

# A trip down memory lane

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Colonial remains: Queen Victoria's Memorial in Alfred Park.

I continued to write Allahabad in the space for “hometown” in school forms for many years after we had stopped visiting with the siblings having flown the nest, and parents caught up in life’s unending commitments, their dream of retiring there slowly petering away.

As the past begins to slip through the invisible sieve of the years, our hold tightens on the little that is left; on what can still be had. The journey back to the city that formed the background to every childhood tale, dinner-time conversation and the benchmark of what everything must be measured against, was inevitable.

One cannot help being sucked into history in the colonial city of Allahabad dotted with quaint bungalows and streets named Hamilton, Clive, Hastings or Elgin. But the remnants are crumbling away fast. A more modest dwelling stands in place of grandfather’s colonial bungalow with its large grounds, dog houses, fruit trees and a lily pond; where as a kid, I took my first wobbling bicycle lessons; and where my aeronautical engineer uncle had a motor workshop, in which Chevrolets and Cadillacs were refitted and we kids got free rides through the city.

Footprints in history

Once in every six years for the Ardh Kumbh and the Kumbh, Allahabad becomes the focus of world media. With the Army taking over the management of the mother of all melas, more and more people — believers and spectacle watchers alike, feel encouraged to travel to Allahabad. The Yamuna and the Ganga, flowing from the Himalayas, running parallel, meet here. Just before it loses itself into the Ganga, the Yamuna seems to cradle this historic city.

Forming the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of three holy rivers — with the Ganga and the Yamuna is the now subterranean Saraswati. Boatmen will take you to the exact spot of the confluence where the faithful take a dip on wooden planks raised into the waters to wash away their sins. The boatmen will point to where the waters from the two rivers mingle — one distinctly dark, the other milky white.

Along the southern edge of the city, on the banks of the Yamuna, stands a magnificent fort. Emperor Akbar constructed it in 1583. It was he who rechristened Prayag as Allahabad, the city of Allah. Hsuan Tsang visited Prayag during Harshavardhana's reign in the 6th century and he too mentions a fort with a stupa and walls a 100 feet high on the banks of the Yamuna. So, an Ashokan fort probably existed on this site before Akbar built or restored it. An Ashokan pillar is now within the fort.

Mark Twain visited Allahabad in 1895-96 and wrote about the Kumbh and the fort, which he called “a large experience in religions”, because it was built by a Muslim ruler, it housed a Buddhist monolith, Hindu temples, and ‘now the fort belongs to the English, it contains a Christian church. Insured in all the companies’, he wrote. To the west of the fort is a 20-foot-long idol of a reclining Hanuman. During floods, that are an annual occurrence, the rise of the waters is measured by the number of times the idol is submerged, or in local-speak, by how many times Gangaji comes in to bathe Hanuman. Apparently, last year, he was bathed seven times.

It was in Allahabad's Alfred Park that Chandra Shekhar Azad, on being surrounded by the British Police, shot himself in the head, preferring death to surrender. The park was renamed Chandrashekhar Azad Park.

### Poets & politicians

Of all the famous people that have lived in Allahabad, the poet Nirala; Rudyard Kipling, who incidentally never grew to like the city; Jnanpith Award and Nehru Peace Prize recipient, poet Sumitranandan Pant; Mahadevi Verma and Firaq Gorakhpuri, both Jnanpith Award recipients; and Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan, the city was the family home of the Nehrus. Anand Bhavan, the palatial home of the Nehrus since 1900, which served as the ferment of the Indian freedom struggle, is now a museum that displays the colonial lifestyle of the first family of India and documents the political happenings of the time.

The Jawahar Planetarium is within the same complex. In the Allahabad of today, the new Yamuna bridge, which connects Allahabad with the neighbouring city of Naini, is an architectural feat — the country's longest cable-stayed bridge. It takes the load off the

charming, double-decked Naini Bridge that has trains running on its top deck and the roadways below. The new bridge offers beautiful vistas of the Yamuna and the city skyline.

A childhood taste that lingers on the tongue as memories scud through the mind is that of the midget samosa — ghee-coated, crisp and golden on the outside and a tangy burst of taste inside brought in by relatives or visitors from Allahabad — Hari ke samose. Poets and politicians alike have all fallen for this delectable Allahabad speciality. Hari ke Namkeen in the Chowk area is a city landmark also famous for its dalmoth and the fried avvakai or seam seeds.

The famous chaats, jalebis, puas, balushahis, mathris called from every street corner, and I finally did succumb to the pleasure of the savoury khaja — its salty wafer melting in the mouth and the crumbling flakes making a fine mess of an adult savouring childhood memories.

Allahabad is also home to the sweetest guavas, attributed to its soil quality. A winter-ripened fruit is large, fleshy, with fewer seeds and of a distinctly superior quality. A picture of me picking guavas in my chachi's backyard drew quite a few envious comments.

A heart in denial of goodbyes, says, surely we will return another day knowing well how the journey of life leads us away, sometimes offering the chance to return to all that was lovely and dear, only in memories.