



**THE
GREAT
HIMALAYAN
TRAVERSE**

**KANCHENDZONGA
TO KARAKORAM**

S P CHAMOLI

When all the highest mountains of the world have been scaled, when the Poles hold no more secrets, still the "Traverse of the Himalayas" has remained a challenge, which was accomplished by the Indo-New Zealand Himalayan Traverse Expedition for the first time. The book also provides details of trekking routes and attractions in Himalayas, with its rich flora & fauna.

This book is a first hand account of a successful venture in cross country alpinism, which was unique in the annals of the history of mountaineering. This epic Traverse was undertaken by 5 New Zealanders and 3 Indians, covering more than five thousand Kms. long hazardous Himalayan journey, in fast moving light weight alpine style, "Living off the Land" technique, made possible, due to great physical and mental endurance and spirit of high adventure, with the true spirit of "Move fast, eat little, sleep rough and think big." This small band of mountaineers were able to cross 106 high Himalayan Passes, between ten thousand feet to twenty thousand feet ht. covering a distance of five thousand kms. and climbed and descended heights over fourteen lakhs feet in only 260 days.

"A new chapter in mountaineering history by successfully completing the longest ever Traverse of the Himalayas from Kanchendzonga to the Karakoram." (The Times of India).

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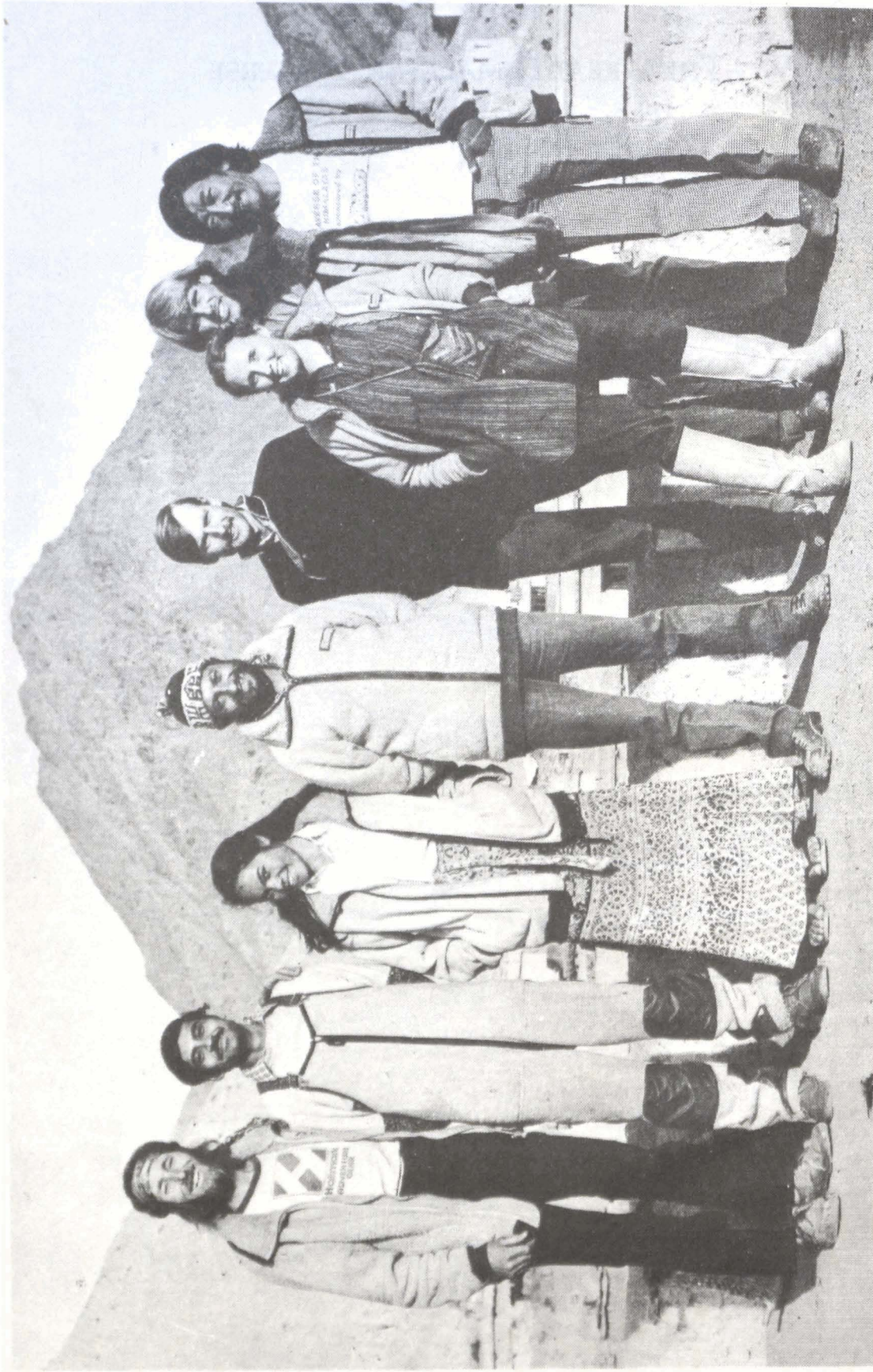
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TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM KANCHENDZONGA TO KARAKORAM (Followed by joint Indo-New Zealand Himalayan)

TRAVERSE EXPEDITION - 1981



THE GREAT HIMALAYAN TRAVERSE



TRAVERSE TEAM MEMBERS AT LEH

(From left to right)

GREAME, ROY, CORRINA, CHAMOLI, DOUG, ANN, PETER & TASHI

The Great Himalayan Traverse

(Kanchendzonga to Karakoram)

S P CHAMOLI



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Dedicated

to

My Father

Who inspired me at every step by his

Saintly spiritual wisdom

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Prologue

Almost all the eight thousander Himalayan peaks have been climbed and the greatest challenges including the highest mountain, the Everest has also been subdued by the unsurmountable will of the climbers. But so far no one could traverse the entire length of the Himalayas from one end to the other.

This great challenge was accepted by the Joint Indo-New Zealand Himalayan Traverse Expedition in 1981, which measured the length of the great Himalayan Ranges from east to west.

This book is an account of the long Himalayan journey of 9 months foot slogging from Kanchendzonga to Karakorams and K-2 in Pakistan. This unique venture was sponsored by Indian Mountaineering Foundation under the patronage of Shri H.C. Sarin, President, I.M.F. and Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand. During this long expedition the team members braved the numerous hazards of mountains, trekked through uncharted valleys, passes, glaciers and meadows in alpine-style light weight expedition, highly mobile, equipped with the light weight space age synthetic-fibre equipment and clothing which made possible to dispense with the porters and reduce the logistic trail for such a lengthy venture. Apart from physical obstacles and difficult terrain, the expedition had to face the problem of permission for crossing over the restricted border areas, inner lines, and border check-posts

from one country to the other which posed a great technical hindrance for any expedition intending to undertake such a venture of trekking in the sensitive Himalayan borders.

This expedition was planned entirely different than the normal conventional expeditions, where the team is supported by regular logistic and communication methods. To complete such a long traverse within the shortest possible time, the team was divided into two small groups. There was a main traverse group consisting of 3 members — Greame Dingle, Peter Hillary and Chhewang Tashi and three member support group Doug Willson, Anne Luise, Corrina Gage, while, I being the Leader was to participate with both the groups as per the requirement to coordinate the move and rendezvous of both the groups from time to time. The traverse group continuously trekked from Darjeeling in the east to Karakoram and K-2 in the west as close as possible and permissible to the Greater Himalayan Range and touched almost all the base camps of all the eight thousander peaks of the Himalayas. The team covered more than 5,000 km. and climbed over 106 high passes between 10,000 ft. to 20,500 ft. height. At the same time the support team also completed the traverse at a lower altitude in different section by trekking on foot as well as by vehicle to carry out the essential supporting role of supplying mail, films, medicines, dehydrated food items and replacement of equipment at pre-determined rendezvous points, and also acted as reserve in case any of the main traverse member fell sick.

Though the expedition was completed in 1981 but I remained committed in my various official as well as climbing adventure activities, but my well wishers and adventure lover friends persuaded me to write the account of this great adventure because, I being the leader, participated in both these groups. I was in a position to give the complete account of this expedition covering the entire journey. Therefore, this book covers inaccessible regions of Sikkim, Nepal, Kumaon,

Garhwal, Zaskar, Ladakh and Karakoram Himalayas. The book not only deals with the mountaineering and trekking aspects of the venture, but also describes the details of cultures and architectures, flora and fauna which differs from one valleys to the other and makes an interesting study. The author has also touched the sensitive and fragile Himalayan ecology which has come under great pressure due to large scale development activities and construction of road networks all along the Himalayan border areas. On one side there is a great cry from the locals for rapid road construction for food supplies, consumer goods of human traffic. But on the other, the natural habitation and ecology is being disturbed tremendously creating ecological imbalances at the cost and great peril to humanity. This is the story of the long Himalayan journey which may be interesting to the readers of Himilayan studies. At the end I have incorporated trekking guidelines for the benefit of those who are interested in trekking in the Himalayas. Some of the major trekking routes and circuits in Nepal and Indian Himalayas have also been described which may be useful for the intending trekkers.

Though during same year another Army Traverse expeditions was launched simultaneously, who started from Arunachal, yet, they were following us and took 15 long months to complete their Traverse, even though they had full Indian Army backup.

Foreword

After achieving glorious success on Everest, and successfully sponsoring the "FROM THE OCEAN TO THE SKY Jet-Boat Expedition", led by Sir Edmund Hillary in 1977, which introduced white-water Rafting in India, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation decided to take up a new and major challenge in the eighties.

The grand Traverse of the Himalayas by the Indo-New Zealand team in 1981, led by S.P. Chamoli, was an exciting adventure and was promptly accepted by the Foundation. It involved cross-country alpinism, an arduous high-altitude journey along the adventure arc from Kanchenjunga to Kashmir through numerous valleys, gorges, forests over snow-bound passes and wind-swept ridges, past an incredible array of world's most magnificent mountains.

The team consisted of 7 members—S.P. Chamoli (Leader), Chewang Tashi (Indians), Graeme Dingle (Dy. Leader), Peter Hillary, Doug Wilson, Ann Louise Metcalfe and Corrine Gage (New Zealanders). Strung into two groups, the Traverse Party included Tashi, Dingle and Hillary, the rest constituting the support group.

Starting from Darjeeling on February 17th the team traversed through Eastern Nepal and continued upto Zanskar.

Capt. Kohli who was then the Vice President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and Air India's Manager for

Australasia based in Sydney, was instrumental in supporting this historic venture, and in assisting me in making this dream a reality.

It is a fascinating story told in simple style by the author and is a worthy edition to our adventure literature in the country.

31 March 1993

H.C. Sarin

Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to those thousands and thousands of people and Himalayan inhabitants who had directly or indirectly helped our expedition team members; in all circumstances encouraged us without which it would have not been possible to undertake such a challenging journey. Their number is so large that it is not practically feasible to mention their names in this small volume. My special gratitude to our patron Sh. H.C. Sarin, and Capt. M.S. Kohli the then Vice President, Indian Mountaineering Foundation and other members of the IMF sponsoring committee who conceived this unique venture and ensured its success by providing all possible help. I also acknowledge my sincere thanks to Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the patron of the New Zealand team and gave personal guidance, encouragement by his presence in Solokhumbu region in Nepal and ensured its success.

Such an adventure could have not been possible but for extraordinary zeal, dedication, mental and physical endurance co-operative and visionary spirit of my team members namely Greame Dingle, Peter Hillary, Doug Wilson, Corrina Gage, Anne Luise of New Zealand and Chhewang Tashi and Subhash Roy of India who created the record of such an arduous Himalayan journey. I have to mention that unfortunately two members Chhewang Tashi and Doug Wilson of the Traverse Team are no more in this world and both these dedicated souls became victims of cancer. We

all shared the excitement, thrill, privations, inconvenience poor food, shelter for ten long months together and now have become a part of our permanent memory and in spite of our difference forged a united team even of being from two different nations.

I am also grateful to my organisation, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, which gave every opportunity, spared me for such a long period to undertake this unique dventure.

Lastly but not the least, I want to express my sincere thanks to Joydeep Gupta who spent long hours to scrutinise the manuscript, and Shri Rajesh Verma and Karna Bahadur of Sikkim Police who worked hard to computerise the manuscript which was a strenous task and shaped the book.

My wife Madhuri supported, encouraged and helped me through out, from conception stage to the compeletion of expedition and writing of this book.

Introduction

Himalayas as you know are woven with many legends of the hoary past connecting it with our inspiring stories of the Gods and Goddesses. Sandwiched as it is between India and China (Tibet) it constitutes a natural wall of protection to our country, at least, it was so thought, spread over 1500 miles over the breadth of the country in the north. The snow clad peaks have stood there for centuries, been explored and their height measured and conquered by many mountaineers like Swein Hidden, even Ms. Bachhendri Pal as its history goes. But what I am telling you now is a different story altogether.

It was a pleasant surprise when in Nov. 1980 at Kulu (Himachal Pradesh) I got a message from my ITBP HQRs, Delhi, that I have been selected for an "Indo-New Zealand Trans Himalaya Expedition" slated for Feb. 1981 and I should be in readiness.

I was thrilled! Why should'nt one whose hearth and home lies in Himalayas? The memories of my childhood and adulthood spent in the Garhwal Himalayas flashed back to my mind, for, since childhood, I had been watching the sparkling white glimpses of mighty Bander Puncchh (6,355 mtrs) peak and shrouded as though by a white curtain-cloth and had always wondered as to what was the silver white huge wall always glittering with its magic beauty. My mother explained it was the abode of Lord "Shiva" and beyond

human reach. If that be so how could a tiny tot like me ever imagine to go there? I was five then; I spent my early 14 years in the Garhwal Himalayas precisely at Barkot, trekking the areas extensively for that was the only mode of travel in the Himalayas.

In 1963, after I joined the Army, opportunities lay before me to do mountaineering course and lead difficult reconnaissance trekking teams which I availed of. I trekked from Badrinath Mana to Gamukh via Kalindekhal and Yamnotri to Gangotri via Dayara, the base of Bander Poonchh and so on. This was the time when I visited almost all legendary passes of UP-Tibet border. I had the real experience of climbing when I attempted Nilkanth (21,640 ft.) in 1974 and climbed and skied down from Kedar Nath Dome (22,410 ft.) in 1978 with success.

Coming back to the message from Delhi for my rendezvous with New Zealanders, I started packing up for Delhi. As my wife Madhuri helped me in my preparations, the task became easier.

Not only helping me but encouraging too.

I vividly remember the day when I set forth 1st of Feb. 1981. The Kulu valley spread before me as though laid with a white carpet glittering with snow.

Here, I was travelling to Delhi with certain thoughts about the things to come my way. First the thought of great experience of traversing the Himalayas and secondly about the preparations that would be involved in the exercise.

I reached Delhi on 2nd of Feb. '81. I was told the New Zealand team of five was already in Delhi. Three Indian members were to now join them. Late Major K.I. Kumar was to join shortly at Delhi while instructor Dorjee Lhatoo from Himalayan Mountaineering, Institute would accompany from Darjeeling. The expedition, they told me, would have to start from Sikkim and ending at Leh.

I, in my best attire of a three piece suit went to meet the New Zealanders, at the IMF. Late Mr. MC Motwani, the then Administrative Officer of the IMF, was to guide and brief me. Mr. Motwani had been a colleague of mine in my department, though, a senior one, at that time. I obviously received the elderly guidance. Then again the celebrated personality in the annals of Indian mountaineering. Mr. H.C. Sarin, gave me his valuable advice and blessings. I was happy. He had more confidence in me than I had in myself. For at that moment of excitement I was to prove my metal too. The New Zealanders perhaps took me to be an elite with three piece suit on. They never expected to see a mountaineer in this attire. I could summarise that they doubted whether I was ever a mountaineer.

In fact, this expedition was first conceived by celebrated mountaineers like Sir Edmund Hillary and Shri H.C. Sarin (the founder of IMF). We and the New Zealanders had already established rapport in the field of mountaineering by climbing the Everest in 1953. Now here was the challenge to go to areas where no one had ever trod on, that is, traversing the Himalayas from one end to the other.

While on a mission like this one is filled with thoughts of the thrill and unique experience that lay ahead. One cannot be also oblivious of the fact that such an adventure pose challenges of various sorts. The challenges of the fury of elements like the shattering winds, vagaries of nature, the fickle weather, hazards of snow and avalanches, lack of oxygen and so on. The Himalayas having epithets such as the "The Abode of Snow"; "The Stony Girdle of the Earth"; "The Abode of Gods"; "The Roof of the World" and "The Third Pole" fill the heart with pride at the very thought of launching on such an adventure in the heart of the Himalayas, that is, the lateral trek. Mind you, no rail nor proper roads cross the Himalayan ranges. They have the highest mountain, home to wild animals, even the legendary 'yeti', the abominable snow man like of which is not found anywhere

in the world, Many such other superlatives would not suffice to describe their might. So it is but natural that one had to be fully prepared physically and mentally to jump into this fray.

A little more about them however. How could one stop singing of the glory of these mountain ranges which we respectfully call. "The Abode of Gods." The Indians, as a whole, revere them, salute them and fear them too. Obviously under such a state of mind, I found myself filled with mixed thoughts of the adventure ahead—the fear of the ordeal, the amount of will-power and stamina that had to be mustered up.

As you perhaps know, these ranges are the youngest mountains in the world, besides being the highest too. They are at least 1500 miles in length. This distance could be stretched further if we add "Hindu Kush" and the "Arakans". Breadth-wise, you will be amazed to know that, at some points they are more than half the entire length of Alps. Peaks rising upto 29,000 ft. and stand majestically as though painted in white.

S.P. Chamoli

Chapter 1

How it Started ?

Never go to meet a mountaineer wearing a three-piece suit. If you know what befell me, you will know why?

Here I was, supposed to be the leader of the longest trek ever planned in the highest mountain range on earth—"The Trans-Himalayan Traverse". And my would-be colleagues looked totally skeptical about my climbing abilities.

How can a climber go around in such fancy clothes? Greame Dingle and his team-mates from New Zealand must have wondered, during my first meeting he suggested at once that we try out our mountaineering skills on the steep stone wall outside the Indian Mountaineering Foundation headquarters in New Delhi. Well, at least that gave me a chance to climb into mountaineering gear. With a rather curious, and possibly sympathetic IMF staff watching on, Greame and I clambered up the 30 feet near vertical stone wall, one of the last outposts of the Aravalli range. I was sweating profusely with this sudden exercise in the plains after my long stay in the hills, but when we came down and shook hands, we lay down the foundation on which mutual confidence would be built. Joint ventures among mountaineers from India and New Zealand are at least as old as 1953 when Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary stood on top of the highest peak on earth.

Since then there has been the famous "Ocean to Sky Expedition" in 1979; from Ganga Sagar on the Bay of Bengal to the source of the mighty Ganga in the Garhwal Himalayas. That was a brainchild of Sir Edmund and Mr. H.C. Sarin, the widely respected President of Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) since its birth.

And now we were about to start the most ambitious programme of them all, a 5,000 kilometre traverse of the high paths, moving as near the cradle of the mighty peaks as possible, from Kanchendzonga in the east to the Karakoram in the West. Much of the traverse would be along uncharted routes.

Of course, to hillmen like me, trekking is an essential part of one's life; I was brought up in the Garhwal Himalayas in the early fifties, when most roads which exist today were undreamt of. Going to school, the market, to a fair, or even work meant long hill hikes.

Not all the hill folks remain unaffected by the beauty and romance of the Himalayas. Their relationship with the abode of snow is organic. One of my first memories in my village home where I was born, was the towering peak of Bander Punchh (6,315 meters).

I kept asking my mother what the white wall in the far distance was, for it obscured the horizon from the village. She replied that it was the abode of everlasting snows, the home of Lord Shiva. From the age of five, I remember an irresistible urge to be close to the blessed mountain that changed colour with every change in light, maybe I could climb to the very top. Another of my earliest memories are the colourful tents of a mountaineering expedition in our primary school compound in Barkot, in 1950. All of us children surrounded them with questions. Our biggest ambition was to accompany them to the very top of the peak.

My chance to go trekking for adventure came in 1963,

when I joined the Army. As part of my job, I trekked intensively in Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir.

After leaving the Army and joining the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, these opportunities increased. I volunteered for the tough jobs, which meant going to the high passes in the border areas and glacier-bound valleys and that helped.

Badrinath and Mana to Gaumukh via Kalindi Khal Pass; Yamunotri to Harsil via Dayara and the base of Bander Punchh; Govind Ghat to Buindhar; Kag Bhushand Tal to Vishnu Prayag; many years of my professional life were spent trekking through this idyllic high altitude landscape. My first successful climb of a famous Himalayan peak was in 1974, when I lead our Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) team atop the 21,640 feet Neelkantha Peak. This was followed by a climb to the Kedarnath Peak Dome (22,410 feet) in 1978.

I have been hoping for some years to accompany a foreign mountaineering expedition, as we knew that they used more sophisticated climbing equipment and I wanted to acquaint myself with that. I was wondering if someone would consider me for being liaison officer for one such expedition, as many ITBP officers had been in the past.

I thought it was simply my dream coming true when all of a sudden I received a wireless message from the ITBP headquarters in November 1980, saying that my name had been proposed for an Indo-New Zealand Trans-Himalayan Expedition, and in case I was interested I should ready myself, as the expedition would probably start in February next. What I did not know then was that I was getting into something much bigger than my dreams.

Just imagine the diversity of this majestic range, from Walong in East Arunachal Pradesh to Leh near the Pamir Knot. Peaks glittering with snow by the thousands, many never shedding their white mantles. The thick green forests of the Assam slopes rising to the deep valleys of Sikkim;

everywhere steep cliffs, rugged barren rocks jutting out of the sea of green; above the tree line, the high Alpine pastures glowing with flowers, then the treacherous moraine ridges and above all the snow.

Wild life galore despite persistent massacres, the beautiful Himalayan pheasant, the golden eagle, the musk deer in the East and red deer in the West, the black bear and may be, a glimpse of the snow leopard.

Naturally, I wondered about the composition of the team, the exact route planned, and all that. I was posted in Kulu at the time and kept writing letters to Delhi, without any response.

Then I saw in the newspapers one day that the Indian Army was planning a Trans-Himalayan traverse. Was it the same one, I wondered? If so, it was bad news for me, as I was taking long walks and concentrating on my Yoga to keep physically fit.

Suddenly, on 29 January, 1981, I received an urgent wireless message, saying that I should reach Delhi by February 2. The Expedition, the message added, was likely to take six to seven months. Three days to prepare for this, as the New Zealanders were already in Delhi.

Preparation would not have been possible without my wife. Madhuri has never missed a chance to encourage me in my adventure activities. This time she started packing confidently, though quite aware of the personal problems she would have to face, moving house and coping with the family all by herself.

The Himalayas allowed me to glimpse at some of her aspects even before I had left home. On February 1, power lines snapped due to heavy snowfall, and the packing had to be finished by candle light. But the next morning, as I moved out of the ITBP campus at Kulu to get to the Delhi there was the glittering white carpet of snow laid out by nature with

crimson blossoms of plums and peaches, all along the way Kulu to bid me good-bye from the mountains, though only for a few days.

At Delhi, at last, my doubt were cleared, that ours was the Joint-Himalayan Traverse Expedition which was to trek Himalayas in Alpine style for the first time and a thorough briefing from the administrative officer of Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF), late M.C. Motwani, specially about logistics involved that made me realize why this expedition, first conceived over 2 years ago had not been attempted before. It would have been almost impossible without the new light-weight equipment and a road network in the interior of the mountains.

Other problems, however, remained. We had to go pretty close to many border areas, and the New Zealanders needed special permits to go there, which were still to be obtained. The other Indian members, neither Major K.I. Kumar of the Indian Army who later died in an Army Everest Expedition, nor Dorjee Lhatoo, an instructor in Darjeeling's famous Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, had yet arrived to join the Expedition.

Chapter-2

The Challenges and the Preparation

I suppose with every expedition, one of the most difficult jobs is to actually get it on the road. But the fact that other expeditions also have similar problems never makes this any less a burden.

In our case, the situation was worsened because the third Indian member was still undecided upon and the five New-Zealanders, sitting in New Delhi for three weeks, were getting very restive. Finally Greame Dingle went off to Kathmandu to get permits for the expedition from the Nepal Government. Even after that, there was some doubts about the actual points where the expedition would start and finish. An Indian Army expedition was currently doing the same Himalayan Traverse, and they had already started from Assam while we were still in New Delhi. The Kiwis felt that their Traverse plan was leaked to the Indian Army and their project was being jeopardized by the IMF. We had earlier been told that we could not start from Assam and that was why we had to settle for Darjeeling. Now, we were told that we should start our expedition from Sikkim and end it in Pithoragarh, in the Kumaon Himalayas. None of us were ready to accept such a drastic curtailing of our programme,

and it took quite some time to make the authorities see things our way. In a traverse that we calculated would take about eight months, it was obviously impossible to carry all the food with us, specially since we had earlier decided that we would trek Alpine-style, without any porters.

So the expedition members were divided into two teams. Deputy leader, Greame Dingle would be in-charge of the actual Traverse group. The support group would rendezvous with the others at pre-selected spots along the route, where, at various times, various members of the support group would join the expedition while others leap-frogged to the next rendezvous. I would lead both the groups as per the requirement and priority. Then came the days of packing, of new problems of logistics cropping up all the while, all requiring immediate attention. I really do not know how I would have managed at all if my family had not come over to Delhi to help. Keeping their emotions under tight leash they helped at every point.

But of course, whenever you go to the Himalayas all problems that can be created by man, pale into insignificance besides the majestic challenges nature throws at you all the time. Just take a look at the statistics of this mighty mountain range.

Everyone knows that the Himalayas contain the highest peaks in the world; but they also stretch 1,500 miles along the northern boundary of the Indian sub-continent, and the figure would be much higher if you included the Hindu Kush in the west and the Arakans in the east, which are really extensions of the Himalayas.

On its northern face, the Himalayas slope relatively gently towards the high Tibetan plateau, which is why it has been easier to build roads and other amenities there.

The southern slope is much steeper, and constantly cut through by gorges that are among the deepest in the world.

And it is on this unpredictable face, the snow line which is normally within 16,000 and 18,000 feet, can come down to 10,000 ft. even in August, if there is a strong blizzard; and the very next day you can get badly sunburnt or even blinded by the force of the sun's rays on the icy slopes. Landslides in the Himalayas have increased in frequency recently, following thoughtless attempts at so-called development.

Even earlier, there were regular occurrences of landslides, often wiping out entire villages.

The temperature in the Himalayas varies greatly from place to place and hour to hour. In a day's climb of four to five miles in the Himalayas, you can see the entire gamut of vegetation which you would elsewhere find only across in entire continent—from tropical forest to deciduous trees to alpine meadows, with the snows brooding atop all. Life is a constant struggle in the Himalayas. Long before climbers and trekkers penetrated these hills, the villagers had to hew out paths in the sides of steep gorges themselves. There are plenty of places where only a crouching man can pass. One false step, and down he plunges thousands of feet, to sure death.

You have to see a bridge over a Himalayan gorge to believe that such a dangerous contraption can actually be used by man. If you are lucky, it would be a fallen pine, with the user balancing himself over it like a rope-walker. But there are no nets below.

Even worse are the contraptions made of vine and may be a few ropes. The steps between them, usually made of cane, can give way any time, and one plunges hundreds of feet into a raging torrent, to be swept away in instant death. I once saw it happen to a child who was being carried by his mother on her back and the bundle somehow came loose just as she reached the middle of the swaying rickety structure. There was nothing she could do except stand in shock.

Most people think that the easiest route to a summit is to follow a glacier along its foot, and so it is, but the way is also fraught with danger. They can close with terrifying violence or break away in ice blocks that weigh hundreds of tons.

And then, of course, there is the physical and through it the mental effects of high altitude. A man's character can be totally altered on the mountain. Little wonder then that those who stay in the cradle of the Himalayas look upon the high peaks with reverence and refer to them as the abode of the gods.

But then, what brings so many climbers and trekkers to the Himalayas? The sheer grandeur of whatever you see in this mighty range, I suppose. At least, that was the main reason why our team was willing to face so many odds and trek through the Himalayas.

Greame Dingle and Peter Hillary, son of the famous Sir Edmund, had already climbed a number of times in central and eastern Himalayas, and obviously had some knowledge of the terrain and local customs. The other three New Zealanders, Doug Wilson, Corrina Gage and Anne Luise Mitchcalf were new to the Himalayas, though they had done a lot of climbing in New Zealand.

The traverse group of our expedition would consist of Greame Dingle, Peter Hillary and another Indian, though at this point it was not decided who it would be. The support group would have Doug Wilson, Corrina Gage, Anne Luise Mitchcalf and I. Eighth February was a nostalgic day for me, as I had to bid good-bye to my wife and children, Pamita Skita and Naveen, who were going to Mussoorie. The children were very emotional, but Madhuri was composed as their vehicle roared out of the ITBP officers mess at Mehrauli. Tired as we were of the constant official hindrances in our path we had decided that come what may, the expedition should try its best to start from Darjeeling on February 15.

So on February 11th, 1981, I finally boarded the Tinsukia Mail from the New Delhi railway station with immediate destination New Jalpaiguri at the foothills of Darjeeling in West Bengal.

Peter and Doug were at the station, as I spotted them very soon because of their colourful rucksacks. They were what singled us out from other passengers through the two days trip. This long train journey through the North Indian Plains in early spring was not only beautiful, it also laid the foundation of a strong friendship between the three of us, so ~~important~~ important to a successful expedition. And this friendship withstood their initial incredulity when they saw me the first morning, lighting two sticks of incense and placing two photographs, of Lord Shiva and Sai Baba, on the seat before starting my prayers. This practice was continued throughout the expedition and it strengthened me mentally no end.

Chapter-3

Take off from Darjeeling

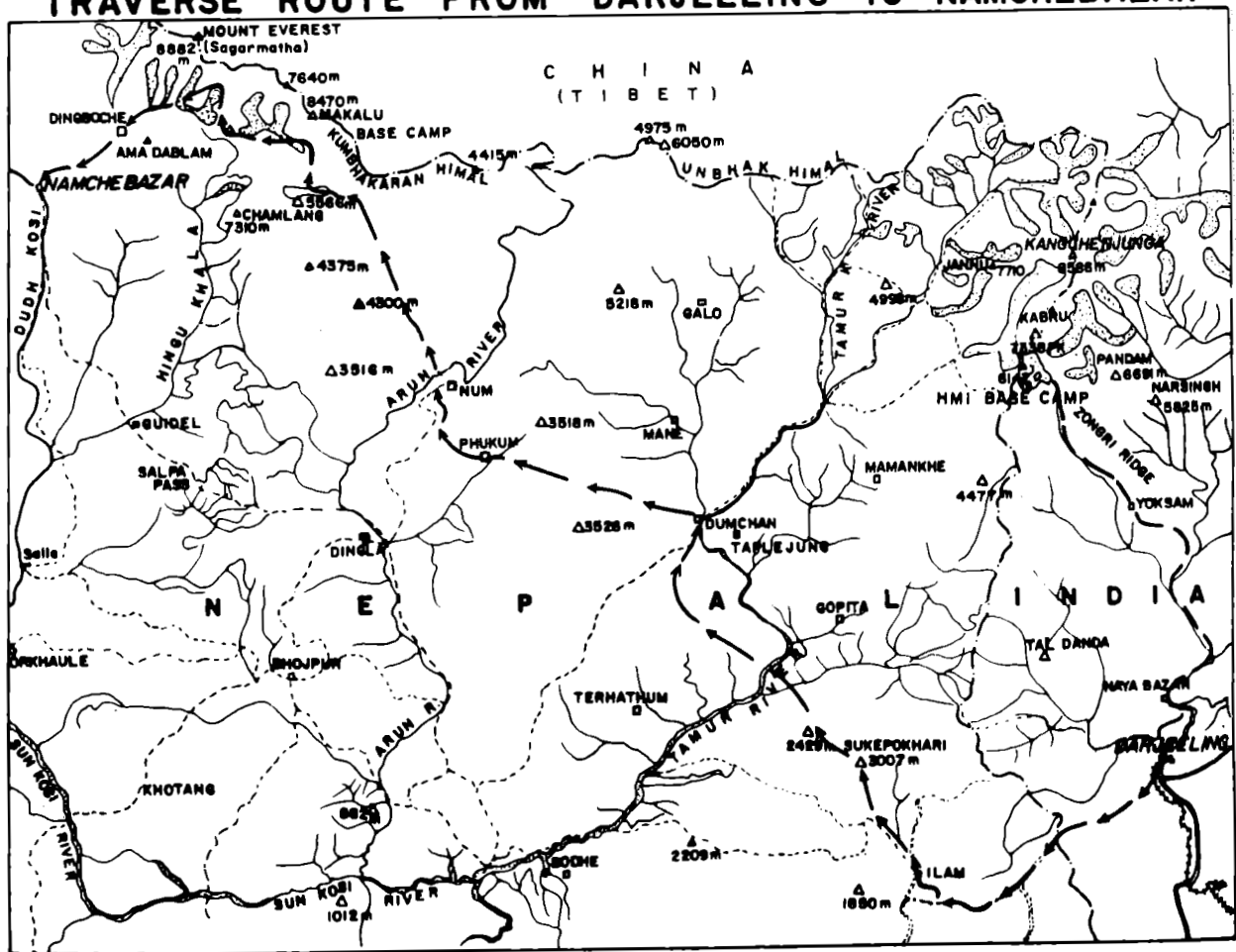
New Jalpaiguri to Siliguri and then by bus to Darjeeling, the famous toy train being mainly a showpiece, slow as it is. We enjoyed our bus journey through the North Bengal tea gardens immensely, though the day was misty and clouded over. And now the eternal Himalayas were no longer just a glimpse. We were actually among the foothills.

It is not for nothing that Darjeeling has often been described as the Queen of hill stations. The majestic Kanchendzonga is only 50 kilometres away, and you can see it almost all the time. There is, of course, the glimpse you get of the fabled sunrise over Everest from Tiger Hill.

But, as I sat in the balcony of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute guest house, I could see spur after spur, the Teesta river flowing below, and the Rangit river which is the border between West Bengal and Sikkim itself invisible but the valley showing clearly.

The Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, or HMI, as it is known among mountaineers the world over, was established way back in 1954, and when we went there its field Director was the world's first Everest, Tenzing Norgay, the grand old man of Indian Mountaineering whose passing away in 1986, has left such a void in all our hearts. We had been to his

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM DARJEELING TO NAMCHEBAZAR



house on the way to Darjeeling, but he was away. However we met his wife Daku, who is no mean mountaineer herself and now conducts treks in North Bengal and Sikkim. She has also passed away recently.

The field director of HMI is another famous mountaineer, Nowang Gomboo, two-times Everester who was then preparing for a third climb. HMI can truly be called a cradle of adventure sports in India.

On the evening of February 13, 1981 when we reached Darjeeling, Greame Dingle joined us from Kathmandu. He had good news, having obtained all necessary permits for our traverse, but he was obviously not very pleased to learn that we had not been equally successful in New Delhi. The third Indian member of the expedition was not even decided upon.

And there was a problem about the second member too. I had been told by IMF in New Delhi that it would be Lhatoo Dorjee, an instructor at HMI and a well-known mountaineer. But poor Lhatoo had come to know about it only few hours before we arrived and that too through just a short telegram. Mentally he was not at all prepared for such a long traverse, and the fact that he had broken his leg six months back in a road accident made matters worse. Greame tried to convince him that evening to start packing for the expedition, but I could see he was unwilling. The Principal HMI then suggested that we may consider Chawang Tashi as a substitute, but he did not have any official clearance.

We all went to bed rather worried, but the next morning the sky was a clear blue, the ranges were sparkling with snow and it was my fortieth birthday.

As I sat under a tree in the HMI lawn and looked at the peaks and spurs and valleys around me in perfect repose, I thought of the time in geological age when the Himalayas were at the bottom of the ocean, since that is exactly what has

been proved from an analysis of the granite formations the major rock base of this range.

But, of course, problems cannot just be wished away. Despite the uncertainties in our minds we had to go ahead with the essential job of deciding what to take with us and what to leave behind, and to test all the equipment like the stoves and the tents that we would be taking with us. We also decided that come what may, we would start our expedition on February 17, taking Tashi along with us.

Though ours was essentially a high altitude trek, there would be places where we would have to do some climbing, so we also had to check out our climbing gear—crampons, ropes and all that.

Finally, on the morning of February 17, five of us—Greame Dingle, Peter Hillary, Doug Wilson, Chawang Tashi and I—got into a vehicle that would take us to Yoksum in western Sikkim, the exact point from which our trekking would start.

Chapter 4

To Sikkim, South of Kanchendzonga

February 17, 1981, early morning, saw us load our colourful gear on to a Land Rover taxi and start from Darjeeling for Yoksom. Group Captain Chaudhry, Principal HMI, Lhatoo Dorjee and Nawang Gomboo came to bid us good-bye, though personally I was almost as unhappy to be parted from Dilip, the great cook at the HMI guest house.

Darjeeling to Singla Bazar on the banks of Teesta is a series of steep hairpin bends on a narrow road, where only light vehicles can ply. It is a difficult drive and the price for a mistake is almost sure death, but we rarely thought about all that as we admired the tea gardens, rows after rows of plants in perfect order, the labourers working in their pretty multi-coloured dresses.

Singla Bazar and then across the Rangit to Jorthang Bazar, the gateway to Sikkim. There the road winds along the left bank of River Rangit for a while along the valley floor, which is probably what saved our lives when the front left wheel of the Land Rover detached itself from the vehicle and went rolling off by itself, about 15 metres off the road. I thought that the best thing that can be said about the mishap was that God's first trial of the expedition members left us unscathed. We hired another jeep, which took us

through Rishi Bazar, Lekship, and on to Pelling monastery, also called Pemayantsi in Sikkim.

This monastery, set in the serenity of a thick forest, gave us the first glimpse of a Buddhist land which we would constantly come across later. Everywhere the prayer flags fluttered and the low wall with the sacred inscription, "Om Mani Padme Hum", – The jewel in the lotus, were to be seen.

We also realized at Pelling how religion is interwoven in the lives of residents, in a land still largely controlled by Lamas, who lay down most of the local laws and conventions. Originally the monasteries had been built in isolated spots, but almost invariably we found that villages have grown around them, with residents largely dependent on the monastery as the source of their livelihood.

The domination of Sikkim by Tibet has of course enhanced these conventions. The Chogyals (rulers) of Sikkim frequently visited Chumbi valley, well inside Tibet, and inter-married with the royal family of Lhasa. Though Sikkim has been repeatedly raided by Nepal over the centuries, the character of the land really changed in the last 200 years, when the Nepalese raiders started settling down. Today they form the majority.

Evening saw us reach Yoksum, situated on a 5,500 feet high plateau at the base of a big ridge, and with thick forests in the north and east. Around Yoksum, there are flat fields with bamboo and cardamom plantations. We stayed at a forest rest house, after our 170 kilometre long drive, we were tired and promptly went to bed.

Next morning we finally started our journey on foot, along the southern flanks of the Kanchendzonga. Each carried a load of 20 to 25 kg. After walking through wheat fields for a while, we passed into the forests of western Sikkim, with the view of the mighty peaks that hold the state between them as in a bowl—Pandim (23,000 ft), Tirichikang (21,000 ft) and

Jopono (16,500 ft.) in the east, Singlalila range upto Khanklakang the north.

We soon crossed the plateau and were walking along the Rangit, a major tributary of the mighty Teesta. All around us were rows upon rows of snow clad peaks, and below them the glaciers, the valleys and the deep gorges.

Large butterflies, mostly black, hovered all around us. Sikkim is the home for over 600 types of moths and butterflies, most of them brilliantly coloured, but it was still too early in the year for them to be about in all their glory.

As I was engrossed in watching the butterflies, and lost in the scent of sweet shrubs, that grow at the base of the magnolia trees and together produced a divine scent, clouds came down from the Kanchendzonga, and soon we had to put on our raincoats. But before long the storm passed over and the bright sun brought steaming vapours from the lower valleys, so that almost everything was a misty blur.

Phidang was the village which gave us our first feel of snow under our feet. It was a steep climb from here to the next village and the snow was nearly knee-deep in some places. We found the going difficult, our bodies still unaccustomed to the rigours of a mountain trek.

To worsen matters, Greame and Peter appeared rather unhappy. They kept muttering between themselves that the proportion of the cost they had been asked to bear was too much. Tashi, too, was aware of the resentment the New Zealanders felt, and I was rather concerned, knowing as I did the importance of a perfect team spirit in an expedition as difficult as this.

As I had expected, it was nature which took care of blue moods and black tempers. Once we reached the ridge of Zongri La, the Mighty Kanchendzonga looked much nearer now, and its sister peaks Kabru South (7317 metres), Rathong (7338 metres), Kabru North and Pandim inspired so much

awe that puny differences about money were quickly forgotten.

We were now at a height of 13,000 feet. in one of the the most beautiful Alpine meadows imaginable. But what held our attention was the Yak-breeding farm set up here, housing around 1,000 of the ferocious looking but valuable beasts. It was being run by someone who claimed to be descendant of the former Chogyal of Sikkim, and after a look at his ferocious appearance, we did not want to contest the point, specially after Tashi darkly whispered that he knew his not so good a reputation. Anyway he did not seem to mind much when we used his stove to cook our lunch. The stove had around it decorated pieces of Yak skin, and the utensils and other pieces all looked like Tibetan antiques. Tired as we were, we hardly managed to get any sleep inside the tents we pitched for the first time that night. We were yet to acclimatize ourselves to the high altitude. Besides earlier in the day we had spent much time and energy ferrying loads to the HMI training camp about six kilometres away, and that, had also robbed us of all our breath. The next morning, when we found that we had run out of fresh food and had to start on the tins, there was another problem. Greame suggested that I give up my vegetarianism for the sake of the team. This I was unwilling to do, and finally won my point, though I realized that in future I would probably get no help in carrying my food.

Anyway, we spent the day in shifting to the HMI camp, where we were put up in two of the loveliest silver huts that you would ever find. They held a special meaning for Peter, as his father Sir Edmund had spent nine months in them in 1956, during a futile search for the elusive Yeti.

Given the choice, I think I could spend years just sitting at the door of these silver huts and watching the play of light and shade on the surrounding peaks. It is never the same. New pinnacles appear as clouds part, with shining glaciers

hanging down the slopes. A golden glow spreads from the highest peak to illuminate hidden crevasses. The light changes to pink. And then again, in a clear blue sky, the summit stands out majestically, sharp as a knife-edge.

Near our huts, we saw some large wild sheep, called Barahals, the first signs of quadruped wildlife we had seen in Sikkim. The evils of population pressure and poaching have obviously reached this idyllic landscape. Our original trekking route was along the Rathong glacier, which would mean crossing the Indo-Nepal border at Rathong La. We had then planned to go along the Yalong glacier, and then through Yarlung, Lapchang, Yamthri, Changthang, then enter Arun Nula, follow Barun Khola, and thus reach the Makalu base camp region. Then we had planned, we would cross the Sherpani Col and the West Col, and enter the Everest base camp region through the Lamja glacier.

But the entire plan fell apart when kiwis realized that there was no foreigners registration checkpost at Khonsa, on the Nepalese side of the border from Rathong La. The only alternative was to trek south right along the Singalila ridge till we reached Kakarvita.

We had another problem. Our rations were depleted badly. That was when Peter coined his famous definition of Alpine style trekking. "Sleep rough, eat little, move fast and think big".

Whatever the definition, the initial exposure to high altitude sickness was taking a toll of all of us. Suddenly one evening Peter left camp and went off to the nearest camp Bikbari, nearly 2,000 feet below. By all tenets of mountaineering, we should not have let him walk off alone, specially after dark, but he refused to take anybody with him. I was most relieved to see him back the next day.

Finally it was decided that Greame, Peter and Tashi would trek down the Singalila ridge and reach Darjeeling,

where we would meet before crossing into Nepal through Kakarvita. We took our last unhappy look of the Rathong glacier. Nature had placed no barrier there, but man had.

On February 25, we all packed our rucksacks and moved out. I will refer to Peter's diary to describe the experiences of the three of them.

"As a strong cold wind gusted, seeming to come straight from Everest through the cleft of the Rathong glacier, we turned south to follow the rambling network of the Sangalila ridge, which would take us down to the steaming plains of the Nepalese Terai. For six days Greame, Tashi and I climbed and descended the convoluted landscape, still caught in the grips of winter. Occasionally, we would surprise a flock of wild blue sheep as we crossed the high, sparsely grassed mountain sides and would stand watching them, admiring their pale blue-grey coats and gnarled horns, as they ran effortlessly in this cold air upward into the mist. As we descended into a side valley through a forest of large firs a strange opossum-like creature hurtled about 50 feet from one tree to another. Somewhat startled we looked at the flying squirrel which peered at us briefly before launching itself from its perch in a great glide that took it into the oblivion of clouds that filled the valley. The same evening saw the gloom deepening outside and in our hearts, as we hurried to the next hamlet, Tashi's stories about the snow leopard ringing in our ears. And the, what about a bear attack or even an enraged Yeti? But shortly, having miraculously survived all that our imaginations had anticipated, we were at camp, thankfully sipping mugs of steaming tea.

One day a compass error saw us descend 7,000 feet and what a knee jarring and ankle wrenching descent that was. The next morning we had to correct our error by going 7,000 feet up the next hillside, pushing through forests of bamboo and thin deodars. We reached the ridge in a violent snowstorm

looking like Arctic explorers and sat the whole night trying to warm ourselves around the pale imitation of a fire.

But all at once the next morning, like a vision, the Kanchendzonga range appeared. The actual summit was still hidden, but the soft morning rays striking the peaks of Pandim and Kabru, cast blue shadows here and there beneath crags of snow covered rock."

Meanwhile Doug and I crossed the Rathong river on our direct route back to Darjeeling, and immediately fell out on the question of where the trail was. I tried to convince him that it was a bit lower, but he insisted on climbing, which got both of us into trouble. It was misty, and visibility was poor.

I had the distinct feeling that Doug was not convinced about my ability to read a map or my track sense, so I left him alone and went down. I found the trail almost at once, and then had to shout for five minutes at the top of my voice before he heard and agree to descend.

Back to the yak farm, and we camped about two kilometres away from it. Even as Doug was telling me how there had been friction on the leadership issue between Greame and Peter back in New Zealand, the fierce Bhotia dogs of the Chogyal's descendant decided that we were unwelcome. They kept barking throughout the night, not letting anyone sleep.

But the dogs' master did seem more friendly as we walked to his house the next morning, and shared his meal of cabbage with boiled noodles with us. It was a perfectly sunny Alpine morning, and in the last week, thousands of little flowers of all hues had sprouted to carpet the entire route. We decided to go through the village of Pelling on our way back, mainly to get a taste of good Tibetan food like Momos and noodles.

Below Pelling stands the small town of Gurung, which, when we saw it, looked like a fairy town, hemmed as it was by clouds on all sides. Near the town is a monastery that stands on top of a ridge which acts as a watershed for three rivers.

Near this monastery, Tashiding, is an old chorten that is fabled to contain the remains of the mythical Buddha who taught Gautama Buddha. It is considered so holy that it is called Thong-we-rang-go, which means the "Saviour by mere sight". The same evening we reached Lakship.

The next day we took a taxi to Darjeeling, to be told upon arrival that Captain Abbas Ali of the Indian Army had arrived a few days ago to join us as the third Indian member of the expedition. He had started towards Yuksom to catch up with us, but had been forced to return as he had developed chest pain.

The traverse group joined us, and one evening Tashi called us all to his house for dinner. I think the atmosphere there did a lot to develop a firm sense of camaraderie between all expedition members. Before we left, we were all presented with white scarves. On March 5, after my morning prayers, we were ready for our next stage—cross over to Nepal and traverse through the eastern parts of that country to reach the Everest region.

Our plan was to divide the group again at Kakarvita. The traverse group of Greame, Peter and Tashi would go to Illam, and then start trekking through the Milky ridge and then the Varun valley before going to the Makalu base camp area. From there, they would cross the east and west Cols to reach the Everest area.

