



**THE HIMALAYAN CLUB**  
**Calcutta Section**

*presents*  
*its*

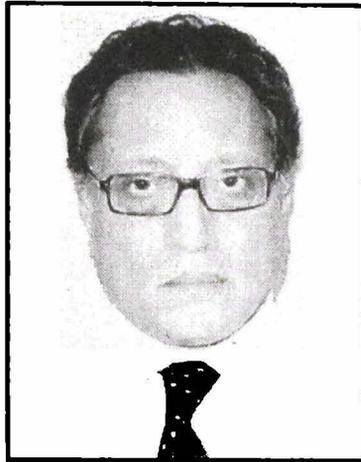
**Fifth Sarat Chandra Das Memorial Lecture**

**“Panch Kedar”**

**by**

**Dr Debal Sen**

7 February 2009



### Profile

Debal Sen was born in New Delhi in 1954 and educated in India and the United States.

Cardiologist, photographer, writer and Himalayan traveller, he is a man of many parts, whose artistic work is breathtakingly beautiful. His photographic output reflects a deep commitment in him to preserve the natural world. There dwells a unification between the varied facets of the man and the subjects and moods of his photography. Clearly it has shaped almost every aspect of his being.

Dr Sen lives with his wife in Calcutta. They have two sons. By his own admission Calcutta is his favourite city in India. He returned to Calcutta from the United States in 1987 as the Director of Cardiology of the first cardiovascular speciality hospital of eastern India. Despite his hectic professional schedule he remains a passionate pilgrim who discovered the Himalaya in his early teens and has returned to it time and time again. His mountain photographs are perhaps best reflected as the subject of his fascinating book "Panch Kedar", which is also the theme of his illustrated talk today delivered under the aegis of The Himalayan Club, Calcutta Section.

If Debal Sen was not a physician or a photographer he would clearly be acclaimed as a writer of considerable elegance and precision, brief evidence of which the text of this booklet provides.

His book on Panch Kedar and the one earlier on Wild Bengal bear witness of the life and work of this cultured man of medicine and letters, his world of travel and of his special adoration of Nature.

# Fifth Sarat Chandra Das Memorial Lecture

## “Panch Kedar ”

Just for love  
Like the wings of some high flying bird  
All the songs I will sing to you  
You can hear every word  
That I ever heard come to you  
Of the people I have been  
Of the visions I have seen  
Of the things I think about  
Situations I have been in time  
Just travelling  
These things can only happen  
Once in a lifetime  
These things can only matter  
If you have time  
Someone will touch you softly  
And it will be me  
Someone will call your name  
And you will come to me  
Free, free as the wind  
Free as the rain falling  
Free as the night  
Free as nature calling

The wilderness always claims its children. Over centuries, in the dark alleys of time past and time present, men have set out into the unknown. In wooden ships with flimsy sails, balsa rafts, dog sleds and when all else failed on their two legs, where land or water beckoned. To a place far removed from the inhabited world, a world devoid of his own artefacts – a journey to a kingdom untouched by him.

Wherein does this urge arise? This urge, which for want of a better word, we have called “the spirit of adventure”. Mallory wanted to climb Everest because “it was just there”. But was that the real motivation behind the man who first, sighting Everest from the Rongbuk Glacier described it thus – “far higher in the sky than imagination dared to suggest, a prodigious white fang,

an excrescence from the jaw of the world, the summit of Everest appeared”.

The great Reinhold Messner, a man blessed with a body physiology which in retrospect, seems supra mammalian, has been quoted as saying that there is no true adventure without the proximity of death. But if that is all there is to it, then every war would be a great adventure.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the great French aviator and writer, literally disappeared into the blue with his aircraft to join the great valhalla of fliers. The manner of his death could not fail to augment the mythology that already surrounded this remarkable and complex man. His lyrical and meditative prose gives us a clearer insight into the 'motivation' of adventurers. I quote two passages from Exupery's novel *Wind Sand and Stars* which sheds a little light on this enigma:

“I walked by bright shop windows with their shining Christmas presents. All the world's good things seemed to be displayed in the darkness and I tasted the proud intoxication of renunciation. I was a warrior in danger, what did they matter to me, those shining crystals destined for evening celebrations, those lampshades, those books. I was already soaked in the spray, an airline pilot, now I was already biting into the bitter pulp of night flight”.

