

## SMALL TOWNS AND BIG CITIES

I was on a pilgrimage recently. I went to a small town called Hebballi about 25 Km from Hubli-Dharwad. The journey started as all pilgrimages do, with confronting the demon! The Chennai Bangalore flight went on to the tarmac and just before taxiing, developed a “small technical snag”. After an hour and numerous syrupy “we will be airborne in a few minutes sir” and several revving up of engines and shutting off, we were told “We will transport you to a new aircraft”!! I actually managed to remain calm through the whole process of perception management.

The trip to Hebballi was pleasant and the experience at the ashram was charming. A small shrine with the “paduka” of the Guru from a well known Ram-Bhakt parampara, looked after with great devotion and dignity by about ten families.

I was filled with this soul stirring simplicity and reluctantly prepared to leave for Chennai. It was time to check out from the Hubli hotel, and while I was still in this euphoric state the clerk slipped me a bill for two nights! “Why two nights” I enquired, “I have stayed only one”. “Saar, you checked in at 11 am yesterday and now it is 1230. See it says 24 hrs check out on the board.” I was taken aback with his slyness. “No hotel does this, they always give a couple of hours of grace time” I protested. No avail, he knew I was in a hurry to catch a flight. I came down to earth with a thud. I paid up and I left.

As I am driving to the airport I reflect on the ease with which I became wistful about small town simplicity! Large cities are small towns that have grown, and people are always the same, they come in all sizes and with all kinds of propensities. Some are trusting and trust worthy, others are canny and extractive. I guess all of us romanticize and hope for a time when we can live in a community where “we can act with honour and live in peace”. We forget what the Panchatantra tales teach us about the fox and the rabbit, the lion and the bull that inhabit the forest.