The next rendezvous with the support party would be at Namche Bazar. Doug, Corrina, Anne and I would trek from Kathmandu with the support gear, essential supplies and mail, and meet the others on March 26, or there-about.

Chapter-5

Into Nepal to the Everest Region

I had some fears that Tashi would not agree to go as a lone Indian member on such a long trek with the two New Zealanders, specially since we still had not found the third Indian member for the expedition. But luckily he agreed to go with Greame and Peter upto the Everest region, telling me that he would decide afterwards whether he would like to continue this way.

So we all took a taxi to Kakarvita, a rather dirty little border town, and from there Doug and I got into a direct bus for Kathmandu. The three traverse members left for Illam.

Well, most people know how beautiful Nepal is, but I must point out the havoc that has been caused to this idyllic landscape by indiscriminate deforestation. The effects were particularly severe in the area around Kakarvita, as it is near the border, and timber export is a flourishing business.

But the Kathmandu valley had considerably more greenery, and the town, of course, is one of the prettiest I have ever seen. We went straight to the Himalayan Trust guest house, where we met the other two team members, Corrina and Anne. Almost as welcome was the big bundle of mail each of us received from home.

We saw the Kathmandu valley mainly on bicycles, which

I think is the best mode of transport there. Signs of the deep religiosity of Nepalese, were everywhere Hindu and Buddhist temples. Of course, the most prominent was the Pashupatinath temple. Despite all this, Kathmandu has been very much influenced by western tourists. Moreover, it is also the main launching base for expeditions.

Anne and Corrina had done some stocking up, as, apart from having to stock the traverse team, we also had to take care of ourselves during the 12-day trek to Namche Bazar, the launching base for expeditions to Sagar Matha, which is what the Nepalese call Mount Everest.

Nepal, till not as long ago, had been closed to foreigners and was opened to them only in the 1950s. Today Kathmandu resembles a mini foreign township as the Kingdom has become a veritable paradise for western tourists and trekkers.

The valley of Kathmandu offers a unique treat to its visitors, be it in art or architecture, its deep-rooted culture or its quaint lifestyle that has survived for centuries. Its crowded, fascinating bazars, its narrow streets and winding lanes take visitors farther and farther into a bygone era. Here, temples, shrines and even houses bear evidence of an age of prosperity and splendour. The entire valley is virtually an open air museum.

Hinduism and Buddhism are the main religions with the former holding sway. Nepal, in fact, is the only designated Hindu Kingdom in the world. The people are deeply religious and worship countless gods and goddesses, in whose honour they observe a number of colourful festivals throughout the year.

Lord Pashupati Nath is the guardian spirit of Nepal and his temple is the main Hindu shrine of Kathmandu, dedicated to Lord Shiva. Situated on the banks of the Bagmati river, it is a beautiful example of Hindu architecture, though unfortunately, not too well maintained. Within its precincts

is installed a unique, four-headed Shivling, worshipped with great devotion by all Hindus. Legend has it that under this deity lies the main temple where there is the Parasmani (magical stone) which, by mere contact, can change iron into gold. The temple is the centre of an annual pilgrimage on Shivratri day in February when thousands of devotees from India and Nepal throng to it.

Swayambhunath temple is located on a small hillock that provides a panoramic view of the city as also snow-clad peaks in the north and the north east. This is an exquisite Buddhist Gompa that is being well maintained by the lamas. Here young monks are trained in the rituals of their religion.

During the past decade and a half, Nepal has been earning a considerable amount of foreign exchange from the large number of tourists who come to bask in its beauty. As a result, interior areas are being exposed to Western civilisation and culture and the entire mental outlook and attitude of the locals is undergoing a sea change, as is the country's economy. Most foreigners, however, miss the finer aspects of development and tend to notice only the backwardness and poverty. They tend to miss the country's rich cultural heritage and the cohesive unity of its social fabric. This is really a pity because they don't realise what they are missing.

Kathmandu is also the launching pad for most mountaineering expeditions and other outdoor adventure activities like trekking, river rafting and high altitude trekking to the Everest region, Manag, Muktinath area, Rara and Jumla areas, among others and a large number of establishments have sprung up of late for conducting tours and providing equipment and expertise.

We, ourselves, consulted a number of experts, among them Ms Liz Holley, an American who runs a travel agency; Dr. Joshi, who has trekked through the whole of north Nepal and Mingma Tshering, a sherpa Ranger who has been trained

in New Zealand and was in charge of the Rara National Park. He provided us detailed information about the route we would be taking and this later proved to be extremely useful.

There are two ways of getting from Kathmandu to Namche Bazar, the base from where expeditions to Sagar Matha (the Nepalese name of Everest) take off; a 12 day trek or a one-hour flight by a light aircraft to Lukla airport situated at a height of 10,000 feet and only 20 km short of the Namche. We opted to send most of our supplies by air while we ourselves trekked to the region via Solokhumbu for our rendezvous.

We left on March 14, boarding a bus for the journey on the Kathmandu Kodari highway to Lamasangu, from where the trail towards the Solokhumbu region branches off. The highway, which runs along the Sunkosi river, was constructed by the Chinese to link Lhasa with Kathmandu and is a major land trade route between the two countries. Lamagasu itself is barely 30 kms from the border and I am told that there is free access for 20 kms on either side for both Nepalese and Tibetans. At Lamasangu, we switched to an over-crowded mini bus for the journey to the roadhead at Karantichap, from where we would travel on foot. We spent an uncomfortable night at Charikote but we were amply rewarded the next morning by a superb view of Gaurishankar, its distinct and long ridges sloping downwards into wide expanses of green valleys. We had another 10 kms to go but our departure was delayed when a group of Dutch trekkers got into an argument with the bus driver, insisting that they would travel on its rooftop to enjoy the scenery better. They won.

The beautiful forests on the Deolekha range across the rivers seemed to beckon to us as we embarked on our trek. The valley which lies below is carved out by the Tamakoshi river, which originates from Gaurishankar. We reached the river at a place called Kabre, after a 10 km journey and bathed in its blue crystal clear waters. Kabre is a small village surrounded by green fields and beautiful ridges and we

basked in the glory of the rhododendrons and white magnolias, clad in their spring finery.

The villagers of eastern Nepal are mainly dependant on agriculture, practising dry cultivation on terraced fields where they grow wheat, barley, rice, millet and corn. Some of them also rear cattle and while this makes them self-sufficient in food, their day - to-day requirements of other necessities have to be purchased against cash, which they earn by doubling as porters. The peculiarity of this area is that all transportation is done by humans, both men and women; we did not see a single mule or pony being used for this purpose. The benefits of modern development have yet to filter down and as a consequence, the economy of this region is rather bad. A few lucky ones who get a chance to enrol in the Indian and British armies are better off than the others.

The track climbs gradually from Kabre to Chisatan and passes through a thick forest of oak and rhododendrons. We crossed a 9,000 feet high pass which provided an excellent view of Guarishankar and Numbun and descended to reach Those, a small township of 4-5 shops. From here, the track followed the river upto a place called Shivalaya and then climbs steeply towards the Sangbadanda pass (7,215 feet), which was still under snow.

We rested in a pleasant little glade and refreshed ourselves with a meal. Transient clouds gave us glimpses of the snows and in the foreground loomed deciduous trees festooned with trailing orchids. Early rhododendrons, mostly of the crimson variety, were in bloom and here and there, stood a scarlet Semul tree. All too soon it was time to pick up our heavy rucksacks and move down to the other side of the valley, towards Khimate khola.

On reaching the pass (8,817 feet), we saw a long line of Chortans, indicating we were in Buddhist territory. A Chortan, also called a Stupa is a receptacle for offerings and

often contains religious relics. Each part of its structure has a meaning: the square or rectangular base symbolizes the earth, the half spherical dome resting on it, the water. Above the dome is a rectangular tower, on the four sides of which are painted a pair of eyes—all seeing eyes of the Buddha—and what appears to be a nose but is actually the Sanskrit sign for the number 1, symbolizing the absoluteness of the Buddha. Above the tower is a conical or pyramidal spire, symbolizing fire, with 13 step-like segments, symbolizing the 13 steps to Buddhahood. Topping it all is a crescent moon, symbolizing air.

We descended to the Sherpa village of Bhandar (Chyangma) and then climbed again the rugged track towards Lamjurala. This village was distinctly different from the others we had come across so far and its most prominent feature was a Gompa flanked by two imposing Chortens. Most of the houses had been converted into tea shops-cum-hotels and were being managed by the Sherpani wives while their husbands were out on expedition. What enterprise!

The higher we climbed, the more difficult it became to find a track and we were glad to have a local boy with us as guide. The vegetation also changed, crimson rhododendrons clustering among the feathery bamboo and carpeting the ground with red, bell-shaped petals; starry masses of primulas, rich in colour, clustering in groups and mingling with a tiny blue flower; the fragrance of daphne and other flowering shrubs scenting the air.

After following the route along of the Lekho khola, we crossed a rope bridge and arrived at Sethi, located in a narrow valley guarded by steep cliffs on both sides. From here, the next day, there was another steep climb to Lamjurala (11,472 feet), the track winding its way through beautiful forests of oak, rhododendron, pine, spruce and juniper—Nepal's equivalent of the valley of flowers.

Higher and higher we climbed, occasionally pausing for

breath at one of the many cairns on the wayside. Progress became difficult as the altitude was effecting our breathing. When we finally made it to the top, the effort was well worth it. The entire range opposite us was glowing with silver white snow and the wide open vista towards Bhandre and Lekho khola was truly fascinating.

We descended to Junbesi amid the contrasting view of steep black rocks on the left and thick green forests of juniper and spruce on the right. There is an important junction here, the trail to Everest, climbing over a spur that separated Junbeshi khola from Ringmo khola and providing the first sight of the mountains and other high peaks like Chamlang and Makalu. Not everyone is lucky as at most times, the peaks are covered by clouds. Downhill, we trailed to Phaphlu, which has a small headquarters of the Solokhumbu region.

On the other side of Junbesi khola we reached the beautiful Ringme village where the locals grow apples and peaches in their orchards and operate a milk processing plant that sells Yak cheese, butter and yoghurt to trekkers and after climbing a hundred feet more we arrived at the Taksindo pass (10,400 feet). A spectacular view unfolded before us and my imagination took flight: snow capped mountains shimmering against the celestial glory of the sky: magnolia tree stretching their gaunt black arms towards the surrounding blue haze of the distant hills, crowned by a thousand gleaming stars that are not stars but large waxen flowers each one set singly as a jewel in a veritable Milky Way ; crimson rhododendrons, coals of fire as they gleam in the sun; fiery blooms against the liquid blackness of leaves; grass a soft, pale green, gentle as a bed; moss that is fern, ferns that are trees that tower as a cathedral above us; star-like flowers that peep out in cluster from under the rocks and form the banks to our winding paths; and, the myriad strange and wonderful things that have unfolded themselves before us and shown us a new way of living and a new way of being blessed.

Would we, I wondered, be able to turn our backs on this and be able to live useful, working lives. Or, would be so enriched by all this we had found, that our joy would be lasting, to which in our memories, we could always return.

After crossing Taksindo, which is marked by a large white Chorten, we descended towards Dudhkoshi khola through a forest rich with animals, birds and plants of different varieties. There is a monastery at Nuntale (7,540 feet) and we halted at a local tea shop. Yak meat was hanging and spread all round to dry, a local method of preservation, and the vegetarianism in me came up to the fore. While the New Zealanders feasted, I went in search of another shop where I would not come across such a sight.

Through scattered villages and fields, we continued our descent, crossed a bridge, turned sharp north and came to the large, sprawling village of Jubing (5,465 feet). This village is inhabited by Rais, who like the Sherpa, speak a Tibeto-Burman language, are of mongoloid stock and whose religion is a combination of Buddhism and Hinduism. We took a short cut that, in eight hours, brought us to Surkhe, saving us the two days we would have spent had we taken the higher route via Khari khola and Puiyan villages. This journey was not without its hazards and we had to be extremely careful on the up and down path as the smallest slip would have sent us hurtling down into the Dudhkoshi river.

Though Surkhe is hardly 2 kms short of the Lukla airstrip, the people of this village are very poor and barely manage to eke out a living from agriculture. They live in thatched houses and the only possessions of most families are a few utensils and a handful of chicken and goats.

We climbed up to the airstrip, around which a small township has developed, picked up the mail that had arrived for us from Kathmandu, and headed on. Upto now, we had hardly come across any people, barring the locals but, as we

neared the Everest region, everything began to change. Not only were the facilities, by way of tea shops, hotels and restaurants better, we also ran into increasing number of tourists, trekkers and climbers as also a long trail of yaks and porters ferrying expedition supplies. Along with them, we moved gradually on to a developed track and halted at Chamua, at a hotel run by the Japanese, and luxuriated in a hot water bath and good food.

We set out the next morning for Joresale, the entry point for the Sagarmatha National Park, on a track that runs along the river and passes through the village of Phakding. The Sherpas here are slightly different from their counterparts in the Solokhumbu region. They grow corn and potatoes when they are at home during winter and also rear cows, yaks, sheep and goats.

Over the Hillary bridge we crossed the Bhotkoshi, which flows from the left, and started on the steep climb towards Namche Bazar, which lies at the junction of the Dudhkoshi and a lateral valley that leads to the frontier pass of Nangpala (18,000 feet). Along the way, we got frequent glimpses of Everest and Amadablam.

Namche is a small village tucked in a bowl at a height of 7,845 feet; the first European entered it in 1950 and many more have come since then but the basic character of the village remains unchanged. It has an airstrip high above but no road, and a temple with a stream of clear water flowing past. Prayer flags, inscribed with the words "Om Mani Padme Hum" flutter from every rooftop and every house has a cottage industry where yak wool is spun and woven into carpets and thick sweaters. Basic amenities like a bank, a post office, hotels and shops where one can purchase climbing equipment, and also tinned food, have sprung up over the years.

A climb of a thousand feet brought us to Kunde village,

where we were to stay with the family of Mingma Sherpa, Sir Edmund's Sherpa Sardar. Here, the Himalayan Trust has established a sophisticated and centrally heated hospital for the benefit of the Sherpas.

We arrived on March 23, to discover that there was no word about the Traverse group.

There was a spell of bad weather in the region for 2 to 3 days and it snowed about a foot in our village. We were getting worried about our Traverse group and contacted the project officer of the National Park, who had a fairly good knowledge of the area they were crossing. Considering the difficult route they were taking and making allowance for the bad weather, he felt that they might take another 5 to 10 days to arrive. We had already catered for a plus-minus factor of ten days and decided to launch a rescue operation if the Traverse party did not surface at the end of this period.

The wait was not easy and we spent the time writing letters and up-dating our diaries. Every day, we would go up to the Tyanghoche airstrip to collect our mail and despatch the letters we had written. We also visited the well-known Everest Hotel, run by the Japanese, where tourists who can afford the costly, stay and acclimatise themselves before proceeding further. We visited the nearby village of Tami across the river and observed how well cultivated the area was. It stands high above a river on the east slope of a spur which runs northwards and westwards. The land here is hollowed out in a wide curve and its elevation is not as steep as it is lower down in the valley.

A fortnight had passed by now and I wanted to request the Nepalese government to mount an aerial search but Doug was not in favour of incurring the expenditure.

Finally, around 5.30 pm on April 6, while we were eating our supper, the three musketeers walked in. There was an

emotional reunion as we greeted them warm-heartedly and heard the story of their arduous trek from Kakarvita.

In Greame's words:

"From Illam, in eastern Nepal, we looked up at the hazy Singalila ridge which we had descended to finish our Sikkim circuit. We ground slowly up the long, hot ridge above the town, our feet hot and blistering inside our space age plastic boots and our tummies pouring digestive juices on a huge lunch of age-old rice. As we descended to the other side, the late sun dyed golden the friendly faces of the locals labouring up past us with big loads. Beyond the valley, a profusion of immense ridges rose one upon another into the hazy blue distance.

The next day, March 8, we climbed 7,000 feet to the large village of Phidim. Peter had gone on ahead and as Tashi and I wound our weary evening way along the cobbled main path of the town, a bugle call rang out and from the right, two Gurkha soldiers with that front-line look pointed their automatic rifles, complete with bayonets and cocked ready to fire, at us. An officer nearby shouted "Halt"

My normal reaction to being told to Halt would generally be pretty negative, but I was tired and the weapons and the Gurkhas were fairly persuasive, so I sat down and gave them the old down-but-not-out-look. When the bugle call ended, the rifles were uncocked and we were left to continue on our confused way along the path.

"The days that followed, as we continued north-westward towards the high hills, were a haze of heat, sore shoulders and feet, huge ups and downs, and meals of dal-bhat (rice and lentils). We moved up towards the Milky ridge, an immense, long ridge that crossed Nepal from South to North. We gained the ridge at a last vestige of civilization, called Gopher, at 10,000 feet and here, in preparation for our sojourn

in the wilderness, bought ten pounds of very fatty pork—for many days later known as the “soggy pig”. It was almost entirely fat. We boiled it with saffron, which turned its copious revolting white fat into copious revolting yellow fat and we stored it in an old plastic bag to add a final disgusting touch. Despite this, the soggy pig became quite a delicacy over the next week of privations, rivalled only by the large block of ‘shukker’ that we bought off some porters. Shukker is extracted by boiling sugarcane. The sickly-sweet brown syrup is put into a round mould and sets like a brick. We would scrape it into our Sustagen drinks or, as a special treat, would simply cut off chunks and eat them. The stuff was so delicious that Peter and I questioned at length the need to process sugar into that bland white stuff.

The Milky ridge was a paradise of fir and rhododendron groves, open glades and immaculate, seductive, scented daphne groves. And, from time to time, we were treated to the most exquisite views of the mountains, to the east spectacular Jannu and massive Kanchenzonga and to the northwest, rising like an immense, weathered pyramid, Makalu. It was a kind of beacon to which we headed relentlessly.

On March 14, we crossed a craggy spur at about 14,000 feet under a leaden sky that promised days of worse than the usual bad weather. As we crested a brow, a herd of Blue sheep (similar to large Chamois) stared up at us from about 40 feet below. They suddenly turned and bounded with amazing agility over the next ridge. Like true Kiwis, all Peter and I could think of was all that lovely meat running away.

We camped at nearly 15,000 feet, a freezing camp on a snowy, wind-swept ridge. As we ate our meagre dinner of dehydrated meat, Peter said, ‘Hey, look up there’.

High above us, on a precarious pinnacle and etched against the sky, were the herd of Blue sheep. As if petrified,

they stared down at us, unmoving, until the night hid them.

Early in the morning, Peter set off ahead while Tashi and I packed up. As he climbed up past the pinnacle, the Blue sheep came bouncing down the almost vertical 700 foot-high wall and ran off around the hillside. They had spent the freezing night atop this amazing perch.

From atop the craggy Milky ridge, we too pondered our situation. We were running out of food and needed to begin westwards towards Makalu and ultimately, Khumbu in the Everest region. The weather was deteriorating rapidly and although the map showed no descent routes from this point, we stupidly thought we could find one. So, as the mist rolled in once again, we plunged down into an icy basin from which we escaped in the most precarious manner.

We were in the altitude range of stunted rhododendron in itself designed to scratch and generally frustrate Himalayan travellers but when the rhododendron grows in deep, soft snow, it is a quagmire of nightmarish proportions. However, by deviously balancing through the top branches of the horrors, we made slow but steady progress. Having escaped from this first trap, we descended relentlessly down a snowy ridge, feeling our way like blind men because of the mist, and occasionally looking at the compass as if it would ridiculously show us the way.

We paddled on down a steep, snow-filled gully, alternately fighting through set, cold bamboo or climbing down little bluffs. We knew that we were being stupid—we knew that in the Himalayas, one does not plunge blindly down these bluff, trackless faces but we were being optimistic and, after all, what were our options?

After several thousand feet of nerve wrecking descent we reached a final cliff and over this abseiled (slid down a rope) into the thickest gully on earth. The floor and walls of this

frigid place were covered in ice. We crossed it and plunged down through more bamboo as the snow turned into freezing rain. In the depths of the unknown gorge we found an overhanging boulder and under this we crawled, like wild animals, to spend the night.

Morning revealed the vertical walls of the gorge, plastered white. We tried to descend the gorge and found it impossible. It would be hard to imagine a more perfect trap surrounded by impenetrable forests, an undescendable gorge and unclimbable bluffs; blinded by seemingly endless mist and, on top of it all, empty bellies and just enough clothing to keep us alive, but not warm.

We decided that up was the only way out, so up it we went, once again battling through close-growing bamboo. Night found us huddling once more under a boulder, and we slept half sitting, while it snowed huge flakes. Sometimes during the night, the storm cleared and was replaced by a biting cold from a clear, starry sky.

In the morning, we climbed fast up the spur, through deep snow, racing against time, hoping that we would reach the top and gain a view before the mist comes again. And this time we won. About midday, as we sat down for a brew of Sustagen, we were about 400 yards from where we had been four days before. We spent another night under a a boulder and started off early the next day, hoping that this time we would reach civilisation. It was an amazing spot on which we were, plunging in a series of spectacular steps towards the valley. After several thousand feet, the angle finally reduced and we reached a definite path. We emerged into the sun and slumped down for a rest. As we looked back, Peter breathed triumphantly: 'Finally out of the clutches of the Milky'.

A shattering descent of 8,000 feet took us finally to a small Limbu village where we were told we could eat a particular rooster if we could catch him. Three hungry men were,

however, no match for the sly old rooster. He had obviously been chased before so we had to be content with a mountain of rice and some very mediocre chhang (a local rice beer)".

Peter continued:

"I had been wary of the information we had received about Num but then, our investigations consistently confirmed: 'Many shops have foodstuff in Num.'

So, reluctantly, I went along with my companions and agreed to put off purchasing essential food stocks. We needed ten days food for ascending the Barun valley and then crossing three, still winter-locked, 20,000 feet high passes would lead us to the Khumbu, land of Everest, and for me, an old stamping ground.

One shabby little material shop selling gaudy cottons stood beside the deserted school and we sat on the grass outside, filled with wilderment. This was it. What would we do now? There was not much choice, as we needed food desperately. We combed the village, purchasing chickens from people who didn't want to part with them, and vegetables and rice, only after several hours of inquiry and persistent searching.

There were other miscalculations that had been made. Like money. For, as we climbed up from the mighty Arun river, we had a sum total of Rs 39.40 (\$ 5) so I was concerned that should one of us have an accident, we would find ourselves in the dire straits. We were, however, committed, as we had to reach Khumbu to rendezvous with the support group to replenish supplies and money, and have a well-earned rest.

For five days, we floundered in deep snow along a ridge line, following the faint impressions of expeditions already at Makalu and the head of the Barun valley. At night, we huddled beneath dripping rocks, beside smoking fires, while it snowed heavily outside. Each day, we continued in the deep

snow and bleak conditions, upwards, up the long, trench-like Barun valley.

A series of catastrophes befell one absent-minded Traverse member. First, Greame lost some of the equipment we possessed and then, to cap it all night, while cooking dinner, he melted one of his plastic climbing boots, resulting in a boot with new, square cross-section with a corrugated upper surface. My fetish of hiding my spoon and toothbrush and, in fact, every item of equipment I possessed, reached a crescendo at this stage as I nervously protected my own gear from the spate of mishaps.

The day before we reached Makalu base camp (16,400 feet), we halted early as the weather was bad and Greame had an altitude headache. Since it was mid-afternoon, and we hadn't eaten since breakfast at 6 a.m. we were all hungry. The three of us squeezed into the tiny, two-man tent and ate our meagre meat. I surveyed the remnants of our food supply. There wasn't much, to say the least. I remembered a quote from a member of the Everest Reconnaissance Expedition my father had been on with the famous English explorer, Eric Shipton in 1951: 'There should be some'. My tummy rumbled and I rolled over to go to sleep. Accidentally elbowing Tashi in the stomach and kicking Greame on the forehead as I did so.

Sorry chaps, I muttered, knowing full well that one of them would be rolling over sooner or later and the accidental and unintended reprisal would manifest itself only too soon.

My food fantasies were all to come to a resounding fruition, for, with our arrival at the Makalu base camp, beneath the massive, pale granite wall of Makalu's South face, we were invited to dinner with the German team, had after-dinner vodkas and chocolates with the Anglo-Polish expedition and given a box of goodies by the friendly Germans to help us on our ways. There was a Japanese expedition

ensconced in the camp too and they advised us on our route over the high passes to the Khumbu as most of our routine lay on their route to the summit of Baruntse.

Incredulous, they watched us pitch our tent which now appeared even smaller than usual amidst the profusion of spacious expedition base camp tents, mess tents and store tents. It confirmed my already strong belief that traversing the Himalayas is a more difficult undertaking and more daunting than climbing a single mountain. Traversing the Himalayas means no comfortable base and no end close at hand: 300 days westward, westward, through the Himalayas."

Greame completed the story:

"With our tummies full again of undreamt-of luxuries, we headed for perhaps the highest, and most difficult, crossings of the Traverse. From the Japanese camp II, at about 19,000 feet we climbed up easy snow towards East Col. A lung infection, picked up from almost every sherpa in the Barun, was beginning to make its presence felt deep in my chest, so, while Peter and Tashi forged on strongly, I plodded in the rear. From the crevassed upper lip, we climbed up a steep final gully, to the top of the Col (20,500 feet).

What a view. All around us, some of the world's greatest mountains rose in their hundreds, all over 20,000 feet. To the West, there were almost too many to appreciate, and our eyes were drawn to Makalu, standing across the Barun like a giant: and its west ridge, which we hoped to attempt in 1983, falling straight from the perfect summit, perhaps the greatest line on any peak over 26,000 feet.

My head was beginning to pound painfully and the pain in my lungs told me that it was imperative that we get down to a much lower camp that night. We abseiled down an old fixed rope to the mouth of the lower Barun glacier and plodded a wobbly line of steps towards West Col. Peter

plunged out in front, occasionally dashing about energetically to photograph while Tashi and I were happy to plod behind. A strong wind made the scene almost Arctic as it swirled the loose snow, obliterating everything below thigh height. After climbing a level plot of about a mile we reached West Col and despite my Misery, I couldn't help being moved by the panorama of the mountains beyond—Kangtega, Tamaserku and Amadablam taking pride of place, all first climbed by the New Zealanders.

The descent from the Col was far from a non-event. The thousand feet of steep, hard ice never is and we were soon plunging across yet another frustratingly level glacier and descending slowly to the Hungu. As we sat for a rest, Peter pointed a finger: 'Just over there is the Khumbu'.

Just over there? But still another 20,000 feet high pass to be crossed, the dreaded Amphu Laptsa.

From the cold camp at about 17,000 feet, we began climbing up towards the notorious pass. My lung infection was climaxing and I was popping pills furiously in an attempt to hold it off for another 12 hours. Tashi too didn't seem to be doing too well although, as usual, he remained silent and plodded on stoically. Peter was fantastic, plunging steps in appalling deep snow and taking some of my load to help. We gained height steadily and from this side, the pass was quite easy; just a bloody long, long way.

About midday, we were there, staring in disbelief down a terrifying ice wall which fell into the Imja glacier. After a short rest, we began the job of the descent. It was steep, but not as icy as West Col and we were soon climbing down quickly and uneventfully, well, except for one small incident near the bottom. The slope was a little avalanche-prone and we were being as stealthy as Red Indians on the warpath. Suddenly, from above me, I heard Peter shout: 'I knew this would happen.'

I looked up, to see Peter and Tashi swimming comically in a flurry of snow. After 50 feet though, the delinquent snow broke up in some rocks and my friends regained their composure. Three hundred feet lower, we slumped down among some rocks and, after quite a while, Peter spoke.

‘Great stuff, felas , we are in the Khumbu,’ he said, slapping Tashi and me on the knee. We camped near the terminal of the Imja glacier and next day, thoroughly refreshed, romped towards the country we knew so well.

It had taken us 30 days from Illam and we had cut it real fine—we had Rs. 5, one match and six ounces of food left. We had climbed and descended a total of a quarter million feet and it was still a very long way to go.”

Chapter 6

Glimpses of Mount Everest

As I mentioned earlier, we utilised our enforced stay at Kunde, waiting for the Traverse group, to undertake some short treks in the Everest region. I made two interesting trips, one to Kalapather and the other to Gorakshep and what a rewarding experience it turned out to be.

On March 24, while Doug and Ann Luise went trekking towards Gokiyu, I set off for the Everest Base Camp and Kalapather. On the way, I stopped at Khumjung village and visited the famous Gompa, where under the personal custody of the head Lama, is preserved the skull of a supposed Yeti, the Abominal Snowman. To me, it seemed more like the outer skin of a Himalayan Brown bear and this is borne out by the report of a scientific exploratory expedition conducted by Sir Edmund Hillary, a copy of which is kept in the Gompa. I also visited a house where seven Lamas, who had come all the way from Thyangboche, were performing religious rituals to protect the soul of houseowner's child, who had died some days ago. I was deeply moved by the welcome I received in this house and it vividly brought home to me the solace these simple people drew from religion.

After walking through levelled fields, I descended steeply to Phunketamka village and, after crossing the Dudh khola bridge took the zig-zag path, set against one of the most

dramatic backdrops in the world, up to the Thyanghoche spur, at the head of which, at a height of 12,493 feet, is located the Tyanghoche monastery in a clearing surrounded by dwarf fur and rhododendron. The monastery was founded in 1920 by Lama Gulu. The main temple was destroyed in an earthquake in 1933 and has since been rebuilt. The monastery has recently been destroyed in fire and now being rebuilt.

Buddhism is believed to have been introduced in the Khumbu region towards the end of the 17th century by Lama Sange Dorjee, the fifth incarnate of the Rongphu (Rongbok) monastery in Tibet. Legend has it that he flew over the Himalayas and landed on a rock at Pangboche and Thyangboche, leaving his footprints embedded on the stone. He is thought to have been responsible for the founding of the first Gompas in the Khumbu at Pangboche and Thami; those at Khumjung and Namche Bazar came up at a later date. The Thyangboche and Thami monasteries, in fact, are off shoots of the Nyingpa sect of Rongphu and every year, normally during full moon in November-December, observe a monastic festival complete with masks, costumes and ritualistic dances to celebrate the triumph of Buddhism over Bon, the ancient animistic religion of Tibet.

From Thyangboche, one gets a panoramic view of the Himalayan giants Kwangde, Tawache, Everest, Nuptse, Lhotse, Amadanblom, Kangtenga and Thamserku and I spent considerable time photographing these peaks.

Paul, an Australian whom I had met at Namche Bazar, joined me here and we set out for Pheriche. There is a short descent towards the Imja khola through a thick forest of birch and conifer and due to the melting snow, the track at times was very slippery and dangerous. We saw a large number of Himalayan pheasants and once a bear and high up, above the tree line, the Dafney, Nepal's national bird. This colourful bird, with its reddish tail, shiny blue-green back and a pure white coat under its wings, is found only at high altitudes.

Crossing the river, we climbed to Pangboche, the highest year-round settlement in the valley where, the Imja khola, coming from the right, joins the Dudh Koshi a little above the village. I looked across the Imja khola, trying to locate the Traverse team who were to enter the Everest region after crossing this river but was unsuccessful in my efforts. The tree line ended here and we passed through alpine meadows of scrub juniper and wild flowers to reach Pheriche, situated on a level patch near the river at a height of 13,845 feet. Apart from a few tea shops that provide the bare essentials, there is a medical aid post maintained by the Himalayan Rescue Association of the Tokyo Medical College with a Japanese doctor in attendance. An air compression chamber has been installed for assisting victims of high altitude sickness.

Most trekkers spend a day at this place for acclimatization and we did so too as the weather suddenly turned bad. There were a few American, Australian, Dutch, Swiss, Japanese and German trekkers there and we took the opportunity to exchange notes and swap stories. I discovered that apart from the Japanese, who were respectful towards the values and customs of India and Nepal, most other foreigners had a rather superficial knowledge of these two countries and literally missed the wood for the trees; they saw only the poverty and missed all the development taking place.

March 27, dawned bright and clear and we set off along a gradual incline towards Phalangkarapa in the north. The clouds soon set in, but not before we got a good view of Tawadche and Cholatee. We turned right and climbed steeply towards the terminal moraine of the Khumbu glacier. Here, there was a small memorial to the Sherpas who had been buried under an avalanche during the 1970 Japanese expedition. Crossing over, we climbed another kilometre and a half along the lateral moraine till we reached Lobuje. I climbed the hill on the left for a better view of the peaks and was greeted by the remarkable sight of the sun setting behind

Nuptse. We stayed that night at the Everest hotel—the word hotel being, really, a misnomer because it was only a place where one could get a bed and something reasonably well cooked food to eat.

Early the next morning, we set out for the Everest base camp. It was so cold that our breath froze, forming crystals on our moustaches. I was fully clad in my mountaineering rig and looked like something from outer space—climbing boots, eight-ply thick woollen socks, woolen long johns under a climbing trouser and a windproof trouser and nearly five layers of clothing on my upper body, leaving only a tiny portion of my face exposed. It was dark as we started but we could see our way from the reflection on the ground. We trod over frozen snow, trampling silently. There was no occasion to speak and the only sounds were those of our breathing and the cracking of the snow beneath our feet. The light came slowly and stealthily. First, the snow was revealed, then our footmarks, then, little folds and dips in the snow became visible and, very slowly, the high peaks on both sides of the Khumbu began revealing themselves as solid and substantial, from a two-dimensional outline to three-dimensional form and solidity. Little by little, the giants came into view, one glorious peak after the other, but Everest was still hidden. We clearly sighted the conical Pumori and Gorakshep peaks. To the south of them was the Kalapathar ridge which provides a good vantage point for viewing Everest.

We reached Gorakshep, which was the base camp for the 1962 Swiss Everest expedition. It was called Lake camp by the 1953 British expedition as there is a small lake, usually frozen, by its side. We found a small, tarpaulin-covered stone hut, being used by an adventurous sherpa woman to run a tea shop. Her one-month old infant played in his makeshift crib nearby and I wondered: 'isn't it a wonder that such a small baby was unconcerned with the cold; would he, one day, claim a climb atop Everest as his birhright?'

We found a few memorials to climbers who had died in previous Everest expeditions. There was also one for an Indian Ambassador, H. Dayal, who had died due to lack of acclimatization during his visit to Base Camp after the successful 1965 Indian Everest expedition.

After tea and biscuits, we began the climb up the steep gradient of Kalapathar. It was a race against the clouds and when we reached the top, of Kalapathar Ht 18,500', Everest was partly under cover. We, in fact, were above the clouds while the Khumbu glacier was seemingly under a sea of cloud, with Nuptse and Lhotse floating above them. Due to the biting cold, a few other trekkers started on their way down but I was determined to stay till Everest came into view.

Myriad emotions flashed through my mind. What was that power, I wondered, that drives men to climb higher and higher. What was so special about Everest that it was the cherished desire of every true mountaineer to stand on its summit? Would I also, one day, stand there?

The icy wind made it difficult to stand upright; I had to crouch against the elements. And, suddenly, my prayers were answered. The cloud patch drifted away and I could see the entire range, from the Khumbu Glacier to the top of Everest, spread out before me. It was unbelievable. I could locate each and every feature of this mountain, from the Ice Fall to Western Col. to West ridge, to South Col. and the summit. Nuptse, silver white, looked even more alluring than Everest. To the east, Makalu, Amadablam, Pumori and Cho Yu were visible. Down below, near the Ice Fall, were the multicoloured tents of the Japanese Base Camp. I almost ran out of film as I clicked away in gay abandon and then, most reluctantly, descended. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of the entire trek.

The complete team was together again and on April 7 we

took stock of the progress achieved thus far, the expenditure incurred and our plans for the future. It appeared to me that the New Zealanders wanted to spend only that which had been provided by the IMF and none of their own, but I was fairly insistent that the money be spent in a 5:2 ratio as there were only two Indian members and this they agreed to after much haggling. Then, they dropped what could only be considered a bombshell; they wanted a month's break so they could travel to Gomukh in the Gharwal Himalayas to participate in an International Mountaineers Camp being organised by the IMF, during the course of which, Shivling was to be scaled with the latest artificial methods. I explained to them that this would seriously hamper our progress of the Traverse. The monsoon was fast approaching and it was essential we exited Nepal before their onset. If we got stuck, particularly in Western Nepal, which had a very poor communication system, we would not be able to reach the Karakoram Pass before winter and this would put us back by another six months. I was in favour of pressing on as fast as we could and with great difficulty, got them to agree.

What saddened me about this particular episode was that it revealed a lack of cohesiveness and team spirit in the group and without these, we could not hope to succeed. However, we did agree to undertake a few more short treks in the Everest region before setting out on our onward journey.

Sir Edmund arrived two days later with a group of six, accompanied by a long trail of 60 porters and since he was to stay with our host, we vacated our room and moved into tents that we pitched in the cobbled courtyard. Sir Edmund, I was told, makes this annual pilgrimage to the Solokhumbu region to supervise the activities of the Himalayan Trust, which runs two hospitals and seven schools in the area, besides sponsoring young Sherpa boys for further training and education in New Zealand. His arrival is a big event and a festive atmosphere prevailed in Khunde through out his

stay as Sherpas and their wives poured in from far and near to pay their respects.

Being the patron of our expedition from the Kiwi side, Sir Edmund was extremely pleased to meet us. We briefed him about our progress and discussed our future plans with him. He expressed his total agreement with what I had chalked out. We also discussed some of our differences and thanks to his wise counsel, most of these were sorted out, or, at least, seemed to have been sorted out.

We set off on our final mini-trek through the Everest region on April 13, Doug and Ann Luise opted out and the remaining five of us trekked via Khumjum to Dela, where we separated—Tashi, Greame and Peter heading towards the Everest base camp, Corrina and me towards Gokiyo. The route was covered with two to three feet of snow and the altitude was beginning to make its presence felt. By the side of a frozen lake, only a small tip of it being free from ice and in which two Siberian ducks were happily paddling, we made our campsite. The next morning, armed with my camera I crossed over to Gokiyo peak (18,000 feet) on the other side of the lake. I photographed the Khumbu glacier, Everest, Nuptse, Lhotse, Cho Yu, Gokiyo Kang and Makalu and even as I was so occupied, the clouds began accumulating and the wind blew up, enveloping me in vaporous mist and sleet. This went on for two hours and eventually forced me down. We ran into a heavy snowstorm on the way back. Walking became difficult and our hands, feet and faces were getting numb. Late that night, the other group returned to Kunde also being beaten back by the severe storm.

We held a final meeting to discuss our plans for the next stage. I wanted to trek with the Traverse group but due to some disagreements about the next replenishment point, thought it would be best to remain with the support team, particularly since Corrina had fallen sick and was to fly back from Lukla to Kathmandu. It was therefore, decided that the

Traverse team comprising Greame, Peter and Tashi would head westwards via Tashilapcha, Rawling, Longtang, Jugal Himal, the Manang valley north of Annapurna and enter the Muktinath area to rendezvous at Jomsom with the support group. Doug, Ann Luise and I would trek through eastern Nepal to Kathmandu via Phaplu, Saleri, Okhaldunga and Tokshilghat, pick up supplies and travel to the Jomsom.

As later events will show, even the best laid plans can go awry.

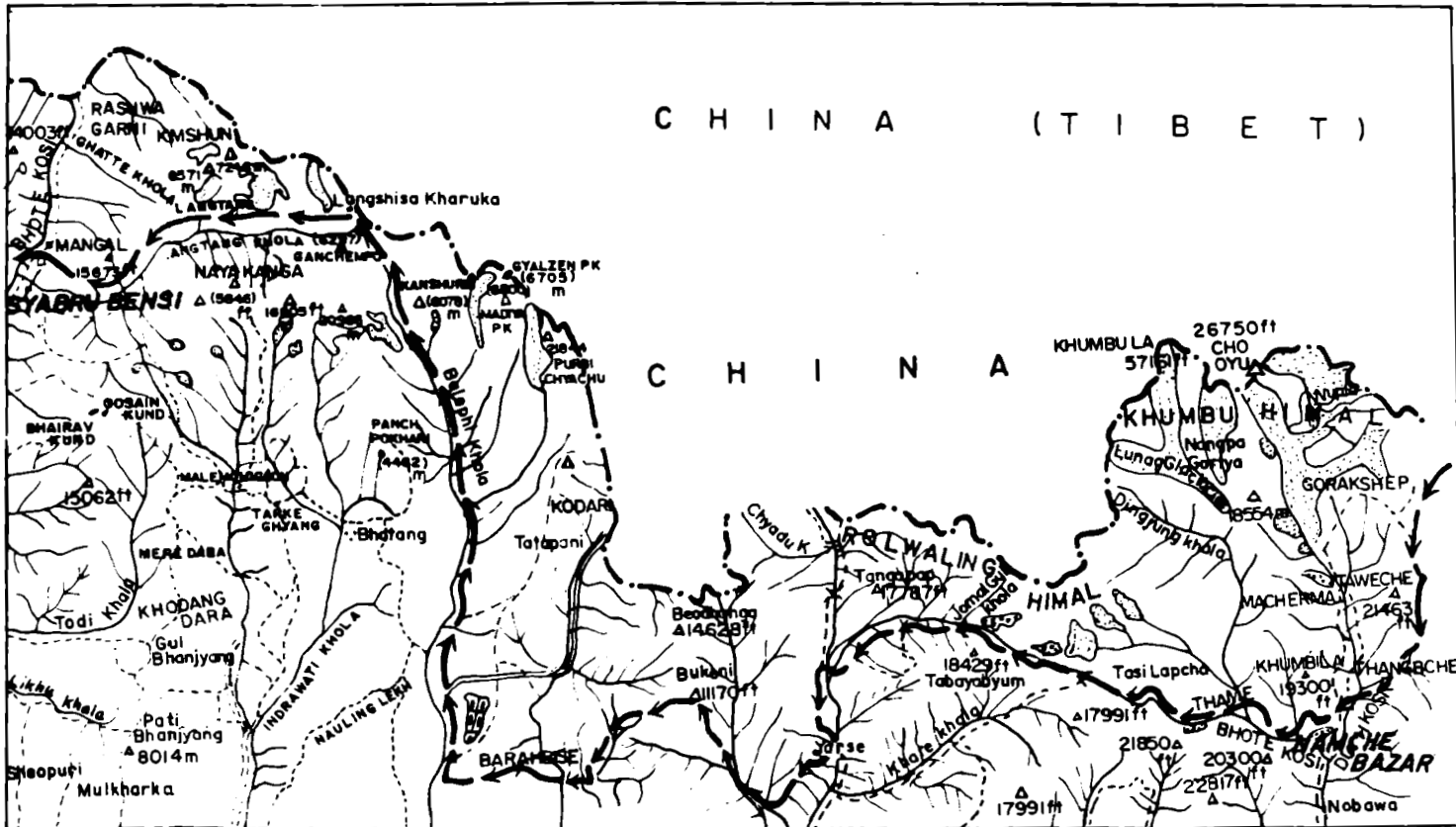
Chapter 7

Trekking in Eastern Nepal

Snowflakes fell all around us as we set out from Kunde on the morning of April 18, it seemed that mother Nature herself had turned out to bid us farewell. I think all of us felt nostalgic but we were happy to be on our way again.

We descended to Namche Bazar, bid goodbye to all the friends we had made in the past month, and took the shortcut to Surkhe. The weather changed appreciably and we could feel summer approaching. We reached the Khari khola and bathed in its cold, refreshing water, washing the grime off our bodies and our clothes. Passing through Manedingma and Taksindo, we reached Ringmo, where the track bifurcates; one goes west to Lamasangu via Junibesi while the other is a foot track that has been laid out through beautiful conical forests towards Phaflu and Saleri, a small township developing near the airfield. As we trod this path, I wondered how long this pristine beauty would remain if the area was connected by motorable road, as was being demanded by the locals. If this was the price to be paid for economic development, it would, perhaps, be better that development did not take place. After a few more miles, the path descended and crossed a double waterfall, a roaring maelstrom as the Junbisi khola hurls down the melting snows of the Solokhumbu region. The shooting spray covered the wooden

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM NAMCHEBAZAR TO SYABRU BENSI



footbridge and we looked down to see whirlpools and breaking foam among the craggy boulders.

We camped by the riverbank at Salami (4,000 feet) and spent an uncomfortable night due to the prevailing warmth, to add to which, I had developed a stomach ache, probably from drinking spring water along the way. We normally avoided water and drank tea instead and if this was not available, boiled the water before drinking it. One had to be very careful and particular about liquid intake in the mountains as, even at high altitudes, profuse sweating can easily lead to dehydration. Large expeditions carry considerable amounts of fruit juices and glucose but we, perforce, had to do without these luxuries as we were travelling Alpine-style.

We embarked on a gradual climb of about 6,000 feet to a point near Chaurikharak, from whence we would cross over to Okhaldunga, one of the main administrative centres of eastern Nepal. We took our time, delighting in the songs of the birds, the sun on the distant hills, the clouds drifting across the valleys trailed by their shadows, the rustling of the waterfalls, the roar of the rushing torrents as they sped over the boulders, the wind crackling through the dry leaves, the hollow roar of the same wind as it swept through the forests and sent rain clouds sliding and breaking over rock-strewn ridges, the clapping of pony hoofs on rocky paths, the cry of the ploughman as he drove his oxen, the tinkling of bells that announced an approaching herd.

We smelt the sweet-scented fragrance a forest gives off after a storm, the perfume of the flowering shrubs, the smell of damp moss on tree trunks, the cloying scent of the orange blossoms. All these had a special meaning and place in our thoughts. It was not just the loveliness or a thirst that could not be quenched, or even the same things seen in a different place and in a different light, rather, things we could feel but could not describe. We choose the things we love and blend

them into our memories, each one of them an integral part of the incomparable lovely whole, where life and love and mountains and rivers and skies and stars join with the firmament, with which we become one. It could be anything—the scent of the valleys with the sunlight glinting through the trees that wave overhead, the tempestuous wind on the mountain top, the deep pools of blue among the tree-clad hills that are the shadows of clouds.

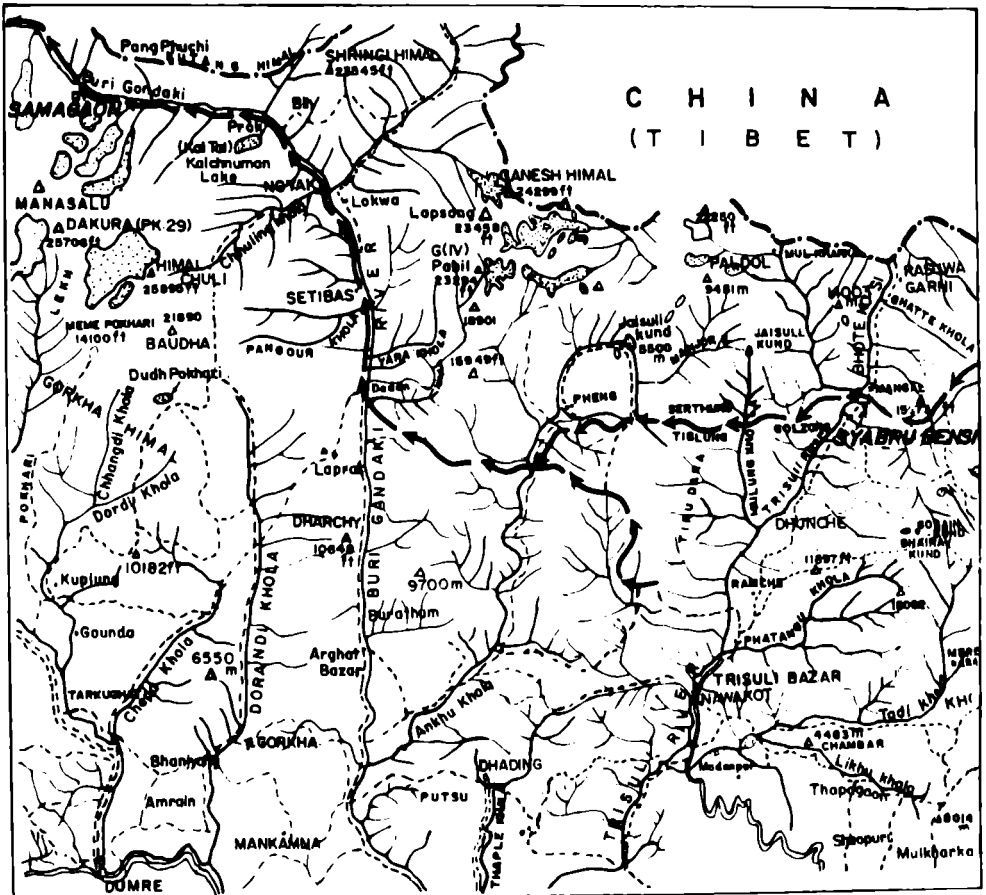
We met a head constable of the Royal Nepalese Police on the way and he gave us a fairly comprehensive rundown on the law and order situation in the Kingdom. Petty crimes were few and far between and most cases related to murders were sparked off by rape or illicit relationships. Being a sensitive and proud race, the Nepalese were quick to defend their family honour and prestige. Land was measured in terms of the area cultivated. The forests, though, have been lately nationalised and restrictions imposed on the free felling of trees.