Take this next passage as representative of his thought process: “The squalls of rain no longer trouble me. The magic of my profession is revealing to me a world where within two hours I shall confront the dark dragons and the crests crowned with a mane of blue lightning and then set free by the coming of the night. I shall chart my course by the stars”.

Nationalistic fervour has fueled many an expedition. Thus, Everest became the mountain of destiny for the British; Nanga Parbat for the Germans and K2 for the Italians. Men raced each other to the poles like the great expeditions of Scott, Amundsen and Shackleton. Tragic judgmental errors arising from the same fervour resulted in the untimely demise of some .

The great Sarat Chandra Das remains an enigma. Born in Chittagong, a brilliant student from the renowned Presidency College of Calcutta, the man was a scholar and a great adventurer. What is it that impelled him to undertake those dangerous trips to Tibet? In disguise, with the ever present danger of a horrible death in the event of being unmasked as an accessory of the British by the

Tibetans, this incredible person not only did some of the most physically arduous of journeys like his crossing of the Donkya La and Jongsong La. Lauded by the great Francis Younghusband as one of the pre eminent Tibetan travellers, he left behind an incredible volume of literary work which still holds its own today. His companions in his later years included Dr. Evans Wentz and even Madam Blavatsky which in a way showed his range of interest and imagination far ahead of many in similar situations.

Another who comes to mind was the explorer, Kingdon Ward. Soldier turned botanist, Ward was one of the first to explore the gorges of the TsangPo in and around the massive U bend as it curved round the base of Namche Barua, the eastern sentinel of the Himalaya. It had been postulated that the TsangPo, which flows at an altitude of 3500 metres in Tibet, lost this altitude in a gigantic waterfall to enter Arunachal Pradesh at a bare 800 metres above sea level. This mythical waterfall, alluded to as the Rainbow Falls, was supposedly located within the hidden gorges of the TsangPO. Ward found no gigantic waterfall. A waterfall of modest dimension was later named the Rainbow Falls. It was the phenomenal depth of the gorges of the TsangPo that caused it to lose altitude so rapidly. Today, Ward's writings hold some fascinating accounts of his travels in that region and his search for the mythical rainbow falls that had brought so many travellers like him to Siang in search of its romance.

Frank Smythe, the first to climb Kamet, called the Garhwal Himalaya the most beautiful place on earth. He returned again and again, a prisoner of its charms. He describes a summit ascent thus - "It was as though I had been led blindfolded up the mountain and the bandage had been removed at the summit. But of all my memories, one stands pre-eminent – the silence. The silence of a dead place where not a plant grows nor a bird dwells. I seemed on the very boundary of things, knowable and unknowable".

Then there were the early Himalayan photographers like John Noel and Vittorio Sella. Noel had been a part of the Mallory and Irvine expedition to Everest and Sella was with the Italian expedition to Concordia and K2. Using some of the earliest equipments in the history of photography, they produced awesome images of the magic of the Himalaya, the awe they inspire, their terrible character, their might and their glory and withal their inevitable attraction.

The mountains have spawned their own adventurers. Most are known, many are venerated and some ostracized. But what is little known is the fact that the

mountains have engendered a very special form of traveller, in some way, a mutant from the others. They were the ones who never summited, who never carried aloft the flags of their nations. They chose to remain nameless and faceless. For them, the mountain was the entheogen (God within). Evidence of their presence is always fragmentary – a cairn here, a flag there. Juniper and silver birch boughs on rock piles by the Baghini Glacier at the foot of Changabhang. Somewhere on the lower ridges and moraine of Aconcagua in the Andes, strange symbols carved on stone wait under the silent blue skies. Where were the hands that constructed these cairns? To whom were they offered? Only the condor wheeling overhead knows, for he has seen.

