

Artists' camp in JK to renew art

By Monitor News Desk

Created: 12/27/2011 9:21:04 PM

New Delhi: Gar firdaus bar rooh-e-zameen ast; Hameen asto, hameen asto, hameen ast...; If there be Paradise upon earth; It is here, it is here, it is here.

When Babur wrote these lines upon seeing the pristine beauty of Kashmir, he was not too far from the truth. This oft-quoted couplet in Persian echoes in my ears as the car winds its way into the mountains from Jammu. This is hardly my first foray into these mountains, but their magnificence is almost heartbreaking in their perfection. The sun plays hide and seek with every turn, highlighting parts of scenic splendour like a giant spotlight. As the hairpin bends become curvier, the car seems to lurch forward with every gradient. It is the expertise and practised ease of the Jammu and Kashmir Police driver that we reach Kud, near Patnitop in less than three hours. A group of 15 artists have been invited by the Jammu and Kashmir Police from all over the country to participate in a seven-day National Art Camp. The cold is biting, especially as the day draws to a close; at night it is teeth clattering. One can understand why the Kashmiris carry live coals in Kangri baskets hung around their necks inside their voluminous fran kurtas. Cold notwithstanding, the wistful prettiness of the surrounding stirs the sensibilities as the artists pull out their brushes.

I think artists need a change of place, perhaps a reconnection with nature every once in a while, to recharge their creative impulses. Most of the artists opted to work in larger formats and the quality of work at the camp was serious. The list of artists included an interesting balance between abstract and figurative painters: Satyapal from Kerala, Mukund Kumar from Bengaluru, Vilas Shinde from Mumbai, Yusuf from Gwalior, Suneet Gildyal from Jaipur, Him Chatterjee from Shimla, Rohit Verma from Jammu, Aftab Ahmed and Shafi Chaman from Kashmir, Shridhar Iyer, Sangeeta Gupta, Vilas Kulkarni, Shama Sondhi and I from Delhi. The director of the camp, fellow artist K.K. Gandhi's eagerness was infectious as showed us the nearby scenic spots.

Having lived in the mountains, I am more than aware of the fact life here is far from mere picture postcard pretty. There is a lot of hardship that comes with the turf. The might of nature for one: For it is unforgiving in many ways. Economic vulnerability and consequently sustainability are huge problem areas. Issues of transportation, power and water are difficult to address. Heavy snowfalls and rains make retention walls an expensive necessity. Homes in far flung pockets makes development expensive, its outreach even more difficult. Then Kashmir has its own share of physical, economic, political and social problems, including terrorism.

For the police department, known more for bullets rather than brushes, to hold such a camp is a way to "re-sensitise both our own corps and people at large about peace time activities," according to the director general police Kuldip Khoda. For those who have lived in these mountains isn't their beauty something they have taken for granted? "For years many artists were unable to work. All one would see was unrest, strife and terror. Our memories are overcrowded with it. It took a toll on us too. Very slowly we are trying to emerge out of the shadows of pain," says artist Aftab softly.

The local artists recount how even quality art materials including colours and canvas are not easily available in either Jammu or Kashmir and often they travel as far as Delhi to fetch them. But then surely, no price or effort can be too dear to capture Paradise on earth...