Okhaldunga is situated on a ridge that provides a panoramic view all around. We had a choice of two tracks to our next destination, Toxilghat—one along the low river valley that climbs and descends through the water and the other a higher route via Manebhanjan. We opted for the latter, which most foreigners tend to avoid, and, after walking along an almost unending ridge, came to the village, situated right at the top.

A dismal outpost in a dismal setting, Okhaldunga contained a few houses, a post office, two tea shops and a health centre that had a staff of 16 but no qualified doctor. Its medicine store contained assorted pills for cholera and malaria, contraceptives and birth control pills, all supplied by the World Health Organisation.

The backwardness of eastern Nepal was brought home in sharp focus. All around us were barren, denuded paths and

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM SYABRU BENSI TO SAMAGAON



an almost total lack of water. Hardly could we spot a green patch in the brown, dry soil. Poverty was visible in its most naked form. Though the people reared pigs and poultry, the main source of income was from portage; on our way we had come across long trains of upto 150 porters, each of whom were carrying between 70 and 80 kgs of load each, winding their way up from Katari town in the Terai to the interior of the Solokhumbu region, some of the journeys taking upto 20 days to complete. The porters, we were told, are paid Rs 2 for every kilo of load.

We ordered a meal of rice, lentils and vegetable gravy but it was poorly cooked and unappetising to boot and we barely managed to get it down. The warm weather added to our woes and we were, thus, greatly relieved when we came to the Sonkoshi river, on whose left bank sat Toxilghat after an eight km descent. We happily wallowed in the water awhile before crossing a modern suspension bridge into the town where we got a tummy-full of rice, chappaties and vegetables for one-third of what we would have paid in the Khumbu region. We slept under the stars, in an open verandah, while all around us, large numbers of Sherpas bedded down under the cover of a huge banyan tree.

Early the next day, April 23, we recrossed the river, followed its right bank for some three kms and turned left along a wide but dry river bed. There was no discernible track and so we went along the bed, crossing it several times. At one stop we came across a woman running a kind of mobile eatery, baking loaves over a fire which she had made on the river bed. There was no tea or salt to go with it but we still enjoyed the stuff; our hunger took care of any deficiencies. A three-hour trek brought us to a tea shop where we got glasses of milk and bananas. Nearby was a shop selling pork cakes and jad (an alcoholic drink). Milk and liquor seemed to be the staple diet in these parts and no one drank tea, at least not the locals.

A climb of about a thousand feet brought us to Chaukidanda. We crossed a 4,000 feet high pass of the same name and started descending through a nullah (wide, open drain) that joined the river bed on the opposite bank. Crossing over, we continued over flat land along the river bed for Katari, which we reached in the evening. We were ready to drop, so tired were we, what with having covered 45 kms in a single day with a 50 pound load on our back. The journey on flat land, had, in fact been more tiring than a steep climb.

Katari is a dirty little town of shops that mainly deal in meat and liquor. I was appalled to see a fat, live pig, strung upside down from a pole carried by four men, being taken for slaughter. The animal was squealing with fright but no one seemed to care a fig. There was no vegetarian food available and I had to content myself with only a shandy.

Finding a decent place to sleep the night was difficult and we ultimately bedded down on the roof of a house. Within a hour, however, a big storm began building up in the west and as the thunder and lightening approached, we were forced to shift to an adjacent roof that had a tile-covered shelter. Never before have I experienced a storm of such intensity and the New Zealanders, too, were suitably awed. I tried to sleep but was soon driven out by the heat and humidity, and attacking mosquitoes. The way back to our original roof was blocked and so I climbed atop of a 45 degrees slanting roof to sleep. The only compensation was the cool breeze in the aftermath of the storm.

We boarded a truck the next morning loaded with an assortment of goods, goats and about 30 human beings for the 30 kms journey to Bandipur along the Tribhuwan Rajpath. This section of the road had yet to be metalled and was only a seasonal track running through alternately dry and slushy river beds and nullahs. We motored our way through the land of the Tharu, well-built, dark tribals who depend on the

forests for their livelihood. Their women, in their manner and deportment, are something out of a dream. Sadly, this colourful tribe is slowly becoming extinct. At Bandipur, a small township of shops and rooming houses, but with no decent place to eat, (we had to content ourselves with watermelons), we boarded a bus that would take us to Kathmandu via Hitaundi, a major trading centre for the Terai and eastern Nepal and which is gradually becoming industrialised. We thoroughly enjoyed the bus ride as the vehicle negotiated a mountain range 10,000 feet high and passed through rich green forests. In the distance, we could make out Dhaulagiri and Kanchendzonga in the west and an assortment of peaks in the east.

Wheat, potatoes and other crops are cultivated in this part of Nepal and the economic condition of the people seemed to be better off than of their counterparts in the east. We overheard passengers discussing the upcoming Panchayat elections and this topic generated much heat.

We arrived in Kathmandu just after noon on April 25. The weather had changed considerably and the valley was blooming with spring flowers. We checked in at the Himalayan Trust guest house to find a note from Corrina saying that she had gone up to Lama Sangu to meet the Traverse group.

A large bundle of mail from home took my mind off this new development.

Chapter 8

When the going gets tough, the tough get going

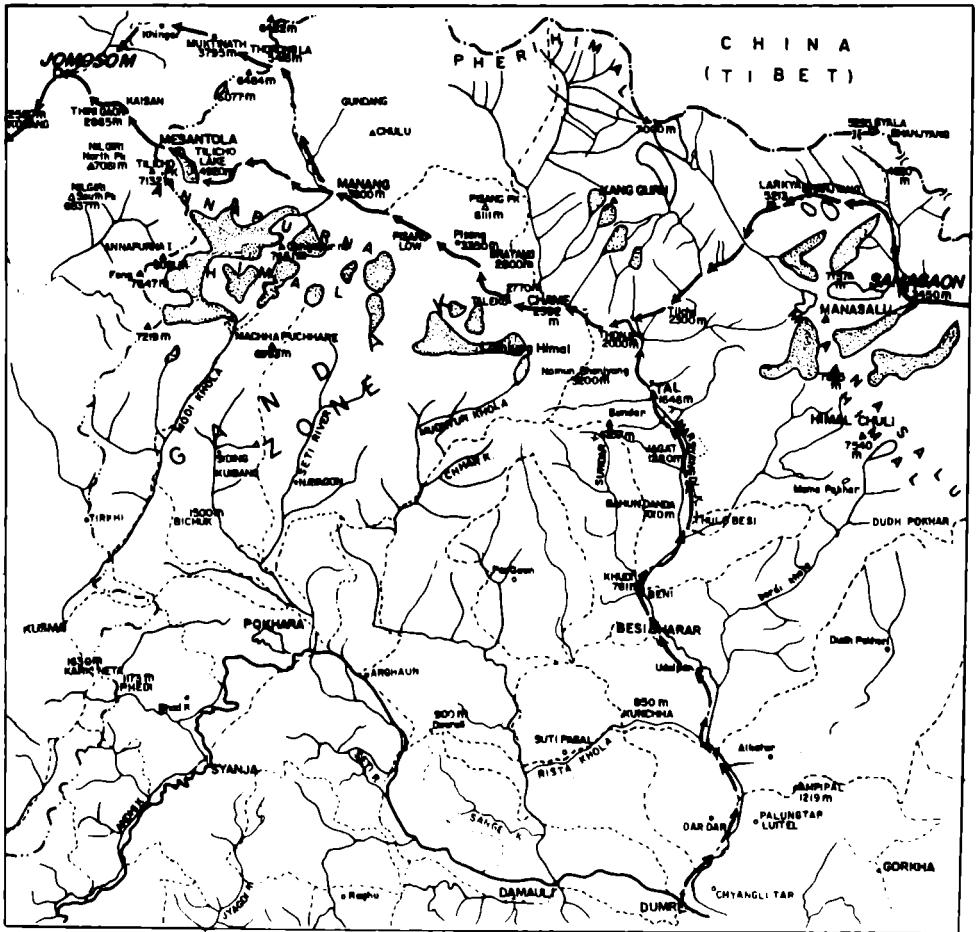
I was out making purchases in the Dili bazar (Kathmandu) the next morning when I thought I spotted four familiar faces. I rubbed my eyes; could they be who I thought they were and if they were, what were they doing here? They should have been miles away in another area. As they came nearer, I saw they were who I thought they were—our Traverse group. They had not been able to resist the temptation of hopping into the first bus they spotted at Lamagasu on the Kathmandu roadhead for the four hour drive to the capital.

Greame Dingle narrated the story :

“After an excursion to nearly 20,000 feet on Kang Tenga, a mountain first climbed by (Sir) Ed (mund) nearly 30 years ago we set off over the high Tasi Lapcha pass (19,500 feet). Ed’s warning words about the danger of avalanches on the pass rang in our ears as we made our way up to the Bote Kosi valley. Both he and Mingma had, on separate occasions, nearly died on the pass and both had a special respect for it.

The valley beyond the last village of Thami was inspiring. Grey ice walls rose through swirling mist up to the peaks of Kunde on our left. On the valley floor, a frozen stream lay

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM SAMAGAON TO JOMOSOM



suspended, awaiting spring, and a charred sky gave promise of bad weather. At 15,000 feet, long-haired Yaks nuzzled the frozen ground, their neck bells ringing out dull rhythmic notes, their backs covered with frost. New mothers snorted at their tough little calves (a noise like a very sick London bus horn) and the craggy old herder told us that many of the little furry bundles fall prey each year to snow leopards. A sad thought, but how we longed to see one of these wary cats. We had no doubt that many had already seen us.

From a frigid bivouac under a boulder at about 16,500 feet, we began the ascent to the pass. Peter was in good form and was soon well ahead. Up across boulder-strewn slopes and snow fields, we stumbled, high above towards the vertical rock walls of the unclimbed Tengi-Raggi-Tau. It was here that we kept a wary eye because any falling rock on ice would take the gully which we were forced to climb. We climbed as quickly as the thin air of 19,000 feet would allow and were soon into a large neve, plodding a weaving line of steps towards the elusive pass. Breasting the final rise, the weak feelings suddenly departed our legs as an amazing vista of sparkling white peaks spread in front of us. Below us, the huge Droiambao glacier flowed past from Tibet. This would be our rocky road down into the Rowalling valley.

Shortly after beginning the descent, Tashi fell into a crevass, winding himself badly and bruising his ribs. We continued more carefully, down an icefall into the main glacier and down this we plodded as the sun softened the snow and made the air seem harder to breathe. After an hour, the glacier suddenly steepened; its millions of tons of icefall was reputed to be the crux of the route on this side and so we climbed carefully down, peering ahead, trying to see over the cliff. Suddenly, as if by magic, a very German head appeared over the crest, it looked not the least surprised to see us and shouted, 'You must put an ice screw in zer'.

We immediately did what we were told, fixed our rope to it and abseiled over the cliff. At the foot of the abseil we met about 14 porters and a little lower down, two Germans were dragging a third man up the slope.

‘Our friend is very sick’, they said.

‘Yes, we can see that ... this man has high altitude sickness and must go down immediately’, we warned.

‘We have told him but he will not go’.

The sick man popped another headache pill and poked one of his companions with a ski pole as an expression of his wish to be dragged on. ‘Vot are vee to do?’ pleaded his friends. ‘He is a doctor’.

We shrugged, voiced another warning and continued down. Four days later, the doctor was dead, killed by high altitude cerebral oedema and a reluctance to turn back.

Below the icefall, the glacier was a tedious mass of ice and morainic rubble. In the afternoon, we walked down the remainder of the glacier, a distance that had taken the German group three days to cover, and just on nightfall, stopped at a cave which we shared with a South African trekker and his porters.

‘Is the springbok tour of New Zealand still on?’ I asked when we had got talking’.

‘Don’t ask me, I only know (US President Ronald) Reagan had been shot about two days ago’, he said.

Below the glacier, the Rowling valley descended through high pastures and beautiful forest until it met with yet another river called the Bhote Kosi (Tibetan river). From here, a series of comparatively low passes took us to Barabise and the first road we had crossed in two months. It’s all a malicious rumour that we went willingly down this road to Kathmandu. A bus came by and we got caught up in the bumper and were

dragged, kicking and screaming protests, all the way to K.C.'s beer and steak bar".

While we were discussing our future route, I discovered that there was no authorised foreigners checkpoint on the western Indo-Nepal border, except for one near Nepalgunj. This was in the Terai and would mean that the Kiwis, instead of crossing over at Pithoragarh or Dharchula, would have to trek down 200 kms just to complete the formalities. I approached the Indian Embassy and they readily agreed to waive the technicality. We also came to the conclusion that no supplies could be provided in western Nepal, except at Jomsom and Jumla, which were connected by small airstrips. Ferrying supplies by foot was impractical; the communications system was so poor that to reach the western districts, one had to cross to India, take a train via Pilibit to Tanakpur and then go by road to Pithoragarh and cross back into Nepal. Keeping all these factors in mind, we decided that the Traverse group would resume their trek from the point where they had got onto the bus and rendezvous with the support group at Jomsom around May 27.

Greame, Peter and Tashi left on April 30 while Doug, Ann Luise and myself departed on May 5 for Dumare, the starting point of a trek that would take us via Manang and over Thorangla to Muktinath and Jomsom. The wheat had turned golden with the approaching spring and we wound our way through these terraced fields of the Kathmandu valley. From Dumre, we hopped onto a tractor trolley for the short run down a road under construction to Daurdaur, where we spent the night with a British Army pensioner and attended the wedding ceremony of a local girl. Although the inhabitants were Gurungs, followers of Hinduism, they had adapted their marriage customs to their economic and social conditions.

We trekked for the next two days along the road under construction from Dumare to Besishahar, the headquarters

of Lamjung district, through a beautiful, open, green valley that had small patches of forests in which birds like cuckoos and "kaphal pakyos" resided in their natural habitat, undisturbed by man. The area reminded me of a natural park though, paradoxically, the economic condition of the farmers was very poor inspite of the fertile soil. The customs and traditions and living style was familiar to me, being akin to that of the Kumaon and Gharwal areas of India. We came across many a marriage party with the bride either on foot or being borne in a dandi (a chair-like contraption attached to a pole and carried by two or four men).

The scene changed beyond Takurighat. The valley here appeared to be a grainary, the people self-sufficient and comparatively better off. We basked in the pleasant weather, laced with occassional showers and at the head of the valley, came to Besisahar, situated on flat land in the shadow of the beautiful Lamjung Himal. Onwards, we had to negotiate steep, hilly terrain as we followed the left bank of the Marsiyandi khola up to Kaudi, where stands an old and dilapidated Shiva temple and a Dharamshala (Hindu inn). The valley narrowed and we winded our way through the deep gorge of the khola to Bawandanda, a picturesque little village with a bamboo grove, a school, houses and a few shops selling clothes and other manufactured goods. Upto now, the dominance of the Hindu religion was evident but now onwards, it changed to a mixture of Buddhism and Hinduism, Tibetan customs becoming increasingly prevalent.

We started on a gradual climb from Bawandanda and as the track became steeper and more rugged, it was, at times, hard to locate. Even a thousand feet above the river we could hear it crashing along on its hurried journey. There were waterfalls every few yards, some of them feathery plumes against the dark rocks, some torrential streams hurtling down, some mere trickles. There were new varieties of trees and tree ferns; flowering shrubs scented the air, gaudy little

birds flitted from branch to branch of the flower laden trees; giant black butterflies floated around. The thick forests of pine and rhododendron changed to conifer; I felt a nip in the air; we were close to entering the Manang valley.

I thought to myself; more happiness lost than gained by wanting too much in the world that we have left behind us. My fervent ambitions have denied hours of joy. I think I have found, since we started journeying in this land that love and life are a firmament of stars of which we are continually losing sight. And though, I may now try to recapture some of these stars and bury them deep in my mind, I still fear that they will eventually become but mystic earth dreams, memories that will stand apart when, back in the other world, my occupation will prevent me from grasping the reality that I had found here.

A large plateau opened before us and, like a vision, at the foot of a huge waterfall, lay the village of Tal. This is the southern most village of the Manang region and falls in the Gyoamsundo division, one of the three in the area. It was once dependent on trade with Tibet but since the disturbances of 1959, hunting and agriculture have assumed importance. Blessed as the region is with a temperate climate and abundant rainfall, the farmers grow two crops of corn, barley, wheat, buck-wheat and potatoes annually. Though they are Buddhist, they also hunt animals like the musk deer to augment their income. Trekking through virgin forests of pine and fir, we passed through the villages of Bagarchhap, Chame and Thonje and caught occasional glimpses of Annapurna II in the south and Manslu in the east, providing a dramatic backdrop to the tree-filled valley, which opened out as we entered the Nyasang division, the upper portion of Manang. This area, in contrast, lies in the rain shadow area of Annapurna Range and the cold, dry climate makes it possible to raise only one crop every year. The inhabitants also rear yaks, goats, cows and horses and the animals, apart from

providing additional income, also serve as an important mode of transportation.

The path we trod was lined with mauve primulas; white pine trees stood like sentinels on the spurs we traversed; the slopes were gradual and the ground rough and rocky where exposed. Beneath a dip, where a waterfall crossed the path, lay a dead mule. It must have stumbled on the slippery rocks. Kites circled lazily overhead.

We reached Bryagu village (10,000 feet), a large settlement of about 200 houses, hidden behind a large outcrop and nestling in a natural amphitheatre. The houses were stacked one atop the other, each one with a verandah formed by the roof of the structure below. Out of the houses emerged a horde of children, squealing with delight, to greet us on our arrival.

Perched on a crag overlooking the village is the largest Gompa in the district, the gold knob surmounting its curved roof set off dramatically against the dark fog cresting the heights beyond. It holds an outstanding collection of Tibetan tankhas and manuscripts, some of them 400 to 500 years old.

A little beyond Bryagu lies the village of Manang at the height of 12,000 feet. The valley is named after the village; 500 flat roofed houses guarded by a Chorten and an extensive wall of grey stones etched with the "Om Mane Padme Hum" prayer. It is something straight out of a picture postcard: narrow lanes with steep long steps leading up to the houses. Annapurna II and IV and Gangapurna were etched in short relief, just eight kms away as the crow flies.

We decided to rest a day in this hospitable village to acclimatise ourselves for the difficult crossing over Thorangla (17,770 feet).

The Manang valley, which lies close to the Tibetan border, offers tremendous possibilities to trekkers due to its rich natural flora and fauna. Three tracks take off from here, the

first via Thorangla, Muktinath and Mustang to Lhasa, a journey that takes four days; the other via Naur khola and Naurgaon which takes five days to Lhasa and the third via Larkiya bazar, which is the one, most commonly used by the people of Central Nepal.

After the Marwaris, who have migrated to Nepal from India in large numbers, the Manangies are the best known traders of Nepal. They have received special dispensation from the King to trade in south east Asia, travelling abroad with precious stones and metals, musk, herbs and curios. They import readymade garmants, watches and electronic goods, Many of them spend as much as six months away from home, returning only during the summer. A considerable number have constructed houses in Kathmandu where their children study in English medium schools, the dichotomy of the parents knowing only a smattering of English being irrelevant as this deficiency in no way affects their trading skills. Of late, and particularly since the area was opened to foreigners in the late 1970s, quite a few have switched from agriculture to hoteleering.

Over Thorangla (17,770 feet).

Local traders complete the journey from Manang to Muktinath over Thorangla on horesback in a day but as we were yet to be fully acclimatised and were carrying loads to boot, I thought it prudent to take two days for the trip.

We set off at 6.30 am on May 14 after a breakfast of Tsampa, biscuits and gur tea for the ten hour trek to the Thorangla Base Camp, where we planned to spend the night, along a gradual climb through cultivated fields. There are actually two camps, one at 14,000 feet which is totally devoid of shelter of any kind and the other 500 feet higher where there is a dilapidated hut which, nonetheless, has a roof over it. In company with two other foreign trekkers already ensconced there, I opted for the higher perch while Doug and

Ann Luise and the two porters carrying our support load decided to spend the night in tents lower down; we lit a bonfire and all seven of us ate our dinner of dehydrated peas, messed potatoes and Sustagen brew around it.

I found it difficult to sleep that night in spite of my sleeping bag and wollen outfit, what with gusty winds howling all night long. In this half awake state, I reflected on how helpless we really were, on how much a man depends on his fellow beings for help and support, on how the mountains brought out the best or the worst in us. Mountains, as I mentioned earlier, do odd things to the psyche and Ann Luise seemed to be displaying the classic symptoms—short temper and irritability. It was not her fault, really; the survival instinct did this to the best of mountaineers.

I awoke at 4.30 am and two hours later, we were ready to move after tucking in a breakfast of noodles, dehydrated fruit and Sustagen that Doug had prepared. We had barely climbed 600 feet when we came across the dead body of a sadhu (Hindu holy man) lying next to the track. It was a ghastly sight, the mendicant's wide open eyes staring at the sky as though his long pilgrimage to heaven was incomplete. Life was gone and the body was resting in peace for ever; the self had moved away leaving only the earthly remains; the ultimate end of all human beings. I wanted to cremate the body but there was no firewood available. Certain technical formalities, like informing the police, would also have to be completed. Reluctantly, I left the body alone; waited for the rest of my group to come up and carefully shepherded them past the site.

The sun came out and the snow began melting. We plodded through knee-deep snow. Gradually, Annapurna III, Gangapurna and Gaundang came into view even as the Manang valley disappeared, like it had never existed. The heights began playing tricks. Every height seemed to be the ultimate goal but as we crested it, another appeared. Breathing

was difficult and the climb unending. And finally, success. We made the pass at 11.30. Spread before us was the Muktinath valley, Dhaulagiri at its other end. To the south were the Anauranas, to the north Thorungse and to the west, the barren Kaligandaki valley.

We spend about half an hour on the pass, ignoring the blustery winds and then descended towards Muktinath. The descent was steep and even though we were extremely careful, went sliding down at places. We had climbed down barely a thousand feet when we spied the valley, wide open and barren with occasional clusters of cultivated patches. We spotted a couple of tiny tents about 2,000 feet below and our hopes soared in anticipation of finding a tea shop. We were carrying only some lolly and chocolate bars and badly needed a hot drink. We reached the tents after an hour and feasted on fried potatoes, biscuits and tea. Groups of western and Japanese trekker were camping at the spot. Muktinath was just an hour and a half away; we got there around four in the evening, tired to the bone.

The trail we had trod has been used by the locals for hundreds of years to transport huge herds of sheep and yak in and out of Manang. It is thus well defined, the only problem being the high pass which occasionally gets closed due to snow and the total lack of shelter anywhere along the route.

Muktinath (3660 metres) is an important pilgrimage spot for both Hindus and Buddhists. It's most prominent shrine is a Vishnu temple where 108 spouts, fashioned in the shape of cow's heads, pour forth water that is considered sacred. This water is channelised from a stream running above the temple. Constructed in Tibetan style, the temple contains huge brass idols of Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and Kali. The priest, to my mind, did not appear very learned and seemed interested only in the offering being made. Nearby is another temple where water gushes out of a rock and this water is considered

even more holy. There is also a Buddhist Gompa and a pagoda type temple dedicated to Jwala Mayi (the goddess of fire). In the latter, shielded by a tattered curtain, are the outlets for the natural gas that oozes from the rock and feeds the flame in the temple. Close at hand is a spring and collectively, this is considered an auspicious combination of earth, fire and water. There are two other temples of note, a dilapidated Shiva temple with idols of the lord and his consort, Parvati and a Narsingh temple in which the rituals are performed according to both Hindu and Buddhist customs. This is a sprawling, two-storey structure, the upper half being the temple and the lower one a gompa. Surely, this is the ideal way for two religions to co-exist and blend together.

Muktinath and its high valley is located in the Mustang Bhote region where the climate and landscape is similar to that of the Tibetan plateau, situated as it is in the rain shadow of the greater Himalayas. Flowing through it from north to south and forming deep gorges is the Kaligandak, which as its name implies, is a black river; the black stones of the river bed and the black soil contributing to the effect.

Scattered in the region are villages like Jhang, Jharkot, Kagbeni and Khingar which cluster around the streams that make cultivation possible. These green patches are the only oases in the otherwise desolate land. Most of the people are Buddhists; a versatile and aggressive lot but very hospitable towards their guests. They neither bury, nor cremate their dead; amidst the chanting of mantras, the lamas cut the bodies into pieces and spread them out for the vultures. They owe their allegiance to a local King who collects revenue from them and deposits it with the King in Kathmandu. For his labours, he has been granted the rank of Colonel in the Nepalese army. They trade regularly with Tibet, bartering yak butter, ghee and salt for rice, clothes and other consumer durables.

We descended through the villages of Jharkot and Khingar

and about six kms from Muktinath, came to the picturesque village of Kagbeni, situated on the right bank of the Kaligandak, in an open and flat valley. On the river bed, I searched for the "saligram" - fossilised stones, considered blessed by the cosmic power responsible for the universe as we know it. These small round stones are easily recognisable by their conical eye on the surface and if broken, are generally found to contain a fossil, proof that the Himalayas were at one time, under a deep sea.

Soon enough, we reached our objective: Jomsom, or correctly, Dzongasm or New Fort, spread over both banks of the Kaligandak, while in the background, tower the peaks of Neelgiri and Dhaulagiri. Being a district headquarters, it is primarily an administrative and commercial centre with government officials and merchants rubbing shoulders with the local inhabitants (called Thakalies) of the region. It has a wireless station, a police station, a bank, a hospital and a veterinary hospital. A company of the Nepalese army is stationed here and nearby is an airfield from where the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation operates bi-weekly services to Kathmandu and a daily service to Pokhara. Due to the strong winds that buffet the area in the afternoons, the airfield is functional only in the forenoon.

The Thakalies, living in nearby villages of Marpha and Tukuche, have for years been known for their trading skills, occupying as they do an important village on the traditional trade route between the Gangetic plains of India and Tibet. Always forthcoming to help their fellow men, they have an organised system called "Thigur" in which groups of 20 to 30 peopled pool certain sums of money according to their individual capacity. This money is then given to any group member who is in dire need for starting his business and repayable in easy installments. Such a sense of trust, is highly commendable. Many of them have migrated to cities like

Kathmandu and Pokhra, but, due to the influx of foreigners, quite a few return during summer to run restaurants and hotels. They follow an admixture of Buddhism and Hinduism, with the latter holding sway. Their marriage customs, to me at least, seemed peculiar. The bridegroom abducts a girl of his choice, takes her to his house and has to get her to agree to marry him. If she accedes within three days the two parents work out the remaining formalities; otherwise the girl returns home and the process is repeated with someone else. There is no taboo to marrying cousins.

Since there was time enough before the arrival of the Traverse group, I decided to visit Marpha village, an hour and a half away. On the way down, I met four persons who were working on a livestock development project being financed by the British government. One of them was an ex-British Army captain, the other two veterinarians and the third a graduate of the Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, to which the Nepalese government sponsors a large number of students every year. They were on a survey of livestock potential of the Lamjung region and had been at it for the past 45 days. It was heartening to learn from them that a number of development projects were underway in the inaccessible areas of the Kingdom.

Marpha village, sited amidst lush green fields of wheat and barley interspersed with apple plantations is a large establishment of flat-roofed stone houses, systematically laid out footpaths of slate and a well maintained drainage system. The main street was spotlessly clean and the houses properly whitewashed, giving a subdued impression of prosperity. It was indeed rare to come across such a clean and well-maintained village in such an interior area and I doubt there were any of this type in the rest of the Himalayas, let alone in Indian Himalayas.

I visited the Marpha Government Horticulture Farm and Distillery which was established in the mid-1960s and was

then being maintained by Sonam Sherpa, a grizzled, yet energetic veteran of the mountains. He had been teaching Tibetan in France and had learnt wine making and horticulture on the side, when he was hand-picked by late King Mahendra, father of the present monarch, to run the farm. This farm grows apples, apricots, peaches and has almond and grape plantations but its main produce are hybrid vegetable seeds and seedlings for export to all over the world. This developed cropping is also done by the farmers of the area. The distillation plant produces good quality apple cider, brandy, peach and apricot and potato wines and other liquors, utilising mainly waste or overripe fruits. Recently it had commissioned a plant to turn out dehydrated apple chips, which were much popular with foreign tourists. The farm also helped the agriculturists of the area market their produce.

May 26 was a happy day for all of us as the Traverse group arrived right on schedule. We were excited to know their thrilling account which Peter narrated.

“Well-fed and rested, we left Kathmandu, returned up the Chinese road to Barabise and started up the Balepi valley. We were heading north towards the Jugal Himal, a distant skyline of shimmering peaks nestled at the head of the long fertile valley. For two days, we marched in the low country heat, through quaint little villages nestled beside streams, with cool, breezy, stone-paved courtyards snuggled beneath the shades of the great boughs of the holy pipal trees and through the green fields heavy with grain. Women wearing brightly coloured cotton saris pounded grain to remove its husk while the men berated their water buffaloes as they ploughed their fields with single-furrowed ploughs. All the while, we were keeping an eye on the horizon ahead, watching the mountains draw nearer.

As the valley narrowed and steepened and the track we followed began to peter out, a vague path climbed abruptly up the steep fir-covered hillside on our left. Up, up, up we

plodded amongst the massive trunks of the lofty fir and the bright scarlet bloom of rhododendrons.

As the sun began to sink low behind the sheer white shapes of the peaks of the Jugal Himal, we stopped at a clearing amidst the deodars and lit a fire to prepare a repast of rice and dehydrated meat.

For this section of the traverse, we had been keen to reduce the weight of our loads as much as possible so as to enable us to move fast and reach the next rendezvous in good time. We had discarded our boots and crampons and most of our climbing gear in the hope that our Adidas (shoes) and ice axe would suffice for the three high passes ahead. If we had known ahead of time what the 17,500 foot Tilman's Col was like, we would have had second thoughts, but then, all indications were that the snow line was receding as the monsoon approached and so it seemed worth the risk.

For a few hours we plodded in knee-keep snow across high alpine basins and over small passes that led into more snow-filled valleys. Where the snow covered the scrub, we frequently plunged up to our waists and instead of our feet getting colder and colder, to our surprise, they warmed up and we began to feel oblivious to the deep snow and our lightweight footwear. As we descended into a gully, pushing our way through with rhododendron bushes coated in powder snow, we found some large prints in the snow. 'A Yeti ... a snow leopard'? ...

A bear, 'countered Greame, tossing a little reality into our flights of spontaneous fantasy. The sky was grey and thick with clouds hanging low over the peaks, isolating us in a lonesome world of cold and white. We plodded on, following the vague prints in the snow that led us towards a 15,000 foot pass over which we had to cross to reach the head of the Balopi valley. This would give us access to Tilman's Col and most important, some where we could find shelter, firewood

and a place to lay our weary bodies. A strong, chilling wind blew out of the dark sky, adding increased impetus to our pace as we climbed up to the pass in the deep crusty snow. From the crest we gazed briefly into the snow-bound bowels of the valley below before sitting on our backsides. Kicking our feet in the air and using our umbrellas as breaks, we slid off down 2,000 feet of plummeting snow slopes and moraine walls to the river far below. It was 6 pm and the chill filled the air as we groped in the gathering darkness for fire wood, the food and billies in our packs and laid out our sleeping bags amongst the azalea bushes.

As the eastern sky began to glow and the star-studded heavens turned a pale blue, we emerged from our frost-coated sleeping bags and gulped down mugs of hot tea before wandering up the valley into the sunshine and to the terminal moraine of a glacier. Following the lateral moraine, we trudged along its crimpling knife-edge towards a glaciated break in the mountain barricade - Tilman Col. As we drew nearer, it appeared the steep tongue of green ice extending from a section of broken and crevassed ice just below the pass and we pondered on the suitability of our running shoes.

There were good steps all the way. Someone had been here recently before us and had left a trail for us to follow, so up we climbed, kicking the toes of our shoes into the narrow steps and hauling on the picks of our axes. A shroud of cloud and freezing wind welcomed us on the pass so without too much to do, we took a final glimpse of the Balopi valley and crossed into the Langtang. The beautiful morning had turned Jekyll and Hyde, and we descended the broad glacier in a maelstrom of wild gusts and falling sleet. Peering through the veil of the storm at the ghostly shapes of the peaks of the Jugal Himal that loomed about us - huge white domes serrated ridges and monstrous precipices dropping on to the soft smoothness of the high neves that fed moraine-strewn glaciers.

As the fury reached a crescendo like some mad pianist with a base key fetish of booming thunder and lightening, we reached the terminus of the glaciers and began crossing a river there. On the far side was a lone stone hut.

Graeme and I were deeply engaged in discussion that was ominously taking the form of an argument when out of the stone hut stepped five vaguely familiar faces ... a group of fellow New Zealand mountaineers. They soon had us in a much rosier, more jubilant state of mind with hot tea and a couple of nips from a precious bottle of scotch to the accompaniment of a raucous rhetoric in thick Kiwi accents as we discovered that it had been their footprints we had followed over Tilman Col.

Down the lovely Langtang valley we marched, across broad grassy flats, along the banks of Chukling streams and beneath the stoic frowns of huge icy flanks and jagged summits. Towards the end of the valley the meadows transformed into gorges as we descended towards the village of Syabrubensi at only 5,000 feet elevation. As we followed the rubble-strewn track, I stumbled and fell, twisting my right ankle; the same one I had hurt on Mt Amadablam in the Everest area 18 months ago. It was like the ultimate nightmare, for, on a Traverse of the Himalayas, there is one thing you cannot afford to do and that is to damage a leg or foot. I felt depressed and sure that I would now have to withdraw from this dream journey across the roof of the world and hobble southwards to Kathmandu for R and R (rest and recreation).

In a house of a nearby village, we sipped some raksi (the local spirit) and philosophised until a glimmer of optimism returned. With a day's rest, a tight ankle bandage and determined to 'grin and bear it', we continued on, heading west to Syabrubensi.

Graeme continued :

Our journey through the Ganesh Himal was frustrated by

bad weather and the inevitable dreaded leeches. The locals told us that the monsoon had begun one month early. We were eager to get further west, away from the main effect of this annual rainy season when the mountains are almost continually hidden by clouds. The days could become bad dreams of wet equipment, swollen rivers and blood-sucking leeches below 12,000 feet and deep fresh snow if we went higher.

After several passes of around 13,000 feet, we reached the Burigandak, a large river, running south out of Tibet. This was the valley which we had hoped would take us west to the Larkya Banzang pass and eventually Manang.

From the beginning, the Buri was a primeval valley. We walked up its deep gorge with cliffs rising hundreds of feet on each side of the torrid monsoonal river, while cannabis and stinging nettle grew in profusion on the valley floor. As my road shoes were at the end of their tether (with several toes protruding painfully through a gap in the side), I had either to purchase a pair of Tibetan boots or some commercially manufactured footwear - an unlikely possibility. We passed a most depressed-looking Japanese expedition retreating, beaten, from an attempt on Ganesh III and about midday reached Jagat. There, in the one shop that sold food and fabrics, were one pair of shoes; they were exactly my size.

On May 16, with fresh supplies of rice, tsampa and makai (popped corn) in our packs, we left Jagat for Nyak. The valley continued in almost vertical hillside with invisible fingers. In places, we could have bounded several thousand feet to the river, which looked like a thin brown stream way below. At one place, Tashi gave a jump and a little squeal as a six-foot long black snake slithered off the path.

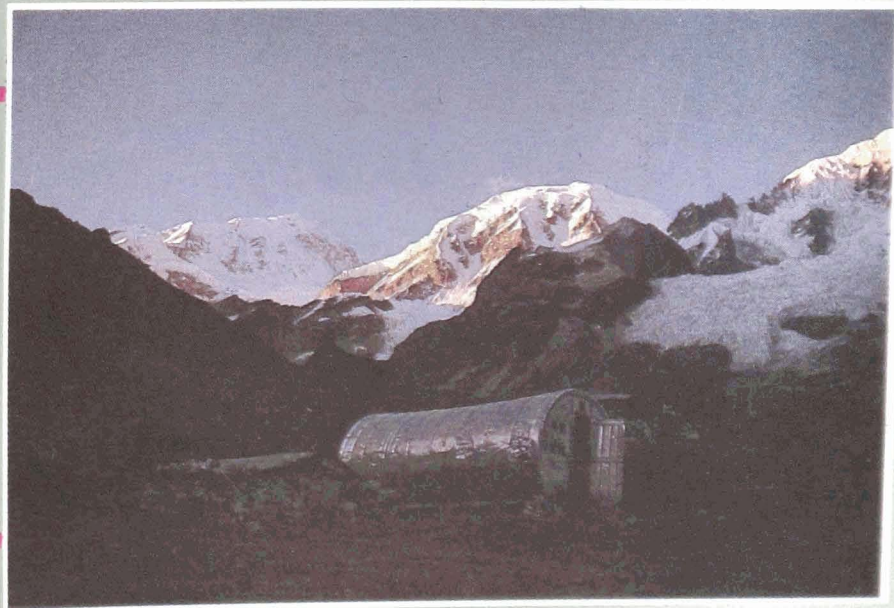
'Was it dangerous?' asked Peter.

'It must be, because it was so big', answered Tashi.



At the start of Traverse from South of Kanchenjunga over Zongri ridge. Doug Wilson followed by S.P. Chamoli, Peter Hillary and Greame Dingle.

The historic silver, (hut at HMI Base Camp) which was built by Sir Edmund Hillary during exploration expedition of "Yeti" at the height of 19,000 feet in Everest region and now at HMI Base Camp for Training.

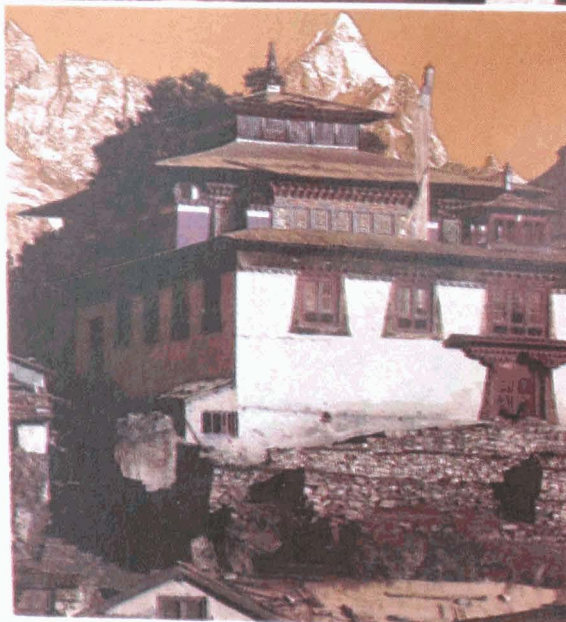
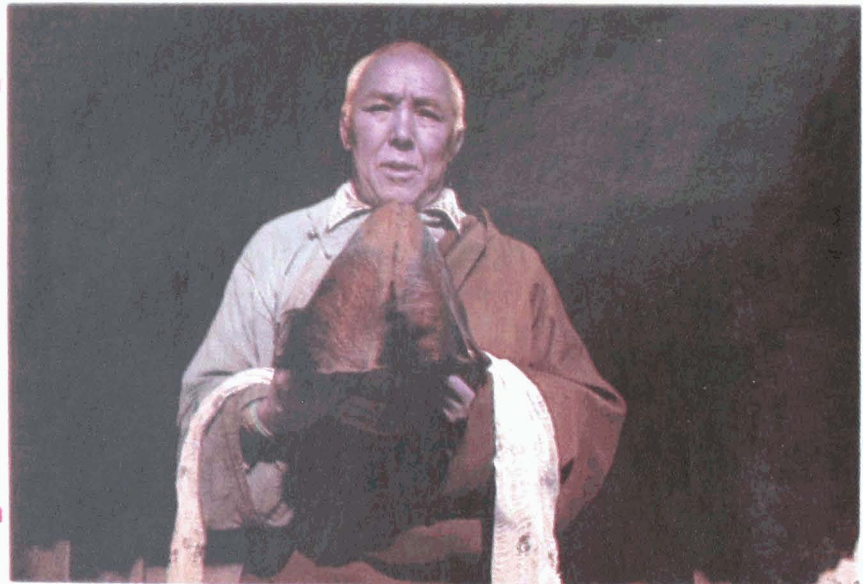


Traverse team members with Hillary family in Kunde village in Khumbu region - standing (from right to left) Peter Hillary, Doug Wilson, Edmund Hillary, S.P. Chamoli, Ms John (sister) & Mr. Dick; brother of Sir Edmund Hillary. Sitting - (Greame Dingle, Chewang Tashi, Ann Louise and Corrina Gage)

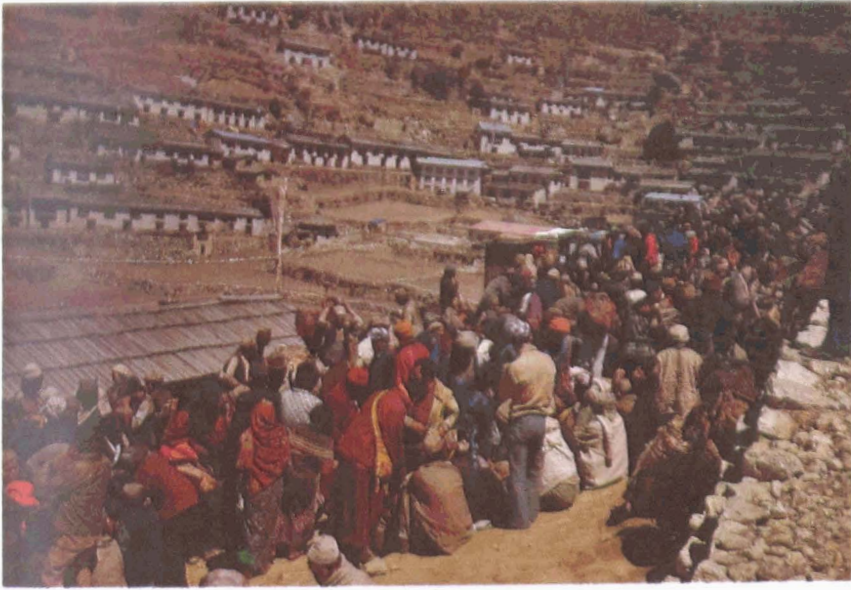


Close view of Mt. Everest from Kalapather Peak above Base Camp, Nuptse in right and Everest in the centre left with drifting clouds. S.P. Chamoli anxiously awaiting in the foreground for clouds to clear up for better view.

The Head Lama of Khumjung Monastery holding the "YETI SKULL" in his hands.



The old picturesque Thyang Boche Monastery which has been destroyed by fire, Amadablam Peak crowning in the background (now new monastery is under construction)



The famous Namche Bazar still pursuing old barter trade between the highlander Sherpas and Rais of the down Dhoodhkosi valley.

The Himalayan Rhododendron in bloom in Eastern Nepal.

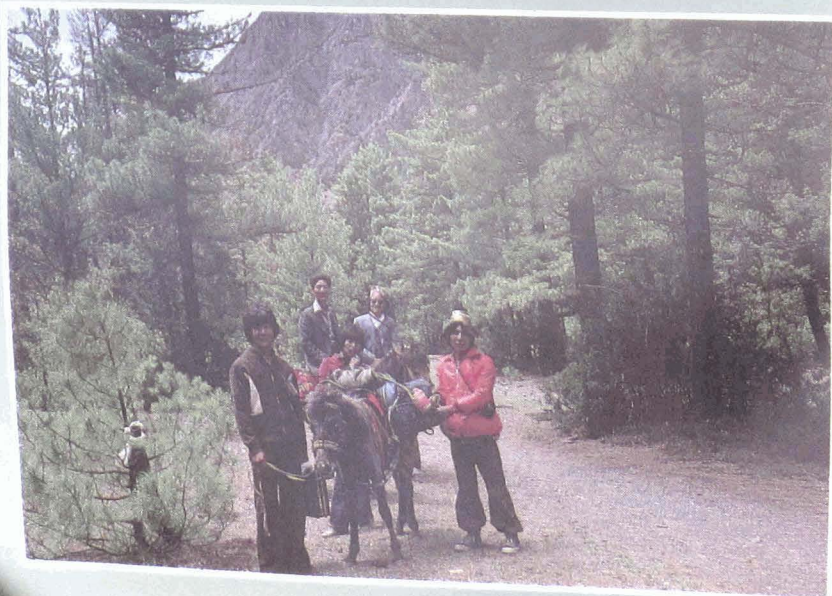


A small seven-year old girl carrying heavy load of firewood; a future Sherpani porter.



Rocknoir peak in
central Nepal.

Gauri Shanker peak.

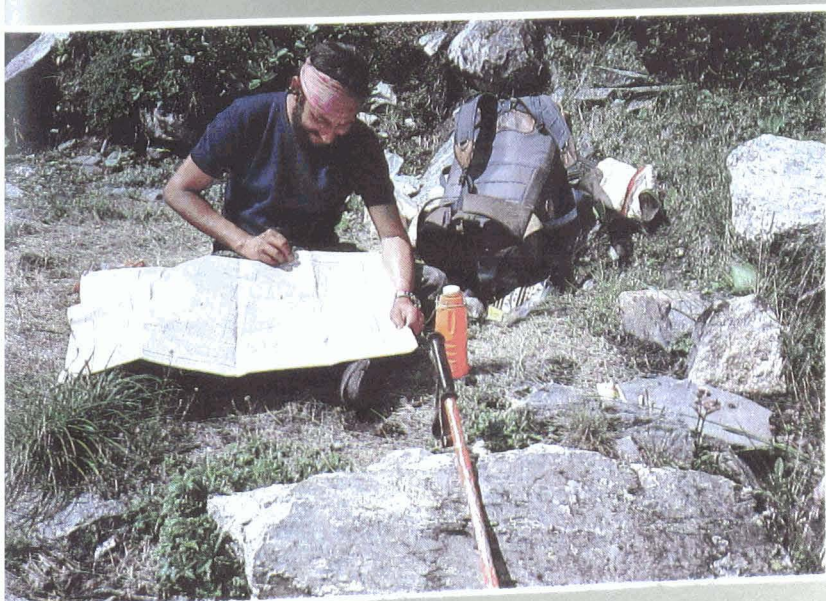
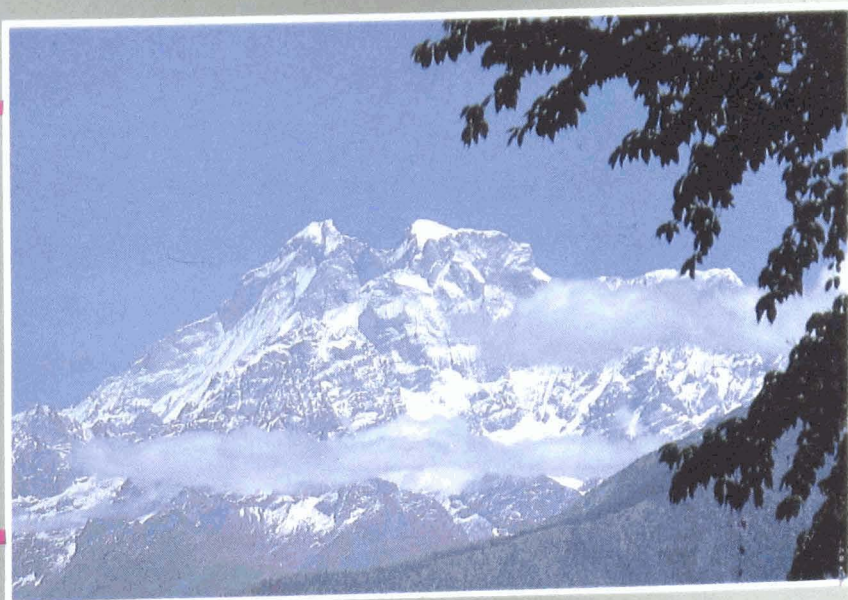


A Manangi trader
his way for trade
South-East Asia.