Many years ago, at the entrance of Pin Valley in Spiti, I had come across such a cairn. In this rock-strewn valley, slumbering in light, I had noticed a movement. It was a fluttering pennant in the vast stillness. I had walked across and discovered this heap of exquisitely carved 'mane' stones lying on the ground. OM MANE PADME HUM, breathed the stones. The desire to possess had overcome me. Furtively, I had purloined two of the stones and slipped them in my rucksack. I returned to Calcutta and the mane stones reposed on a dark shelf in my room. I had brought them away from the light of 16,000 ft.

The next year I returned to the Garhwal Himalaya. As an after thought, I had slipped the rocks into my rucksack. Toiling up to the Nela Pass on my way to Rudranath, I came upon a wondrous view of Nanda Devi and Dunagiri. On the Pass stood a similar cairn of 'mane stones'. I returned the stones to its companions to sing OM MANE PADME HUM to Nanda Devi.

Who are the ones who come here and why do they choose to remain hidden? They are not here to classify or verify. They come only to celebrate, kneel in silent worship of unnamed gods of unknown pantheons.

In the year 1924 a young Bengali traveller by the name of Uma Prasad Mukhopadhyaya journeyed up to Hardwar and Rishikesh at the foot of the Garhwal Himalaya in the state now known as Uttaranchal Pradesh. From there he embarked on a 300 mile walk through the mountains to the shrine of Kedarnath, one of the most venerated temples of Lord Shiva in the Indian subcontinent. The journey was long and arduous and had to be covered almost wholly on foot. The young traveller was so entranced by this experience that he returned many times to these sacred mountains that now had become for him an abiding obsession. Not only was our young traveller energetic enough to tramp the steep mountain

trails but he was also an impeccable record keeper. From his extensive journals emerged the first systematic accounts of the romance of the five temples dedicated to Lord Shiva or the **Panch Kedar**.

The original publication entitled Pancha Kedar is written in the Bengali vernacular and dates back to 1968. It was the first introduction of the Panch Kedar to the general populace. The myth about the origin of the Kedar shrines has however been common knowledge for many years. After the epic battle of Kurukshetra as recounted in the Mahabharata the clan of the Pandavas although victorious in battle were morally shattered. The slaughter on the battlefield and their culpability in the deaths of their relatives had taken its toll. They longed for expiation. In their remorse they appealed to Lord Shiva for forgiveness. But the Lord was not to be won over so easily. In his effort to shake off the Pandavas he transformed himself into a bull and tried to disappear underground in the abode of eternal snow – the Himalaya. The Pandavas however, were also a tenacious lot. Bhima the strongest among them seeing their quarry burrowing into the ground threw himself at the receding hindquarters of the bull and clung on begging to be absolved of their crimes. This impassioned appeal for forgiveness even the good Lord could not deny and he froze in his tracks with parts of his body visible above the ground. The Pandavas built shrines in commemoration at the places where the Lord was visible. His hindquarters can be seen at the shrine of Kedarnath, his face at Rudranath, his forearms at Tungnath, his midriff at Madmaheshwar, and tresses at Kalpeshwar. Shiva granted the Pandavas absolution and thus the five temples of Kedar were established.

The temples stand on mountain ridges and alpine pasture lands of Garhwal, an area in the Indian Himalaya that mountaineer Frank Smythe called the most beautiful place on earth. The people of Garhwal call their land Dev bhoomi or abode of the Gods. The temples stand at altitudes that vary from 3300 to 3600 metres. Tungnath at 3600 metres is the highest of the five and is also the highest Shiva temple in the world. Bridle paths and mountain trails link the shrines and pass through some of the most enchanting mountain landscapes anywhere in the world. The trails traverse altitudes from 800 to 4000 metres. Some areas are snowed in during winter and remain completely inaccessible. The paths leading to the temples usually commence deep in the gorges and then ascend up forested hill slopes. After climbing beyond the tree line at 2800 to 3000 metres they enter alpine pastures where most of the shrines are located. The exception

