

NICARAGUA - A LAND OF PLENTY

By - Pandurang Hegde

213, A.C. Layout, 16th Cross
VIJAYANAGAR, BANGALORE-560040

As I alight from the aircraft in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, the first thing that strikes me is the similarity of lush green surroundings. It reminds me of Bangalore airport. More than this greenery it is the fresh tropical air and the warmth of people. People are fair and healthy, always smiling and willing to help you. While travelling around Managua city the familiar faces, the markets and shops makes me feel at home. It is very much like any other Indian city. The only problem is that I can not talk to them as they only know Spanish.

Inspite of language problem I manage to move around Managua. The city is located on the shores of a big lake, Xolotlan. As I go near the water my friend Manuel said "The lake water is polluted due to discharge of effluents from the factory. We can not even fish from this lake". In addition to this lake, there are two huge lagoons. These are fresh water lagoons formed over centuries of volcanic activity. Nicaragua has many active volcanoes. From the heat of one of these volcano electricity is manufactured harnessing the geo-thermal energy.

In comparison with any Indian city Managua, with a population of just 7 lakhs can be called as a small town. However, it has many characteristics of an Indian town.

There are street hawkers and women selling fruits and snacks under a shade of a tree. People waiting at Bus Stop to catch city service, crowded city bus. There are restaurants as well as way side hotels to cater the needs of people. The market selling vegetables, food and other items is not at all different from Indian market. In Managua we see a lot of women working along with men in every sphere of daily life, in the office and in market.

Staying in a middle class residential area of Managua with my Nicaraguan friend Sandra I realised that they two suffer from power cuts and water shortages, as we suffer in Indian cities. While staying with Sandra, she showed me the bullet marks on her wall in the drawing room and said "These bullet marks are the signs of 1979 revolution. This whole residential area was a stronghold of Sandinista revolutionaries. During a fight these bullets came into my house. Every day we ran to find shelter, a safe place to save ourselves from military attacks". I could sense the light in her eyes and the excitement when she told the historic victory that came as a big success to the people in Nicaragua as they threw out Somoza's dictatorship.

Nicaragua is as large as the state of Tamil Nadu. It is the largest country in central America. It is also the only central American country to have coastline along

Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean. Though it gained independence from Spanish colonisers in 1821, it was ruled by Americans. The coffee and sugar oligarchies ruled Nicaragua with the support of Somoza. In order to overthrow the repressive rule of dictator Somoza Sandinista Liberation Front, a revolutionary organisation was formed in 1960. They succeeded to overthrow Somoza in 1979 as he fled out of the country. The Nicaragua's revolution led by Sandinista forces and backed by Marxist, Leninist ideology brought about far reaching effects in Nicaragua.

While travelling around the countryside I learnt the diverse nature of Nicaragua. On our way to Boaco, 90 kms north of Managua we passed through extensive mango orchards. On the roadside women and children were selling mangoes. The variety of mango is limited compared to India. The ripe mangoes are tempting but it is not as sweet or as delicious as mangoes from India. However, in Nicaragua one can find fruits throughout the year. The variety is also amazing; from papayya to pineapple, varieties of Bannana, Avacado and mangoes.

Boaco, literally meaning 'the land of dancing people' in native Indian language is situated amidst gently sloping hills. It is a small town surrounded by villages. The main occupation is Ranching. Large herds of cattle is maintained for meat and to prepare cheese. They also cultivate millet and beans.

Boaco represents a beautiful sight, with house roofs made of home made tiles and flowering trees. The main centre in front of the Church is crowded as youths are practicing Bull fight. We see lot many people on the back with straw hats. The sleepy but clean town Boaco reminds me of a mideval age, with old buildings and houses around with a few four wheel vehicles. The people look very healthy and joyful. As we enter a restaurant to have some drink and snacks, a group of local residents sitting next to our table offers us a warm hand-shake. They compel us to have a drink. Though I do not understand their language, my friend translates for me. They say "you are our guests, you should have some drink with us". They are very open and like to entertain guests, even if they are strangers! Very much like Indians.

In and around Boaco there were very rich Ranchers before revolution living in luxury. After revolution most of them have fled the country and the government has distributed their property among poor people. Similarly the government is also trying to establish new villages or communes in the countryside.

Driving across Pan-American highway we went to Esteli, 130 Kms from Managua on the border towards Hondarus. Esteli is a small town situated on a plateau sorrounded by moderate hills. It looks like a hill station as the weather is cooler than Managua. Paddy fields, fruit orchards are in abundance. We see modern fruit processing industries near road side.

In Esteli, we went to see a medicinal project launched by the government. In order to popularise traditional medicinal system, the National Medicinal Centre, conducts research in Estili. It has a herbal garden of its own and the herbal medicine is popularised through government health centres. This pioneering work in popular medicine has created awareness among many south American countries. During our visit a team of health workers from Chile had come there to learn from the Medicinal Project.

The most interesting part of my trip in Nicaragua is the visit to Venavista village, 250 Kms away from Managua in the interior region of Rio San Juan. We drove across the vast countryside, following a temporary road in midst of beautiful Mahogany forests. In these vast pastureland we came across cattle carvans led by people on the horeback. Occassionally we saw some villages with thatched roofs, and surprisingly for me for the first time I saw tiles made from wood! That really shows the abundance of wood. Troops carrying arms is a common scene in interior areas. We halted at St. Carlos on the banks of river Rio San Juan. In the countryside bannana is a staple diet. Fried banna chips and fish is a common mans food. I enjoyed this meal.

Leaving our vehicle behind we took the motor boat to Savalos, about 50 Kms from St. Carlos. It was a memorable sight as on both side of river vast strech of swampy land and forests reminded me of Bhrmaputra river in Assam. After reaching Savalos we again took a truck ride to Venavista.