The small two-men
hallmark tent used
by team, weighing
three pounds only.

Ganesh Himal.

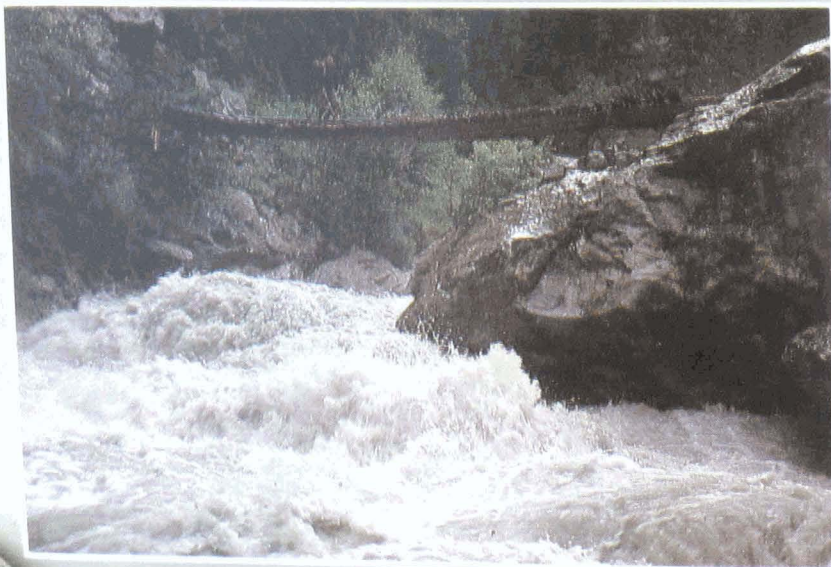


Leader finding the
way in Western
Nepal Himalayan
wilderness.

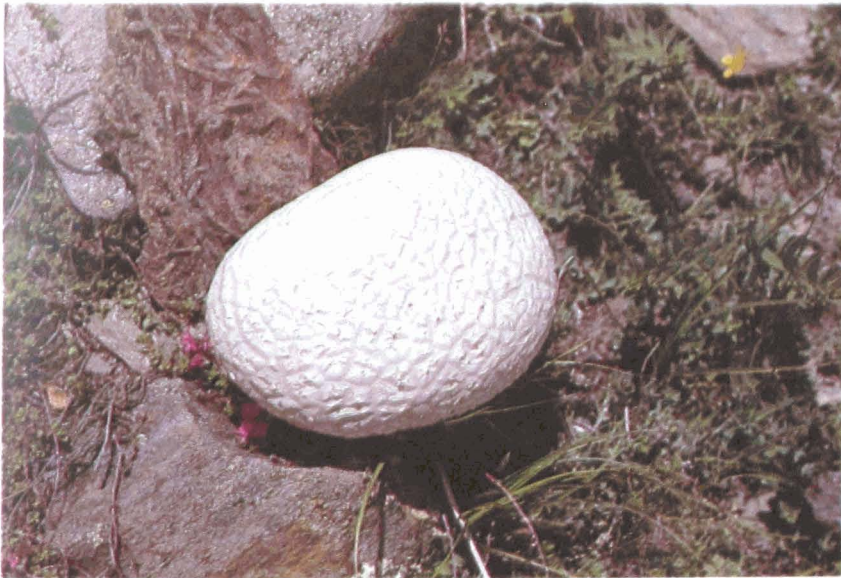


The Shivling peak in Garhwal Himalayas.

Trekking to Nanda Devi Sanctuary through the Rishi Ganga Gorge.



The single log bridge over Rishi Ganga Gorge.



A wild mushroom in the Nanda Devi Sanctuary.

The herd of blue sheep grazing freely in the wilderness of Nanda Devi Sanctuary.



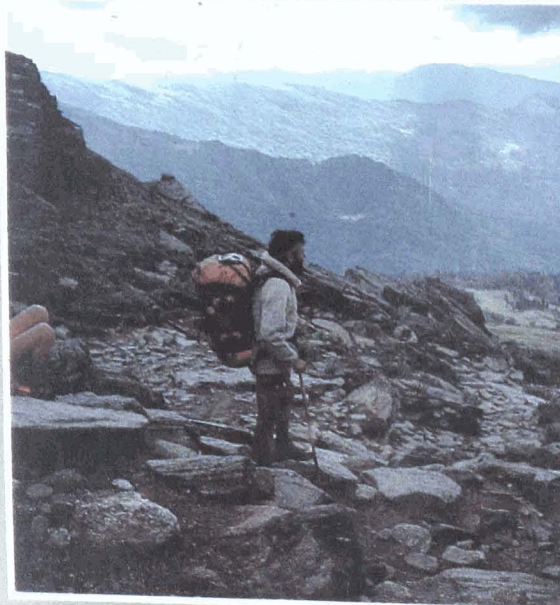
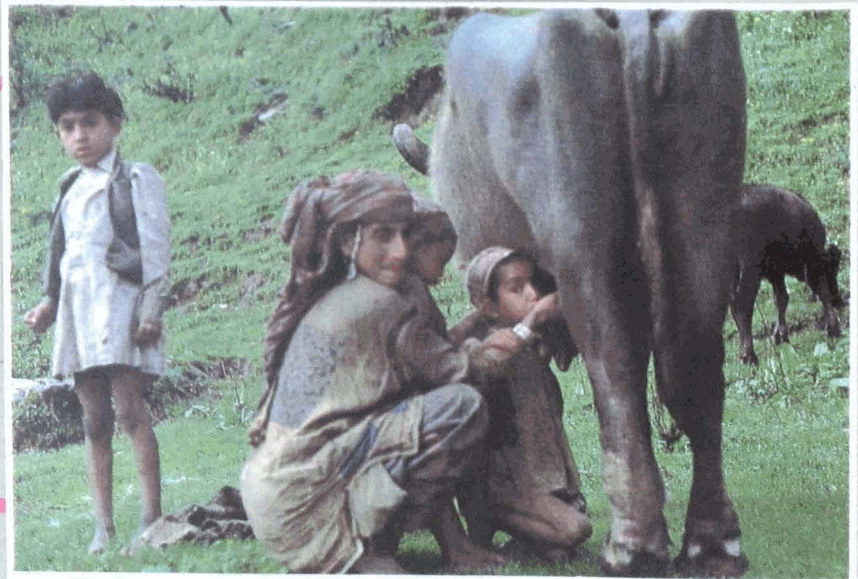
Chaukhamba and Badrinath group of peaks floating over the sea of clouds, as viewed from the Nanda Devi base at Pathalkhan.





The Traverse Team,
Greame, Peter, Tashi
& Chamoli enjoying
the sulphur hot
spring bath of
Yamnotri.

A nomadic Gujar boy
taking milk directly
from his buffalo :
their only source of
living.



Crossing over the
Aicha Pass of
Thadoldanda.

We crossed a large side river on a narrow land bridge. The river had drilled its way through apparently solid rock and now thundered past in a slit gorge several hundred feet below. Beyond, we climbed steeply up the hillside, weaving through vertical cliffs on a trek that edged along ledges and was built up in places by precariously stacked rocks. It was late afternoon when we climbed past a final vertical cliff to reach a little pass with a Chorten and prayer flags and there, spread out before us amidst the vertiginous hillside, was the green patch-work oasis - Nyak. We found a friendly house to spend the night in and drank a little rakshi to relax our weary bodies. We were well pleased with progress.

We were told that one day's walk above Nyak, a checkpoint would stop us entering the restricted area near the Tibetan border. This naturally concerned us greatly as there was no reasonable alternative route which would take us to Manang. We approached the checkpoint nervously through an amazingly beautiful fir forest.

The checkpoint stood in the village of Nandu and was manned by two policemen. We were sickeningly nice to them.

'Trekking permits, please', said one policeman firmly. 'Oh, trekking permits, yes', said Peter and I in chorus.

The policemen asked Tashi to write the details in the book. We will never know what Tashi wrote, but we were soon bowing and scraping our way off, up the valley towards Tibet.

In the next two days, we circum-navigated the 26,000 feet Mansalu. The Burigandak was fantastic to the end - ever changing, always different from any other area of the Himalayas that we had so far seen. For two days, we walked through a barren Tibetan landscape with great peaks towering above and chaotic icefalls tumbling into the valley.

The Larkya Banzang was the easiest high pass we had

crossed. We crested its 17,500 foot top and descended easy snow slopes towards Manang. Sadly, the weather was poor and there were no views of Manaslu. At about 14,500 feet on the other side, we were surprised by a human voice and, on investigation, found three Tibetans crouching by a small fire beneath a rock. They were a woman and two young children aged about ten and five. They planned to cross the pass the next day. As we continued, Peter said, 'In New Zealand, I reckon a man could go to court for sending his wife and kids over there.'

That day we descended the long valley of the Dudhukhola to 10,000 feet and early the next evening, we entered the fascinating Manang valley at Thonje. Here I went looking for eggs for breakfast and finally found three.

'Six rupees', said the seller.

'But that is exorbitant'. I pleaded. 'We have never paid more than one rupee per egg'.

'This is Manang', said the man, withdrawing his eggs from sale. And so it was. It was hard to believe that these apparently simple people in their traditional clothes and living in stone and mud houses were such 'Jetset travellers'.

Peter concluded :

In a series of geographic transitions, we had surely reached the opposite pole. The Manang valley is a dry, brown and desolate place, very different from the thick forests and bright green valleys of Sikkim and eastern Nepal.

We were all footsore as we followed the dusty track on yet another day of double marches and yet our enthusiasm for the country through which we passed seemed undaunted. Whole mountain sides of bare rock slabs swept in huge geometric curves to the craggy summits far above and to the south of the barren landscape rose one of the world's greatest ramparts, the Annapurna Himal, a string of huge mountains

that fend off the monsoons, leaving Manang world's apart from the green vales on Annapurna's southern flanks.

As we approached the town of Manang itself, we passed ranks of honeycombed rock spires, frittering away in the dry desert heat and blustery winds. Nestled among these extraordinary geological oddities were whole village of flat-topped Tibetan-type houses with a red white Gumpa placed dominantly above. The scenes conjured images of medieval times, and places long forgotten. My imagination wandered off into the high Tibetan plateau, riding horses with the tall and proud Tibetan Khampas from one fortified township to another.

We headed up the valley across the bare, rubbly hillsides with the occasional bush or pine standing gnarled, weatherworn and lonesome, to where the hills turned to shingle slides topped with tortured and sculptured stone pinnacles. Here, we climbed upwards and crossed into a great basin sparsely vegetated with juniper and flowering groves, from where we scrambled up 12,000 feet of loose rubble into the cloud and wind and snow. After crossing several snow-clad folds, we descended a short snow slope and before us, the cloud rolled back like a stage curtain, leaving the smooth, frozen surface of lake Tilicho stretching out before us towards the 23,000 foot Tilicho peak and beyond to the 16,500 foot Messanda pass, our passage to Jomsom. We laid out our sleeping bags on the alpine meadow, snuggled inside and watched the cloud swirling amongst peaks and the sun casting subtle colours and shadows as it receded in the west.

I poked my nose, closely followed by two weary eyes, out of the two inch diameter opening in my sleeping bag into the frosty air. Before me, rose the spectacular form of the rock Noir, its eastern faces splashed with colour as it welcomed the rising sun. To its left a great snow dome towered above ...

Annapurna ... one of the world's greatest mountains. I shouted across to Greame and Tashi. Have a look at this fellas.

In the morning cool, we traced the northern perimeter of the frozen lake, making a head for the Mesantola pass, its western end. Just as it seemed we were on the verge of reaching the far end, sheer bluffs dropped into the lake ... What to do now? Retracing our steps wasn't an attractive proposition so we put the rope on and, moving gingerly, we stepped out on the thin ice, which did little for our apprehension as we moved stealthily and silently across the several hundred metres of ice that separated us from the end of the lake. With relief, we stepped over the mass of chilly water separating the ice from the shore and climbed a moraine wall to pass.

It was like a prize, for there loomed the massive pyramid of Dhaulagiri, with its sweeping snow flanks cast against the blue sky. Seeing Dhaulagiri too meant that we had seen all nine of Nepal's 8,000 metre peaks, an exclusive group of the world's largest mountains numbering only 14 in total. Far, far below in the barren, brown valley of the Kaligandak lay a patch of green fields by the river and village. Down here somewhere was Jomsom and the support team and hopefully, lots of letters from home, only separated from us by 8,000 feet of icefall, shingle slides, bare, slippery ground and, below that, the gnarled and twisted forms of juniper trees being lashed by the dry desert winds."

Jomsom, Muktinath, the Mustang area and the Manang valley were not opened to foreigners till 1977. The area, in fact had been used by the Khampa rebels as a base in their attempts to free Tibet from Chinese occupation. A well known rebel, Wangdi, had established his base camp about six to seven kms from Jomsom as it was the closest point to Lhasa and had a climate and terrain similar to that of the Tibetan plateau. He garnered a lot of sympathy among the locals, till the Nepalese government, bowing to Chinese

demands, sent its army into the area, annihilated the base and killed him. Since then, the army had maintained a permanent presence in the area and had been conducting regular courses in mountaineering and rock climbing for its personnel.

I also came into contact with a couple of revolutionaries who wanted to introduce communism into the Kingdom but by and large, I found that the average Nepali was in favour of a gradual and democratic change rather than a drastic overhaul of the system and were making earnest efforts to bring themselves close to the King.

The views from Jomsom were fascinating as the golden rays of the rising and setting sun reflected off the Nilgiri and Dhaulagiri ranges. The entire panorama was filled with golden, glittering light with the barren, black and dry mountains of the surrounding Kaligandaki valley providing a dramatic contrast. I can never forget the beauty of this great Himalayan valley as observed one day just before midnight. Cool breeze was blowing gently around me, tranquility reigned unchallenged. I climbed up the flat roof of the house and gazed at the starlight sky, bathed in the clear enlivening rays of the moon. The valley below seemed grimly sombre in the night shade. I stood in silence for many hours, drinking in the beauty of nature to my heart's content. This, since my childhood, is what I had longed for.

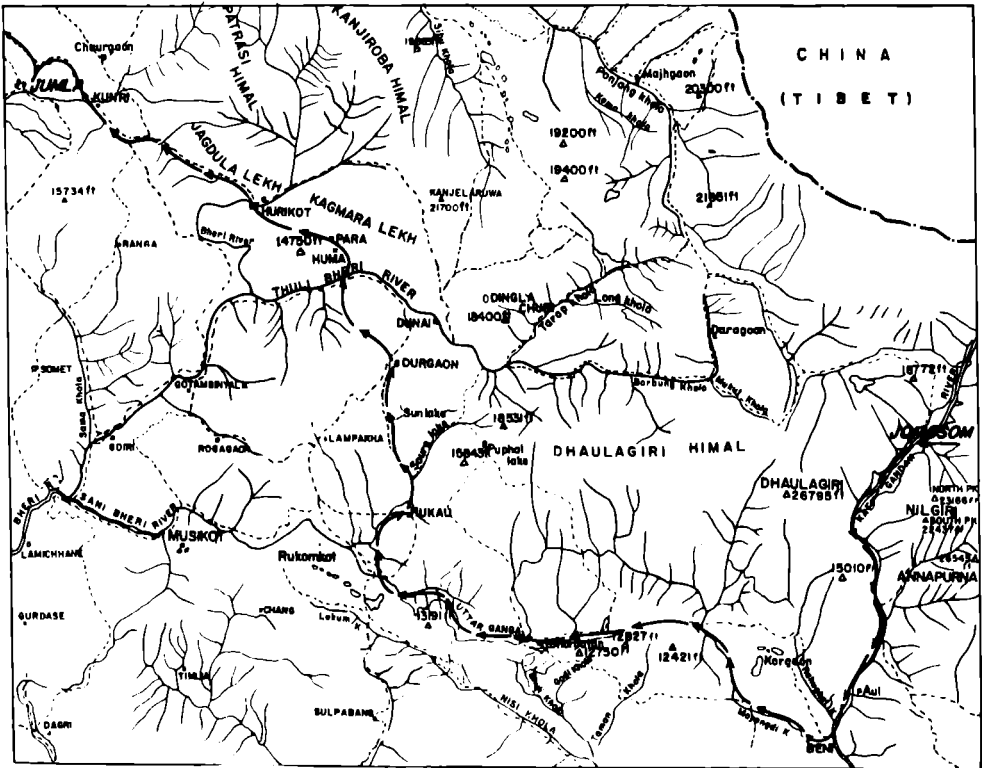
Chapter 9

Trekking in Central Nepal - Jomsom to Jumla

Nepal has developed an extensive network of small airfields that can be used by Short Takeoff-and-Landing (STOL) planes and this came as a godsent when we realised at our strategy session that the distance from Jomsom to the Indian border being too far, we would have to establish a supply point in route. Jumla in western Nepal seemed to be the only feasible spot and though it was otherwise inaccessible, it was connected by air to Kathmandu. Had it not been, it would have taken us nearly two months to ferry loads overland to Jumla, thus delaying the expedition considerably. Accordingly, we decided that I would fly to Kathmandu, pick up supplies and fly on to the rendezvous point to Jumla so as to reach by June 12. Doug and Anne Luise would pick up other supplies and equipment obtainable in Nepal and meet the Traverse group as it exited Nepal at Dharchula (Askot) in India.

We then discovered that the Traverse group would not be able to follow their planned route north of Dhaulagiri via Dolpa district, as this was a restricted area, but would have to come down through the Kaligandaki gorge and then trek south of Dhaulagiri towards Dhorpatan and then swing north towards Jumla.

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM JOMOSOM TO JUMLA



I flew out on May 31 and was in Kathmandu eight hours later after a brief ride on the roof of a bus from Pokhara; it would have taken me at least a week on foot. What a contrast it was in environment, topography and climate. Summer had arrived and with it, occasional showers, carpeting the valley in green. I waded through a large bundle of mail that had arrived from home. Wrote to my family and the IMF informing them of the progress made and busied myself purchasing supplies and other odds and ends. As usual, there was very little vegetarian stuff available, though, non-vegetarian dehydrated food was there for the asking, be it Indian, Chinese, Japanese or Western, most of it bought over by the shopkeepers from returning expeditions.

Arriving at the airport on June 5, after procuring air ticket with great difficulty, I found the airlines staff would not permit me to take aboard the two kitbags containing the supplies as they were 12 1/2 kg overweight. A little greasing of the palms soon solved this problem but then the flight was cancelled due to technical reasons. There was no flight the next day and on June 7, I repeated the bribery rigmarole all over again before getting airborne at 9.30 am. The snow-clad peaks of the north kept us company through out the 90 minute flight and I could clearly recognise Annapurna, Machhapuchare, Dhaulagiri and Manaslu. We were in an amphitheatre of peaks and something of their immensity became clear as we flew close to Dhaulagiri. The range now appeared as a coastline, the clouds, a grey sea washing its shores and penetrating its fords.

Jumla is the headquarters of Karnali district and I was rather surprised to observe the extremely dirty environs of the town. The development process had not yet extended its reach and the tourist business was yet to pick up. I did not feel like staying here for even a moment but had no choice as I had to await the arrival of the Traverse group.

The people of the region are Thakuries, a Chhetri sect that has the highest social, political and ritualistic standing. Being conservative Hindus, they consider westerners to be of low caste and thus, unwelcome. Unlike other Nepalese, the Jumlaies are lethargic and inactive, backward in their thinking and very poor. There is a vicious circle of poverty, inactivity and exploitation as the shopkeepers and other higher castes exploit the poor and innocent. Everything, including food, is scarce.

It is but natural that I should feel claustrophobic in such an environment and it was thus with immense relief, that I greeted the Traverse group on their arrival.

Said Peter of their journey :

“A strong southerly blasted out of the deep slot of the Kaligandaki gorge, blowing grit in our eyes off the dusty, rubble-strewn path. Down valley we marched, leaving Jomsom and its barren, brown topography, a Himalayan desert capped by great snow peaks, the green forests and hillsides of the gorge already shocked with mushrooming towers of white cumulus.

From Jomsom we planned to continue non-stop to the Indian border, a distance of 500 kms as the crow flies and since not one of us was ornithological by appearance or nature, our journey would be substantially longer than this, following the massive convolutions and riddles of Nepal's western geography.

We passed through small villages, idyllic in their settings, nestled beneath huge, desolate hill sides and surrounded by green, well-irrigated fields. Narrow, stone-paved streets led past the flat-roofed, whitewashed houses, and low, wood-framed doorways led into courtyards filled with tethered animals, fodder and straw, groups of village gentlemen talking or playing cards and the sound of restless horses' hooves.

Crossing the valley to the true left, we walked across the broad shingle flats of the Kaligandak river for many kilometres, watching the white puffy clouds above turn a less friendly grey. A stream of pilgrims walked up the valley; some limped, some staggered. They were dressed in the thin cotton saris and loincloths of the plains of India, the material inscribed with Hindu incantations; their dark faces anxious, almost fearful, as they looked ahead, probably in the mountains for the first time in their lives, at the greatest gorge in the world. Sandwiched between two 8,000 metre summits, the huge rock walls magnifying the roar of the river, channelling the rush of the wind and capturing the ever-darkening and changing forms of the black clouds that obliterated the friendly blue of the sky. They were on their way to the holy shrines of Muktinath, beyond Jomsom, and the long journey was obviously a test of will, determination and nerve for many of them ... but a religious fervour spurred them on ... the lame and the handicapped, the old and the young and the strange wandering men of Hinduism, the sadhus, with their brass buckets, cotton loincloths, huge knots of unkempt hair and their mysterious and distant smiles.

In places, the track was cut into the rock walls of the gorge, a slot cut horizontally, leaving the side open to the river far below and the ceiling solid, grey stone. Eventually, the valley broadened and we left the restrictive confines of the gorge and found ourselves surrounded by hill country and the heat and humidity of the low lands. At Tatopani, where our route would leave the tourist trail, we treated ourselves to a final indulgence - beer, carried on porters' backs to the village, popped corn, baked soyabeans, eggs, a curried stew and to top off our repast, lemon pie and yoghurt. Waddling awkwardly, we descended to the river side to bath in the water of the hot spring there, yelping and exclaiming with verbal exuberance (and hardly eloquence), we eased

our bodies into the extreme heat of the sacred waters.

With clouds hanging low over the head of the valley and the odd crackle of thunder, we reached the village of Lumsum at the end of our fourth day. We paced up and down the stony pathways that zigzagged the village from house to house, avoiding homeward-bound cattle, villagers with heavy loads of grain and wood, and the spinney leaves of stinging nettles leaning over across the tracks, until we found a house where we could stay. A group of villagers were ensconced on the verandah playing cards, betting and drinking, so we seated ourselves comfortably on grass mats beside them and with a sordid glass of rakshi and some seasoned wild mushrooms to nibble on, we began to feel very much at home. As we ate our dinner and fended off chickens and pet pigeons that seemed determined to get a look into our meal, we were watched, every move, by two dogs. Their vigil was to bear fruit for them as we were later able to reciprocate the questionable pleasure of watching them scoffing down the scraps off our plates and knowing that they would be the same plates we'd use again in the morning after only a precursory rinse in cold river water, so fresh and so strangely incongruous with the hot and dry wind that blew up the broad, green valley; tall, scented firs, forests of junipers with the tinkling bells of cattle and horses feeding on the green swards amongst the trees.

The further we went, the broader the valey became and the more gentle the hills on each side and the vaster the scale. In my mind, it conjured thoughts of the American West and I imagined the "High chaparall" and look out across the near endless green flats into the haze that masked all fine definition, towards a hill far to the west. I almost expected Adam, Hoss and Little Joe, along with their Big Daddy, to come galloping across the plain, demanding an explanation for our trespassing.

As we reached Dhorpatan, an immense refugee village and our destination, I talked with Tashi about his family.

'One thing about this type of trip is you really appreciate your family and friends when you get home'.

'No', replied Tashi emphatically, 'they appreciate you'.

We stopped at the house of a tall, fine-looking Tibetan man and his family for the night, and kicked off our shoes and relaxed and listened to the wind blowing across the fir and shingles on the roof ... it had been a long day.

Greame continued :

Beyond Dhorpatan, we remained fascinated by this strange valley where broad and fertile flats were contained between strangely rounded hills and where the influence of the modern world could not be seen. We were clearly getting into that dreaded area which we had been warned about so much - western Nepal.

As we rollicked along the easy path, chatting vigorously about our writing commitments, I carelessly caught a toe under a rock and went sprawling. In a wild attempt to get my landing gear down and to avoid skidding on my nose, I sprained my hand painfully. It brought home to us once again, just how far we were from any medical assistance.

It was a long day during which we covered 40 kms. Footsore and weary, we reached Takum in the evening, a strangely Tibetan-looking village of flat-roofed houses. We slumped down outside the shop, known as the 'pasel'. This was a typical arrival in a village so is worth recounting. Tashi's stamina would put any 25-year old to shame - at nearly 43 he is truly amazing. He had no sooner dumped his pack than he was off looking for a kind soul who would share his roof and fire with us. Peter and I remained slumped against a stone wall, waiting for the shopkeeper to catch scent of our money and open his pasel. We didn't have long to wait, he undid the lock and began removing the boards while we watched intently, with visions of shelves full of chocolate bars, biscuits and beer. The last board was removed and we

stood peering into the gloom—the shelves were absolutely empty. Gloom and despair. Then we drew on our reserves of bad Nepali. Can you get rice, vegetables, tea, rakshi, etc. - the usual list. And can we stay here. Yes, of course, he had everything. Soon Tashi arrived back, pleased to find that we had some where to sleep and the hope of food but as often happens, time drew on and none of our needs arrived. Finally, Tashi went down to the river for water and began an epic circuit of the village for rice, vegetables and rakshi while Peter stayed to mend the equipment. He followed my progress around the village by the hysterical barking of the dogs.

As I walked up the narrow street between walls of stone and mud, I had a glimpse of life in the time before Christ—simple, superstitious people living a totally basic subsistence life. I stepped over a dying dog, hungry and its head caught in its own lead, and as I stared down hopelessly, it gave its last gasp. More in need of rakshi than ever, I went on with my search. Alas, I managed to buy some rice and dried vegetables, but no rakshi. Despondent and footsore, I returned to the pasel to a pleasant surprise. A local man had brought for us the entire village supply of rakshi—about two pints. We added to it lime-flavoured Sustalyste, to disguise the jet fuel flavour and, moments after drinking, began to relax. After a meal of rice, vegetables and our own dehydrated meat, we slept on the flat roof, under the stars. All around us the village dogs were raising bedlam at the moon.

At Takum we asked the fateful question : What is the best way to Jumla? A man carrying a huge bale of hay told us to head for Maikot. 'If you go quickly you will be in Jumla in three days'. (He had obviously never been there). So, without a hint of emotion for what lay ahead, we turned northward. Ahead rose Khanjiroba — a great flat-topped pyramid, rising icy-white from the blue hills. Somewhere in those hills nestled Jumla where we would receive mail and goodies from Kathmandu.

We climbed over a low pass and began sidling up the Buri khola river. It was a very beautiful valley, a little on the hot side and as I walked, I thought of the words to as many songs as I could. As I sweated a long way behind Tashi, I suddenly realised that when the trip was over I was going to miss him. When I told him so he was a little embarrassed and asked why, so I sung him a song from 'My Fair Lady', at which he gave his characteristic roar of laughter. We reached Maikot in the evening, soaked to the skin by a thunder storm complete with simultaneous thunder and lightening; the noise was deafening.

At Maikot, we stayed in the headman's house where, after a meal of dhal-bhat, a large group gathered around the fire. One man asked why the sun rose and set if the earth was flat, so Tashi explained that the earth was round and that it revolved around the sun. We really were in a pre-medieval society.

Next morning we continued north, following the directions of the Maikot people. After a couple of hours, we descended to the river, horrified to find no bridge across this boiling torrent. I was determined to cross and began scrambling up-stream frantically. The solution appeared after 100 metres : a single, greasy pole, wedged in position by a flood, rose at a 25 degree angle to the top of a boulder on the opposite bank. The roar of the river filled one with excitement as I felt an adventure coming on. Tashi and Peter had waited downstream and I signalled wildly to them to come up. When Tashi arrived, his face was a picture of wide-eyed astonishment.

Having first surveyed the river below and concluded that there was little chance of survival if some one fell in, I began uncertainly.

I wished for the rope left behind at Jomsom to save weight. I knelt on the log, desperately trying to close out the

rushing water below, pretending I was on one of the safe confidence-course obstacles at the Outdoor Pursuits Centre of New Zealand. The pole quaked as the water surged against one end of it but as I reached the middle my legs began to tremble uncontrollably and it was only with a great effort that I brought them under control. I wobbled up the last ten feet, pulling vigorously at my ice axe as if I was climbing a wall of ice and with a feeling of great achievement, sprung down on to a solid boulder on the western bank.

Now it was Tashi's turn. With great courage he mounted the pole. He was much craftier than me and straddled the pole as if lying on a horse's back. In this way, he slowly and painfully crossed. Peter did the same and we were soon all on the desired bank and steaming up the hill to the village of Rumgaon.

At Rumgaon we hired a man with a huge white grin to guide us to the next section, where the way was said to be vague. Manjit Singh was a strong intelligent man of about 25. He was a Karmi (lowest caste, sometimes called untouchable). We became quite close to him and were appalled to find that the caste system is alive and well in most of the Nepalese villages. For two days above Rumgaon we followed Manjit's bare feet up vague and precarious jungle trails, over a snow-clad pass of nearly 17,000 feet and down to Tardigaon - a slum set in paradise.

It was in Tarigaon that the depth of the caste problem struck home. Manjit had become accustomed to eating with us but here he suddenly began to avoid any intimate contact with us for fear of being beaten by the locals. We were glad to leave Tarigaon and descend to Juphal, where we sadly said farewell to Manjit.

It was late afternoon when a policeman arrived at the stone-and-mud shambles known as a hotel and asked to see our trekking permits. Peter and I had already had a couple of rakshis and were in a carefree mood but we soon sobered up

when the policeman told us we were in the highly restricted area of Dolpo and would have to accompany him to district headquarters at Dunai, ten kms up-river. Peter had been stung by bees and could walk only with difficulty. So Tashi and I made the pilgrimage to Dunai.

There we faced a distinguished-looking Chief District Officer with an extraordinary amount of black hair growing out of his ears. For about two hours we were grilled, first together, then separately; what are you doing here? how did you get here? what languages do you speak? what do you know about Dolpa? and so on.

After about one hour, the Chief District Officer asked, 'What am I to do with you? You are criminals and should be in jail'. 'But sir, we had no intentions of violating any regulations and we apologise for any inconveniences.' His stern reply was, 'For you the minimum penalty is two months in prison and for your guide four months', he said, gesturing first at me and then at Tashi. Tashi immediately fell to his knees and touched the C.D.O.'s feet in a pathetic gesture of pity. This humility hurt me and I said, 'This man is a really good man'. The C.D.O.'s stern reply was, 'To you, he may be a good man, but to us, he is the culprit'.

It certainly was a heavy day. Between questioning, we could see the armed guard or the sinister Dunai Jail. The verdict came after a total wait of about nine hours. The sentence, a fine and escort from the area. Two days later, as we crossed a high pass and entered the district of Jumla, Peter turned and gave a rude gesture to the people of Dolpo.

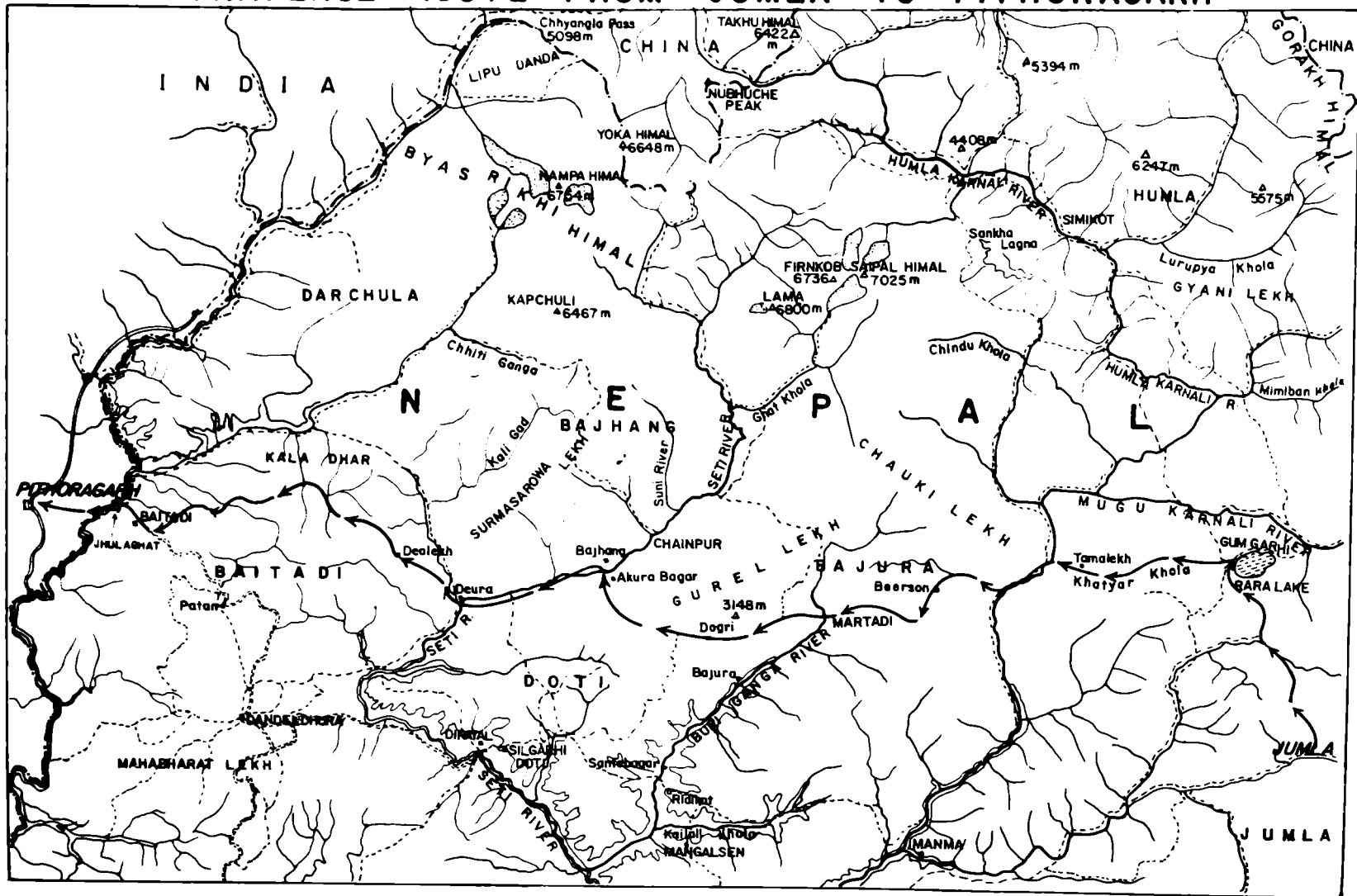
Chapter 10

Through Interior Western Nepal

Now monsoon was approaching very fast and it was nearly the middle of June. So it was important for our team to complete the traverse of Western Nepal as fast as possible so that before the first onslaught of monsoon we would be well clear of the remote area of the Western Nepal, which has very poor communication system. There were very fast flowing rivers like Karanali, the Mahakali and many such. Those get flooded, having very few rope bridges to cross them and there were chances of our getting held up and cut off in Western Nepal which might further hamper the progress of our Traverse, causing further delay in Karakoram in severe winter.

From Kathmandu I brought the support kit of some essential dehydrated food packets, mail, medicines, etc., to Jumla by air for the team members and we were now fully prepared to cope up with the food scarcity in the area we were going to traverse. Now we were four members traversing, Greame, Peter, Tashi and I, who headed westwards without losing any time to Rara National park, where we were eagerly looking forward to meet our friend Pasang Norbu, the ranger of Rara National Park, a naturalist and environmentalist trained in New Zealand by the help of Himalayan Trust.

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM JUMLA TO PITHORAGARH



On our way up we passed through two high passes of Daphe and Bhul-Bhulel (height 12,000 feet). Alpine meadows blooming with different types of flowers. The late spring was in full bloom, carpeting the hills and dales all around with flowers. This was a fascinating area with beautiful countryside. The green forests covered with coniferous deodar, fir, spruce and pine trees and on higher reaches were birch trees. The migratory Bhutias whose beat spreads from Mugo and Jumla, were camping in single fly tents with their large herds of goats, sheep, cows and horses on their way up from Surkhet and Terai plains.

The snow white Kanji Roba Himal far away in the north east, was shining and guiding our trek ahead of Daphe pass, we passed through a wide glaciated alpine valley full of beautiful flowers. Beyond Chautha we climbed up to Bhul bhulel from where the boundary of Rara National Park starts. The walk to the pass was gradual across fascinating alpine meadows full of flowers and beautiful pasture land.

The track suddenly drops on a steep slope for about 2,000 feet and a newly constructed track bifurcated from main track towards Rara Lake, through the thick pine and fir jungles with beautiful birds and rare wildlife.

In these heavenly surroundings we passed through a primitive dilapidated village of Pinna and escaped its bad odour when we entered the scented pine and deodar forests. With a gradual climb reached on the table-top alpine meadow, stretching far in front of our eyes, blooming with flowers and just below a vast blue lake at the height of 3,000 metres, was spread out before us like a giant crater with high Himalayan back-drop. This was the dream land of Rara, heaven on earth.

Oh! What a wonderful lake it was! I have no words to describe it. It was the very heart of nature, full and throbbing.

I sat down under a tall deodar tree in the wood-land, the beautiful Rara lake down below; I drank the beauty of nature

to my heart's content and spent an hour in this serene atmosphere.

Rara National Park, found in 1975 by H.M. Nepal Government for conservation and environmental protection of beautiful forest which could be developed as a good tourist resort in the backward and under-developed part of western Nepal. Rara is one of the 4 National Parks of Nepal, spread out over 44 sq. kms. The bow shaped lake is formed over a plateau at 10,000 feet height surrounded by gently rolling mountains in all sides. Geologically the Karnali river used to flow through this area and due to some geological disturbance the river passage got blocked and the lake must have been formed. This sweet water lake is said to be 145 metres deep at the centre and has a few water streams flowing into it and having only a very small out-let of water in the west. The National Park is being administered by a park warden, assisted by 2 foresters and forest guards with a platoon of Royal Nepalese army having 4 check-posts around the park premises.

Late King Mahendra, was very fond of this place and would camp for many days in the serene and awe-inspiring surroundings of the beautiful lake. He composed many beautiful poems while camping near this lake. All sides, surrounded by gentle slopes of beautiful pine and fir forest, full of alpine flowers of different kinds, like potentillas, irises, geraniums, lily of the valley, myriads of daisies, sweet peas, yellow dwarf chrysanthemums, phlox, nasturtiums, etc. all around. The lake was full of trout fish, from 14" to 18" long. The park authorities were zealously protecting the flora and fauna and strict control was being exercised to stop the grazing cattle menace. The number of wild animals like deer, wild dogs, foxes, jackals, wild boars, bears, various types of jungle fowls, birds and vultures were now increasing. On the eastern side, a short take-off and landing air strip is being planned where small aircrafts can land. At present there was

no facility of food or tea-shop. But one tourist hut with some amenities has been constructed for lodging the tourists. This park has vast tourist potentialities. Within a few years, it was likely to attract a large number of tourists and trekkers in Western Nepal, when there will be a direct flight for tourists from Kathmandu to this park, as in Solokhumbu region. We enjoyed the sumptuous hospitality of Mr. Passang Norbu, warden of the Park. He told us that the Rara lake was full of trout fish which were too slow and numbed by cold water and fishing was done by spears which sure was a novel method. So far no boat was available here.

In this calm, serene and heavenly atmosphere of Rara park, we were lured to rest for a day - to drink the beauty of this heavenly abode. We had hot bath, the water being heated by solar panels, and wondered to see the beauty of our surroundings. I wandered through the nearby forests, full of thick blue pine, deodar, juniper and spruce trees; the scented breeze was soothing with its serenity, the abundant trout fish playing hide and seek in the crystal clear blue water and clearly visible from the banks of the lake. The alpine flowers had carpeted the ground with their multi coloured blooms up to the banks of the lake, I lay down among the flowers of this nature's heavenly garden, in loneliness, to drink the nectar of the serene atmosphere and enjoy the solitude. The park precincts seemed to be not of this earth, but of heaven, the blessed land of good souls. The snow clad mountains, gentle green slopes and spurs around, were reflected in the still, crystal-clear water of the lake. Sunrise and sunset, the blue canopy of the sky during the day and the silvery moon and stars at night, all were sights of ineffable beauty. At such a beautiful solitary place, the mind loses itself and there is harmony full and complete. It seemed as though this landscape, was unreal; as though it no longer belonged to this earth, and was nearer to heaven and therefore, reason of dreams and fantasies, rather than to this earth of men and sinners of worldliness and vanity. I kept on lying among

these flower-beds rolling one in to other, the bounty of mother nature, a heavenly scene.

The locals of Rara and Jumla area were economically backward, superstitious and conservative Hindus by nature. In contrast to this heavenly beauty the villages were dirty, filthy, invariably human excreta spread over the tracks approaching the villages. The Hindus of different castes, Brahmin, Thakurs, Kshatriyas, were very caste conscious. The food was scarce; the locals were still using primitive methods of agriculture, harvesting and cultivation. Lately apple plantation has been introduced, as also cultivation of some vegetables, onions and garlics. It was 17th June, when we headed towards the valley westwards, gradually descended towards Karnali river. Initially, we passed through very dense forests of blue pine, deodar and junipers and then came down to the inhabited valley. In the irrigated, level fields, paddy was being planted. The villagers have drawn canals from streams, and made good use of stream water everywhere. The rice plantation was a social event with the villagers putting in collective efforts, jubilation, beating of drums and much gusto was displayed.

Dead tired due to the long march and the hot climate in the down valley of the banana belt, we reached Sukadik. Sukadik was a large village, 600 feet above the Karnali river on a flat plateau where people were comparatively better off growing fruits like peaches, apricots and bananas also cultivating onions, etc. They seemed intent on improving their economy. The houses had slate roofs indicating better living standards. There we stayed in a police station which was comparatively a better place.

As the track winds down through the well cultivated fields, we saw the Karnali river curling like a great silvery snake in the valley below. The banana trees grow besides the little houses of the villages with thatched roofs and plenty of honey bee-hives. We paused for some minutes on the bridge

and watched the swift flowing stream with its deep green, swift under currents. The river has now become much wider than where we left it last below Rara lake, and the rapid torrents have lost some of their velocity though here it was much deeper and there was fast flowing, gushing current. Just below Sukadik, a rope bridge was being constructed since the last five years over the swiftly flowing Karnali river, costing about ten lakh rupees. The iron rope cables were dropped by helicopter in the absence of motor roads, as such heavy cables could not be transported manually by porters from Mahindra Nagar or Nepal Gunj even after 15-20 days' march. How difficult it is to carry out such heavy construction in these interior Himalayan regions, far away from the plains. One cannot comprehend such a possibility in more developed countries.

We crossed the mighty Karnali, by way of the two iron cables, connected one to the other, at a distance of about 200 yards apart, taking full adventurous chance, testing our nerves over a confidence course where a slight slip or distraction could have seen us hurtling down to sure death in the strong current of the Karnali. The other alternative was to cross over an improvised trolley, equally unsafe, dangling on a thin wire and a rickety wooden frame.

Thereafter we followed the right bank of the Karnali river, for about 8 kms and then turned right towards the Kolti Gar, a tributary in Seti Anchal. Trekking through the wide valley surrounded by dry mountains we saw water channels constructed by villagers collectively for irrigating paddy fields. Inhabited by the orthodox Chhetries and Brahamins, for whom alcohol is taboo, unlike in other parts of Nepal. We gradually climbed through oak, birch and rhododendron forests, and after crossing a pass, 7000 feet high, we entered the valley of Martadi and Mawakot, on the other side, a comparatively poor and backward area of western Nepal.

Greame expected good food at Martadi, being a district headquarter where cookies and tea would be available but soon, on reaching there, we were disappointed. This new district of Bajura was created in 1976, for rapid development, with headquarters at Martadi. There were only a few tea shops, in temporary thatched hutments. There was hardly any thing to eat except some meat and puries. This part of western Nepal is economically backward, poor, being remote, where supplies reach only through Julaghat in India. The people are so caste conscious that they do not even accept money from the hands of untouchables, so much so that the 'untouchables' throw the currency notes on the ground to be picked up by the higher castes or vice versa. Even the shadow the low caste must not fall on the high caste and physical contact is prohibited.

After Nawakot, we entered the valley of Veena Bajang. The track passed over the high valley and there were three small passes, of 6,000-7,000 feet height. The people were poor, having very few slate roofed houses. They mainly depended on their meagre agricultural income for their sustenance. I developed some footsores and rashes due to scorching which became very painful, but I had to bear with it and continue marching fast to maintain the schedule to cross over the western Nepal before we got trapped by the monsoon and thus we were racing against time.

We now followed the bank of the Seti river. Ploughing and planting of paddy was in full swing as we moved fast towards west. We crossed over the Kalnga, another deep and fast flowing river. The trek to Deolekh was a gradual climb. The villagers of the valley were comparatively prosperous having slate roofed houses. Deolekh was about 8,000 feet high pass with thick jungle of oak, rhodendron and pine trees all along a mountain ridge. Kanzi Roba and Ape peaks were now glittering close in the north towards the Indian border.

Our excitement soared high when the map sheet of Nepal was about to end and we started using the map sheet of continuing across the Indian border of Almora district. Trekking with a speed of 25 to 30 kms a day, one by one the map squares were being covered and we were fast approaching near the Indian border - the completion of the first ever traverse of Nepal.

We moved fast to Riga and then climbed up a long wide ridge stretching north to south overlooking the Indian side of Pithoragarh across the Mahakali river. We were excited to see the white streak line of a road under construction from Jhulaghat to Baithadi, and Dundel Dhura seemed exceedingly attractive. Our excitement and feelings on reaching the more developed area and the end of our remoteness in western Nepal can be imagined. The trails of porters loaded with provisions and stores had started appearing from across Jhulaghat, which was the border town and road head from the Indian side. We could see the impact of development and road construction on our way, an encroachment on the natural sanctuary. So far people of Western Nepal had to undertake a circuitous long route to reach Kathmandu. After travelling across the Indian side by bus till Tanakpur and then by rail upto Gorakhpur via Pilibhit and again by bus from there to Kathmandu.

We were jubilant to see some tea shops and provision stores as we approached the Baitadi town. Influence of development from Indian side, was visible in this border area. Apple, plums, and peaches were in plenty. Better tea shops and hotels where eatables were available were a welcome sight. We grabbed the eatables and fruits from the shops like hungry wolves as we could not resist our temptations after weeks of hunger and under feeding.

Peter and Greame were working out their plans as to how to cross the Nepal Border in the absence of proper foreign exit

point in case they were caught by Nepalese police, otherwise they would have to trek down all the way to Mahendra Nagar via Dunde Dhura for about 15 days and then cross over to the Indian side. I was hopeful that, we would be able to overcome this and cross the border to India. But, Greame and Peter insisted that Tashi and I should take their gears across and in case they were not allowed to cross the border via Jhulaghat, then they would manage to swim across the mighty Mahakali river, whereas I was very apprehensive about this plan. We became so self conscious, on approaching the district town of Baitadi that we started to walk faster, did not linger, avoided attracting the attention of the local authorities as if we actually were smuggling out some important commodity from one country to another. Nobody was aware that we were on a big venture - the Himalayan Traverse and that these minor technicalities could mar our programme and schedule. When we were just below Baitadi, hardly 2 kms. away from Jhulaghat, we could see the mighty Mahakali river frighteningly deep and swift flowing.