is Kalpeshwar that nestles in a valley at 1800 metres. When we talk of the temples of Kedar, a point to remember is that two of the five i.e., Rudranath and Kalpeshwar do not have a temple edifice. In these two shrines the Deity stands enclosed in a brick hut as at Rudranath or inside a natural cave as at Kalpeshwar. Kedarnath, Madmaheshwar and Tungnath have impressive temple edifices made from granite. The structures in all probability date from the time of Shankaracharya and are all over a thousand years old. The site of the original temple built by the Pandavas can still be identified at Kedarnath but the temple as it stands today is probably from the time of Shankara.

Much has changed in the Garhwal Himalaya since the time of Uma Prashad's first visit and the legacy of the Panch Kedar is eroding rapidly. The road-head has reached Gaurikund from where Kedarnath is little over a day's walk. Tungnath and Chandrashila peak are a day's excursion from Chopta that is again easily accessible by road. Kalpeshwar is half a day's walk from the village of Helang by the Alaknanda river on the highway to Joshimath. Only the shrines of Rudranath and Madmaheshwar remain pristine. A road-head that is far away from the temple and an arduous three-day hike up the steep mountain trails, has protected both from the casual visitor.

My travels to these shrines started almost thirty years ago. Since my first visit I have returned year after year drawn by some strange compulsion that I learned to accept as the years went by. I have often wondered whether Uma Prashad felt the same way, since he too returned many times to the Kedars. I have walked in his footsteps during these years and each time I have stood on the portals of a Kedar shrine I have been overcome by the same *déjà vu* that I experienced the first time I stood there. Some say these are memories of past lifetimes and maybe they are.

Mountains do not part with their secrets easily. Many a time I have toiled up to some high pass or ridge only to find the peaks I had come to photograph had drawn their veil of clouds around them. Bitterly disappointed I had vowed to return the next year and return I did till some of them yielded their secrets. I remember coming back to the alpine meadows of Adi Maheshwar three times before I could get an acceptable image of the snow mountain Chaukhamba towering behind the cairn of stones that was the shrine of Adi Maheshwar. I firmly believe now that mountains only reveal their form when they want to. My favourite images were gifted to me by no other than the mountains themselves.

I just happened to be there with my camera. The collection of slides presented here has been garnered over a period of 25 years during my travels in the Garhwal Himalaya. During this time much has changed. The surroundings of the shrines, my fellow travellers, my camera equipment, and most of all my own consciousness has gone through a process of gradual metamorphosis. Only the temples have stood timeless and inviolate for a thousand years.

Though the myth of the five temples of Shiva in the Garhwal Himalaya is relatively common knowledge in Hindu religious lore, I feel the significance of the shrines (like many others in history) goes far beyond common mythology. The journey to the Panch Kedar is a commemoration of magical places. It is the proverbial alembic of the alchemist where the base metal of our everyday consciousness is turned into transcendent gold. The traveller who has frequented these places always returns with the knowledge that he has stood at the portals of the 'Presence'.

The Kedars are examples of places where men have experienced the ineffable. They built shrines and placed symbols of stones in grottos and caves in commemoration of this experience. Over time, these places 'evolved' into temples. Around some of them little townships have sprung up often crowded with man and his artefacts. Here the worshipers are legion but the worshiped has retreated to the mountains. Some of the shrines however, stand pristine and untouched as they were a thousand years ago.

My book and this illustrated lecture, urged by The Himalayan Club, Calcutta Section, is an invitation to a journey through these places. I hope I have been successful in distilling some of the magic from these amazing places into these little rectangles of celluloid film. If these images strike a chord in my viewers, a chord of ancient recognition, of paradise regained, then my mission is accomplished.

**– Debal Sen**



**Sarat Chandra Das (c.1849 - 1926)**

The Sarat Chandra Das Memorial Lecture is an annual feature of The Himalayan Club, Calcutta Section, that honours the memory of a man of letters, a pioneer Pundit explorer of the Survey of India, scholar, and Tibetologist.