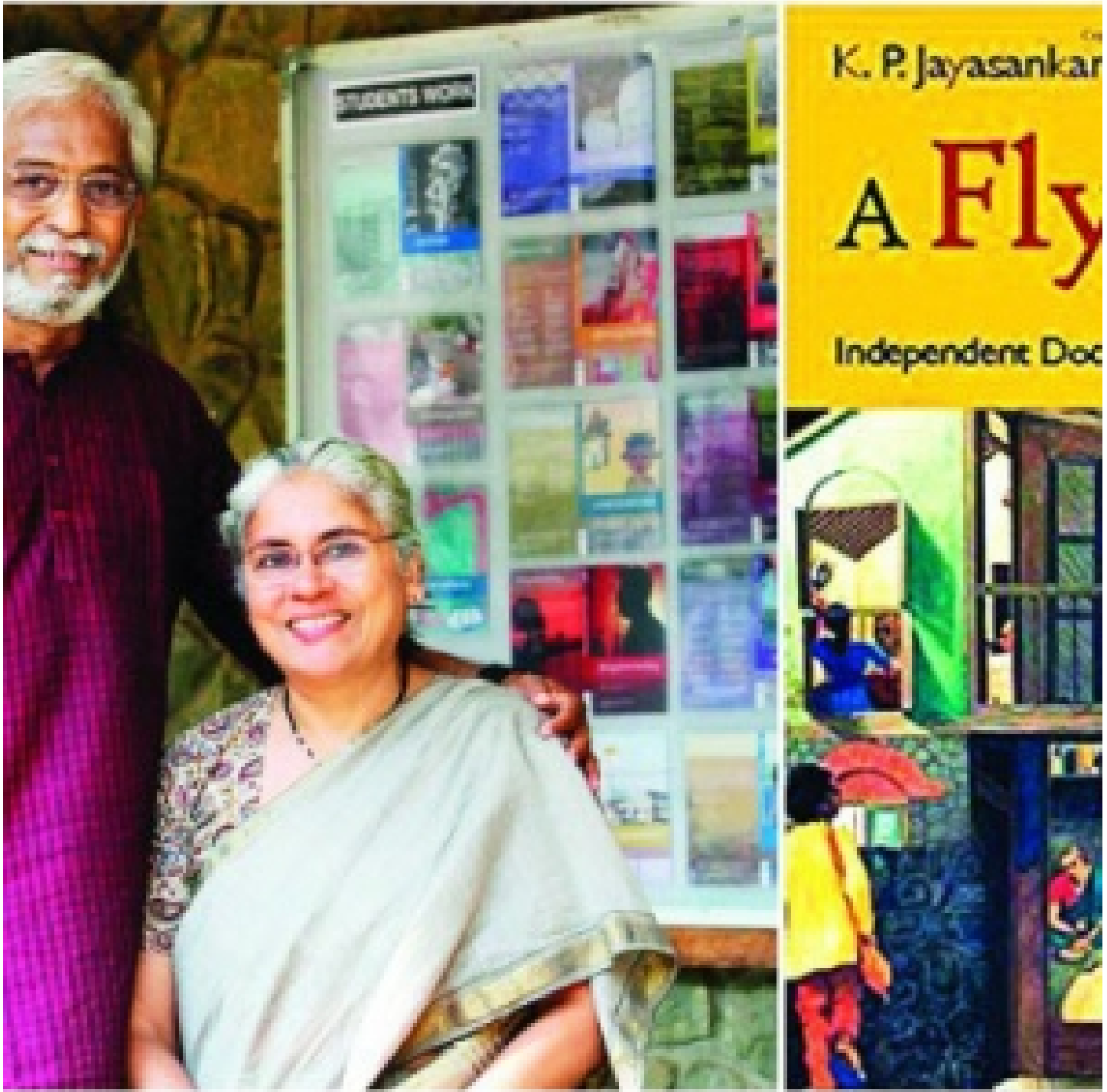
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