The nearer we approached our destination - the Indian border, at Jhulaghat, the more cautious were Greame and Peter. About half a km above Jhulaghat, there was a Nepalese Customs checkpost. We sneaked cautiously past it and continued without even looking at the checkpost police for fear that they might stop-us. Greame and Peter whisked Tashi and me behind the lantanna bushes and then dumped all their gear into our rucksacks. Greame started pretending as if he was a very sick person so that he could be taken across the border over the Mahakali bridge as an urgent case for treatment. I never agreed to their plan of swimming across the Mahakali river which could have been a fatal proposition. Anyhow stealthily we approached the Nepalese side of Jhulaghat town. Greame stopped in a tea shop like a very sick person pretending severe stomach-ache and Peter and Tashi both holding him to see and assess the situation for crossing

the bridge, I went down to the border bridge, guarded by the Nepalese police and an Indian guard on the other side. The Nepalese policeman was unconcerned about the fact that Jhulaghat is not a valid foreigners' crossing check-point and they presumed that it was not an unusual thing for the New Zealanders to cross at this point without having taken the proper exit records. Our plan worked perfectly well and we took the Kiwis across the bridge, where to my dismay the Indian policeman stopped us. He was aware of the rule that foreigners could not be allowed to cross over at that place as it was not the valid entry point. But now I was confident I could deal with him as I was on my own soil, and had a letter from the Indian Embassy at Kathmandu giving permission for entry into India from Jhulaghat.

What a relief!

Hardly a 100 yards across the Mahakali river, on the Indian side, the small town of Jhulaghat was so different, we felt as if we have come to a different world. Here was a well electrified township booming with big shops, power-operated machines and metalled roads and buses. After trekking for more than 3 months in Nepal, through the high Himalayan ranges and deep valleys, we enjoyed the modern amenities and luxuries. We realised for the first time, the luxury of electricity, buses, trains and aeroplanes, the gifts of the modern scientific and technological age, only after such a trek.

Ours was the first ever traverse of Nepal and Sikkim ever completed by any organised team from east to west within 110 days. We had trekked roughly 2,800 kms and had crossed over 7 high passes of more than 18,000 feet and 50 passes between 12,000 feet to 18,000 feet so far, since we started to trek from Yoksum in Sikkim.

The entire Nepal was like a natural sanctuary in its beauty, greenery of forests, not yet disturbed much by so called modern man, with roads and other industrial

exploitations of natural resources. Whatever few roads existed in Nepal, these were mostly located in Terai area and around Kathmandu valley but the hills were still undisturbed. If at all, nature has been disturbed only for survival purposes by the native people. Though large number of forests have been destroyed or the process of destruction was still continuing for cultivation or shifting cultivation, thus denuding the area and disturbing the ecological balance. But still, Nepal as a whole is endowed with unparalleled natural beauty and can boast of eight highest peaks of the world on its soil. Naturally every Nepali is proud of this fact. The long line of white snow clad peaks from east to west are very close to the plains of Nepal and constantly visible. The area is easily accessible and the mountains are more gentle and rolling nearer to the plains. Nepal Himalayas are relatively easy and trekking is not difficult. This seems to me the main reason why western tourists flock into Nepal, where various types of trekkers and nature lovers find satisfaction according to their choice. For moderate trekkers, there were interesting treks, whereas for tough mountaineers there were challenging peaks to climb. The people are docile, hospitable, by and large honest, hard working, God fearing and have not been exposed to so called modern world where people consider cheating and robbing other people, intelligence. Nepalese, with their simple ways may appear to the outsider as poor, ignorant and uneducated, but they have a great cultural heritage and rich customs and traditions with strong ties of social life. Except at a few places, where people have been lured by the glamour of the riches of the modern trekkers, and begun to dominate the poor inhabitants, that some stray cases of crime have taken place. Otherwise, throughout Nepal people are still very simple, honest, with warm hearted affection towards the outsiders.

It was my feeling that Nepal has now been exposed to the modern world through its foreign tourists influx. The simple Nepalese were coming into contact with foreigners daily.

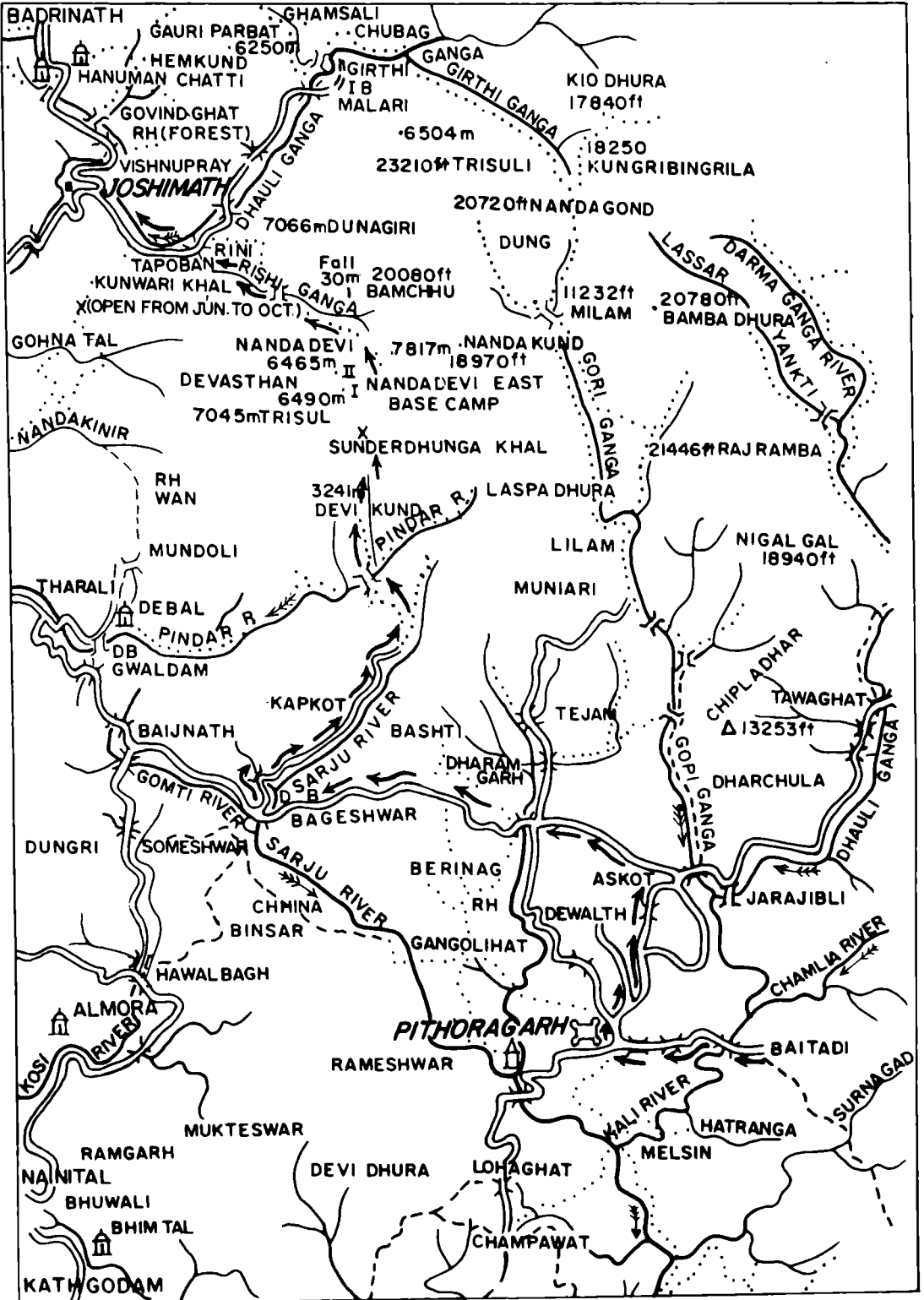
This is bringing change in their outlook, influencing their thinking, and is bound to create a change in the whole social structure and political setup of Nepal. People were becoming aware of their rights, refusing to work as beasts of burden, and will not tolerate any more exploitation of their hard labour by the so called modern man. Beauty and simplicity will no longer be there for the outsiders.

Chapter 11

Across Kumaon Himalayas

Well in time, before the arrival of monsoon, we crossed Mahakali and entered into India on 25th June. From Jhulaghat the metalled road climbs up bends for the tableland of Pithoragarh. This region of the Indian Himalayas is comparatively well developed, where well laid out concrete buildings glittering with electricity, water supply and telephone facilities are available. Pithoragarh town, the district headquarters, was coming up well. It was carved out of Almora district in 1960s as a result of Sino-Indian border dispute. Schools, hospitals, offices, cinema, etc., besides a well laid out army cantonment are what you notice here. This border town is connected to Delhi by an over night direct bus service. As in Nepal, the hill districts of Kumaon and Garhwal, were also backward, without roads, lacking communication system till 1962. But the Chinese conflict awakened the Indian govt. and attention was paid towards development of the remote hill areas. Communication network and roads were constructed faster. As a result, within 20 years there is a well spread out network of roads, all over the Indian Himalayas and approach to the mountains is easier. Pithoragarh is situated at the height of 5,000 feet on a plateau, surrounded by low mountains. The view of Panchachuli and Nanda Devi mountains is superb. On our arrival, our team

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM PITHORAGARH TO JOSHIMATH



was accorded a warm reception by the district authorities of Pithoragarh. Specially my old friend Chandra Singh, ADM was very helpful and arranged functions to felicitate and accord a befitting reception to our team. Mr. Joshi, District Magistrate, equally warm hearted, gave an ovation to the team in the Officers' Club. Cultural programmes, games and matches, including a function at Nehru Yuvak Kendra were organised where we shared experiences of our adventures with the youth.

Again there were technical difficulties for obtaining permission for our expedition. The District Magistrate sought clarifications from Govt. of U.P. whether our Joint Indo-New Zealand Himalayan Traverse expedition was permitted to trek inside the restricted area of inner line to cross over to the Nanda Devi sanctuary; were we permitted to carry the cameras etc. in the sensitive area. Our permission letter stated that, "On emerging on Indian side at Askot, our expedition will go via Nanda Devi Sanctuary and Joshimath" but it did not mention whether the foreigners (Kiwis) could cross over the inner line area. So radio messages were being exchanged between the Chief Secretary of UP and Home Ministry, Govt. of India regarding clearance of our Traverse Expedition. Such were the bureaucratic hazards that were more difficult to overcome than the actual difficulties of our trek. The third Indian member S.K. Roy was yet to join-us.

I visited Mirthi about 50 kms and met my old friends of ITB Police who welcomed me warmly. Mirthi is located 3 kms short of Didihat town on a beautiful ridge, from where I could see Panchachuli, Nanda Devi, Ape and a few unnamed peaks of great scenic beauty. The surroundings were beautiful and I enjoyed the beauty of rolling mountains of Kumaon hills. Everything was blue—the sky was blue, the hills were blue, with blue green pine and oak forest.

Every now and then clouds like mighty veils, were drawn

across the summits of Panchachuli, Nanda Devi and Ape and as these cloud patches passed the light on the mountains was for ever changing. The light changed time and again; this time a golden glow was spreading slowly down from the highest peaks to illuminate some of the hidden snow valleys on the lower slopes. In the morning the summits stand out, knife-edge against the clear blue of the morning sky, a challenge to man.

Our stay at Pithoragarh was a well deserved rest for attending to our correspondence, writing of articles and recoument of lost health. In fact, it was a period of our physical recovery where our under-fed team from western Nepal traverse could have mangoes, curd, bananas, eggs, Thumps up, Limca and lastly but not the least the 'Chilled Beer'. Every one was enjoying the stay in this small beautiful hill town where most things were available. The only nuisance we faced were the bed bugs and mosquitoes at the so called 'Raja Hotel'. Those few days of enjoyment, health building and recoument passed very fast. Mr. Micheal, a New Zealand friend also came from Kathmandu with our support group Doug and Anne and stayed at Pithoragarh. The monsoon had already arrived in the U.P. hills, a week had gone past but the clearance for our move in the inner-line area of Kumaon had not yet come and we were getting restive with the passing of each day.

Meanwhile, S.K. Roy joined us on 3rd July at Pithoragarh. He had done lot of trekking in Garhwal and Kumaon hills and was an instructor of mountaineering at Gwaldom and had done some climbing in Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh area. S.K. had a good knowledge of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary area and I was happy to have him as the third Indian member in the team. Since we did not receive the permission to cross Nanda Devi Sanctuary via Milam glacier after crossing over the Long Staff Col. being in the inner-line, and thus a restricted area, we started thinking of an alternative route to cross over

to Nanda Devi Sanctuary, if possible avoiding the inner-line.

The possible route could be via Sunder Dunga Khal. I was convinced that we should continue our traverse via this route without losing any more time. But our New Zealand members, especially Peter, were keen to go to Delhi to sort out this problem and also know about the future instructions by I.M.F. to other District Magistrates for onward journey. Greame and Douglas were also of the view that I should go to Delhi though I was reluctant to do so as it would mean losing more time and I did not think much useful purpose would be served by going to Delhi, but on consistent persuasion by Greame I accompanied Peter.

We had plenty of time to explore Kumaon hills which are rich in cultural heritage. Kumaonese belong to a predominantly patriarchal society which recognises superiority of man over women. Social structure is based on joint family system, the eldest being the head of the family. Women are respected in society but she confines herself to house-hold affairs. No religious ceremony is considered complete without the wife joining the husband. Women also work in the fields and forests with men. In Kumaon bigamy or polygamy has religious sanctions but polyandry is forbidden. Widow marriage and re-marriage by divorced women is permitted excepting in certain sections of high caste Brahmins and Rajputs. Child marriage is still practised in all the classes of society inspite of legal restriction. It had of late disappeared from educated and cultured society.

The older men in villages wear cotton churidars, long coat with plenty of woollens to keep themselves warm. Women wear Ghaghra (skirt) with Angra (full sleeves blouse) and lots of silver and gold jewellery. The elderly Bhotia ladies wear a skirt of thick woollen cloth stitched together with full sleeves blouse with a thick apron tied around the waist.

Kumaon comprises the three hill districts of Nainital,

Almorah and Pithoragarh, bordered by Kali Nadi in the east, towards Nepal and district of Pauri Garhwal and Chamoli in the west. Tibet in the north and Terai in the south. Having Tibetan watershed east of the Unta Dhura pass, the boundary follows the ridge. The inhabitants of this area, besides having martial traditions, have inherited belief in number of gods and goddesses. Bhima, Bhairav and Nanda are worshipped with great reverence. These gods are the protectors of land, people and harvest. Crime is rare, disputes are normally settled by invoking the village gods through 'jagar', which keep the defaulter shuddering under the devastating impact of public insinuation and exposure.

The Kumaonese are fond of music, folk dance and songs supplemented by local musical instruments like *murli*, *bina* and *hurka* played by *hurkiya* and the dancer accompanying him known as *hurkiyari* are mostly his wife or daughters. They go from place to place narrating folklores, singing praise of gods and goddesses. At the time of fairs and festivals, at harvest time, Kumaonese may be seen dancing Jharvra, Chandhur Chhapalior and many other forms of folk dances. The popular folk songs are Malushahi, Bair and Hurkiya Bol.

Malushahi is intricately woven in the cultural folklore of Kumaon. Malu, a boy living in Dwarahat, once saw Rajula—a Bhotia girl in his dream. He was so charmed by her beauty that left his home in search of her and after walking some two hundred miles on foot meets the girl who has had a similar dream. Malu approaches the girl's father Sunpati Shauka and asks for his daughter's hand to which the later does not agree. Malu decides to fight the issue and succeeds. He returns happily. This story forms an integral part of Kumaon folklore.

Obviously the Kumaonie's love for music attracted Udai Shankar and Anna Parilove to set up their dance school at Almorah.

Kumaon has inherited rich treasures of art from Katyuri

and Chand kings who built magnificent temple at Baijnath, Dwarahat, Jageshwar, Bagesgwar, Katarmal and Champavat.

Kumaonese are fond of fairs and festivals, and they provide ample opportunity for social get togethers, visiting places, reviving old friendships, trading in local products and for display of their wear and jewellery. The prominent fairs of Kumaon are Jauljibi (Thai) Bageshwar and Devidhura. The most famous festivals are Nanda Devi, Olkiya Sankaranti and Dewali. Jauljibi (Thai) and Bageshwar were trade centres for the people of Tibet/Nepal and Indian traders, who traded here in borax, shilajeet, wool ghee, carpets, honey, herbs, woollen clothes and other woollen items, such as thulma, blankets, pankhi, pashmina, chhutka and dans. The most colourful festivals of Kumaon is Nanda Ashtami when the idols of Nanda Devi are taken out in procession round the city and ultimately immersed in some water tank.

The economy is based on the principle of scanty food supply. Every home sends out at least one male member down to the Desh (plains) for service while women folk and remaining male members take care of agriculture and cattle. However, the backbone of economy is its forests and Kumaon had the distinction of producing good timber. People know the importance of forest wealth and there is growing consciousness towards afforestation so that the future generation is not deprived of the rich heritage. In order to give Kumaon economy an agro-industrial vent, vast resources of hydro-power need to be tapped. This has started taking place with the opening of new roads; horticulture and other allied industries are progressing. Another aspect of Kumaon's economy is the increasing exodus of people in search of better land, milder climate, easier conditions of living and new prospects of advancement in fertile Terai, resulting in fast development of new agro industrial areas in Terai which once used to be thickly wooded region infested with wild animals.

The Northern Highland are inhabited by the Bhotias, a semi-mongolian people belonging to the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bhotias of Uttarakhand claim descent from those Rajput who come from Kumaon and Garhwal and settled in the upper valleys. The Shankiyas living on the southern fringe of the eastern Bhotia country claim connections with Joharis.

Bhotias are found all along the Tibet border from Nepal in the east to Uttarkashi on the west, for a distance of roughly 30 miles south of the border line nearer to all passes of Tibet. Those living close to the Mana pass near Badrinath and those by Niti pass are known as Tolchas and Marchas, where as those by the Untadhura pass are Johar and Saukas. South of Johar are Bhotias or Jethora Bhotias who are not traders but cultivators.

Bhotias are hardy, industrious and shrewd businessmen and are gifted with all the qualities of a deft mountaineer. Famous Bhotia mountaineers like Pandit Brothers, have surveyed the impenetrable Himalayas including Tibet.

The northern part of Uttarakhand which borders southern Tibet and Eastern Nepal is known as Vyans-Chaudas. It falls on the left bank of river Kali and starts from Dharchula-Twaghat. From there one track goes up towards Drama valley all along Dhauli Ganga winding through steep climbs and descends through most picturesque places and villages on the old Kailash Mansarovar route.

The valley becomes most picturesque above Chhiyalekh, where ranges tower over the horizon. While Garbiyang is on one side of the river, Tinkar Changru is on the other side in Nepal.

Johar valley or locally known as Bhot, has two axis, one from Jauljibi via Garjia, Barm, Chhydrigarh, Asjoith, and Munsiri, the other route is motorable up to Munsiri through Thal, Tejam, Nachni, Girgain, Kalamunni and Munsiri.

Thus Mungsiari is the gate-way to the main valley which houses scores of villages on both sides of river Gori right up to Milam, the biggest village in the valley, once a big centre of business but now wears a desolate look.

By now the monsoon lashed the Kumaon Himalayas, and we were happy that at least we were well in time to have crossed western Nepal and now we could continue the traverse even during the monsoons even if the rivers were in spate, for the Indian Himalayas were well connected with bridges and roads. The Himalayas are a climatic barrier, southwards, they absorb the monsoon like a hydraulic buffer, northwards they protect the plains from the cruel cold climate of Tibet, it's searing summer winds and bitter winter gales. As it moves westwards, the monsoon's load decreases and rainfall is also depleted.

The monsoon is partly responsible for the variety of Himalayan vegetation, but more important is the rapid change of altitude. The southern slopes of the mountains are quite different from the northern slopes. Similarly in ascending from the jungles in the lower valleys to the tree line and then the snow line, one passes through botanical variations that could only be discovered in the plains of other continents by a South-North journey of 3000 miles. Almost the whole range of world's climate, and hence flora and fauna, are concentrated within four or five vertical miles—from tropical jungles to snow covered slopes in the Himalayas. We could see in Kumaon the sal give place to pine, the pine to oak, the oak to juniper and rhododendron and in the higher reaches are the birch, which mark the end of the tree line. But the king of them all in the Kumaons is the cheer pine clothing the brown hills and filling the air with the sweet scent of resin.

Wild life is gradually becoming extinct in entire Himalayas and Kumaon hills are no exceptions to this. When I reached Didihat, I heard that only 2 days earlier a tiger had killed a water-buffalo in the nearby village. Every summer

tigers raid the neighbourhood for cattle and the children have to be locked up to safeguard them from tiger attacks. In his classic, "Man Eaters of Kumaon", Jim Corbett describes how he shot half a dozen of the most notorious killers in the very district we were visiting. One tiger had killed 434 people before it fell to Corbett's shot. Still occasionally we hear of the man-eater tigers in Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas and a prize is announced to shoot these carnivorous animals. But the tigers and leopards are rarities and we saw none. Only they can be seen in natural sanctuaries and national parks. The monkeys and langurs are very common and can be seen occasionally on the treks.

Our bus journey for Delhi was quite interesting. The road passed through the Ghats and the beautiful area of Champawat, with thick forests and apple orchards. The Terai ends at Tanakpur and then we were in the plains. What a luxury to drink Thum-up and Limca! It took us nearly 18 hours by bus to reach Delhi. What a sudden change from mountains to the glittering life of Delhi.

We met our expedition patron Shri Sarin and apprised him about our difficulties. But he advised that we take the alternative route to Nanda Devi Sanctuary and avoid Long Staff Col. which is in the inner-line, as referring the case again to the Government of India would take a lot of time and thereby delaying the expedition.

I visited Mussoorie on my return from Delhi and had a memorable reunion with my children—what a reception from my son Naveen daughters Pameeta and Skita and my wife Madhuri. Any how nice it was to be at home for at least 2 days. Mr. Michel had also come from Pithoragarh and visited my family who enjoyed meeting our foreigner guest.

I reached Pithoragarh on 12th evening and found that our party had left the same morning from Pithoragarh in 2 groups. The traverse team comprising of the trio—Greame,

Peter and Tashi had left for Munsiyari and Doug, Corrina and Ann with S.K. Roy for Joshimath as a support team. They did not leave any message for me, whether my kit had been taken by support party or by traverse team. Next day I went up to Tejam with Mr. Gupta, the Superintendent of Police. However, the road was blocked 6 kms sort of Tejam and we trekked upto the village. At Tejam checkpost, we were disappointed when we did not get any clue about our team, so we returned to Didihat for the night.

Didihat is a small town situated on a ridge with dense oak, rhododendron and pine forest. The panthers and leopards are normally seen in this forest while driving on the road at night. The Inspection Bunglow is located amongst very beautiful surroundings. I left for Joshimath, the next morning I travelled through Bageshwar, Garur and Gwaldam. The Kumaon hills are comparatively more beautiful than the Garhwal hills. The mountains are comparatively less steep and wide open valleys are full of green forests. Kausani and Gwaldom are known for this beauty and are located on hill tops from where one can have long panoramic views of Panchchuli and Nanda Devi Ranges. The road joins at Karnaprayag along Pindar River to the main highway to Badrinath and Niti pass.

On reaching Joshimath, I learnt that Doug, Ann, Corrina and S.K. Roy had already left for the valley of flowers. So, as per our earlier planning I had to go to Nanda Devi Sanctuary to provide assistance to the Traverse team to cross over into the Sanctuary and continue the traverse.

Ultimately, our Traverse team reached Joshimath via Kunwari pass and Tapovan on 29th evening. Our major worry was over and then we heard the New Zealanders account of their agony.

In the words of Greame, "It was mid July when we began moving again, this time north west towards the Nanda Devi

Sanctuary. Tashi, Peter and I, the old team, tramped across misty ridges towards the Pindar valley aware of two main problems ahead. Monsoon-flooded rivers and the high pass crossing to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. We were going to attempt to cross the Sundarhunga Khal, a pass which we were told had never been crossed, by the newest member of our party, S.K. Roy. S.K. had accompanied the support party to the Joshimath, the area where we would meet them.

On July 14, we met some shepherds on their way to the high pastures, so we accompanied them through leach-infested, primeval forests, towards the glaciers, hidden by the perpetual mist and rain. This trek up the Sundarhunga river was spectacular in itself but largely unappreciated as we were impatient to reach the snows.

The shepherds were real mountain men. Dressed in heavy woollen coats and pants, they smelled like the herds they watched. As they walked they deftly spun wool, with only their fingers and a spool, that the spun wool was wound onto.

About mid afternoon we reached the crux of the journey to the valley ahead, Maiktoli—a difficult, rocky traverse above the raging river where a slip would have meant sure death. The shepherds know this place well and danced across confidently. Tashi was in front of me and was having trouble with one move when a painfully enthusiastic shepherd noticed his trouble. The shepherd immediately dropped his spinning and hurried back, his bare prehensile toes gripping the small holds on the rock as if they were suckers. By now Tashi had let me go in front but the shepherd was bent on rescue and he grabbed my out stretched arm and swung me across. He now set about rescuing Tashi and grasping his wrist he swung him off his holds. But the shepherd's hold on the rock was pretty tenuous and for extra support he reached out for my arm. Now, from my right hand, which held a rock hold keenly, extended a human pendulum 15 feet long with

Tashi swinging gracefully at one end. But he was soon on secure ground again and the shepherd returned to his spinning.

Maiktoli was a lush, green and flower bejewelled paradise at the foot of the glaciers. But although the roar of avalanches was common place, the mountains could rarely be seen and our lot was rain and more rain.

On July 19, despite the rain we moved up to a high camp below where we guessed Sundardhung Khal was. The Gods must have decided to reward our persistence because no sooner had we pitched our tent on a rocky ledge (at about 15,500 feet) than the rain stopped. The clouds parted and we were treated to a fabulous view of the peaks and ice-falls all around. Away, down ^{the} valley we could almost see the plains. A huge hammer head cloud appeared and Peter quipped. 'That one's probably just drowned 10,000 people'.

7 Morrows, the morning dawned fine which meant we had to go up. As we weren't sure of the route we decided to do a light reconnaissance and so without breakfast we began upwards. To begin with, the climbing was up easy ledges interspersed with short walls, then we traversed into a steep ice-fall and the fun began.

It was steep, dangerous work, as we were continually threatened by dangerous seracs (ice pinnacles) and ice cliffs. And to our horror, to top it all off, the dangers were capped by two awful gullies, down which debris rattled from time to time. After 4 hours laborious and nerve-wracking climbing we emerged onto an easy snow neve and there not more than 400 metres ahead was Sundardhung Khal, we had done it but unfortunately all our equipment was still at the camp and we all felt that the route would be unjustifiably dangerous to try again with loads. One may tempt the devil once, but with a feeling of bitter disappointment we descended to our tent just as the rain set in again.

The next day we decided to attempt another route to the south and accordingly moved our camp up to 16,500 feet. On a ledge above a horrific drop we pitched our tiny tent. As it was misty and we could see no more than 50 to 60 feet, we had no idea of what lay above but some avalanche debris nearby gave us a clue of hidden dangers. Our only security against avalanche was a large boulder which partly protected the tent. Rain fell all afternoon and after the usual meagre soupy stew we went to sleep to its gentle drumming on the Klima tent. About 9 pm I woke up with a terrible fright. It was pitch black and Tashi had just said, 'Greame, we must move from here'.

The rain was now torrential and debris was falling down the gully 10 feet from our tent. I tried to gather my wits.

'Why, Tashi I asked'.

'Because rocks and ice will come down with this heavy rain'.

I was now wide awake and staring into the blackness. I figured that although Tashi was correct we would be in great danger trying to move in the dark than we were behind the rock. Peter had now woken up and could hear only snippets of our conversation. He felt so claustrophobic jammed down the sharp end of the Klima tent that he turned around and so packed in like sardines we lay there as the rain drummed on the fabric and the avalanches roared down the gully—it was a frightening night.

A brief clearance in the morning showed 2 tiers of dangerous ice cliffs above us, then the mist closed in and reluctantly we decided that Sunderdhunga Khal had beaten us. In the bad visibility we would be like blind men. It was a conscience-wrenching experience, in silence with the dilemma—sound mountaineering judgement or lack of courage? Probably a bit of both.

Our failure to cross over meant a very long walk through sodden jungles and across lower passes. In 8 days we walked 300 kilometres and on July 29 we crossed Kuari Khal to Joshimath—the pass that Frank Smythe described as one of the best vantage points in the Himalayas. All we saw was mist—we were sick of the monsoon."

After spending a day at Auli, an evening meeting was arranged and we discussed our future plans and moves as the position of Traverse team was changed due to the arrival of Mr. S.K. Roy as 3rd Indian member and therefore at least 2 Indians were to take part in the Traverse team. Moreover, Greame was interested to take Corrina with the traverse group. In the Officers' mess, a little over-drinking by Greame created a very funny situation, when he wanted to act as a blind man and walked out into the dark wearing Peter's goggles. He went up to the bamboo fence and wanted to show off his ability to somersault, and in the process the fence gave way and Greame fell down about 10 to 12 feet and got his left arm dislocated. Thank God the presence of an ITBP Unit doctor who came to our help. Instead of attending the officers' dinner party, we all had to run around to help him. None could enjoy the party as it all turned out to be an emergency.

Next day we took Greame to Army Hospital, personally requested the Surgeon, (Surgical Specialist) Major Mukhopadhyaya who set it right and suggested that Greame should not do any strenuous work for one month so that there is no movement in his dislocation.

Chapter 12

Garhwal Himalayas & Glimpses of Nanda Devi

Joshimath is described in the scriptures as Kartikeyapura, because Katyuri Kings named it after their God, Kartikeya. Jyotirmath or Joshimath as it is now called, is one of the four great Maths, established by the great Adi guru Shri Shankaracharya in the 8th century AD. Joshimath was the heart of the historical and cultural activity in ancient days and continues to be so even today.

There are two distinct rivers, Alaknanda and Dhauliganga which meet at the confluence at Vishnuprayag below Joshimath. Dhaulagange from Niti valley is approachable from Joshimath by vehicle upto Malari and a little beyond. The entire route is lined with thick deodar forests. From Malari one track goes towards Niti village (via) Kailashpur, Farkia, Bampa, Ghamsali and Niti. The entire valley is throbbing with activity during summer. Niti is the last village of the valley, from where track goes towards Niti pass (5299 mtrs) and Marchokla. The inhabitants of these valleys are simple, sturdy, dynamic like their Jauhari counterparts in Kumaon. The left valley of Alaknanda and Saraswati is the route to the famous Badrinath shrines and then to Mana pass. As per our original plan, support party

was to go to Nanda Devi Base Camp to help the Traverse group to cross over into the Sanctuary via Sundar Dungakhal. But Doug, Corrina, Ann and Roy had already left for trekking to Valley of Flowers leaving my climbing kit at Neelkanth Hotel. I felt morally obliged to proceed as per our original plan and so I went to Lata village and persuaded my friend Hukam Singh to trek to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary.

Lata village, 26 kms away from Joshimath, perched 1,000 feet above the road on a steep slope, is the gate way for Nanda Devi Sanctuary and Trishul peaks, and is well known in the mountaineering circles. It is from here that expeditions in the past have been engaging high altitude porters.

Nanda Devi temple at the top end of the village, dominates the village with its deity shining with golden and silver ornaments, occupying the centre of all cultural activities of the village including 3 main annual fairs. One of the such activities is Baikhoti fair in April, when the Nanda Devi jagar (story) is recited by jagris to melodious tunes played on local music bands. The story is enacted with masks and Shiva dance; other Mahabharat stories are also enacted in Jagar to the accompaniment of Dhol and Damao. Gopi Nirtiya is also performed during this period. One person impersonates as Lata (meaning a dumb person) after whom the village has got its name as a joke, and acts out old themes. The Nanda Ashtami fair is held towards August end when the idol of the Devi is taken out in procession and her history and deeds are recited in the form of Jagar story. Different kinds of bread in the shapes of goats, sheep etc. are cooked and offered. The rear variety of alpine flower Bhrahm Kamal are offered to the Devi to invoke her blessing. The Devi, as the Avatari incarnate, starts dancing, strides on two sharp edges of Khadkas (weapon) and then forecasts the future. During Durga Ashtami, sacrifices of eight different animals like goat, lambs, chicken, and buffaloes are made while chanting hymns, offered by people to get the blessing of Devi for fulfillment of their worldly desires.

Another fair called Chaushat (sixty four) is also celebrated when 64 animals are sacrificed as offering to Devi. This is done only once in 70 to 80 years. In this case, another idol of Devi is kept hidden under the present idol, having 64 mouths which are kept filled with butter all the time. On this special occasion, these mouths are opened. The 64 Khadkas by which Devi had destroyed the Devils (Daityas) are taken out. All the incarnate gods and goddesses of all the surrounding villages are gathered and taken out in procession to the beats of drums and musical instruments.

The ceremony is organised systematically as per their hierarchy and then the offerings of goats are made for their Khadkas. Buffaloes are slaughtered near the Kali Khappar.

A motorable road, along the banks of Vishnu Ganga leads to the border villages of Malari and Niti inhabited by Bhotias. The villages look exceedingly beautiful in the settings of green and reddish fields of pepper and potatoes. Above the village, junipers and rhododendron bushes provide green patches and above them are precarious rocks where black sheep (ibex), musk deer (kastura) and snow leopard lurk. Above these ridges, snow pheasants are found in abundance and Himalayan eagles occasionally dive from peak to peak.

Hukam Singh and I started from Lata village (7,000 feet) on 18th August, 1981 for Nanda Devi Sanctuary after a steep climb through a thick jungle of deodar, blue pines, and junipers towards the Lata Kharak.

As we gained height, passing from forest and springy turf and then to rocky terrain, the mountains which we had been glimpsing through gaps in the trees, now rose before us as a distant and broken wall of dazzling whiteness. Nearly all the giants of the central Himalayas were there to welcome us, from the Kedarnath peaks and Kamet in the north to Trishul in the east.

While camping at Lata Kharak as we watch, the sun rising on its course picked out hills and valley beneath us where the Vishnuganga, winds down from the icy glacier that was hidden beyond distant hills. The golden sun turns white and gold against the blue of the sky, while the last clouds drift west-ward; disclosing, as they part, twin peaks, the crown of the Nanda Devi, the Goddess of Garhwal and Kumaon, she stands there high and glimmering above us.

Nanda Devi, a huge monolith, rises dome shaped upto a height of 7816 metres and is the second highest peak in India and stands majestically behind the white snow curtain of Trisul.

The famous mountaineer Long Staff entered this region through Rishiganga gorge to explore this area, which has ranges connected with each other in a semi circular arch. The terrain lying on the western side of water shed of the Nanda Devi group of mountains, is drained by rivers like Ronti Gad, Rishi Ganga, Tolma Gad, Gona, Khum Nala, Dunagiri Gad and Siraunch Gad. The most important of them, is drained by the Pindar, flowing through the Nanda Devi group of mountains which ultimately forms a confluence with Alaknanda at Karanprayag.

The mountains of this region are divided mainly into three groups : the Nanda Devi group, Badrinath group and Kamet group. These groups of mountain-ranges consist mainly of high ranges with steep slopes and deep valleys, full of craggy boulders of gigantic dimensions and movement among them is difficult and tiring. The boulders and rocks are practically perched on the steep slopes and therefore, the intervening valleys are extremely avalanche prone. So narrow were some of these valleys that they hardly receive any sunshine during the day. The peaks rising above 5000 metres in this area have snow permanently or at least for the greater part of the year. As such, quite a few glaciers are seen in these areas. Also quite a few rivers such as Alaknanda,

Dhauliganga, Mandakini, Pindar—all tributaries of the Ganges have originated from these glaciers. The area in the northern tracts of Chamoli district is bare of ~~vegetation~~ and the slopes are devoid of soil—any habitation is rather impracticable. The international border which runs along the watershed, marks the beginning of the sprawling plateau of Tibet.

The Nanda Devi group of mountain ranges on the boundary line of Pithoragarh and Chamoli districts, consist of Trisul (7120 mtrs.) Nanda Ghunti (6309 mtrs.) Dunagari (7066 mtrs.) and Nanda Devi (7816 mtrs.) itself.

Badrinath group of mountain ranges runs east-west comprising the famous peaks of Nilkantha (6596 mtrs.) Chaukhamba (6853 mtrs.) Sathopanth (7075 mtrs.) Kedarnath (6940 mtrs.) Bhriгу Panth (6772 mtrs.) and Shivling (6540 mtrs.), etc.

These peaks always remain under the cover of perpetual snow. In the east, this region is drained by Alaknanda and its tributaries such as Arwanadi, Alaknanda, Khirao Ganga, Kalpa Ganga, etc. The river Alaknanda originates from Satopanth glaciers on the eastern flanks of peak Chaukhamba. Saraswati river, originating from a place near Mana Pass on the international border, drains the north eastern and north western flanks of Badrinath and Kamet groups of mountains respectively.

This was the only region explored in 7th century by Shri Adi Shankaracharya who established the shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath and Madhmaheshwar. According to the great epics the Pandavs entered this region for their final salvation.

The vegetation had now changed, at 8000 feet above sea-level. Conifers, silver birch, spruce, larch and juniper bushes formed a covering on the opposite bank of the river, which looked quite perpendicular from this side. Low clouds prevented us from seeing the peaks on either side and snow

was still lying deep on some of the northern slopes. The ridge we crossed distinctly divided the upper and lower valleys, and from rocky promontory we saw the Nanda Devi in the distance, although we had to descend and climb again before we could enter its' sanctuary.

Lata Kharak is an alpine pasture above 11000 feet on a ridge. The tree line ends with the Himalayan small rhododendron tree. This entire meadow was full of flowers of different colours, blue, red, yellow, pink and we felt as if we were walking over a carpet of flowers of this natural garden. The Dharansi ridge about 2000 feet above has a gradual climb upto the Dharansi Pass (16,000 feet) on a saddle and then turns on the right of the ridge.

After a sharp descent to Rishiganga, for about 7,000 feet, we trekked the sharp ridges and nullahs. The slopes on our side had very steep rock faces and mean dangerous drops. Beyond the ridge the trek was gradual and straight along the ridge from where we could see wide open view of distant peaks—Nanda Devi, Devasthan, Trishul, etc. The other flank of Rishiganga was full of green forest of fir, spruce, and deodar and then beyond the tree line were the alpine meadows. The waterfalls were particularly attractive during the rainy season falling off from the slopes like thin white lines of lightning among these forests. Dharansi Kharak, was an open beautiful pasture land marked with stone (cairns) and Binayaks on the way. The local legend goes that one queen used to collect the tax from those entering this gate of stones. There is an old local deity at this place which is worshipped as the Khadka of Nanda Devi. There were stone circles marked as the camping sites of the shepherds. Water is easily available. Except for the difficulty of fire wood, it was an idle camp site at 14,000 feet. But we avoided camping there and went down 400 feet at Dhibru Gheta, a beautiful flat ground with water and fire wood available. We camped under big rockcaves comfortably. Due to rain, clouds and foggy weather we could not enjoy the scenic view.

Early next day, we walked through Dibrugheta meadow, carpeted with multicoloured flowers and soft grass. When Tilman first visited this place, he found it surrounded by a luxuriant growth of wild flowers, the forest of tall stately pines bordering this glade on every side, with only a glimpse here and there of some icy peak, it was impossible to imagine a glimpse of the main valley so close at hand. Impressed by the exquisite beauty of Dibrughita he rightly called it : "a horizontal oasis in a vertical desert". We were winding through a thick fir and spruce forest. After climbing about 3,000 feet the track reached on the top of the ridge and then the walk was gradual through rocky nullahs over to the sharp ridge, full of wild life, herds of Barhals and Thar.

Sun was now high in the heavens, and the lower valleys which were previously hidden in obscurity and the mist of draping clouds, gradually began to disclose themselves. The ridge we came over ~~yesterday~~, still stands dark and ~~forbidding~~ and gloomy between us and the rest of the range that takes its name from that crest and leads up to the higher peaks of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary.

I crawl over the spur of the hills, where the wind was most tempestuous and in a hollow, beside some of the hills and valleys of Garhwal, now bathed in the morning sun, to where—above the crusted line of wind and mist at the very end of the thin white line of eternal snows—towers Nanda Devi between the two spurs of Dronagiri and Trishul. The view was open on the eastern and southern side of this ridge and snow clad mountains like Nanda Devi, Devasthan, Maiktoli and Trishul, etc., were glittering in the east and far north. The track descended to a place called Deodi, where there is an improvised log bridge constructed earlier by I.T.B.P. expedition over the turbulent Rishiganga river. After climbing 2,000 feet through a very thick jungle covered with bushes, spruce and fir trees we reached at Trishul Nullah junction. There were 3 logs precariously

balanced over this turbulent and dangerous Trishul Nullah, which could be washed away at any time by heavy rain. The fury of this rivulet was dangerous and crossing over the logs to other side was risky. We climbed up gradually through thick rhododendron bushes and heavy undergrowth over boulders and rocks.

Now the deep Rishiganga gorge, the dangerous well known cliff route, first discovered by Tilman in 1934 for nanda Devi Sanctuary, awaited ahead—a strenuous and dangerous trek for the next day. This section of the Rishiganga was a fine example of box-canyon; that is to say, a canyon whose sides rise perpendicularly from the water's edge. The walls of this gorge maintained a tremendous steepness and culminated in peaks of 20,000 feet.

We climbed the steep and dangerous rocks above Ramani to Binayak and at many places with the help of climbing rope and fixed ropes to negotiate the rock faces. Beyond Bhujgarh to Patakhani we cautiously trekked along narrow and steep rock ledges and also at places, had to negotiate the impossible ledges with the help of fixed ropes. Above and below us the cliffs were impregnable. Each section had to be tackled with the utmost caution, it was slow work as the job required all our attention. There were little terraces running steeply across the face of the precipice. We gradually became used to the gigantic depth of the ravine above which we were making our way, the early feeling of nervousness changed to one of exhilaration, a glorious feeling almost of being part of this giant creation of nature. The notable mountaineer Dr. T.G. Long Staff considered the entry to Nanda Devi Sanctuary more inaccessible than the north pole. About half-way across a narrow slanting cliff had to be negotiated in order to get on to a lower ledge. This was the worst section, as one's load was apt to catch and throw one off one's balance and my heart was in my mouth as I watched Hukam negotiating it.

The deep Rishiganga gorge was 3,000 to 4,000 feet below, however, over hanging rocks obscured the Rishiganga. It could be considered as one of the most difficult and tricky tracks from Lata to Nanda Devi Base Camp and this was the most dangerous patch of the trek.

Up and down, negotiating the rockfaces, we reached Pathalkhan (14,000 feet) where, before us opened a magnificent view of the Nanda Devi and its satellite peaks though in the middle of the rainy season they were partly covered by mist and we were always praying for clear view of these Himalayan Giants.

At sun-set the rain cleared off and, as we sat round our juniper fire, we witnessed a heavenly unveiling of the great peaks of the basin. First appeared the majestic head of Nanda Devi herself, frowning down on us from an incredible height, utterly detached from the earth. One by one the white giants, Dronagiri, Changabang, and many other unnamed ranges to the north followed suit, until at last it seemed as if the entire mountain realm stood before us bathed in the splendour of the dying sun, paying homage to the majesty of their peerless queen.

God was kind to us as next morning when I peeped out of my sleeping bag weather was exceptionally good, and greeted us with a bright sky, so I ran for my camera to catch the glimpses of the first golden sun rays on Nanda Devi glittering with silver snow on top and on the east face and steep rocks on the west face. Lower ranges were of brown and black rocks and on the west and north were glittering peaks of the Changabang and Dronagiri. As we watched, the sun was rising, on its course picking out hills and valleys beneath us where the Rishiganga winds down from icy glaciers that are hidden beyond distant peaks. The golden sun turned white against the blue of the sky, while the last clouds drifted westwards disclosing, as they part, twin peaks, the crown of the Nanda Devi the goddess of Garhwal and Kumaon. It

stands there high and glimmering above us.

It is with no little wonder that this mountain is considered holy by all those who live in the network of mountains and valleys that crouch at its feet. She casts a spell on her domain and under that spell we may live these moments in the slow breaking of dawn as she holds her court. I climbed about 2,000 feet above the ridge overlooking the Rishiganga gorge. I could see in the far distance Chaukhamba, Neelkanth and Mana Parbats. The sea of clouds had filled in the valley down below, where as, these white mountains and green forests were floating above it. As is generally the case with such views, the mountain summits appeared as something detached from the earth, floating in the upper air at a fantastic height. The golden sun rays had slowly started turning into glittering white. The view was superb, like a fairy land floating over a sea. I could see Hanuman peak on the north in the vicinity, whereas Devasthan and other ranges were hidden behind.

Must all beauty fade as this view faded? For, no sooner had we picked up our cameras to capture the range before us than the clouds began to close in again and the whole landscape was once more concealed from view.

Was it a dream? Was there a mountain standing high above us, or was it all an illusion? Had I only thought I saw the shimmer beneath the summit, as the sunrays, caught up in hanging glaciers, sent out glancing points of light?

I tried to capture these memorable scenes in my camera and took a number of photographs. After two hours I came down as the mist and fog started covering the valley and the mountain tops. I had a pleasant feeling in my morning prayers with a kind of ecstasy and exhilarating feeling not usually experienced by me.

Taking advantage of this exceptionally good weather, we

visited inner Sanctuary after breakfast of tsampa and tea and cakes. Winding through few ups and downs, the inner valley of Sanctuary opened up. The alpine meadow was full of green grass and carpeted with different types of flowers—geraniums, honey suckle with pink and yellow flowers, irises, lily of the valley, myriads of daisies, nasturtiums with bright and red flowers, primulas, potentillas, potonicas, saxifragas and wild rose of various hues. Now there was no sign of rain and the grass was spread like velvet all around. In the middle of these wide gentle slopes, the streaks of white streams were flowing down from the melting glaciers of Devasthan. On the north was Nanda Devi glacier and deep gorge of Rishiganga. We went on walking over one slope to another.

Owing to the easy passage we were above to give our whole attention to the enjoyment of this wonderful new world we were in. Every few hundred yards, some new feature would reveal itself—here a side valley to look up into and to speculate as to where it would lead; there some graceful ice-clad summit appearing from behind a buttress, and looking, in the newness of its form, lovelier than any of its neighbours; there again, a herd of wild mountain sheep gazing indignantly at these intruders who had violated the 'sanctity of their seclusion'.

The mighty Nanda Devi used to shine with intermittent exposure to sun rays at times and again get obscured with thick blanket of fog. We could see the vast spans of glaciers converging towards Nanda Devi base whereas the Long Staff Col., Nandakhat and Maiktoli peaks remained obscured most of the time under thick fog. We seemed to be right underneath the mountain as we crane our necks up to look at the hanging glaciers as they shimmer and flash in the brilliant sunshine.

All too soon, as we were leaning on ice-axes and

speculating on the time it would take to reach the Col. (not that we have any intention of displaying such energy) clouds begin to blow over from the west and soon the snowy peaks were entirely hidden from us.

For the first time two big flocks of sheep and goats of shepherds, had penetrated the sanctum sanctorum of the Sanctuary and were camping in the Sanctuary, their white tents were surrounded by their flocks with 500 to 1,000 sheep and goats. The watchful eyes of their sheep dogs could not be deceived by us and immediately they smelt our presence in the Sanctuary area and started barking aloud. They took their defensive positions around their sheep flocks and zealously guarded them with a constant watch on our movements.

I was eagerly expecting our Traverse team to meet us in the Sanctuary who were to cross over Sundardunga Khal (18,500 feet) on the right and enter into the Sanctuary. We kept on watching through our binoculars from one boulder to other, through glaciers and streaks anticipating every pinnacle or a brown bolder to be Peter, Greame or Tashi; but after gazing for a few minutes, when we did not find any visible movements, we would feel disappointed. Are they camping under the big boulders, are they descending behind the rocks or crossing over the turbulent nullah, were all our wild guesses. As per schedule they were supposed to have crossed Sunderdunga Khal at least 3 to 4 days earlier and by now they should have entered the Sanctuary and we could have not missed them in anyway.

