

**YOUR TURN**  
choices

# Call of the Wild

She gave up a high-profile job and all the trappings of urban life to build a small home in the hills. It was a decision that over-turned their lives—sunny side up.

BY Pallavi Srivastava

**T**he chocolate cinnamon cake is in the oven, the rosemary I plucked is getting steeped for tea in my favourite brown mug, there is a plate by its side nestling cutlets made of home-grown potatoes, the boys are at school, and I am writing this. Well, as soon as I read the previous sentence, I feel kind of jealous about my own life.

Over the past four years, the emotion has crept in numerous times. And each time, I try—and fail—to place the moment when we decided to toss life in the metro—night schedules at leading media companies, the double incomes which resulted, the prestigious Noida school our child attended, the condominium with the pool, gym and power backup, all the family members living nearby, the restaurant visits, malls, multiplexes, birthday bashes...

No, we did not take our passports to some Walmart-speckled destination. The husband and I traversed hairpin bends in our SUV,

loaded with pre-school activity books, diapers and baby food—and our two sons, then aged 12 months and 4 years—to a small village in Uttarakhand. To live there. Full time. “Even in winter?” the locals asked. On hearing the affirmation, some plainly nodded, “We will see.” It was easy to understand their apprehension. Neither of us belongs to the state, or any hill state for that matter. So there was no ‘going back to the roots’ justification to be offered. People, after all, head to the city for better lives. We were doing the opposite. It appeared foolhardy to most.

## Hills and harmony

As did the choice of the destination. This was no glamorous erstwhile British seat like Shimla or Nainital, which offered some, though limited, comforts and means of occupation. This was a village, a two-hour drive from the district headquarters, with little else but farming to engage people. Though

Pallavi Srivastava dotted the one-acre farm with fruit trees.

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we had planned to dot the one acre land we'd bought some months ago with fruit trees and a tourist cottage, there was no elaborate business strategy in mind. Neither was there any intention to harbour one. The goal was just to be able to spend more time together, to expose the kids—and ourselves—to simple living, and follow the prescription handed down by grandparents: fresh air and fresh food. We got all of it. And more.

**The learning**

For the next three years, the joys came from just sitting in the open, sipping tea, gazing at the mountains, and watching the boys make mounds of pine cones and stones. We saw more of the day and less of the night than we ever did during work life. For the first time since they heard the rhyme, the kids actually saw stars twinkling. The older one attended a primary school run by an NGO promoting alternate education in a neighbouring village. The students criss-crossed slopes to reach the small building. They sat on the floor, sang songs, went on nature walks. They spread mats under trees and ate lunch, learnt the alphabet and numbers, and came back, with no home-

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work. I was delighted the day he recited a Kumaoni song he had learnt. *Ni kaata ni kaata jhumrali baaja. Bajaanidula thando paani.* “Don’t cut the oak thickets. Beneath them lies cold water.” Oak is the Himalayan sponge. Unlike pine, which doesn’t let life flourish beneath, oak promotes undergrowth. The passion flower that we planted under an oak sprang to six feet in the same time it took another plant that was out in the open to grow one foot high.

**New friends and family**

So you see, we too learnt new things every day. Like when to sow what, what a rajma or garlic plant looks like, how to recognise weeds, or hold cowdung right in your hands. It was, of course, the neighbours, like Dhyan Singh, and Mamta, who turned tutors, and we were the willing pupils. Her first courtesy visit turned into a daily routine when our one-year-old climbed readily into her arms. She would call the kids, hold the hand of one and carry the other in her arms, and take them off to pluck peaches or plums. Just as I was giving up on the prospect of finding a maid, she offered her services. I hesitated. She was, after all, applying for ‘private BA’. But her parents

convinced me. “Girls here do the housework anyway, since mothers manage farms. From you, she will learn many things.” Mamta became the kids’ best friend, and my help, native guide, and friend. She told me about local customs, crop patterns and cultivation. From me she learnt about the ‘foreign’ herbs we’d brought from nurseries afar, and sundry urban traits. Together we perfected fruit preserves, jams and squashes.

Along with other villagers, we were often invited to the neighbours’ houses for lunch during rituals like shradh or upanayan. We always went, and politely declined the chairs that were hastily drawn out for us. To make the hills truly feel like home, we had to first make ourselves at home sitting on the wooden floor in their stone-and-mud houses. And we did. And felt at home.

**Growing up with the kids**

The kids were having a blast. They loved the jungle walks, picnics on hillsides, plucking pea pods, choosing the juiciest from the basketful of freshly plucked fruits. They were happy, and healthy. The lack of medical facilities, which was the greatest concern of all, didn’t arise. The older son, who in the city was on nebulizers and inhalers for six months in a year since the age of 3 months, had no hint of congestion. We stocked up on the usual medicines. But antibiotics were hardly needed. Camphor oil massage and tulsi ginger tea worked for the occasional cold and flu.

**Finding ground**

There sure were times of challenges too. The son’s toothache once had the husband drive with him an hour in the rain to reach the nearest dentist. In September 2010, when torrential downpour continued unabated for the second day, Mamta sensed my growing anxiety as farm terraces started sliding around. Her mother came over, her umbrella turned inside out, sari hitched up



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to her calves, her chest heaving due to the brisk uphill walk in the storm. “You can move to our house,” she said. “But don’t worry. Your house is on solid rock. Nothing will happen.” Nothing happened. Except that the market ran out of some provisions, electricity was gone for four nights, and water supply stopped for a week. We lit candles, used the backup inverter judiciously and purified water sparingly, and collected run-off water. But there was no scarcity of fresh milk, and vegetables dangled within sight.

That’s the primary thing rural life teaches us—to make the most of what’s available. To appreciate the gifts of nature. To wait for the sun after a rainstorm. It often brings along a rainbow. Sometimes even two. ●