This is a newly settled village with about 150 families.

All the houses were built from logs and they had tin roofs.

This remotest village had a school and a creche for children.

The people are hard working cultivating rice, millet and beans.

Rino, a middle aged peasant leader, the president of local peasant organisation said "The whole village is organised through co-operatives. After revolution every individual is allotted 40 hectares of land for cultivation. Prior to revolution individuals never owned land. Now with land reformation everybody has land". I came to know that people owning 40 hectares are considered as poor"! What a change by a government that is willing to distribute land. We have government that talks of land distribution, for past several years without actually helping landless. And in Nicaragua, the revolutionary government achieved it within few years. Yes there is one basic difference, in Nicaragua there is plenty of land available for cultivation. But no human hands to plough this vast fertile stretch. The whole population of the country is 40 lakhs, almost equal to the population of Bangalore. Such a meagre population and an area as large as Tamil Nadu. Thus the government is willing to give land to anyone who wants to cultivate. But they can not sell the land and nobody can purchase. Isn't it a rare case in today's overcrowded situation?

Education is another area in which Nicaragua has shown remarkable achievement. For two years they closed down universities and colleges and the people went to villages to teach ordinary people. They stayed and worked with villagers and taught them to read and write. In a short span they raised the literacy rate to 90 percent.

This remarkable achievement of a revolutionary government increased their popularity among Central American countries. The United States of America became cautious of this trend and it started supporting contra Revolutionaries from neighbouring countries. The USA imposed economic blockade on the goods exported by Nicaragua. The country's economy was basically dependent on agricultural exports of coffee, sugar and fruits to USA. The economic blockade led to collapse of the economy. The contra war supported by CIA devastated the life of peasant who had recently got the land. Nicaragua had to channel all its resources to fight the contras and production came to stand still. In 1989 the inflation rate was about 30,000% per year ! when I landed in Nicaragua I got 8000 Kordobas (local currency) per US dollar. When I was leaving after 25 days a dollar was fetching 28000 Kordobas! This high inflation rate coupled with drastic reduction in availability of essential goods had already wiped out the gains of revolution. The USA has eventually succeeded in devastating a young society based on egalitarian values.

Nicaragua, a land of plenty with vast amount of natural resources and a favourable climate to achieve prosperity is struggling to survive from the clutches of US imperialism.

ARUNACHAL FORESTS - IN THE EYES OF A CONSERVATIONIST

As an activist of conservation movement I dreamt of visiting the forests of Arunachal Pradesh. I read a great deal about the forests in Arunachal and heard exciting anecdotes from friends who visited these forest areas. Tempted by these tales I decided to spend a months time in Arunachal during November-December 1989.

I visited Tipi and Orchid sanctuary at Sessa. I spent some days at Orchid centre, Tipi. During my stay I ventured to cross kemeng and trekk inside the magnificent forests of Pukoi Wild life sanctuary. Then I visited chessa saw the work at Van Vignan Kendra. I spent some time with Principal Chief conservator of Forests at Itanagar. Fortunately I met most conservators at Itanagar with whom I had a lively discussion on the state of forests in Arunachal. I went to Zero and Apata valley I crossed Bhramma putra and visited forest areas in Namsai, trekked some areas where forest felling was going on, I visited changlang division and walked in the forests near Burma Border. During my last phase of tour I visited Namdapha National Park, one of the most memorable, magnificent forest areas I have yet to see in India.

I became aware of the vastness of Arunachal while travelling in these areas and I felt I have hardly seen anything. But with whatever I have been able to see and learn, it is due to the assistance provided by forest officials and staff members. Without their help I would be lost in the vastness, and would have been difficult to understand the complex realities of the situation.

After attempting to understand these realities I have tried to bring out some points of observation based on my short experience

FORESTS : Arunachal Pradesh is endowed with one of the most varied forests types in our country. It has tropical, sub-tropical, temperate and alpine forests. It is amazing that in one state we

can come across such different ecozones. Due to this the biological diversity is very high. The himalayan tracts and the changing river course indicate the fragile nature of the ecology in Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh is the only state in India that has a forest of 62% of its total geographical area. The hilly terrain and the steep slopes are thickly covered by dense vegetation helping to maintain the fragile nature of the mountains. The importance of the vegetation in these hill areas become more important as it is the catchment area of Brahmaputra. The stability of the Assam plains is linked to the forests of Arunachal Pradesh. The recurrent floods in Assam and Arunachal is accelerated if forests are removed from the hills. But the land slides, landslides and change of river course in the state seems to be a natural phenomena, as a part of stabilising process in the delicate structure of land formation. This is a very crucial juncture and the management of forests becomes very important. There is no experience on which foresters can depend to draw a working plan. Thus whatever the experience Arunachal Foresters have gained becomes an immense wealth in it self as a scientific base to manage forest resources in such delicate ecosystems in future. This puts a great responsibility on foresters. I found that the department is adopting to changing situations and it is incorporating these experiences into new working plans. (ROY 1967).

Though 62% of area is covered by forests only 13% of this is managed under working plans. The remaining part of the forests is under the control of tribals who hold traditional rights over these forests. This peculiar land tenure situation is typical in some north-eastern states making the job of foresters more complicated. The traditional right allows the tribals to carry on shifting cultivation on the forest land. As there are only hilly

region without any valleys, the tribals have evolved their own system of shifting cultivation in various parts of the state. However, in recent years the increase in their population has led to shortening of the jhum cycle leading to desertification of the hills. The foresters have to work with the tribals, upholding their rights and trying to adhere to the objectives of conservation. This is a very complex task and this factor differentiates the forest problem of Arunachal and rest of India.