Most of the time our eyes were gazing in that direction to locate and trace 3 members of our Traverse team. But ultimately we failed and were disappointed. As there was no certainty of their arrival, we went to the shepherds' camp to enquire from them and enjoyed their hospitality of tea and goat milk which proved to be a very costly venture to me subsequently as it upset my stomach and I had diarrhoea and

cramps. Probably the goat milk did not suit my system, or it might have been contaminated.

Such large flocks have entered the Sanctuary for the first time when they were able to forge a new route from Trishul Glaciers side. After crossing the ridge above the height of 19,000 feet these flocks entered into the Sanctuary from above Pathal Khan ridge.

Infact, our report was one of the contributory factors to declare the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, a protected area after 1982, and was made a biosphere reserve. We could see the impact of human interference and aggression made in this fortified sanctuary in various forms, like litter of expeditions having passed through and grazing by these animals. But now we hope that with the formation of Nanda Devi National Park, this nature's preserve will be saved from such reckless destruction.

We could see herds of Barhals, in hundreds, freely and graciously moving undisturbed on the spurs of the Sanctuary. When they noticed our presence in the vicinity they were alerted and started running over the huge scree straight for their hide-outs. They were masters of that land and could jump from rock to rock and within minutes they were 1000 yards away from us hiding themselves behind the rocks.

The mists rose and darkness falls in silence. We sat alone on a hill-top surrounded by such magnificence that I found it difficult to believe it to be a part of the same world in which we have lived all these years. I was filled with a sense of exhilaration at the thought that 25,000 feet of mountain side, crowned with such superb grandeur as these snowy peaks pointing to the skies, can be taken in at a single glance.

We were now concerned about our return trek from Pathal Khan to Ramani, the dangerous and risky patch especially when the fixed ropes had been removed by the porters, due to recent rains it was bound to be slippery. At one

time we were even planning to climb up through the higher route which was discovered by the shepherds last year. But it meant climbing an extra 3,000 feet and then to descend to Trishul Base Camp besides taking additional two days. Whereas, if we took the risk, the old route could be covered within half a day. I finally decided to take the risk and follow the lower track.

On a foggy morning, August 22nd, we took our time to prepare ourselves for the return trek, delaying our move, hoping the weather would improve so that the rocks at the steep gorge would be dry and thus less slippery. After bidding good-bye to the Goddess Nanda Devi, cautiously we move down slowly while descending from Pathal Khan to Bhujgarh. We were negotiating difficult ledges belaying each other with our rope, hardly 40 feet long. After 2 hours, the weather improved, there was sunshine, our movements easy and safe. But we were more concerned at a point where one Australian climber had died the previous year. He was returning after the climb of Changabang and slipped and died. While peeping down the deep gorge 3,000 feet below, because of overhanging rocks, the Rishiganga was only visible at a few points. The green spurs and rocky spires on the other side with cascading, white waterfalls were fascinating and eye catching.

On reaching Ramani safely, we were happy and relieved of our worry of negotiating the dangerous path. After a brew, we headed for Trishul nullah, an another danger concerned us. Due to heavy rains for a couple of days this fast flowing mountain rivulet was in spate, the water just a few feet below the 3 logs kept over it for crossing and they could have been washed away. On reaching the Trishul nullah, horrifying looking in its full spate, rumbling and falling over big boulders. The water had eroded the bank and started flowing over the improvised logs dangling over the boulders kept across. Naturally we were afraid and worried. So, I suggested to my

lone companion Hukam Singh, 'let us go up to the log and see if we can cross over it to the other side'?

The water was gushing over the logs and at times the strong thud of water were smashing the logs and destabilising them. Water was flowing over and around the boulders where the logs were kept, and even to approach these boulders was dangerous. It was obvious that any further delay would increase the water flow which would wash away the logs at any moment, forcing us to stay there for the night and then we would have to climb up to the Trishul Base next day even when we did not have provisions for an extra day. So I took the chance, and when the gushing water thud was less, first I jumped on to the few logs hanging from the rock and got over the big boulder on which 3 logs were kept to cross this roaring mountain torrent. Hukam also followed me and now we both were standing in the middle on the big boulder. The situation now was worse, as the river water was touching these logs and at times would hit them hard and destabilise them. The logs could be washed within a second by this roaring mounting river. We were now surrounded from both sides by gushing water. So there was no alternative but to take risk and cross over these precariously hanging 3 logs, cautiously adopting a monkey position with my feet and hands, praying to Lord Shiva all the while.

Crossing over this 40 feet of span took a minute, and I was on the other side. But this one minute was like an hour as I was hanging between life and death. Now Hukam was hesitant to cross over the logs, it being too risky. I was shouting from the other side to hurry up otherwise the logs would be washed away, if he delayed any more and he would also be in danger as there was water on both the sides of the boulders where he was standing but, because of thundering and roaring of the mountain river, we could only communicate with our hand signals. At one stage Hukam came 5 to 6 feet over the log but when the water hit the logs, turned back from

the dangling logs. He was now more shaky. Certainly his life now was in more danger. Hukam made other determined attempts to cross. I was, all the time, praying to God for his safety. I was vainly trying to hold the logs with my hands to stop them from getting washed away in case water hit them hard. Thank God, within a minute Hukam joined me on the other side. What a risk we had taken! I can well imagine how such risks are being taken by many simple villagers and porters for whom the life is always a chance.

We were happy and thankful to Almighty for our safe crossing over to the other side. We kept on watching for few minutes, this dancing fury of the river and then resumed our onward move. It was a perfect evening, as I lay on my little platform under the rock cave. Watching the multi-coloured glow of sunset spreading over the vast mountain world about me. I was filled with deep content, untroubled either by the memory of crossing of the dangerous Trishul nullah, or by the prospects of further march tomorrow as we were now moving on to the known tracks. A vision of such beauty was worth a world of striving. The thick green forests on both the sides of Rishiganga and the white thundering streaks of the fast flowing mountain rivulets with many waterfalls were beautiful on the other side. The clear view of the Nanda Devi was superb in the east at the head of the gorge. We saw 2 groups of 20 to 25 Bahrals near the Deodi ridge. Where from behind the boulder, these wild Barhals got their 3rd sense and became alert to the danger. They kept a watch in all directions. The newly born calves suckled by their mothers kept us mesmerised. Finally, we decided to disturb them so that they also vanish in the wilderness and we resume our trying march. The herd of blue sheep within minutes crossed over the steep rocky face and were now 1,000 feet above, where they were more safe, and then resumed gazing at us without fear of attack. It was difficult to understand what brings these animals to such altitudes. Two thousand feet above was perfect grazing, and neither men nor beast to molest them.

Their lives must be wonderfully care-free and one would expect them to be content to grow fat and lazy down below; instead of which they seemed to spend most of their time climbing precipices of astonishing steepness, risking their necks on steep rocks and going as far way as possible from easy food and comfort. It seems that surely they too have the capacity to appreciate the savage beauty of high mountain places—potentillas, large blue gentians, and flowers of other varieties, while the stately army of tall dark pines stood in wide circles as if guarding this little throne from the demons of the “Rishi Gorge”.

The next day we had to undertake a tedious and tiring climb up to Dharansi pass. However, descending was more difficult from Lata Kharak because of the steep slope. We reached Lata village by sunset. The old father of Hukam Singh spotted us miles away, for his eager eyes were all the time gazing at the track. He had been concerned about our safety due to bad weather and risky trek.

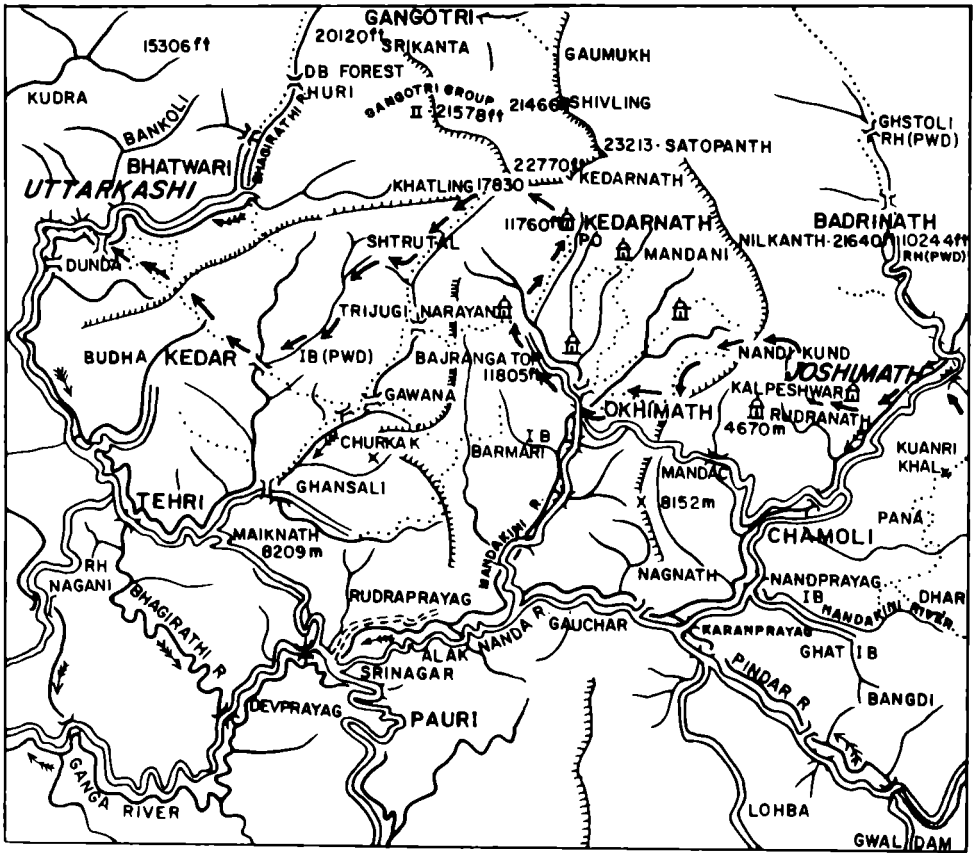
Chapter 13

On the Pilgrim Trail of Uttarakhand

After the mishap, we decided that Douglas will join the Traverse Team upto Uttarkashi in place of Greame, who had dislocated his arm and now the Traverse group would consist of Peter, Doug, Tashi and S.K. Roy. Rest 4 members including me were to be in support party, as transporting of heavy support gear was equally important for this section, due to numerous road blocks and heavy rainfall. Since Greame had to take a few days rest, I decided to trek to Urgam valley, and Kalpnath, and return via Rudranath to Gopeshwar. On 3rd August I set out from Joshimath but found a road block near Joshimath, big boulders were falling from the hill-side. The rainy season was at its peak and high mountains were obscured, the nullahs and rivers were all in spate and there were numerous road blocks on the way. Our spirits seemed to rise and fall as the hills and valleys round us; rain was depressing at any time, but to have low clouds continually shutting out what you know must be a glorious view was aggravating to most.

Wet and tired, I reached Urgam after fourteen miles march; but though I gazed hopefully up the Urgam valley, I saw no mountains, only a thick wall of cloud beyond the nearest hills. Out on the verandah I saw that rosy clouds at the

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM JOSHIMATH TO UTTARKASHI



end of the distant valley as they float gracefully above these folds of mountains.

At the height of 7,000 to 8,000 feet is the lush green valley of Urgam named after Urva Rishi, who had done penance here. There are famous temples like Dhyan Badri, Kalpeshwar Mahadev, and a few others. Kalpeshwar (Kalpnath) is one of the Panch Kedars, the other are Kedar Nath, Tung Nath, Mad Maheshwar, Rudra Nath and Kalp Nath. At this place Lord Shiva, showed only the middle portion of his body to Pandavas. The Ashta Dhatu idol from Dhyan Badri was stolen on 7th June, 1981. Kalpnath temple is only at a distance of three kms., located under a big cave.

The Urgam valley charged with peaceful surroundings, fast flowing nullah on one side, milky white waterfall by the side of cluster of deodar trees around the temple. The 6 feet wide foot track gradually ascends from road-head at Helang to Kalp Nath.

After visiting Kalpnath, I trekked to Dumak. The morning was one of exquisite beauty. The air cleansed and purified by the rain of the previous day filled with the delicate scent of the pine forests. From behind the great snow peaks came the beams of the newly-rising sun, in magnificent contrast to the sombre, heavily forested country about us. The trees with their drowsy limbs still wet with dew, the song of the birds sharing with us the exaltation of the new born day, the streams splashing down in silver waterfalls or lying dormant in deep blue pools, all played their parts in this. A fine morning when all considerations of time and distance was eclipsed by the pure delight in one's surroundings. The 6 feet wide foot track passed through a very thick forest of oak, rhododendron over a ridge of about 9,000 feet and then descended with a gradual walk of about 18 kms. upto Dumak. On my way, I saw an army of white langurs and one black bear in this forest which indicated that wild animals found this forest secure, away from the roads. At Dumak I

joined the Traverse group who had already arrived there.

We camped in the local primary school of the village. Life in these little mountain villages is delightfully simple, and the inhabitants, almost entirely self supporting. The few terraced fields carved out in the steep hill-side by their ancestors, supply all the food they require. A flock of sheep and goats tended in summer by the youth of the community, on the high mountain pastures, provided them wool for their clothings. This wool is spun into yarn by the men, who carry their takli (spinning wheel) about with them where ever they go, so that they can constantly spin, while carrying loads, tending sheep or performing any job that does not involve the use of their hands. The yarn is woven into cloth by the women with astonishing skill.

Thus all are busily employed, all are well-fed and clothed and all are contented and happy. Visibly nothing has changed since olden times. The villages, which are little away from the main motor roads have hardly been touched by the so called developmental programmes and are still carrying on in the same age-old systems and using out-dated instruments.

Peter was not feeling well and was feverish, so the Traverse team had to stay at Dumak, and were to follow the upper route for Uttarkashi via Nandan Kanan, Pandusera, Mad Maheshwara, Kedarnath, Khatling glacier, Buddha Kedar, Pamwali Kantha, Belak to Lata and Bhatwari in Bhagirathi valley.

I left for Rudra Nath with a local guide via the upper track, but there was virtually no track but only a direction march through a thick bushy-forest, full of leaches and monsoon flooded rivers. Two fast flowing rivulets were crossed before going to the other side of Rudra Nath ridge. We were lucky to have a wooden bridge over the first nullah where as the other one had to be crossed over a dead log lying across a 20 feet wide mountain rivulet.

Low clouds crowned the summit of Rudra Nath and beams of sunlight pricking through the gaps in the ridges on our side of the river lit up both cloud and forest bank. It was almost a day's march to descend to the river and climb up to a corresponding height on the further side; and yet it looked close as if we could shout or throw stones across the intervening blue space.

The weather cleared; there was beautiful sunshine with only few patches of clouds. After rains, everything is blue here—the sky is blue, the hills are blue, the distance, the reflections in the river, and the noon day shadows of the snows. And the blue has a great depth and when night falls it seems as if the blueness descends and envelops us.

We trekked through thick jungle of oak, rhododendron, poplars, juniper, fir, etc. with thick undergrowth of bamboo bushes and grass. Virtually without any track, from the nullah bottom of 5,000 feet, we ascended the steep climb through a thick jungle upto 9,000 feet where the tree line came to an end, near the ridge. There were two Guzar (nomads) huts, on the way. These Guzars were still leading their life in a perfectly natural way. We could see a Guzar thatched hut perched on a small mound, over-looking the crystal clear water of a mountain lake amidst the multi-coloured flowers on a open alpine meadow. The setting was perfectly serene, with thick green foliage of heavily wooded forests under the azure sky. A small child was sitting outside the thatched hut left in the care of mother nature while the entire family were away looking after their animals.

The child started crying on seeing us; she was obviously more afraid of men than the wild animals. The Guzar was a stout, healthy, bare footed, strong man who probably had never put on any shoes in his life. He had 2 sons, both married, who trekked daily through a thick jungle to Gopeshwar at a distance of 12 kms. for selling 25 kgs. of milk. The Guzars are entirely dependent on buffaloes, a few horses

and cows; they are nomadic tribe who trek with their animals from Terai area in Rishikesh in April and after a month's march reach this area. They again trek back in September to Terai area, and their annual cycle is completed. Though they have been allotted land on a 10 years lease for pastures for permanent settlement in Terai area, this modern concept has no value for them. Due to their scattered living and nomadic nature, it is just impossible to educate their children. I think nature is the best educational laboratory for them where they learn the lesson of survival of the fittest.

Over the steep slope of Rudra Nath, the going was more complicated and strenuous than we had expected. The hill-side was covered with thick under-growth, the going steep, every now and then we stumbled on boulders which had been masked by the under-growth. Moreover we had no chance to make a selection of a suitable route from afar, and now could not see far enough ahead to choose out the best line. Our pace was slow, the day waxed hot, and our throats became unpleasantly dry.

When we reached the meadow (Bugyal) at the height of 10,000 feet what a beautiful grassy 'maidan' we saw! The buffaloes of Guzars and sheep of the shepherds were lucky to drink this natural beauty. But could they appreciate it?

A glance at the view changed our gloomy outlook on life to one of thrilling exultation. The afternoon was clear and still all round us was grandeur and beauty. The alpine flowers like irises, daisies, potentillas, primulas were blooming in big patches as if mother nature has planted them in orderly fashion. There were clear-cut flower beds of blue, red, purple, yellow flowers with well demarcated clusters. It was unusually like a well-designed natural garden, the scale of which was too vast for human conception.

The 6 feet wide track from Gopeshwar joins at the ridge and then onward was a gradual climb for Rudra Nath,

skirting around the ridge. Local guide was dispensed with by me.

Now it was a well defined track to Rudra Nath, gradually climbing along the ridge, on gentle slopes, full of multi coloured flowers of nasturtiums, primulas, wild cosmos, with small patches of rhododendron bushes. Wearing a red nylon wind proof jacket and carrying nearly 30 lbs. in a New Zealand make ruck-sack on my back, I moved on. My beard had grown, and, I had wrapped a cloth band over my face to absorb the sweat. In all I was dressed in typical mountaineer's gear. When I reached Rudra Nath, there was no one about, except a temple pujari who was staying close to the temple and I was hopeful to stay with him for the night. But to my surprise, on my first approach itself, the temple pujari was rather hostile and did not want me to stay near the temple and suggested I go down nearly 500 below where a hermit was staying. I certainly felt somewhat annoyed and reluctantly I went down to the hermit's cave.

Rudra Nath is located over a ridge (at 14,000 feet) with two big rock caves, and water spring. The Rudra Nath Linga is one Mukha (face of Lord Shiva) whereas the other 4 Mukha Roop are at Pashupathi Nath in Kathmandu. The story goes that Pandavas wanted to have the glory of his darshan, but Lord Shiva was evading them. Meanwhile Narad Muni went to Lord Shiva and when he was talking to the Lord, Pandavas managed to see the Lord Shiva, but he had to change his position and as a result the Shivlinga is slanting here.

Even at this height, Rudra Nath, temple was full of beautiful stone sculptures of ancient period and one Vishnu-stone idol in Padmasan is a rare antique marked 17th in order of value by archaeological department of India. But I am afraid, it may not be safe from idol lifters, who were operating in this part, without adequate security arrangements by the Government.

Towards sun-set the rain cleared off and as we sat around our juniper fire, we witnessed a heavenly unveiling of the great peaks beyond, standing out above a dark cloud, was a wonderful panorama of the Garhwal mountains. In the east were Trishul, Nanda Devi, Dronagiri, Changabang and in the north, were Kamet, Chaukhamba, and Neel Kantha. The surroundings and the serene atmosphere certainly was perfect for meditation by the hermits in this heavenly abode.

I am convinced that the Indian sadhus who deeply meditate and attain spirituality acquire supernatural powers which help them to survive in such high Himalayan region without adequate food. Baba Takhat Giri, with whom I stayed at Rudra Nath, was a living example. The temple pujari seeing me clad in unusual trekkers gear did not allow me to stay in the temple premises, thinking that I may be a thief or an idol-lifter, that is why he suggested a place, 500 yards down below, a big stone cave of Takhat Giri Baba, from where I could see the smoke curling out. Pujari also told me that the Baba was a regular visitor to this shrine and stays for about 4 to 6 months in the serene Himalayas to meditate and to enjoy undisturbed peaceful seclusion for spiritual attainments. I should expect neither any food nor a comfortable shelter with him. So I thought it proper to stay with the Baba Takhat Giri and benefit myself with his spirituality at this pious place. I gradually descended through the thick grassy flower-ridden meadow covered with freezing dew, towards the cave. The huge bonfire burned under the cave, and an old, naked Sanyasi sat by its side with a severe face in the meditating Padmasana posture. Slightly disturbed on my arrival, he opened his eyes, and on seeing me approaching him, he gave a warm hearted welcome saying that the place, belongs to God and I had equal right to share the place.

What to talk of comforts, uneven stones formed the floor and there was hardly space for two person to stretch their feet, apart from a place of bonfire. The cave was open from

three directions and the water dripped inside through over hanging stones. Baba had spread out 2" to 3" cushion of grass over the place, and had only a thin locally woven blanket, an empty 5 ltrs. plastic can and an empty dalda tin of 2 kgs. as his worldly belongings; he had no food worth the name, what to talk of sugar, rice or any other eatables. Baba fully relied on Almighty for food and other essentials of sustenance, and believed firmly that food and sustenance are provided by our Creator, who is responsible of our birth. As per the Baba's belief, God is responsible to feed all the living beings including birds, animals and accordingly they are sustained on this earth. His duty was to pray and remember God all the time as he wants to merge his Atma with Parmatma (self with the universal self). He was least bothered about comforts of physical body, which is only the means, a ship to cross over the wordly sea to the other side in the realm of Brahma, the Universal Home, being an atom of the nucleus universe.

I was amazed, this spiritual knowledge was beyond my comprehension and could not be convinced how this physical body can be sustained by the unseen Almighty, unless one makes physical efforts and actions. So I thought here was a chance to see this unique Super Power performing the physical action. I expressed my humble request—if Baba could permit me to stay with him for the night enabling me to derive enormous pleasure in his company. I looked around in the cave but there was nothing except 4 chappaties kept on a stone nearby wrapped in leaves, sent for him by another saint living near the temple premises, who respected Baba as his Guru. I settled down on this grassy cushion and spread out my mattress, rucksack and sleeping bag, I prepared drinking chocolate, nutrinuggets and vegetable noodles and shared my food with the Baba. Both of us enjoyed the food and the soft spoken religious preachings of the Baba. I was completely enchanted by his spiritual teaching and deep knowledge of religious scriptures. Baba knew of large number

of rare Himalayan herbs and lived for years together on these herbs and medicinal plants. At Rudra Nath he had seen rare types of medicinal herbs, including the Sanjeewani Booti. The Baba stayed at Rudra Nath till Diwali festival when on a pitch dark night, these plants get illuminated. So he tied coloured threads around these plants at night to mark them, and the next day collected the roots. Before going to bed, I saw Baba eating some herbs which convinced me fully that baba uses these herbs and medicinal plants for his sustenance. In fact Baba impressed on me that since we were undertaking such an unique Himalayan journey to remote and in-accessible areas, we should know and recognise these rare species of medicinal herbs and also keep a look-out for the precious stones like diamonds, etc. which he believed to be abundant in these areas. Alas! if only my limited knowledge could be enlarged upto this universal knowledge. Baba sang melodious and enchanting bhajans at night and every second of the night was spent in exaltation, in perfect solitude and ecstasy, without feeling the passage of time in the company of Baba Takhat Giri.

It is not "I wasted a day" or "I gained a day", but "I have lived a day". And that day shall stay with me and give me life and hope and dreams and imaginings and a fullness of joy that will fade only when I fade—back to the primeval substances form which I was made.

The day was dreamed away on the mountain-side gay with the flowering trees, sweet with the scent of them. Blue hills fading into the mists and mists fading into the clouds beneath the massive, crystalline mountain summits. Together with the flower-scented breezes from the hills on either side. As the night came, we sought the solitude.

I experienced a mystic ecstasy while staying in a cave with Swami Takhat Giri, who occupied the cave the same day. I enjoyed his company and felt exalted.

Next morning, I prepared the hot brew of drinking chocolate, cooked noodles, and shared my meal with Baba. I also wanted to experiment, like Baba, just once, as to how could one get food without any effort and that too in these uninhabited places. So I offered all the food including sugar and tea, whatever was with me to the Baba, who was so far away from habitation. It was a spotlessly bright sunny day when the snow clad peaks were brightly shining in the far east and the beautiful Himalayan giants like Trishul, Nanda Devi, Chaukhamba and Neel Kanth were glittering in the far distance. Deep down, the river valley were covered under the white sea of clouds, where as the green forests and alpine meadows were lashed with beautiful multicoloured flowers of geraniums, potentilla, irises, lilies nasturtiums, daisies and wild cosmos.

Gradually, I climbed up to Rudra Nath temple, where I offered my pooja to Lord Rudra Nath (Lord Shiva) and also had the 'darshan' of some of the old rare stone idols. I was told by the pujari that one can see the one face Mudra of Lord Shiva at this place carved out on the shiva Lingam and the 4 faces of Lord Shiva can only be seen on the unique temple of Pashupati Nath, which I had already visited at Kathmandu. I was lucky to have seen such rare idols and visited these religious shrines. It is said that the Panch Badri had been made by Pandvas themselves for worship and then they proceeded via Nandi Kund to Pandushera 12 km. away at 14,000 feet where still the old utensils of Pandavas are seen by the people who visit that place. Rudra Nath temple situated in the beautiful surroundings of natural flowers where there are large patches of one particular type of flower and then suddenly you find flowers of contrasting colours blooming together. The whole appearance of this natural garden looks as if it has been decorated by an expert gardener.

While descending to Gopeshwar, the view of the other side of the ridge was superb. I could see the deep valley of

green thickly forested area of Mandal and Anusuya Devi temple. The view of the far distant chain of mountains from this high ridge of parallel ranges and different valleys merging with the main Alaknanda Valley was superb and fascinating. There was no habitation in between and I was coming along without even having a cup of tea, having full faith in the Almighty like the Baba. Near around 2 pm when I was feeling very hungry and tired, I was praying for the supernatural power to help me out. There was a miracle. It did come and help me with its wonder. I was slowly trodding along the track, dead tired and hungry when I saw a large herd of sheep and goats resting on the meadow with one tent pitched just near the track. Two ferocious looking sheep dogs were zealously guarding the tent and I was afraid of them. I shouted for the shepherds to catch hold of their dogs so that I could pass through the place. A Garhwali shepherd came out of the tent and controlled his dogs. When I approached his tent, he requested me to sit down and humbly offered me a chappati (loaf of bread), which he had just cooked over the fire—as if it had been prepared for me. Should I think it a coincidence or a miracle that I reached just in time when the first loaf of bread was being cooked over the fire? They offered me 2 loaves, with a pinch of salt, and I relished it more than any tasty food. I thanked the shepherd for this kind gesture. It had certainly confirmed my faith in the teaching of Baba Takhat Giri, who believed that the Almighty only provides food and meals to all creatures of the universe. Then I trod down the steep gradients, had a long day and reached Gopeshwar, the district headquarters of Chamoli district.

The pilgrims or the trekkers go self sufficient. Only very few people undertake the trek to this holi shrine of Rudra Nath. I was pained to see that the track was soiled at many places with the empty cans and litter and wrappings of sweets and biscuits—all indication of the pollution on this pilgrim route. Once inaccessible shrines have also been

thrown open to the influx of modern tourists, resulting in garbage dumps and environmental pollution on the tracks.

Similarly, lot of encroachment on forest land and deforestation was being carried out recently, turning these beautiful green mountains into barren hills. The two forest species, pine in the lower altitudes and oak on the higher reaches have been threatened by the population pressure. The pine forests have become victims of the commercial exploitation for extraction of resin by the various agencies like forest contractors, resin contractors, etc. through their untrained and unskilled labourers. Deforestation has also been accelerated by the increasing needs of local population for fire-wood, which is becoming scarce with the influx of large number of outside agencies, construction labour gangs for road, dams, buildings, etc. And presence of para-military, military establishments which have been set up in the area in view of the threat posed by the forces across its borders. The valuable oak tree has also been endangered by the clearing of forest land for potato cultivation, orchards and insatiable desire of man for land acquisition. The oak, economically, a very valuable tree, has also been indiscriminately cut for fodder for animals, and fire wood near around the villages. Due to sudden threat of large scale deforestation in these areas, the "Chipko Movement" has been launched by locals and especially by the women folk of this area who are directly dependant for their daily needs on forest produce like, collection of fire wood, fodder for animals, etc. The world famous Chipko Movement leader, and Magasasay award winner, Shri Chandi Prasad Bhatt belongs to Gopeshwar town and had emerged as a leader of this nature conservationists' movement out of the pressing needs of the people to conserve forests for their own survival.

History and legends are intricately woven in this part and it is difficult to separate one from the another. It is stated that the epic Mahabharata was written in this valley of Gods, a

place called Vyas Gufa near Mana where Lord Ganesh is believed to have written Mahabharata, living in a cave above Mana on the bank of river Saraswati. At the base of Suryakund glacier, is a hot water spring where Kunti used to bathe at Pandukeshwar near Badrinath. The Mahabharata is thus inextricably woven with the legends and folklore of Uttarakhand.

The Mahabharata also mentions tribes like Yavanas, the Sakas, the Kambojas, the Nagas and the Khasis. The Khasis or Khasias were in majority and most of the present population are their descendants. The first dynasty was of the Katyuries, extended from Sikkim to the extreme western regions. For generation the people in the north western hills were called Khasias and the ruling dynasty was referred to as Katyuries who were Suryavanshies. Chinese traveller Hwen Tsang visited this area during the reign of Katyuries and had written an account of this flourishing Hindu Kingdom in Uttarakhand. He has described the city of Mayapur, capital city of Brahmpura which has been identified as Joshimath.

The women generally wear ghagras, although now most of the women have started wearing dhoti—saries and blouses. But in olden days generally women wore the ghagras, full sleeve blouses made of cotton or goat wool and invariably a twisted shawl wrapped round their waists and were very fond of wearing ornaments.

Previously the border trade with Tibet used to be carried through the two major passes of this district known as Mana and Niti Passes and the Bhotias and Marchas belonging to the border village of Mana, Niti, Ghamsali and Malari used to migrate down upto Chhinka village near Gopeshwar, for the winters and their economy was based on border trade.

Greame Dingle, inspite his dislocated arm also left with Corinna for the traverse the very next day, much against the advice of the doctor. Ann and I had to take the complete

support gear to Uttarkashi. We faced many road blocks on the way and had to tranship the heavy loads at odd places. The massive landslides are being caused due to deforestation near Srinagar and Tehri. There has been no scientific management whatsoever of the civil Soyam and Panchayat forest. The result of such unrestricted felling of trees, tapping of resins and grazing in civil Soyam and Panchayati forests has brought about complete denudation of these areas. Barring a few patches of forests here and there, they are generally treeless and exposed to severe soil erosion.

This was the peak of the monsoon season in Garhwal Himalayas and most of the rivers and nullahs were in spate, mostly the high mountains were under the veil of thick clouds and even passing quite close to these beautiful mountains we could not get a glimpse of them. Our Traverse team had undertaken the old pilgrim route from Rudra Nath onwards via Tung Nath, Kedar Nath and Trijuginarayan to Buda Kedar. Trekking was quite uncomfortable due to thick growth of the grass and green foliage infested with blood-sucking leeches at the lower altitude. Even small reptiles and snakes were a common sight on this track. We reached Uttarkashi along with our heavy support gear of nearly 20 kit bags after making transshipment on the local buses for about 15 times. At many places small nullahs had swept away the culverts and bridges and vehicles had to make dangerous crossing through gushing water. There were huge landslides caused by flooded rivers.

On the way to Uttarkashi, I had a chance to meet my younger sister at Tehri, for about 20 minutes, and I took Ann Luise with me to her house but it was surprising, that she did not like the idea of my meeting my sister even for 20 minutes and could not understand the emotional feelings of brother and sister who were meeting after such a long and continuous trek. This was certainly beyond our comprehension as we Indians have great emotional bindings and respect for each other's feelings.

On 10th August we reached Uttarkashi and had a comfortable stay at Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in their newly established complex. Both principal, Col. Balwant Sandhu and vice principal, Major Prem Chand, were out with their courses.

The Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, is situated on the spur at Ladari, dominating the beautiful town and over looking the entire valley. This national institute imparts mountaineering training to the young people to inculcate the spirit of adventure among the youth of the country. This is the second National Mountaineering Institute, which conducts the basic courses and advance mountaineering courses.

Uttarkashi, district was a part of Tehri district till 1962. The beautiful small town is situated on the right bank of Bhagirathi at an height of 1550 metres. The temples and ghats have names almost identical to those in Varanasi. The most important temple dedicated to Shiva is known as Vishwanath Mandir, where stands a magnificent Trident (Trishul), one metre in circumference and is made of copper. It supports a trident four metres long. Each prong is about two metres in length, one of the important monuments. Uttarkashi is known for its temples dedicated to Parshuram, Datatreya, Annapurna Devi, Kali, Bhairon, etc. At one times, there were 365 temples. Uttarkashi is also known as Barahat, meaning a big marketing place, on way to Gangotri—trekked on foot in seven days, to Yamunotri five days, to Srinagar six, and to Kedarnath in twelve days from here. It has a number of ashrams for sanyasis and mendicants who occupied the banks of the holy river for penance and prayers.

The urge to progress has still not come to the hill-man and wheresoever it has come to a limited extent his aspirations have not been fulfilled by his surroundings and the administration.

The difference between the rich and poor is not much

noticeable. Generally speaking, it is a moderate society in which economic differences are not so marked and, therefore, there are far less social disparities in comparison to societies in the more developed parts of the country. Social distinction does exist which is based on caste structure.

The main head water of the Ganga is the Bhagirathi, its source at Gaumukh, an ice-cave. Sweeping west-wards from its source the Bhagirathi turns south, cuts through the Great Himalayas in a deep valley and flowing through the Lesser Himalayas and receives another principal affluent, the Alaknanda, at Devprayag. The combined rivers then take the name of Ganga. Flowing south for 70 kms and cutting through two ranges, the Nagtibba and the Siwalik, the Ganga descends to the plains at Hardwar.

About 25 kms. west of the Bhagirathi, the Yamuna rises from the Jamunotri glacier west of Banderpunch (6317 metres), and traverses the Lesser Himalayas when it is joined by the Tons river and pierces through the Siwalik range down to the plains.

Majority of Hindus of this area worship Goddess 'Durga' in one or the other form. Almost each hill-top has a small shrine dedicated to one of the manifestations of Durga. The worship of 'Durga' means animal sacrifice and religious rites as prescribed in Shakti cult. They also have belief in spirits and ghosts. All villages have village deity. In any calamity, family trouble, sickness or happiness, in most important fairs and festivals, the local deities are invoked and worshipped for blessings.

The ritual of invoking the family or village deity is quite interesting. A low-caste 'Das' is the priest who presides over the function of invoking the deity. The invocation is done during night time. All the house-hold members collect and a sacrificial fire is lighted. The 'Das' invokes the God by his Mantras sung to the accompaniment of drum beat. A male or

female is chosen by the invoked deity as a medium. When the Mantras and drum beats reach their crescendo the Das lapses into a state of trance and the spirit of the deity enters the body of the medium. The Das then asks favours or requests deity to ward off the evil spirits or bestow blessings on the family. It is surprising that in this state of trance the medium can cross live fire or lick red hot iron implements or walk on fire bare footed or beats his naked body with burning torches of heated iron implements, apparently, without any physical discomfort. There are no marks of burning, etc., to be seen on the body on the following day. This phenomenon of spirits, witch-craft, ghosts, curses etc. has a deep influence over the locals who continue to be superstitious.

Locals are extremely proud of their religious heritage and jealously guard their social purity. This religious heritage and visits by pilgrims from all over India coupled with the advent of modernity has infused sense of national integration among the people.

Our stay at Uttarkashi was enjoyable. The Traverse team had reached on 16th August and Greame wanted some time to rest his arm.

There was some tension between Indian and the New Zealand team members when the accounts were finalized. The New Zealanders, had inflated their extra expenditure and did not want to give full details, obviously to take advantage of the Indian side. Peter had gone to Rishikesh to encash his Travellers' Cheque which he was unable to encash at Uttarkashi. This seemed to be a genuine difficulty faced by the foreign tourists; lack of such facilities discourages the development of tourism in this part.

The local Lions Club at Uttarkashi arranged a reception for our team. Greame, Doug and Ann did not attend the function, interested only in the dinner party, which I thought was being too selfish and discourteous to the locals. Peter

however, valued the local sentiments and was present at the function.

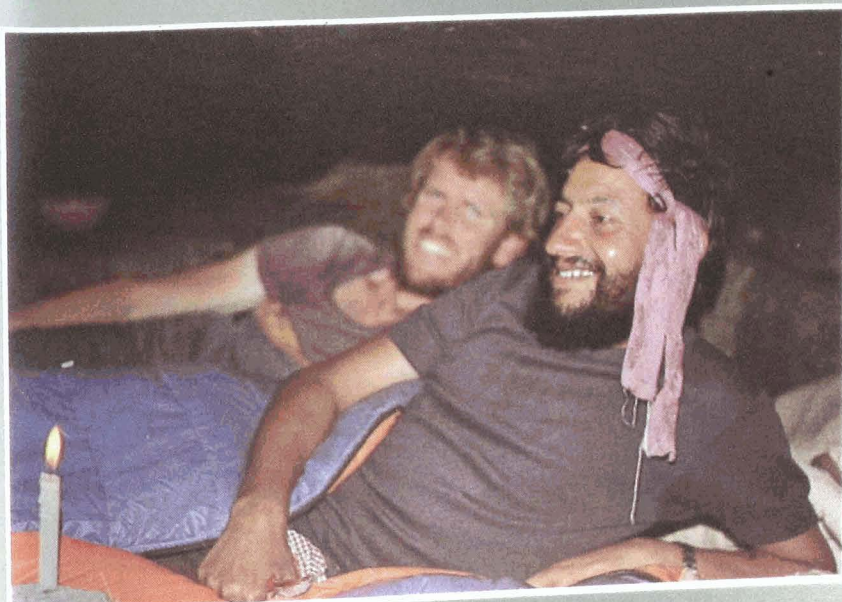
During our stay at Uttarkashi we sorted out our administrative problems. Greame got time to rest his dislocated shoulder and Tashi was able to attend to some urgent work. Meanwhile, the other members—Peter, Doug Wilson and Ann Luise had gone trekking to Gaumukh, and rubbed shoulders with the magnificent peaks like Shivling and other peaks in Gangotri region.

Uttarkashi town has developed rapidly due to construction of the Maneri Valley Hydro Electric Project. We were invited to see the project. The power house was under assembly and construction on the tunnel was nearing completion. It was very impressive that all the technical knowhow and machinery was Indian and without any foreign collaboration which was very hard for the New Zealanders to believe.



Creame, Peter, Tashi & Chamoli at the 195,00 feet high Yamnotri Pass viewing the Bander Punch Peak.

Peter, Tashi & Chamoli trekking down the lush green Harkidoon valley.

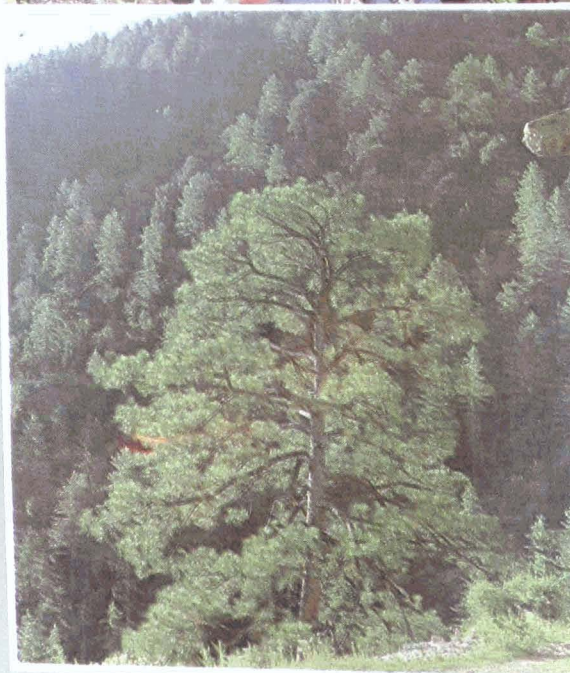


Peter Hillary and S.P. Chamoli spending night in a bivouac.



Shankri village in lush green Harkidoon valley.

Greame among the Ranwalta tribals; the only followers of Duryodhan.

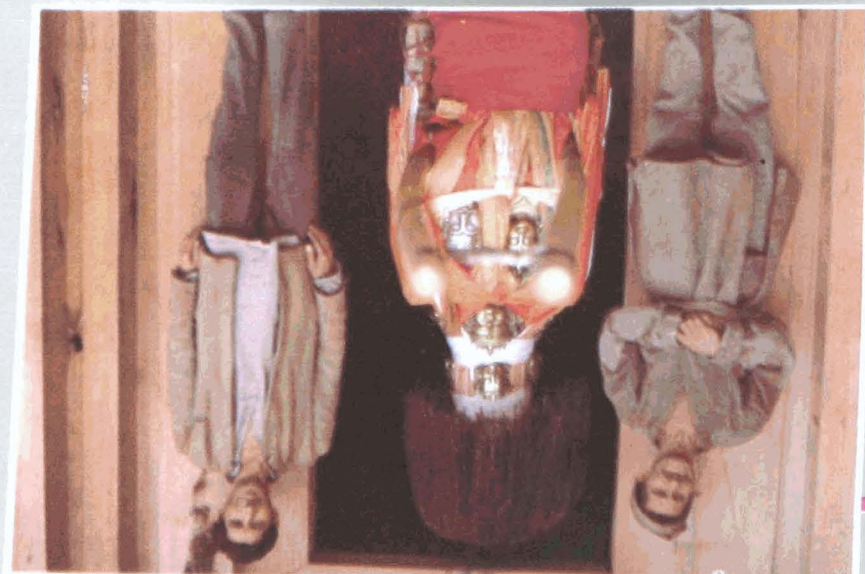


The thick pine forest of Tonse valley; one of the best Pine forests in Asia.

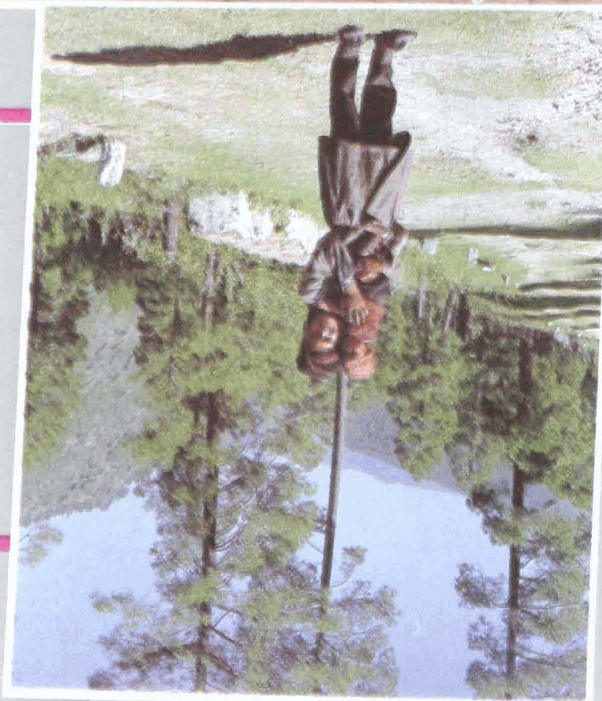
Mahasu Temple of
Dodar village.

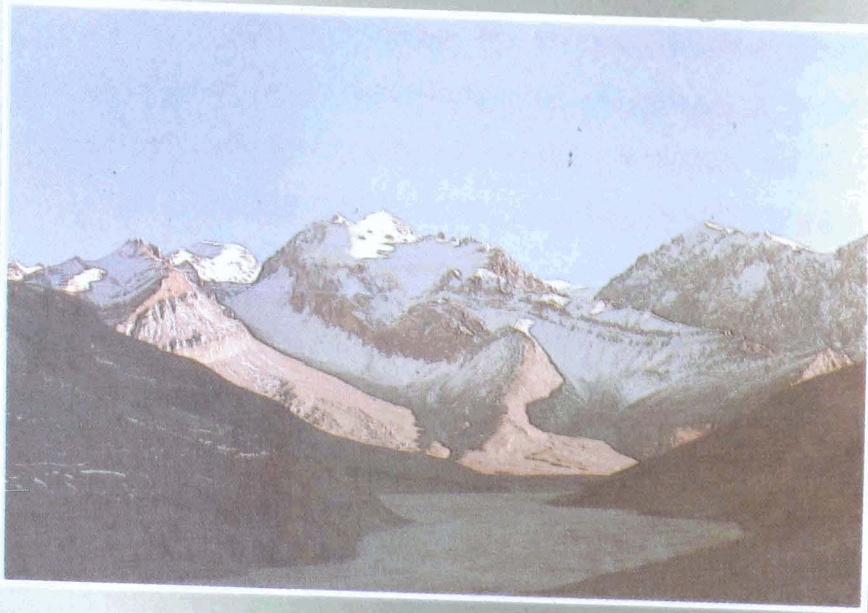


The presiding deity
of Mahasu, (Maha
Shiva, the Preserver,
Destroyer and
Regenerator trinity of
this valley of Gods.)



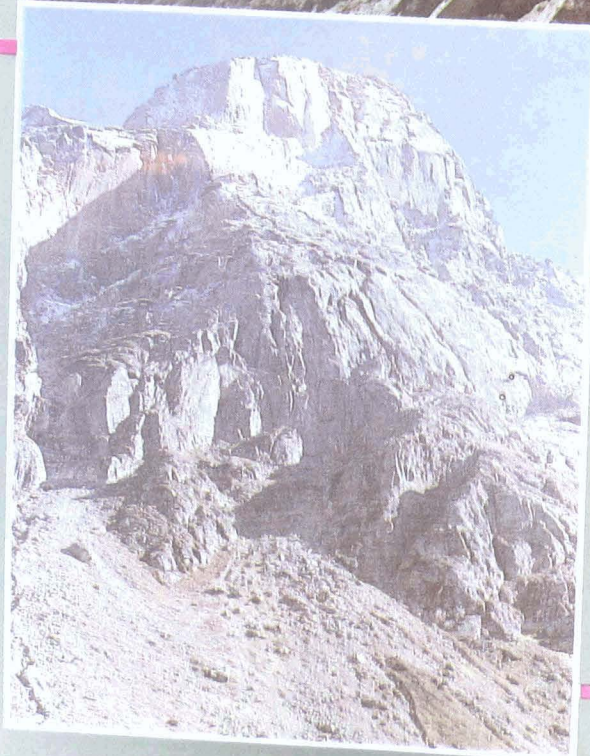
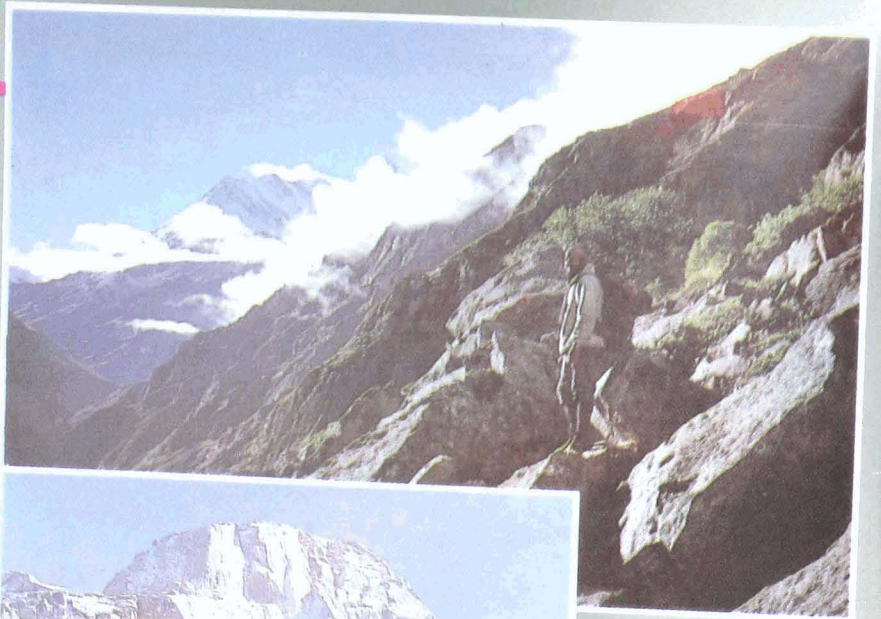
A Ranwala woman
of Naitwar with her
child.





Western Karakoram
ranges.

Trekking through
Parbati Valley.

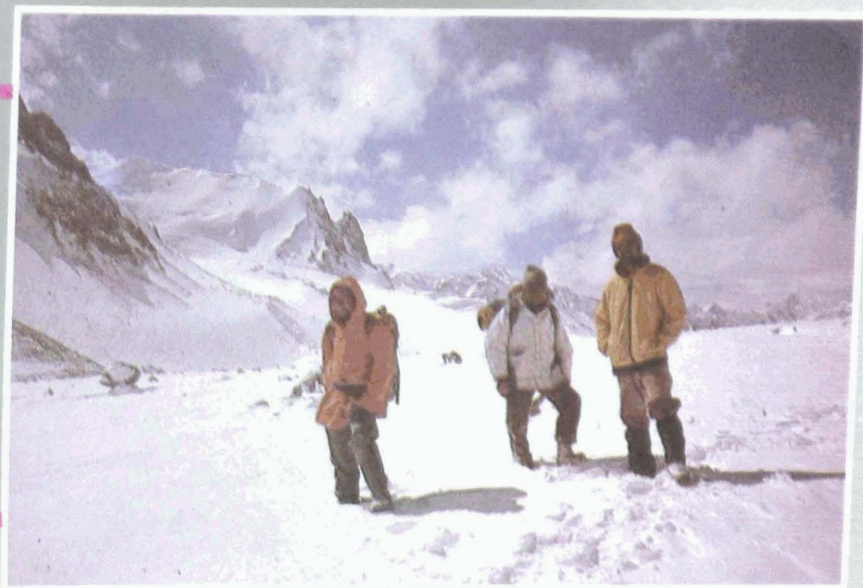


A beautiful
unnamed, majestic
rocky wall in Parbati
valley which
constantly allured us
by its majestic
views.



The Leh town with the Royal Palace in the background.

hamoli, Roy and
ashi over Saserla in
arakoram ranges of
Western Ladakh.

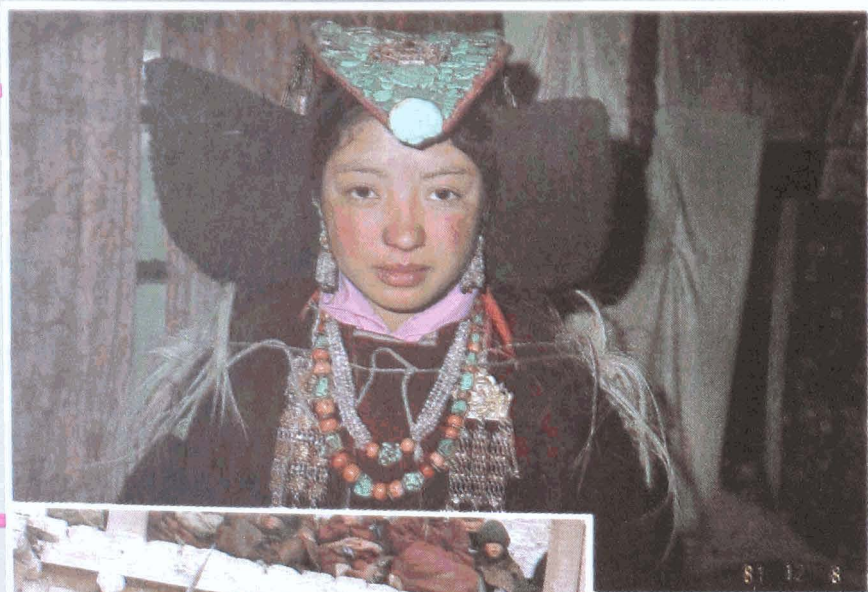


The cemetery of Daulat Beg at desolate Karakoram range being guarded by the I.T.B.P. known as "DAULAT BEG OLDI" in old silk route.

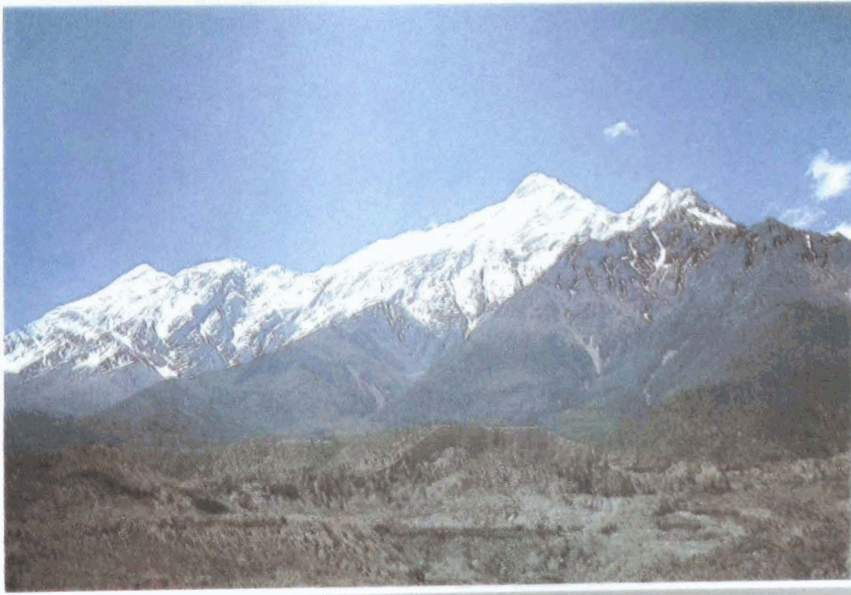


The Great Himalayan Traverse of 5000 km. long trek ended at historic Karakoram Pass by Hoisting the Indian National tricolour on 25th October 1981 at Karakoram Pass.

A Ladakhi woman wearing her precious turquoise jewellery.

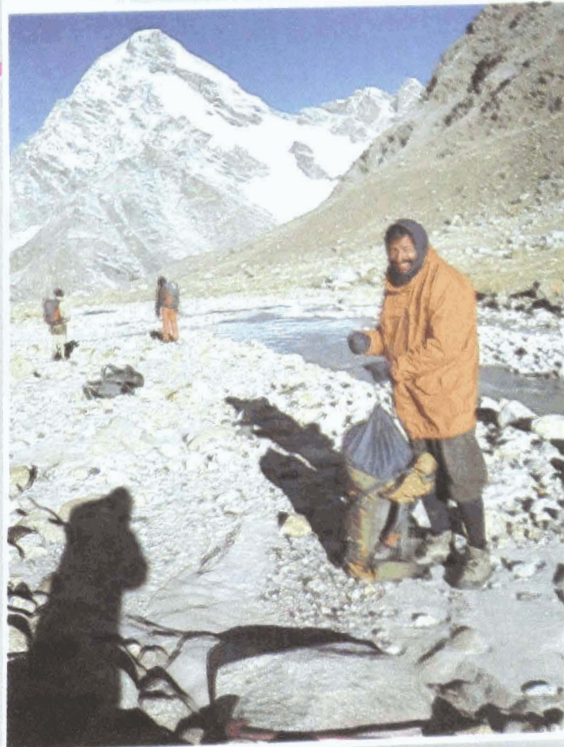


The Demon dance of famous Hemis Gompa in Ladakh.



The Manang valley,
North of Annapurna
range in Central
Nepal.

The wild double
humped camels
found in Nubra
valley of cold desert
of Ladakh (12,000
feet).

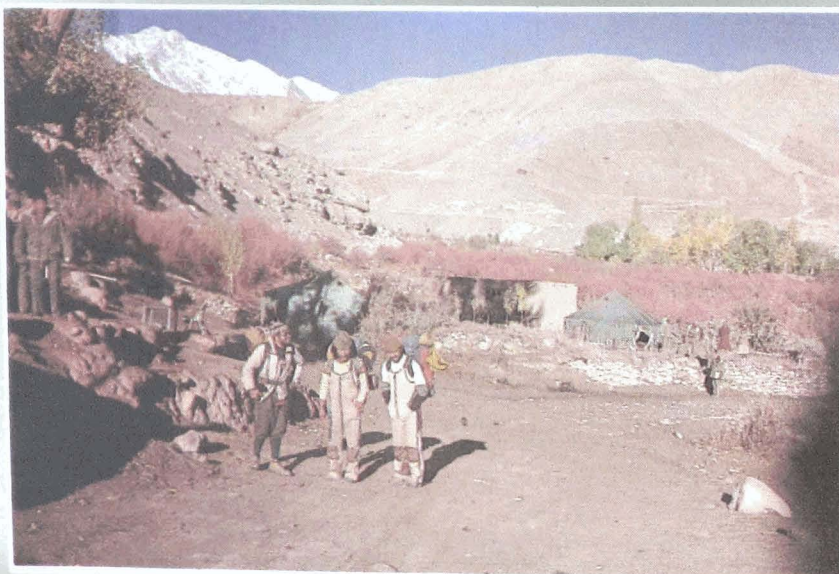


The Traverse Team
in Parbati Valley
after crossing the
Pin-Parbati Pass in
Himachal.



The Buddhist : A
Chorten in Ladakh.

Close view of
crowning jewel of
Garhwal - "The
Nanda Devi" at
sunrise.



Tashi, Roy and
Chamoli; the three
Indian members in
Panamik Nubra
valley of Ladakh.

Chapter 14

The lush valleys of the Yamuna & Tons

Now Greame, Peter, Tashi and I joined the Traverse group for the next section, and our support group consisted of Roy, Doug, Ann and Corrina. The next meeting point was fixed at Manali and we estimated to reach there within 12 to 14 days. On 29th August, early morning, the support team left by bus and we resumed the traverse of western Garhwal and Himachal.

Walking early morning through the peaceful streets of Uttarkashi town was pleasant upto Gangotri, along the metalled road. We turned left along the banks of Varuna, a tributary of Bhagirathi and followed the track towards Kelsu Bhan Koli, a village on way to Dodital, a tourist spot. Leaving the kacha road at Kalyani, we climbed towards Ainch pass through the green paddy fields. Gradually the climb became steeper and tougher. Beyond the Naugaon village, there was a straight ascent of about 5,000 ft. I suddenly developed cramps in my legs, I wanted to rest, so that my system could get adjusted. But Greame and Peter insisted on continuing. I found Tashi also did not cooperate. Our route now was a steady climb; continual landslips now marked the dark mountain-side and the roar of the stream gradually diminished. The track became precipitous and craggy as we

left the last rhododendrons behind and sighted the first alpine imulasin on the grassy banks. Blue and mauve flowers with silver green leaves, and the higher we climbed the thicker they became. We left the tree fern in the lower valleys; oak and chest-nut flourished between 7,000 and 10,000 ft. and we were beginning to see the last of these. On the grassy meadows were young larches. The trees in the valley were many and varied; larches grow plentifully at 9,000 feet though I was unable to recognise them at first. In some places rhododendrons were massed in the undergrowth of ferns. This valley was full of green pine forests. The rainy season was nearing its end and post monsoon heat and brightness had started appearing in these hills. The high ridge known as Thadol Danda, a watershed between the two mighty river systems—Yamuna and Ganga. The continuation of this ridge towards north east extends to the Banderpunch peak and we were now about to cross this watershed at about 11,000 feet height at Ainch pass. We reached the Ainch pass (3500 mtrs.), late in the evening and mists and clouds had obscured the view of the mountains. Soon it started raining. We descended about 500 yards below the pass and camped in a cattle shed as we were not sure about our orientation. It rained at night but we stayed comparatively with ease. Our peace and content was almost perfect as we lay round a fire of pine-wood which burnt like a torch, and gave off an oily smoke, smelling pleasantly of turpentine.

Yamuna valley is separated from Bhagirathi valley by Thadol Danda from where we saw the picturesque Yamuna valley on one side and sprawling Bhagirathi valley, on the other. The sun was setting behind the Jaunsar ranges far in the west, where as the valley below presented a salubrious atmosphere and a fascinating view of Yamunotri underneath the towering Banderpunch peak.

Next day we started early to take advantage of good weather. We climbed up the ridge and then saw the wide

view of Banderpunch and its surrounding peaks. The snow peaks were a magnificent sight in the morning now that the whole of the Banderpunch Range was visible in the distance, and as we gazed at them we were able to pick out the Swarga Rohini—a black peak on the western boundary, we had missed seeing on account of the low clouds. They were very much higher up in the skyline than we had expected them to be, and towered above the mountains and hills in the foreground, which glowed in the morning sun. This track was beautiful—recommended for trekkers. After crossing the pass we descended through the alpine meadow and enjoyed the hospitality of a Gujar (nomadic tribe) family of Kashmiri descent. These Gujar are very sturdy people made strong by their tough, rigorous life. Their women folk are beautiful. They live in the most natural surroundings and closest to nature. We now descended through the thick forests, and through the Liari-Phetari villages reached Hanuman Chatti on the banks of Yamuna.

Hanuman Chatti, is the road-head for Yamunotri shrine. A motorable road connects Yamuna valley from Saharanpur, Mussoorie and Rishikesh. Trekking up the pilgrim route along the beautiful Yamuna valley, we reached Yamunotri the same day. It was a long day, but I was now in better physical condition. Reaching Yamunotri from Uttarkashi next day was a very fast trek. We enjoyed the soothing and pleasant sulphur water bath at Yamunotri hot springs and enjoyed the traditional hospitality of Bengali Baba and the locals who knew me well as I grew up in the same Yamuna valley.

The inhabitants of this Yamuna valley are full of joy of life, steeped in tradition and living amidst great beauty of nature. These hard working people lead a busy life carrying heavy loads in their long cylindrical baskets, and spinning simultaneously on the wooden revolving spindle—Takli. Men and women often dance together in a big colourful circle

in measured rhythmic step. Festivals present a most colourful sight when women can be seen in their best attire, giggling with innocent pleasure. Their men folk carry idols of Gods, on resplendent crimson palanquins which are preceded by the drummers and trumpeters who tuck flowers in their round woollen caps.

Besides the main Yamuna valley there are smaller side valleys namely Rama Serai and Sarnaul, which house important villages like Purola and Surnaul. Some of the most beautiful temples are located here. From Nawgaon the valley stretches towards Purola. The people inhabiting the area in and around Yamuna valley are known as Ranwaltas. Their customs and traditions are kin to Jaunsaris.

Yamunotri is a beautiful Hindu shrine situated at the height of 11,000 feet just below Banderpunch peak. In its hot water spring with the boiling point temp, pilgrims cook rice and potatoes just by dipping them into the hot water, and take it as Parsad of Yamuna Mai. There are 2 famous temples at this shrine with 2 dharamshalas. The temple is a small wooden structure, containing an image of the Goddess Jamuna. The temple was destroyed by an avalanche and the rebuilding of the temple was being planned. The valley is lush green and the view all around is truly magnificent. The water of the stream is icy cold and it would be a mistake to think of a bath here for it would numb the body immediately.

Next to Gauri Kund is a cave that serves as a dwelling for ascetics some of whom stay on during winter. It is the lure of the mountains that makes them leave home. Near the ascetics' cave is a hot spring whose waters keep the cave warm even in winters. The prayers and offerings to Yamuna are made close by the river water. The place was apparently neglected. There were no proper lodges or tea-shops in spite of the heavy rush of pilgrims and visitors. The temple committee was also not organised properly and no proper civic body was looking after the administration of the place. There was direct

confrontation between the local Pandas and shopkeepers at this place. Other agencies are discouraged from making arrangements of stay for the heavy rush of pilgrims in order to exploit their helplessness.

The same day a group of Japanese climbing expedition to Swarga Rohini peak had also arrived there and were staying in Birla Dharmashala. We met them and shared our mountaineering and trekking experiences with them. Next day we were to cross the high pass over Yamunotri at 18,000 feet height to enter into Tons valley. This was a unfrequented and undefined, difficult pass which hardly few people used, so we took a local guide with us. We started climbing in the morning, keeping the general direction of our trek towards the pass through a steep ridge covered with thick grass, bushes and trees, taking the support of branches of the trees and bushes. Climbing through this thick undergrowth and rocky terrain was extremely difficult, what with heavy rucksacks of about 40 lbs on our backs. The thorny bushes tore at our clothes and we stumbled on boulders masked by the undergrowth. We were unable to make a selection of a suitable route from a distance as we could not see far enough ahead to select the best line. Our speed was slow for the day was hot. Our throats were unpleasantly dry. We kept struggling through these steep crags and thick undergrowth of thorny bushes, bamboo shoots and rhododendron bushes. Gradually the Alpine clearings started appearing beyond 13,000 feet at the end of the tree line. We started climbing through grassy meadows and over the steep ridge, which became a sharp knife-edged ridge having rocky crags on both the sides.

The clear sunshine, provided the panoramic view of green Yamuna valley upto far distance towards the west. But climbing through the tall grass was difficult and the ridge was slippery and dangerous. We were getting entangled, falling over the slippery patches. There was virtually no

track. We were maintaining the general direction towards the pass indicated by the local guide, over the rocky ridge. On the right Banderpunch was very close by and the snow covered patches were hardly few hundred metres away from us. Climbing this steep ridge, over dangerous stretches where a small slip could have endangered our lives by taking us plunging 3000 to 4000 feet down. We reached a level patch at the height of 15,000 feet. Our so called guide only indicated to us the general direction over the ridge, and returned to Yamunotri having been virtually of no use to us. We further negotiated a steep climb of about 1,000 feet and could see a depression around 1,000 feet above which was probable the pass. We reached at the top of the pass (18,000 feet), and were amply rewarded by the fascinating view of Swargarohini in front of us and the deep green Tons valley towards the west and wide open Yamuna valley in the south. All around us were scenes of grandeur, the scale of which was too vast for human conception. A glance at the view changed our gloomy outlook to one of thrilling exaltation. Banderpunch peak (20,220 feet) was glittering white towards our right. On other side of the pass, was a steep glacier having a wide Burgschund and deeply crevassed neve which was slippery and dangerous. We cautiously descended the glacier for about 1 km and slowly got down along the lateral moraines of the glacier towards the Har-Ki-Dun valley.

After a descent of about 3,000 feet at the base of the Ruinsara river, we saw a few Nepali labourers camping. They were out to collect medicinal herbs. It was these labourers who led us to the other side, where we camped under a big stone-cave. Here under this cave I could not help appreciating that in the company of a handful of the finest men in the world, we were accomplishing our Himalayan Traverse.

For us the test of endurance, was our will-power, the appreciation of beauty, that accompanies the striving. To forgo the settled comforts and routine of ordinary life and to

court discomfort and danger implies not a desire to turn things topsy turvy or to escape, but a sense of values that can take you away so far and so long from the contrasts of civilisation; a delight in small joys that can lift you above annoying trivialities, and delight in awareness of all that goes on around you without the accumulation of distracting side issues. It was a nice camping place under the big boulder where we could be accommodated easily. We cooked our dehydrated packets of macroni, cheese and noodles for the night and drank the Sustegin brew. Night was cold but still pleasant. I got up early next morning around 5 am and prepared morning tea and break-fast of tsampa and Sustelyte for the other 3 members as per my turn of cooking for the day. We were carrying MSR light weight stove weighing hardly 300 grams, foldable and easy to carry. By 6 o'clock, we all were up again after packing our rucksacks and meal, etc. It was a bright, sunny day, the sun-rays were glittering with golden colour over the Bander Punch which was hardly 1000 mtrs. away from us as the crow flies. We were feeling cold and reluctant to come out of our stone cave and by the time the valley was shining with smoothing warm sun-rays, we had started descending along the banks of Tons river.

This green alpine valley was full of multicoloured flowers, nasturtiums with bright yellow and red flowers, primulas, geraniums, white chrysanthemums, and wild roses of various hues, junipers, cedar and birch forests which were the best we came across in the entire Garhwal Himalayas; one of the most enchanting valley for trekkers and tourists. After trekking down for about 4 kms. we came to the junction point of the Har-Ki-Dun and Ruinsara valleys. We went to one of the nomad Gujars who welcomed us into his hut with big glasses of milk and butter, a welcome gesture. We enjoyed the variety of colourful flowers on the way and crystal clear water of the Supin valley.

Har-Ki-Dun Valley drains out the Swargarohini and

Supin river, draining out the water from Banderpunch, Black Peak and Swargarohini Peaks in the Tons Valley. Tons is famous for its green forests of the pine and deodar trees, one of the best forests in Asia. The Har-Ki-Dun meadow is well known for its beauty and luxuriant flowers.

The beautiful Har-Ki Dun valley was hardly 4 kms. away to the north from us but we had to miss this opportunity as we were heading faster towards the west. The inhabitants of this valley are known as Parwati though similar to their counterparts in Jaunsar and Rawain, yet claim their descent from the Kauravas. In fact they are the only people who worship Duryodhana and a number of temples are dedicated to Duryodhan. Every year Dhuryodhan's one-legged idol is taken out in procession in a palanquin from village to village where, on its arrival, a lot of merry making ensues. Another god who is assiduously worshipped is Pokhu or sheep god for he inspires them to steal sheeps and goats from nearby herds and feast on them! These people still believe in polyandrous society. They are superstitious and orthodox.

Trekking down the Supin along the known track through the dense deodar and pine forests was pleasant through Osla, Panwali and Taluka villages. From a distance, the flowering blood-red Ramdana fields contrasting with the greenery of the area, looked as if the whole landscape was painted in multi-colours. The houses in this valley were built with fine architecture, having conical, sharp sloped roofs covered with sleeper joints, 3 to 4 storied high covered varandahs with beautiful wood carvings. The top floors were invariably used for residential purposes; the lower storey, housing cows, goats and sheep, whereas, second and third floors were utilised for storage and living accommodation. Taluka village has an old, but beautiful forest rest house, on a mound facing Banderpunch in the north-east. We camped under the verandah of the forest rest house. We spent a comfortable night over the flat, levelled-stone varandah with a roof

covering our heads. We spread out our sleeping bags and mats and enjoyed this camping with the comforts of cooked meals from local tea shop.

I pondered, that with the road construction, this place will be soon linked with the so-called modern, civilized places of the country, and with it, will come the vices of the civilisation. The shops will boom with ready made garments and other modern amenities, disturbing the ecology and self-supporting economy of the area. The locals, still use their hand spun woollen garments and eat the food grown in their fields. They are quite content and spend their life happily in their simple natural ways. They mostly depend on the local resources, rearing their animals and cultivating their fields to meet most of their day-to-day requirements, except salt and sugar. But soon they will be exposed to the vagaries of modern civilisation and this present economic structure will be destroyed. People will vie with each other, in cut throat competition, for modern amenities. The local hand-spun woollen garments will be considered as inferior and use of synthetic fibre cloth and possessing plastic goods a sign of modernity. As a result they will strive for more economic resources and ultimately helpless natural resources like easily available beautiful forests will be the first victims of this modernity. The costly deodar and pine trees will be cut and wooden sleepers sold at cheaper rates smuggled out to the plains. As it happened in various parts of Garhwal Himalayas where large scale deforestation has similarly taken place. Little realising that although cutting and destroying the forests for such small, selfish gains does not take much time, but they are the irreplaceable wealth of the nature which has taken hundreds and hundreds of years to grow. Not only these forests add to the beauty of nature but also provide innumerable economic benefits to the people, but though the innocent villagers do understand the importance of these forests yet they become easy prey to the monetary temptations.

Will this unspoiled valley still remain the same even after a few decades to come? I have my doubts.

The sky was clear and a fair day was promised. As the sun came up, we watched from the varandah, the changing light up the valley's misty, tree-clad slopes looked golden in the morning light. Down the Tons valley, the sun was shining through clefts between the ridges making one bank of the river black and ominous and lighting up the tree-tops on the other with a soft, honey-coloured glow. At the end of the valley Swaragarohini and Banderpunch rose from the dark hills above the river, a gleaming sparkling mass, the snows on the summit melting in the morning sun. It seemed incredible to think that since we left the Banderpunch Base we have now descended to this height.

The view from Taluka Forest Rest House towards Har-Ki-Dun valley and Banderpunch peak was fascinating and awe-inspiring. The green deodar, fir and spruce forests were well spread on both the sides on the slopes of the valley, whereas the river-bed was mostly wide and flat. The Tons river makes serpentine loops with enchanting beauty at this place.

We started early, trekked along the newly constructed motorable road. On our way we passed through one of the best pine and deodar forests of Asia and reached the beautiful villages of Saur and Sankari. There was a forest rest house, school and few tea shops. The trekking was pleasant and enjoyable during post monsoon season through the thick green pine forest, white snow clad peaks in the back drop in the distant north.

We reached within a few hours at Netwar village in a fine confluence of Rupin and Supin rivers and an up-coming new township having few shops at the road head, school and medical facilities with few government offices. The unique Duryodhana temple, dedicated to the eldest brother of

Kauravas, made this small part of the region different from the rest of the country.

The forest rest house is located at an altitude of 4,600 feet from MSL. There are two suspension bridges for village of Naitwar, one over river Supin and the other over river Rupin. At Naitwar is an old temple of Pokhudeota made entirely of deodar wood and stone masonry of old architecture. Here the locals trace their descent either to the Pandavas or Kauravas. Presence of polyandrical marriage and worship of Duryodhana indicate that they are the descendants of Duryodhana. After the confluence of Rupin and Supin rivers at Netwar, now the river is baptised and is known as Tons river which flows down through the deep gorge that separates states of Himachal and Uttar Pradesh. The area is inhabited by the well-known tribals of Jaunsar-Bawar and are called Jaunsaries.

Jaunsar-Bawar forms the northern half of Dehradun district. They are a feudal and happy-go lucky people covering the hill-locked region of Chakarta and Purola tehsils, and Ranwai of Uttarkash district still steeped in the legacy of the fast-vanishing past which was till recently untouched by the development taking place in the plains. This area had certainly some link with the ancient cultural waves which swept over this part of the country, particularly during Vedic, Mahayan, Kushan and Gupta periods. The inhabitants follow the same old customs even today, distinctly different from those pursued by their counterparts in Garhwal, Kumaon and in Himachal. Their physical features, customs, traditions and dress are distinctly different. Even the art and architecture has its unique features with profound use of wood-work.

Polyandry is still common among them. Women are the backbone of family economy, it is they who collect fire wood, fetch water and have to bear the brunt of social insinuations after attending to the daily chores of life while the men-folk normally gossip, sit idle or drink. An interesting aspect of a

Jaunsari and Ranwalta wedding is that the bride goes to the bridegroom's house where the marriage ceremony is performed. The bride's party is feasted followed by lot of merry-making.

Jaunsaries are fond of dressing up and during festivals they wear Thalka or Lohiya which is like a long coat. Thangel folds like a tight fitting trouser. Digwa or cap is the traditional Jaunsari head-wear made of woollen cloth. Women wear Ghagra, Kurti and Dhoti. They love ornaments. The most important festival of the Jaunsaries is Magh mela. The Jaunsari festival is an entirely religious affairs connected with Mahasu Devta when the deity is taken out for a religious bath to the nearby river. Another interesting fair is Maun fair which is wholly connected with the catching of fish. Bark of Tejbal tree is collected and after grinding into powder, is thrown into the water for it has a stunning effect on the fish. The pivot of their religious life is Kanol where the Mahasu temple is situated.

We crossed the suspension bridge again and trekked across the overhanging cliffs, quite close to the river. As we were quite close to the river we could hear the roar of the water over the rocks—a constant accompaniment to all the other sounds of the valley.

The river was calmer here, and there were no steep water falls. A pink light was reflected in the water from rose coloured cloud in the sky and the hills reflected diminishing shades of purple. The banks of the stream were strewn with stupendous boulders, great boulders, great blocks of stone, some of which measure 20 or 30 feet across. The rainy season precipitate great avalanches of moisture-logged earth and rocks to the swirling stream beneath. We crossed Supin and headed along Rupin valley towards Dodra Kunwar via Sewa Dogri. The Rupin river was crystal clear with blue water alluring all of us to have a cold water bath in the river. Being low altitude only upto 4,000 feet we were experiencing scorching heat while trekking across the grass and bushes

along the route. This cold water bath was soothing and refreshing.

Rupin valley is full of tall pine forests, still untouched by exploitation. Trekking was enjoyable in this remote area. We reached Sewa Dogri village, the last village of Uttarkashi district of Uttar Pradesh.

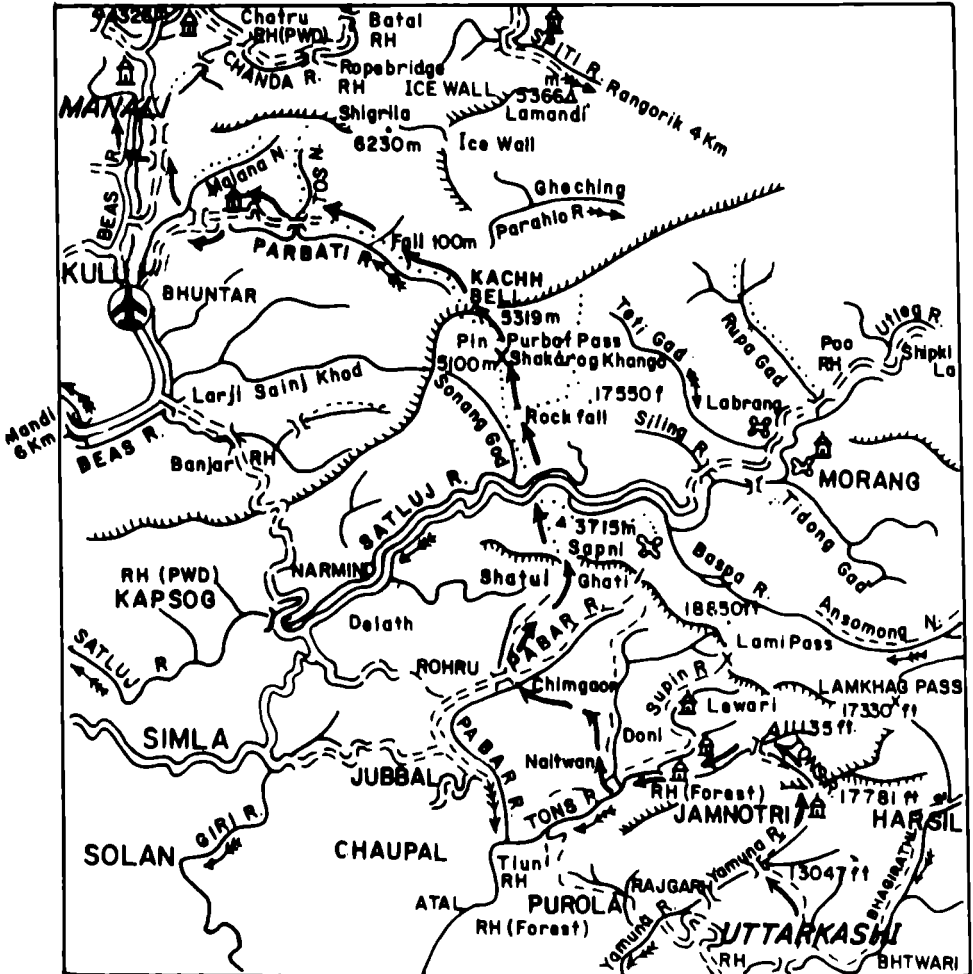
Chapter 15

Across Changsil Pass into Kinnaur

On 3rd September, we entered Himachal, through the villages of Dodar-Kunwar. Dodar is a considerably large village with grand multi-storied stone houses, located on the UP-Himachal border. The temple of Mahashu Devta, is the centre of attraction. 'Mahashu' means 'Mahashiva' and is the presiding deity of the area. This beautiful temple is located in the heart of the village and has a beautiful 4 storeyed structure. The deity is kept decorated in costly velvet and multi-coloured embroidered garments. The people are friendly, more like the Kinnauris. They cultivate potatoes, millet, wheat, buckwheat, etc. and rear sheep and goats. The locals of this remote area were self-sufficient in food grains and clothings. So far the rays of development have not yet penetrated into this area and one could see the old unspoiled cultural impact in all spheres of life. The houses, constructed in different architecture pattern, have an elegant and decorative look; they are 3 to 4 storeys high, built with chiselled, clean-cut stones with deodar sleeper joints. The roof tops are with steep conical gradient, covered with clean stone slates. The top storey has beautiful wood carving and balconies.

There is a forest track from Dodar to Changsil pass which remains open for 6 months in the summer, being the shortest route from Simla to Dodar, but in winter months the pass remains closed, covered under heavy snow and all

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM UTTARKASHI TO MANALI



communications including postal services are carried on through the long route via Netwar of Uttar Pradesh to this remote area of Himachal Pradesh. We trekked to Changsil pass, through the thick forests of oak, pine, deodar, juniper and birch trees upto 12,000 feet and then the alpine grassy meadow upto the top of the pass. In summer the nomadic Gujars and shepherds camp, over the Changsil Range at 13,000 feet. The deodar, fir and blue pine forests upto 10,000 feet height are magnificent and unspoiled, with lasting impact. The pass was a beautiful flat depression over which Changsil range stretches north-south. The grand view of the entire Himachal with of the Dhaula Dhar range in the far distance, was superb and fascinating. On the other side, in the Pawar valley was a wide motorable road visible on its right flank towards Simla. Changsil is one of the most beautiful easy passes in the Himalayas which could be considered as a paradise for a variety of alpine flowers.

We descended down a well marked track down the ridge, full of thick forests of blue pine and deodar. We came down to Tigri village, at the bottom of the valley, situated on the banks of Pawar river, well connected by motorable road to Simla. The village is situated in the fertile valley, surrounded by golden paddy fields, having horticulture and sheep and goat rearing as their main sources of earning. The distinct impact of horticulture was visible on the economy of the people, with many apple orchards developed in the recent past. People have started adopting modern means of living with the use of electricity.

We trekked by the right side of Pawar river along the motor road for about 8 kms. downwards upto Chirgaon village, at the head of a fertile valley. This is the junction point of Raul valley from the left, originating from Shule pass (17,000 feet) which is an unfrequented and difficult pass for entering into Sutlej valley and was the shortest route towards the west for entering into the other side. Locals consider this

pass as a difficult and challenging route. We followed Raul valley. A 15 M.W. hydel power house over Raul river was under speedy construction.

We were trekking along the old track on which big boulders were falling from the road construction higher up. We were surprised on hearing the peculiar bugle call a familiar tune of an army camp, but looking around astonished, we saw the sentries blowing these bugles just to give warning for stopping the construction work on the road so that the people could walk below and cross over to the other side. We were trekking with good speed, to cover up this section of western Himalayas quickly, on an average, trekking 30 to 35 kms. a day, even missing our lunch at times.

With its towering hills, tinkling streams, terraced fields and thick forests, Himachal is a land of breath-taking natural beauty.

We saw local annual fair in Raul village, being celebrated with merry-making and folk dances by the villagers to welcome the harvesting season. It is customary to welcome all outsiders and treat them as their guests on such occasions, but since we had to cross the difficult and dangerous Shuttle pass (17,000 feet) next day, we decided to go ahead as near as possible to the pass. On our old map the route was not marked properly so we took a local guide and trekked through the terraced fields and then entered into thick forests of oak, birch and fir and then through alpine meadows at approximately at the height of 11,000 feet. The shepherds and locals were bringing baskets full of Brahma-Kamal flowers, grown above 14,000 feet for the worship of the local deity at the local fairs. It is a custom among the locals, that rare varieties of alpine flowers from these high meadows are reverently offered to the local deities in this season, an example of harmonious combination of the nature's gift, with religious faith. It has been a long day and we were tired, when suddenly we were challenged by 2 ferocious looking sheep

dogs, guarding the shepherds camp of 2 small tents on a flat patch, full of soft alpine grass and flowers all around. We were welcomed by the shepherds when we joined them for the night and enjoyed their hospitality. These shepherds are really true adventurers, constantly facing the dangers of the Himalayas, looking after their herds, enjoying happily nature's gifts and beauty which others cannot even dream of.

When our local guide refused to go further, we persuaded one of the shepherds to show us the track to Shuttle pass. We were trekking across the gradual alpine meadow at the height of 13,000 feet. The trekking was pleasant and enjoyable, with the panoramic view upto far distant ranges covered with green forests and wide valleys. Though it was early September, autumn had started showing its signs and the water started freezing, grass covered with frost and we could feel the cold in the morning. Though we wanted to cross over the difficult Shuttle pass and the same day enter Suttlej valley, but our shepherd guide, refused to accompany us further, and he showed us the general direction of the pass. Apparently he also did not know the pass and may never have seen it before. We continued to climb but could not find the pass and got stranded. We reached upto the top of a ridge about 18,000 feet but it was steep down with a sheer cliff on the other side which was impossible to negotiate. So we descended for about 1,000 feet, hungry and dead tired. We decided to camp at the location instead of exerting ourselves beyond our limits. We levelled the ground, pitched our nylon tent, dejected as our poor maps were giving us trouble and we could not rely on them. We were short of kerosene oil, had meagre ration with us and therefore had to economise on all our resources. It was necessary for us to find the pass next day, otherwise, we could not afford to stay for longer period for which we were not prepared mentally nor had we catered for any basic needs. Greame, Peter, Tashi and I, all 4 cramped in one single tent, and kept on discussing the possible route at this height of about 16,500 feet.

There was no comparison to the panorama which opened before us high in the sky, glinting in the morning. It caught first one snow clad peak and then another, sending off piercing rays of light from hanging glaciers and minarets of melting snow. Misty hills, as yet untouched by the morning glow, reach down to soft folds in the still dim regions below. A transcendent wonder filled the valley before us, as the sun slowly illuminated mountain after mountain and gradually filled the deep crevices in the hill sides with light. The clouds draped some of the dark slopes while we watched the shapes and colours changing and the sun mounting in the heavens.

We packed up early morning after a cup of tea and started climbing. Tashi and Creame in one group and Peter and I, the other group and followed 2 possible routes to the pass and after about an hour's climb, Tashi was lucky to see the cairns, from a distance, which were a sure indication of the pass. We crossed over big boulders and a small glacier. We had some difficulty in negotiating the steep loose boulders which covered the ridge. By about 11 am we were on the top of the Shuttle pass. The view of far distant ranges across Satluj valley towards north-west, was superb. We could see the ranges upto Lahul and Spiti in the west and towards Shipkila in the north. Some of the peaks bordering Tibet were also visible. But on the other side of the pass there was a steep descent with a big glacier dangerously crevassed just in front of us.

After taking a few photographs, we descended along the sharp ridge and had to take each step cautiously as a wide open crevasse and deep gap of a burgschund were yawning before us. We crossed over the burgschund, though with some difficulty and risk. Over the glacier, again it was slippery and too steep with frozen ice and burglassed slope making it more dangerous. We made use of our ice axes, cautiously walked over the glacier and descended about 1,000 feet, we crossed the left bank of the glacier, trekking over lateral

moraine ridge. Within an hour we descended to the alpine, grassy meadow of Sutluj valley. We did have some difficulty while walking through the thick rhododendron bushes but then we came across the sheep track and followed it. This valley dropped steeply and joined the Sutluj valley down below near Wangtu, but we maintained the height by following the left side track through the thick fir, juniper and the deodar forests. We headed downwards with faster speed, and reached the first habitation. We were hungry, badly in need of tea and food, but in turn, we got apples in the first dwelling which were welcome at that time.

We continued over the forest track and passed through orchards full of apples, enjoying the fruit as much as we could eat. By evening we reached a small township of Nachar. We enjoyed the luxury of a few bottles of beer and delicious food which we rightly deserved after a long strenuous trek like this. We were now in the Sutluj valley in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh—another landmark of our Himalayan Traverse.

Kinnaur is the North-East Frontier district of Himachal Pradesh. Before independence, Kinnaur formed part of the erstwhile Bhushhar State. As a result of reorganisation of border areas, Kinnaur district was formed on 1st May, 1960, for speedy development of this inaccessible area. Kinnaur is bounded on the north by Spiti valley, on the east by Tibet, on the west and south by Simla district and Uttarkashi district of Uttar Pradesh.

The entire district is a semi-arid zone, and as such there is hardly any rainfall above 2,450 mtrs. The average rainfall varies from 10" to 45". Sutluj river enters the district from the north-east and leaves at its western end. In its passage through Kinnaur, river Sutluj crosses successively three great mountain ranges, the Zanskar mountains, the Great Himalayas and the Dhauladhar. To the east of Sutluj river the valleys are narrow,

while in the west the valleys are wide and open. The significant tributary streams and rivers that flow into the main Sutluj river successively from the south.

The standard of literacy in this part was low but in recent years the government had made every effort to increase educational facilities and introduced compulsory primary education, as a result of which the percentage has increased considerably.

The people of Himachal, particularly the tribes, were left alone during the British regime but after independence due to communication through roads, automobiles, post offices and banks, a change had taken place. Modernisation, though slow is influencing the hill culture, their tradition and mode of living too. Due to spread of education and contact with outsiders the educated Himachalis have started to break away from their age-old traditions.

The crests of three mountain ranges, i.e. Zaskar mountains, Great Himalayas and the Dhauladhar lie generally in perpetual snow with many peaks rising between 5,000 mtrs. and 6816 mtrs. The highest peak in Zaskar mountains is Leo Pargil (6791 mtrs.) and the other peaks which overlooked Mainang pass between Ropa and Spiti valleys and Kinner Kailash (6473 mtrs.). The Kinner Kailash rises from the base of Sutluj river at 1,900 mtrs. to the spectacular height of 6437 mtrs. in front of Kalpa. The third mountain range Dhauladhar is some what lower.

There are seven major valleys in Kinnaur district - Sutluj, Ropa, Bhabha, Tidong, Baspa (also known as Sangla valley), Nessang and Manirang valleys.

The Sutluj valley is the largest one. The eastern bank of the river which has a north-western layout contains comparatively more plain land. Except in some portions, extensive vine-yards, thriving crops and orchards of apricot, apple and grapes are found in the entire area.

By virtue of its elevation, the district enjoys a temperate climate with a long winter stretching from October to May and a short summer from June to September. Only the lower area of Sutluj valley and its subsidiary, the Baspa valley receives monsoon rains while the upper areas of the valley are mostly in rain shadow area with dry Tibetan type of climate. Most of the big villages of Kinnaur district lie along the banks of the main valley of river Sutluj, while a few small villages nestle inside the main subsidiary valleys. The intervening valleys are extremely avalanche prone. The crest of the three mountain ranges that encompass Kinnaur district are generally covered with perpetual snow through out the year. The ranges are full of craggy rocks of gigantic heights and spurs having perilous gradient.

Generally the mountains on the lower side are invariably well covered with a thick blanket of forests. Whilst the opposite ones are more gentle sloped, not so well clothed with vegetation and afford rich pasture. The north western side of the mountains are remarkably precipitous and present huge boulders rock and cliffs of varied forms.

The results of old contact with Tibet are still visible in the fairs and festivals and other customs of people of the remote areas. It is, however, interesting to note that the customs have undergone a change. With the increase in the number of visitors from the plains, the younger generation are rapidly taking to modern ideas and changes. The Kinners are honest in their dealings.

The families are usually small. The joint family system is still prevalent in this area. Polyandry prevails in the villages but is rapidly losing ground to monogamy. The inhabitants are generally fair complexioned, well built, tough and muscular. Buddhism and Hinduism both are practised. A vast majority of Kinners are Buddhists under the influence of Tibetans and they have adopted this religion especially in the northern half of the Chini sub-division. They also believe in

various Hindu gods like Badrinath, Maheshwar and Bhagwati but their worship is catholic to a degree. Wine is offered to the Devtas and goats are sacrificed in the name of local deities.

Among the arts of Himachal Pradesh, painting is most popular, the central theme of which is love. It is said that when Aurangzeb in his puritanical zeal, was driving out artists from his court, they found refuge in the small principalities of Himalayan foothills. The influx of artists from the Mughal court, therefore, helped to strengthen and develop the artistic tradition of these lands. Himachal crafts include exquisitely designed shawls of Kinnaur, baskets and earthenware of Lahul, Spiti, the pattu from Kullu.

The hill people are frank, honest, hospitable and peace loving. The Himachalis "have derived their peaceful nature from eternal snows, from the ups and downs of the terrain they have got their hard working nature and perseverance; from ancient Rishis and Sages they have inherited their calm and imbibed their democratic spirit". The life of the people is simple, placid and hard too. But they have a rich cultural legacy, a treasure of legends and myths which make an interesting study.

The racial features of the people reveal that there have been inter-marriages among some of the tribes. They are also an admixture of the Indo-Aryan and the Mangolian races from the north-western borders of the country. As time rolled on and the environment changed, they moved from plains and went to these hills where they settled in their present abodes. Their names appear in the ancient Sanskrit literature, Puranas and Mahabharata.

The colourful fairs and festivals of Himachal provide healthy recreation and marketing places for its people. There are many fairs held round the year and we could watch the colourful hill people at their joyous best. Most of these fairs of Himachalis are held in commemoration of some event the

origin of which is lost in the legends. Among the most important religious fairs are at the colourful Renuka lake near Nahan. Shivratri fair in Kulu, Mandi and other areas and the Dussehra in Kulu.

Folk dances are an essential part of the life of the tribals and dances are a means of enjoyment, reaffirming social unity and occur on all occasions which have some social bearing.

Polyandry is commonly observed in Himachal Pradesh. The Himachalis practice the fraternal polyandry and patriarchal system of inheritance. All the brothers of the bridegroom are considered automatically the husbands of the bride. Man occupies superior position as against woman in their socio-economic set up. At the time of marriage among Lahulis, the younger brother of the bridegroom presents one rupee to the bride's mother and thus establishes his right as a second husband. Polyandry helps the people of Kinnaur to perpetuate the name of their family, and safeguard the property from fragmentation. The polyandrous tribes of Himalayas associated the institution of polyandry with that of the Pandavas who are believed to have lived in polygamous system. However, such marriages are on the decline.

The Kinners also celebrate their festivals with all gaiety. Baishakhi or Beesh is celebrated on the 1st of Baishakh. The Goddess is brought out of the temple and a fair is held in the courtyard of the temple. They gather in colourful dresses, drink and dance. Annual worship at Koshme, Shukud, Sazo, Deeval, Flaich, Dakhraini and Sukar are some of the festivals celebrated on various occasions. The Buddhists celebrate Shivratri. As the fairs and festivals are associated with the region, there are occasional sacrifices of animals too. Chandika demands too many sacrifices from them. The Kinners believe that as she is the well wisher of her people it is in their interest to please her by sacrificing animals. She is really a benevolent tyrant.

The Kinners believe in evil spirits such as ghosts, raksas, khunkch, etc. It is believed that Banchir, the ghost who lives in a forest of kail (blue pine) tree, can assume any shape of ghost man, jackal, monkey and is believed to be a very cruel spirit. A man who commits heinous sin during his life turns into a ghost known as raksas and it is supposed that he will never get salvation. Khunkch is believed to be a house spirit who can be passed on to an other house by selling one's animals or marrying one's daughter. A puja is done to ward of the evil spirits.

In the bright sunshine of Sept. 7, Greame, Peter, Tashi and I dressed in multi-coloured suits, heavy ruck sacks weighing nearly 30 to 35 lbs on our backs, descended from Nachar down the steep gorge of Sutluj valley to the Hindustan Tibet road, a national highway carved out through the steep rocks of Sutluj valley. We dropped nearly 4000' within 2 kms.

While trekking on the motor road, we were passed by two of our ITBP vehicles. I was differently clad in trekking dress, grown a long beard on my face, so the driver did not recognise me and in spite of my waving a lot he did not stop the vehicle and passed by considering us to be hippies trekking in the wild. Such was our physical appearance that no one could recognise us, unless purposely introduced. In these nine months, we had changed considerably. The extra fat had slashed down and we all were reduced to skeletons. Having grown long beards, and attired in New Zealand made garments and colourful rucksacks, we were completely different than the rest of the people. I was disappointed when these 2 vehicle did not stop as I wanted to send some important message to Kulu to my colleagues. We trekked down about 13 kms. over this highway up to Nigulsari, where we were to cross the mighty Sutluj, to the other side.

As one steep slope after another got left behind, and we climbed down lower and lower, the river looked larger, the

water sounded louder through the denser air in the contracted valley. We stumbled down another length and reduced the height by a hundred yards, and then by another and thus gradually approached the great Sutluj river. The view contracted as the mountains rose even higher. Now the roar of the river filled all the valley.

Due to its deep canyons and gorges, the Sutluj valley remained inaccessible, with poor communication system. Specially the valley had only few bridges as the wide span of the turbulent Sutluj had always posed a problem for bridging its both sides. We wanted to cross over to the other side of Sutluj but there was no bridge, only a single cable rope improvised trolley, pulled by the people. On this narrow ledge Sutluj was about 300 feet below, flowing fast with its torrential currents. The single rope trolley was unsafe and dangerous. Moreover, to our dismay, there was no one at the other side to help us or to pull us towards the other side. It was a challenge to us. It reminded me of the account of old travellers like Capt. Rawling, Major Ryder and Sven Heden, who launched their Trans Himalayan Expeditions between 1904 and 1907. We were facing exactly the similar situation as existed near 75 years before, in this part of the region and described by Sven Heden in his book:

“I lay myself down on the bridge platform and carefully hitch myself toward to the edge. Just below me tumbles the mighty river, one of the giants of the Himalayas. Immediately below the stone pier two colossal boulders have fallen into the bed, and between them and right rocky wall the river is compressed into a space of perhaps twenty feet. The whole Sutluj seems here changed in to a swirling jet which bores through the mountain with marvellous energy. The white foaming volumes seems to dive under the boulders and disappear, only to shoot up again in boiling bells and vaulted hillocks of water. The whole is like a gigantic boiling cauldron. The noise is like growling thunder, it reverberates among the

cliffs, it is deafening to the ear, and one feels dizzy, and under its influence as same magic power that playfully attracts one down to the flakes of foam under which the Satluj dances raging furiously and white with wrath. I can hardly help feeling frightened. What if the beams now gave way while I am lying here gazing into the depth? What if the cable parted with a loud report as I hang over the river?"

There was no one on the other side of the mighty Satluj to pull the rope across. We shouted in the hope, that there may be some one across but it was in vain. So Peter, the youngest member of the team, enthusiastically, with the help of a long stick, pulled the rope and the one seat trolley up to the corner. Greame helped him to ride the trolley and got into it. Within seconds the trolley was hanging in the middle till it was dangling between the mighty Satluj and the blue sky, where our comrade was suspended over the chasm. So far the trolley has moved with its gravitational force, but now the struggle for life started. Peter had to pull himself up towards the gradually slanting wire against gravity, which demanded a lot of stamina but it was a struggle for survival. On such occasions one gets tremendous stamina which gives extra strength. That helped Peter to pull himself upto the platform over the other edge of the Satluj and he was on safe ground. Now it was comparatively easier and Greame crossed in second turn, in similar way, but helped by Peter in pulling his trolley from the other side.

Now, it was my turn. Tashi helped me to sit on the trolley, then, it began to glide and I am suspended beyond the brink and seeing the greyist hollow of the river rolling beneath me. It seemed an age. It was only about 200 feet. I was dangling between heaven and the murderous Satluj. I never entertained such great respect for this grand, majestic river as at that moment and suddenly I realised the meaning of the Chortens, pyramids and cairns on the bank of the bridges- those cries for help against the uncontrollable powers of nature and

those prayers in stones to inexorable gods. My eyes fell on the gigantic white cauldron boiling in the abyss below. Only the droning of the thundering water could be heard, repeated every moment.

I swung about at every jerk increased by the pull on the rope, till only 2 yards to the edge, I moved with a comfortable feeling of security as I glided over the pier. The two Kiwis gave me a hearty welcome and congratulated me on having performed the short aerial journey without mishap. Now I joined them to watch Tashi cross over the cable trolley and helped others to pull him up to the corner and we congratulated Tashi also.

The bright, frothy water of Satluj rushed in reckless rapids over white, round, smoothly polished boulders, hills, whirling and seething as if it could not get down quickly enough to the river bed.

We climbed up the steep cliffs to Chhota Khamba village. The mighty Satluj has carved out a sharp escarpment, forming a deep gorge. Peter was about 15 minutes ahead of us when he entered the Chhota Khamba village, but he had an encounter with a few drunkards who gathered for a local fair celebration in this village, from neighbouring villages Bara Khamba and Shorang. Local boys collected around Peter, mistaking him for a hippy and wanted to chase him away. Peter got frightened and started running down with the boys chasing him. It was a nightmarish and unexpected situation when some of the old people intervened. Due to language difficulty Peter could not communicate properly, and he got frightened. We saw Peter returning in a frightened and demoralised state towards us. He was very nervous. He narrated this strange episode to us and did not want to stay in the village. On seeing our group of 4 people, the gangsters fled. No wonder we were looked upon with such suspicion by these mountain people, due to our funny dress. We found

the villagers few hundred yards away. We were invited to sit down in one of the varandahs and offered apples and cucumbers which were in abundance. We moved ahead where few people were dancing in a group in a courtyard of one of the house. They invited us to stay with them for the night and join them for folk dances. Tashi and I intended to stay with them and join the fair, but Peter and Greame were suspicious and distrustful due to the unfortunate episode. We moved ahead in the dark inspite of the habitation in sight. We were totally exhausted, there was no proper camping site, only lots of bushes and tall grass in pitch dark. With difficulty we cleared the bushes and camped near the small stream under a tree, spreading a single nylon fly of our tent, and slept, only contented with few biscuits and brew as our dinner of the night. Morning greeted us with bright sunshine. We wanted to confirm our trek towards Pin-Parbati Pass before moving on as this was the last habitation enroute. In a small shepherded house we found only three cattle; the people had abandoned the house - could be, they were frightened after seeing us approaching this lonely place. We continued ahead; gradually, the track disappeared under thick bushes in the forest, till it vanished completely therefore we could not continue further. We were compelled to return to Shorang, the last village of Kinnaur district, adjoining to Pin valley. We stayed with the family of Shyam Nand Negi, who welcomed us and treated us their guests. They looked after us well as per the local customs. The old lady of the house looked after the family; one of her son was a Range Officer, two beautiful daughters, well educated, were staying with their grand mother. Both girls were fair complexioned and sharp featured, true to their Kinnaur beauty known since ancient times. The Kinner Kanyas (girls) were famous for their beauty, and find mention in old scriptures, when they were used as poison girls (Vish Kanyas) by the kings and royal families to overcome their enemies, by using the seductive talents of these beautiful women. This family was in the know of previous day's

episode at Bara Khamba village, and were apologetic about the misbehaviour of the miscreants. In fact this family looked after us so well that the Kiwis immediately changed their opinion and praised the locals for their affectionate behaviour and hospitality.

One of the festivals known as Fulaunchi (Flower picking) is celebrated in September, and ideal time for the alpine flowering in this region. The local deity "Ushadevi" is decorated with fragrant multicoloured flowers. The young girls collect multicoloured alpine flowers and offer worship with rare variety of fragrant flowers. People have complete faith in the deity, obtain her blessings for the happiness of their family. Ushadevi is supposed to be the daughter of "Hidimba" of Manali, having 14 brass idols of the deity. People collect from far away places and then trek to distant high meadows to collect rare variety of fragrant and multicoloured high altitude flowers. Brahm Kamal, blue poppy are offered as garlands to the deity. The other important festival is Raj Diwali and Baisakhi in which men, women all alike drink the local brew and dance to the tune of rhythmic drum beat, to the accompaniment of local musical instruments.

Chapter 16

Over the Pin-Parbati to Malana & Manali

On 9th September morning, we said good bye to Shri Shyama Nanda and his family of Shorang village, where within a day, we became a part of their family. The old lady of the house ensured that we all carry more eatables, dry fruits and apples for our onward journey. She knew very well the challenging trek facing us ahead. The locals did not have much details about this route to Pin-Parbati valley, so they suggested that we should first enter into Pin valley, then to Spiti valley, and then on to Leh. The inner line passes over the Pin Parbati pass and Pin valley falls within inner line area where technically Kiwi members were not supposed to enter being a restricted area. The locals did not know much about the Pin-Parbati pass, and tried to dissuade us from such a venture for entering into Parbati valley.

We followed the Shorang Gad, passed a dense forest with thick under growth, track virtually non existent, following a general direction towards the pass. These forests were completely virgin, due to there inaccessible approach. We reached Searchpati, an alpine meadow at the height of 13,000 feet where shepherds of Shorang were camping. Untimely storms and snow fall had caused heavy loss to their flocks

and there was a dump of dead goats and many of the animals were very sick.

Rain was coming down in sleets; clouds closed in from all directions. If the weather continued like this, what would it be like tomorrow; if rain here, means snow there at the tops? We kept on discussing the point.

Searchpati, at the height of 14,000 feet was a good alpine meadow having a beautiful gentle slope with a stream at one end, making it a good camping site. The stone caves under big boulders provided a good shelter to the shepherds. We camped under a huge boulder with a spacious cave where firewood was stocked by the shepherds. Handicapped by poor maps and unable to correctly work out our timeschedule, to reach the inhabited area of Parbati valley, only with 2 kg of rice among 4 members to last only for 2 days - certainly a very unsatisfactory state. But we had our limitations of carrying heavy loads on our backs. It was my turn to prepare tea and breakfast for the morning. I prepared the brew over our light MSR type stove, lighted the fire wood and prepared the breakfast of noodles and nutrinuggets, whereas, the other 3 members had canned meat and beef steaks. After my ritualistic prayers, we started the climb to the pass, in bitter cold; frost had covered the golden alpine grass, indication of the approaching autumn.

In the brilliant sunshine following the sheep tracks, panting, gasping as usual at such an height, we approached the pass. We got on to a big glacier from the western ridge, and approximately at 17,000 feet height, on the top of the great Himalayan range but it was difficult to exactly locate the pass, as the valleys were originating to all directions.

Enjoy ourselves we should have, but we could hardly do that, carrying our heavy ruck sacks on our own backs and fighting our way in waist-deep snow across these mountains. And there was the possibility of being cut off with no rations at Pin-Parbati Pass in case we got lost over there where

mountain sickness usually occurs. Our problem further increased due to 3" to 4" fresh snow fall the previous night obliterating the track completely. Thus it was difficult to guess the track to the pass. We continued over the glacier towards north west. As usual, we were expecting some cairns indicating the pass, but we did not find any so we must have missed the right pass. At last we reached a depression over the ridge and started descending to the other side. Greame and Peter were not convinced whether the shepherds really undertake such dangerous tracks and cross over to Pin-Valley. For them it seemed simply unbelievable. It was a vast sea of ice, white mountain pinnacles floating over it.

I gazed and pondered over how a drop of water converted by heat into vapour, is carried by currents to some lofty mountain-top, where, condensed by frost, it is cemented to others of its kind to form an ice mass, in whose frigid remembrance it remains locked for hundred, perhaps thousands of years undergoing, various changes of position, till it becomes a part of the descending surface of some great glacier. Here, under the influence of sun's rays, it was changed for the fourth time into its original form of water.

Gravity quickens it into life. The drop, begins slowly to move, the touch of a feather would efface it. But soon uniting with other drops, it forms a little rill, then later a rivulet which ripples laughingly over the surface of the glacier, as it hurries swiftly onwards to join the stream. After leaving the glacier, the rill, swollen in volume to a mountain current, plunges downward in cascades and waterfalls with a roar, which attains the power and force it has acquired. What touch could efface it now? What could stem its tide? The mountain torrents combine and emerging on the plain we behold the Satluj, the Indus, the Ganges, which move onward with a majestic flow to feed the ocean.

Everything around, the mist that veils the mountain heights, the storm which mantles the landscape in white, the

movement of the glacier which seems its structure with crevasses, and into thousands of ice needles, the slow but constant disintegration of the rockborn sentinels that tower, proclaim the action of an inexorable law of change, that no creation of God or man can withstand.

As per our old maps, I thought, after Searchparti pass we must continue climbing straight west so that we can directly cross over to Parbati valley. But both Greame and Peter at first wanted to cross into Pin valley and then to Spiti valley and then after taking a long detour, wanted to cross over the Pin Parbati pass to enter into the Parbati valley. Now, in this wilderness, our old maps were completely confusing and could not be fully relied on. In this part we were just crossing over the great Himalayan range and all-round the valleys were originating to 4 different directions. On the east Pin, in the north Spiti valley, in the north west, Parbati valley towards Kulu area and the fourth was towards south going to the Satluj valley. All the peaks and ridges were not very high from where we were, in close proximity of climbing.

After descending for about 2,000 feet we reached the bottom of the valley, where, after having our hot brew near a stream we trekked towards north through a flat, wide valley. Now all sides were surrounded by snow clad peaks and here was a beautiful flat patch in the centre, having a stream running through it known as Bag Singling - a good camping site. We headed for a small pass over a depression on the other side of the valley. While climbing upto the pass suddenly the snow blizzard surrounded us. Under the grip of bad weather and cold, we put on our rescue clothings, wind proofs, balaclava caps, hand gloves, snow goggles and covered ourselves well in the shivering cold.

The steep climb of 2,000 feet and fighting against the snow storm, we could feel some warmth in our body. On reaching over the pass marked with the cairns, we were disappointed. While we were expecting the Pin valley on the

other side, instead, there was a huge hanging glacier, dangerously crevassed and a frightening ice fall. Now we were on top of the great Himalayan range, approximately, at the height of 18,000 feet the snow covered range was leading directly towards Parbati valley. It looked dangerous, full of crevasses and ice falls. We ruled out the possibility of trying direct axis. We also saw another higher pass towards north east. It was already 4 pm and the snow storm had started lashing more severely. So we were faced with a dangerous situation. To cross the other pass would have been a suicidal decision at that time. We descended the dangerous scree shoot of loose boulders over the glacier and we looked for a camping place but were unable to find even a single level patch for pitching our tent. In the midst of this snow blizzard, we cut at the hard ice to level a patch of 5' x 6' space under a big boulder and erected a stone wall around us to work as a wind barrier. We made a lean-to shelter by putting our single nylon fly. Another immediate problem was of water. We could hear the mild dripping sound of water, a pool under a narrow crevasse formed by the melting snow under an other big boulder. When I peeped underneath a big boulder the water was there but the gully was hardly one foot wide, and difficult to enter into. Somehow Peter was able to collect water, just sufficient to make a hot brew for all of us. Tashi and Greame improved the shelter to accommodate all of us.

Our hands and feet were numb, with the unbearable chill due to heavy snow blizzard. We could prepare our hot tea, vegetable nutrituggets for supper and made a conscious effort to sleep. But continuously blowing winds and cold, almost at the top of the great Himalayan range, we spent a sleepless night, trying to close the corners of the tent fly but from the few holes and the sides, snow flakes with cold wind kept on blasting inside the whole night. Morning greeted us with bright sunshine and azure sky with silver-white snow all around. We had an apple each with a cup of tea for our

breakfast, when we resumed climbing towards the pass. Within one and half hours trodding over the fresh snow we were at the top of Pin pass at the height of (19,000 feet). The Pin pass was distinctly marked with stone heaps of cairns. We were amply rewarded by a wide and clear view from the pass. It was a great Himalayan divide, ranges branching of on all sides. In the south the Himalayan ranges looked lower upto the far distance, whereas high ranges were running east to west with the hidden valleys in between. Spiti valley, in the north west direction, between shining white snow tops, whereas a barren landscape, looking black and brown below the snow lines, appeared as far as the peaks and ranges of Tibet.

Unlike any other pass of the Himalayas, the Pin pass was not formed on a depression or a saddle, instead it was situated over the Great Himalayan range, having a height between 17,000 to 19,000 feet. The surrounding peaks were also just close to the same height - within 1,000 feet of height only. The big glaciers were hanging down in all the directions. We were depleted of our rations and were managing with only one meal a day to stretch our meager food stocks which we were unable to carry. But as per our maps the Parbati pass was very close by towards west behind the snow covered ridge where we were standing which was hardly a few hundred feet higher than this pass. In case we negotiated this snow covered ridge directly, we would be able to cross over Parbati Pass and enter into Parbati valley the same day, thus saving a lot of time and energy. We decided to directly climb over the snow covered ridge, negotiating huge snow fields full of yawning crevasses, with lurking dangers due to fresh snow fall. We were able to maintain the height but were not prepared for negotiating such a huge glacier and snow even in this alpine style. Our feet were numb with cold. After climbing nearly by 1000 feet over the snow ridge avoiding dangerous crevasses, we all were very happy to see a pass

across, thinking it to be our destination, the Pin Parbati pass. We plodded down on a huge ice field in knee deep snow completely fatigued and exhausted. After negotiating the scree shoot, we climbed up to the pass, but, on reaching over the top, we saw to our surprise, there was another deep valley stretching towards Pin valley and we saw another height across which could be the so-called Parbati pass. We all were utterly disappointed. It was already late afternoon, so we all became apprehensive of our party being trapped and getting lost among this Great Himalayan range, equipped only with poor maps, short of food in severe cold and hostile climate. As happens in such situations our group was divided into two different views. One view was that we should not take unnecessary risk and get down to Pin valley and then after necessary procurement of food and having obtained details from locals, we should climb up to cross over Parbati pass. Another view was that we must continue across and should not lose height even if we have to go without food for a few days. We agreed to continue and attempt the other pass for which we had to first descend a steep dangerous slope of about two thousand feet and then climb-up to almost the same height. What a physical agony but we were helpless. Yet determined. After a strenuous descent we climbed the barren ridge. It was again a hard climb, we were lucky to have an unusually clear day, the visibility was clear, and we could see the passes clearly one after another, and thus kept our direction correctly. Otherwise, a small patch of mist would have completely marred our prospects and there were every chance of our getting lost in the middle of these big heights for days together.

The gruelling climb seemed to be unending. We were dead tired, stopping after every two steps to take a deep breath. The Pin Parbati pass was testing our nerves and determination. Now, only a few hundred feet below was perpetual snow to be negotiated with more strength. We saw stone cairns, a definite indication, of a high pass, but we were

still uncertain as to what there was for us in store? This was a fateful attempt. In case we were on the right pass, the Parbati valley would be close by and we would be soon down in the valley. But in case it turned out to be the wrong pass, then we would be in big trouble. Late in the afternoon we reached on top of the pass. What an awe-inspiring view we beheld! A big white glacier rolling down from the Great Himalayan range, protruding to a deep, glaciated valley. A wide and panoramic view of mountains, glaciers jutting out, congregating with this valley. It could be nothing else but the Parbati valley, heading towards the south-east direction. We all were very happy and soon forgot our mental agony and apprehensions.

We got down through the scree shoot, over a huge rolling glacier, full of wide yawning crevasses, moving over the lurking dangers, yet were walking faster as the descent was easier.

The lateral moraines, equally torturous with ups and down and loose boulders, we reached at the bottom end of the glacier, jutting out like a serpentine lip. The snout was the source of Parbati river, covered with big icicles, frozen verglas, covering the water. It was getting dark, we were on the look out for a camping site. We found a huge boulder over the dry glacier bed having a big hollow space in the middle. It was like a readymade house, built by nature for us. We soon dropped our heavy ruck-sacks, levelled the ground inside, and settled in our new spacious boulder house comfortably.

The water was frozen so we melted ice for making some brew. The first rays of the sun were still to shine on this beautiful valley, whereas the surrounding high snow covered peaks were glittering with silver sheets of eternal snows. We were definitely in a fairyland of great scenic beauty, unspoilt by human beings, as yet. We followed the dry bed, crossed the frozen river many times easily and cautiously for it was

slippery and verglassed. Gradually the sunrays spread their warmth and brightened the whole valley. There was a sharp drop of about 2000 feet of straight cliff down to the wide glacier bed, steep and dangerous. We were not being able to find our way to get down on to the glacier and wasted nearly 2 hrs. but did not reach any possible end. At last, I saw some wild animal track over a cliff and we descended over this track with a lot of caution and reached the glacier bed. We followed the right bank, crossed over the treacherous moraines, with ups and downs, over the loose boulders, crossed the bone-biting, chilled water many times over. Further down we were walking over a wide open glaciated valley, in the midst of high, snow covered peaks and huge black granite rock mountains. Many small glaciers were converging from both the directions to join the Parbati glacier. An undiscovered area was just before us. One after the other, each mountain was inviting and alluring to be climbed. This seemed to be the mountaineers' paradise with innumerable virgin peaks, unexplored as yet.

Further down was an alpine, grass-carpeted wide valley, which must have been formed by the blocking of the glacier by huge boulders, now turned into a flat valley. This beautiful meadow known as Pandu Sera, a good pasture, is shepherded' paradise. This place is worshipped and attracts local pilgrimage. We had Sustelyte brew and some noodles for our days' meal, and continued our march downwards. One after another mountains were towering over this valley, spreading their majestic beauty, the focus of our attention turning us to capture these mountains in our cameras. Going down was quicker than going up, and soon after we had left the last field of primulas and the last patches of snow on the brown grass, we saw the first tree of rhododendrons in the valley below. Through the valleys we were able to see the white peaks, on either side of that were hidden from view by the smaller mountains and rock piers just before us.

Walking was now pleasant over grassy patches which were now turned golden brown due to frost of approaching autumn season. Now the valley was becoming narrower with steep rock faces on both our sides. We followed the goat track, amazingly dangerous through the rocks. Virtually there was no track, not even a foot hold. I wondered how the shepherds took their flocks over these cliffs.

The view of the Manikaran and Kheer Ganga valley was fascinating. The habitation and villages had started appearing. People were similar to Kinnaurites. We were very hungry and on our first opportunity, when we reached the village, rushed to find out about food. We were offered sweet apples, whole gram chapatias, delicious and tasty, specially when we had not had proper meals for a few days.

The valley below was rich with marijuana plants. We saw a few hippies making marijuana, by rubbing the saplings. We reached the famous shrine of Manikaran.

Manikaran was a small up-coming town with facilities of electricity, and a road head. There were temples of Shiva, Rama and a new Sikh Gurudwara. The main attractions were the hot sulphur water bath. It was simply so relaxing and soothing. Plenty to eat and drink.

We followed the road along the left bank of Parbati river upto Jari through the thick, scented deodar and pine forests. From Jari we turned right to Malana valley, crossing the wooden bridge over Parbati river. A steep and strenuous climb for Malana. Malana is known for its oldest democracy, the village administration is run by 2 houses, upper and lower house of the village people. There is a central store to serve food to guests or new arrivals in the village, free of cost. In fact as per their belief, the food should not be sold as it is forbidden by the village deity. Therefore it is normally issued free of cost from the central granary.

We took some clues from the villagers regarding our direction for Chandarakhani pass (10,000 feet), a steep climb along an unfrequented track over a nullah full of thorn bushes, and a forest full of undergrowth. After the steep climb upto 9,000 feet height, the alpine pastures started appearing. Surprisingly we saw two western trekkers camping over the ridge-top. To our pleasant surprise, they turned out to be the two Swedish couple who had met us in Kathmandu and had come to Kulu-Manali on our suggestion. In fact, they had written me a letter also giving details of their visit. We all were very happy to have met again, having become old acquaintances. The two were camping at Chandrakhani pass for the night. After bidding good-bye we continued to the pass, only about 500 feet above.

The Chandrakhani pass is known for its scenic view. We saw the snow clad peaks upto a far distance in the north and north west towards Hanuman Tibba and Lahaul Spiti. We were dead tired, having covered a long distance and climbed steep heights. While coming through the thick forests of deodar and pine in darkness, we missed the track and landed in thick bushes. With great difficulty we could reach a village above Nagar where we got shelter in a room. The villagers warmly welcomed us, provided food—apples and tomatoes to eat. We enjoyed the local rakshi brew and were amply compensated for our hard day's march. The architecture of the houses of Kulu valley was different from that of Kinnaur or the Parbati valley. There were many huge and spacious houses with lot of wood carving.

We entered the beautiful Kulu valley of Himachal. The original name of the Kulu valley was "Kulunthapitha" meaning 'the end of the habitable world' and any one who has stood at the top of the Rohtang pass, the boundary between Kulu and Lahaul, will understand this name. It was 15th September morning, when we headed for Manali, eagerly expecting to meet our support team members. De-

scending a few hundred feet through the apple orchards we reached Nagar in Kulu valley. Nagar has a small bazar, but a historic Nagar Castle, Rorich Art Gallery and a number of old Hindu temples with beautiful stone sculptures.

The entire Kulu valley was heavily laden with the golden apples as well as golden rice fields, symmetrically terraced, with their majestic beauty of post monsoon brightness. The atmosphere was charged with the sweet fragrance of paddy and apples. The thick forest of blue pine and deodar covered the valley over the gentle mountains on both sides of the Vyas river. Due to the greenery and good forests, there was abundance of water springs and nullahs making it a fertile valley. The Kulu valley is known for its rich art and culture with its well know traditions. People are happy and gay; the beautiful women folk full of simplicity. Kulu is famous for Dushhara festival, which is well known for its gaiety and merry making and the rythmic 'Nati' dance. Men and women dance for hours together, hand in hand in a systematic rythem to the beat of drums and trumpets. The whole atmosphere of the valley was of enchanting beauty, full of many handicrafts specially of spinning and weaving of famous Kulu shawls.

We had great sense of achievement and joy when we reached the Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute at Manali. We had accomplished our march of crossing of 5 high passes, above 15,000' in 14 days, stretching our physical limits to the maximum. We met our support team Coorina, Doug and Ann.

The Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute honoured us and we had a chance to pay our homage to Dalai Lama of Tibet in exile, who was camping at Manali.

Chapter 17

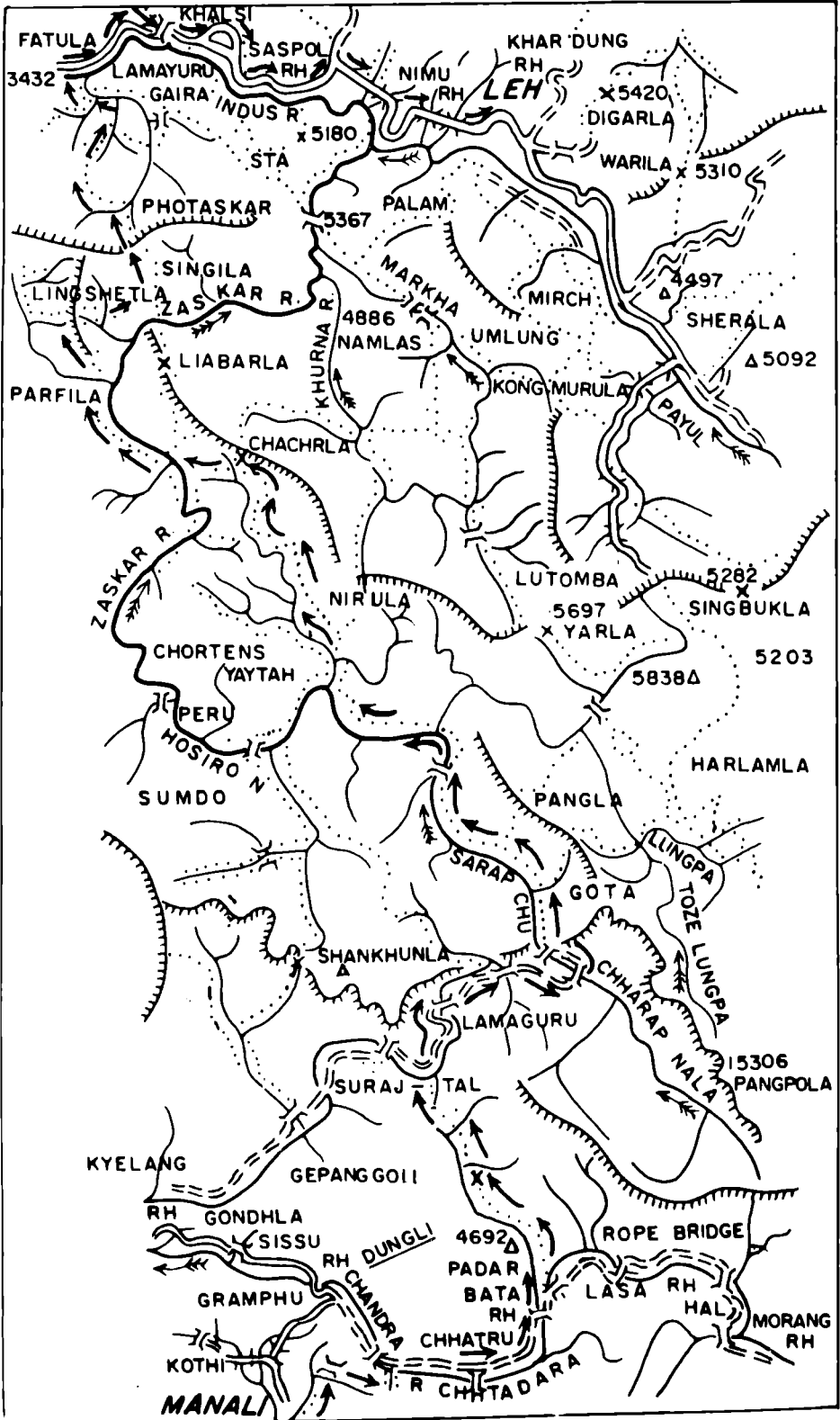
From Lahaul-Spiti to Zanskar

Stay at Manali was comfortable in the luxuriant surroundings of Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute. We were well looked after by its founder principal, late Mr. Harnam Singh. We also visited our Indo-Tibetan Border Police Training Centre at Kulu, where we all enjoyed the hospitality of my colleagues. We ate so much to recuperate our lost energy that our hosts were astonished how much we could eat after such a strenuous trek.

Now the last part of our joint traverse expedition with the New Zealanders was to be completed up to Leh. From there New Zealanders were to go to Pakistan to cover the traverse section from Skardo to K-2 base, whereas we 3 Indian members would trek to Karakoram. For the Manali to Leh traverse section, Peter, Greame, Corrina and Tashi formed the Traverse group, whereas Doug, Ann, Roy and I formed the support group to make the resupply and provisioning at next rendezvous point at Leh. The details from Manali onwards described by Peter:

“From Manali we headed due north towards Leh and Ladakh. The Humta Pass rises between Preenee, in the Upper Beas valley and the encamping of Chhatroo, a desolate spot in the upper Chandra valley. The ascent of the pass, estimated

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM MANALI TO LEH



at over 15,000 feet in altitude, is somewhat long and tedious, but the scenery throughout is very beautiful. Commencing at Preenee village the real rise by a steep incline for about a mile, and then wanders off twelve miles more through rich forests of pine and walnut, inter spread with open grassy slopes, swept bare of trees by the avalanches, to Chikkun at the foot of the pass, just above which vegetation dies out, and now frowning precipice of limestone, heavily crested with snow, which spreads over the roadway, form the landmarks of the line over the mountain. The view from the crest is superb, on one side lies the Kulu valley, in all its sylvan beauty and turning from this aspect of wealthy wood land and extensive area of cultivation, on the other side we are confronted by heavy snowy heights which tower over one another in dazzling brilliance. Although much higher than the Rothang, the Humta, if not easier, is a pleasanter pass to traverse, and it is but little troubled with the furious icy gales which rage on the other. The descent into the Chandra valley is somewhat abrupt, and crosses two beds of snow, which have to be carefully treaded. The Humta is open from May till the end of October and if the weather holds up, it can be traversed even in December. We climbed to the Hamta Jot pass through thick forests and green pastures, past proud buttresses and great pale yellow rocks and descended into the Chandra valley and another world. Gone were the breezy pine forests and scented alpine meadows of the Kulu valley. What lay before us was barren, dry and desolate; a harsh world of vigorous climate, broad dusty flats and steep razor-edged mountains of rocks and sweeping scree slopes, a host of pastoral shades, the antithesis of the south side of the Hamta Jot. Gone in the flash was the green alpine scenery of the Kulu valley, gone were the trees and forests of the southern slopes. We passed in an instant from the humid flanks of the Himalayas to the desert-like, dry tundra of its northern face. Now we walked through broad valleys hemmed in by rocky and treeless peaks stacked one behind the other. Now we had

entered the valley of Lahaul, this is a deformation of the Tibetan "La-Yal" which means 'the villages of the gods'.

At the tea shop that comprises Chattru we had lunch, copious cups of the tea that kept the teashop boy tremendously amused as presumably patrons normally order only one cup of tea each. We ordered and consumed well over 30 cups and then as if to prove a point, we purchased 48 packets of biscuits to supplement our food stocks and departed up the road. All afternoon we walked along the dusty and rubble strewn road watching the perfect granite walls and peaks around us dissolve into the smooth and eroded contours of a Tibetan landscape: ruddy red scree and pure white glaciers oozing from between the eroded domes of once great, high mountains. Foot tracks took us across great scree slopes, over the high pastures already burned dry and crisp by the restless wind and past Chandra Tal, a large glacial lake of translucent green, where I stopped to wait for Greame. He trudged across the thin, brown pasture by the lake and flopped down beside me. "Can you give me some aspirin", he mumbled, he was not looking at all well.

The greater portion of the entire valley of the Chandra is a desert, in which nothing but grass can grow and in some of the upper reaches numerous flocks of sheep and goats are annually fed. Some twenty five miles from its source the river passes a lake on its left bank, called Chandra Tal, a refreshing sheet of placid green water, about a mile long and as much broad, to the north of which is a plain of fairly good grasses. This little oasis, sheltered from the bitter winds, and rejoicing from its position in an almost tolerable climate, is a favourite halting place for shepherds, who bring up large herds from Kangra and Kulu.

At the shepherd's shelter, a stone igloo, made by building stone walls that progressively canterlevered inwards until only a 4 feet wide home remains at the top, we halted, for the night. With our tent fly strapped over the top we retreated

from the blast of the wind, the cold and the ominous weather to the relative warmth and seclusion of the "stone igloo", rolled out our sealed foam mats and sleeping bags and made ourselves at home. It was a terrible night. Snow fell in sporadic flurries, the wind never abated and Greame suffered frightful fevers that left him shivering and perspiring, a very sick man.

However we kept going, getting closer and closer to the Bara Lacha pass. At a large stream Corrina offered to carry Greame across to save getting his feet wet so she voluntarily took him, along with her pack and Greame's on her back and dithering and tottering in the icy water she gingerly moved towards the far bank. To my absolute astonishment, disaster was averted until she reached the stony bank on the far side where she stumbled forward, both people and their two packs being dramatically reached in what looked very like a rugby ruck!

The valley broadened and the sky cleared. Vast meadows, now golden brown, reached out to the mountains and glaciers that flanked the valley and ahead, the gradually rising ground hinted the pass itself. We walked and walked yet the ground never seemed quite elevated enough to be the pass. At long last we reached a pile of stones with sticks and prayer flags protruding from the top. This must be it! It took us another one and a half hours to cross the great plain that constitutes the Baralacha pass (16,500 feet) and reach the narrow motor road below. As Tashi and I sat on the road side we stared across at the jagged peaks. Millions of years of exposed geology and the multicoloured talus slopes that swept down into the valley of the Chandra river. There was an eerie desolate feeling pervading the country, not made for man nor life. Tashi started out at the scene, "there is truth there", he said thoughtfully.

In July, August and September the Bara Lacha is almost

entirely divested of snow. From the crests another path turns to the south toward the head of the Chandra valley, but this is a mere track, which without a guide, is not safe to traverse. It winds for about three miles between lofty peaks of dazzling snow, and then commences to dip down towards the Chandra river, and is certainly not a practicable route for laden animals.

Flaked by sudden squalls carrying banks of wind-born dust that filled our eyes and hair and clothing with grit we marched down the huge barren valley. The great mountain sides, gigantic mosaics of an expressionist's plate, tumbled in craggy buttresses and sweeping screes from the sky, restricting our world to two long strips—spectral opposites of bright blue sky and peach hued earth.

Destination of lunch time was Sarchu, marked prominently on the map and mentioned fleetingly by advisors in Manali. To warrant such mention it must, surely, be of some consequence - a teashop perhaps? Filled with dubious anticipation I approached the stream upon which Sarchu was supposed to be. Peering around the bend in the road I looked upstream to a lone bridge surrounded by monumental and garishly coloured signs pronouncing that this was Sarchu and listing distances to other places—presumably to illustrate the obvious—just how far we were from any where. The sign went on to proclaim the valley as the "Valley of the Gods". Yes, there was something special about the place, inhibiting perhaps, a place where abstention would be not a discipline but a matter of course!

A narrow track continued down the river passing groves of willows, a brilliant autumn gold, and spiny red bushes girding the turquoise blue river. In the evening we climbed high above a gorge and across a succession of undulating passes till over one pass we gazed down a gulley and there, around a slender wisp of rising smoke, men and animals. Our food reserves were getting low and we crossed our fingers that we might be able to purchase some. We rushed down

towards them like a band of savages to be met by two tough Ladakhi gentlemen wearing maroon woollen cloaks, Tibetan boots, long plaited hair, turquoise earrings, the padded top hats of Ladakh, narrow scrutinizing eyes and the skin creases of many years' travelling across the high passes. Their horses and mules were laden with woollen sacks of barley flour they were taking to the Indus valley to sell. They gave us Solja (Tibetan tea with salt and butter) and tsampa (barley flour) which we ate greedily. Tashi succeeding in powdering his face with flour in his enthusiasm.

The following day we reached a village, Sutok, nestled in a cul de sac. A compact group of Tibetan type houses, white-walled and flat topped and with small dark windows arranged haphazardly along the walls, too few to let much light in but too few to let much heat out, and great stacks of grass and winter feed piled on the roofs. People were working around the little village, threshing grain using the stomping hooves of furry Yaks while others tilled the fields. The women wore long black dresses, Yak skin shawls, white shell bracelets and on their heads a great headpiece liberally covered with turquoises, corals and precious gilded prayer boxes. On the sides of their heads huge woollen wings were attached giving a large sloppy bonnet appearance. The people were all smiles, inquisitive and generous and we were soon being well catered for!

The people of Lahaul-Spiti and Zanskar still observe the ancient laws concerning property and marriages. These laws are directly responsible for the relative wealth of these Himalayan people who are of Tibetan culture, which preserves and keeps intact man's house and his fields through the generations. All land has to be transmitted in its entirety to the eldest son, or failing a male heir, to the eldest daughter. The other sons and daughters get nothing. This law, of course, left the second sons with no land, and that is why both the celibacy of monks and the custom of polyandry

comes in as a natural regulator of population growth and regimentation of land holdings.

We continued down the river, crossing in one place via a locally made vine bridge ... a precarious affairs! Twisted vines span the crystal clear waters, a number were bound together to form a footpath and a rope on either side acted as handrails. The track sidled through a spectacular gorge, followed narrow ledges perched high above the river and crossed exposed little shelves where huge drops plummeted to the river far below. When the river turned abruptly south we cut across country, taking a route via Tantar Gumpa to the Zanskar valley. Tashi and I chattered, as we walked, about our physical and mental condition after such a long duration.

We agreed that since we had decent quantities of food we both felt much stronger although our physiological reserves were becoming depleted.

Eventually we reached an enormously wide and nearly mile long prayer wall, the most impressive in Zanskar, a great rectangular mass of hundreds of river boulders carved with the prayer "Om Mani-Padme Hum". It is a magic formula which mean "Hail thou jewels of the lotus".

Of all the mountains, these of Zanskar were the most picturesque, weird, astounding and perplexing. The valley of this river having precipice-walls were not only of enormous height, but presented the most extra-ordinary forms, colours and combination of rocks. There were castles, spires, plateaus, domes of solid rocks. At the entrance of many of the ravines there were enormous cliffs thousands of feet high, which looked exactly as if they were bastions which had been shaped by the hands of giants. The colours of these precipice walls were of the richest and most varied kind. The predominant tints were green, purple, orange, brown, black and white and yellow. It can easily be imagined that with such colours, the dazzling sunlight and the shadows of the effects.

Sometimes the sunlight came down through a dark coloured ravine like a river of gold. The dark brown manganese like cliffs looked exceedingly beautiful, but no sooner was one extra-ordinary vista left behind than a different but not less striking one broke upon the view. The geology of these valleys was rather puzzling, the way in which various rocks pass in to each other as the clay-state into mica-state, the mica state in to granite, the quartz conglomerate in to grey-wacke, and the mica schist into genesis.

The people are Tibetan speaking Lama-Buddhist; are more pastoral, more primitive, more devout, hospitable and less democratic.

Past Tentar Gompa, we continued up the valley towards the Thonde la following a little track connecting fields and grazing areas and then the track became confined to the river bed necessitating many freezing crossings of the icy waters in the sunless gorge. From above the gorge a good track led on to the 16,000 feet high. Thonda La from where we could look down on Thonde Monastery and the vast Zanskar valley.

At the top of this pass a most wonderful view is unfolded. To right and left, rise glorious peaks covered with glittering snow fields of glaciers while our path itself was across the stones and rocks. To the right the river torrent has cut a deep gully, walled-in by tall, perpendicular snow banks. Down the mule track we rushed to leave the penetratingly cold wind on the pass. Thonde Monastery's large white buildings with red trimmings, a close of golden polars and all perched on a rocky buttress far above the broad Zanskar plain. We descended past the white chortens and "Mane walls" by the dusty track heading down toward the patchwork quilt of brown fields with their scattering of houses over the vast expanse of plain and in the distance, jagged snow-capped peaks shimmered like cellophane images beyond the clouds of wind-borne dust.

From Thonda we descended the Zanskar valley to the village of Zangla from where we crossed two passes to cut a corner in the river's meandering path.

Our hearts beat with excitement for what had been for so long only a blur on a map now lay before us. At our feet sprawled a large and practically straight valley bordered by peaks whose glaciers lapped down to narrow plains, set between great scree slopes of ancient avalanches.

"Zanskar" mean the 'revealed land', its presence is unexpected in such a high and rugged region where it lies as if by a miracle. This is a lonely valley set so high above the tree line and hidden between the wall of the world's most impressive ranges.

There are hardly few more closed economy than that of Zanskar, whose inhabitants not only make their own clothes and shoes and grow their own food but mine their own gold, silver and copper. They collect from their barren mountains the herbs that are used as medicines. The result is a strong, sturdy and independent race of men and women. The high standard of living of the inhabitants of Zanskar is acquired entirely by depending on their own products. From the Neru La, 16,000 feet we could again see the Zanskar valley, track etched on the barren hill sides on the far side that would lead us to yet another 16,000 feet pass set amongst the rocky spires and walls scattered with the colossal folds of geological conclusions and scattered amongst this land, seemingly so inhospitable to life, there were tiny villages, places where man and beast make out their existence.

On the other side of the pass, we came up on a nice group of Ladakhis camping in the glorious scenery which we admired. Behind them was a magnificent stretch of mountains, the glory of light and shade are indescribable, and this little group of humanity in the fore ground just completed the picture. After crossing the bend of the ridge behind, an

equally wonderful view burst on the right, but there was no sign of cultivation on these bare brown or snow white peaks, and one really felt as though even at the "back on beyond", in every direction, there never would be human habitation again.

Just below Singola, as Tashi and I were climbing up towards it, Tashi saw a strange animal—an ibex. A large mountain goat with two long curved horns, a rare and beautiful animal - perhaps a good omen for the remainder of our journey. Wanla was a pretty village and showed signs of having been an important one. Crowning the hill which dominated the village was a fine old ruin, and behind it a most peculiar built monastery, in many places resting on beams which look so insecure that they might give way on the slightest provocation. The fine water prayer wheels in the village, which day and night turned round its prayers to benefit the community, while in the little shelter made to accommodate it four more rather large prayer-wheels were inserted to be worked by hand. Twirl as he goes along, may add his contribution to the volume of prayer that brings favour to the village.

Zangla, was the old capital of a small former province of Zanskar, consisting of only seven villages, which were presented to a king as a reward for aid rendered to Zorawar, the Dogra general on his way through to the conquest of Ladakh.

In this part of the country none of the houses were white-washed and seemed rather crabby although some were decorated with red swastikas and triangles.

Singola or Lion Pass has a long gradual ascent leading to it, covered with wonderful flowers. Here the many marmots provide interest by announcing the coming of a stranger with a shrill policeman-like whistle, as they sit at the mouth of the burrows.

In these barren area near Panjula, we could not help noting the only sign of vegetation on that bare hillside were a few pine trees. Evidently it had found a little spring to sustain its life. So does the smallest rill or source of water permit the growth of one or two trees in such a dry stony land. The "Shugpa" or pencil cedar tree of this area is regarded as a holy tree and in it dwells a Lha or a food spirit. Often an altar scribed high with the horns of wild sheep or goats, is built around the stem of such a tree; of certain shugpa it is said that to break off a twig of branch will cause the death to the offender within a year. Among the oldest trees in the land, where wood is in such demand for fuel, is the Shugpa tree, owing to its existence to the protection of its gods.

Up and down the hill sides we go to avoid precipitous cliffs. View around was enchanting, on the sides of a clear bustling stream which made a very respectable roar as it passed through its self-excavated tunnels. At its sides grow rose bushes and tamarik in profusion, while the wild red currants are wonderfully sweet to the taste. While looking up to right and left, we see the great slabs of cliff rising absolutely straight up from the river, suggesting one of natural wonderful cathedrals.

Three days later we reached Lamayuru, a large monastery positioned on the Leh highway not far from Kargil and only 130 kilometres across the Indo-Pakistan cease-fire line to Skardu where we intend to resume our journey again and travel into the Karakoram, to the foot of K2, the world's second highest mountain.

Lama Yuru, the prominent village on the way is interspersed with "chortens" and long "mane walls". The village is built on the rocky hillsides, here formed into strong fissures and crags. It looks as if one shake would topple the whole absurd structure on to the cultivated fields at the foot. Topping the hill, stands the monastery with its flat roofs

adorned at the corners with holy Yak tails and prayer flags.

While approaching from Kargil side, the gorge opens out in to a broad cultivated valley with a great panorama of majestic mountains beyond. Here and there are soft sand stone cliffs, behind, strange peaks with jagged pinnacles in their rugged outlines, rising higher yet sinking in perspective as they reach the horizon to stand out clear and sharp against the brilliant azure sky. The extraordinary formations of sand stones are sculptured by wind, snow and rain in to the most grotesque shapes, looking in some places like the ruins of some ancient village or even turreted castles.

Leh valley, the Indus spreading out in to several silver streaks as it winds in and out of its broad acres. The terraced plains are very long. We passed Spituk, with its monastery-crowned hill on our right. Leh, the capital town of the District, stretches for 5 to 7 kms. across the desert and surrounded by large number of barracks and recent construction and temporary structures and a prominent air field. It still retains its old look by the long prayer-walls, just outside the old Leh town, which stretch for half a mile across the desert upto the chortens. We view with delight to broad bazar, headed by the mosque, its row of poplars on one side, its castle on a hill on the right, behind it the mountains over which the Khardungla pass leads to Karakoram."

The majesty of range after range of glistening peaks and shining glaciers in the regions of ever-lasting snow, their ever changing colour from morning to night, from winter to summer, always new, always different with their never failing inspiration and picturesque parables.

The wonderful sun set from Spituk is undescribable. In a riot of crimson, the sun drops down behind the western gate of the valley, while every possible shade of blue and purple and crimson and gold steal across the great ranges flanking each side of the long valley whereas the rugged, jagged, cruel pinnacles of rocks are pointing upwards to the sky.

There is such a joyousness in the land, between the long stretches of bare desert of rock and barren hills, which have their own beauty, specially approaching autumn setting of blue green river and azure sky. Whenever a green village snuggled into the brown red hill side, a rippling stream is heard and a cooling breeze felt in the little plantations of trees, whilst the soft evening light makes the green corn look like plush in contrast to the autumn gold glory of the poplars, all set against a background of white snow peaks and blue sky. Surely this joyousness gives the people their merry look, their cheerful willingness and the happiness that bursts in song during every kind of work.

Leh situated at an altitude of 11,000 feet, has the extremes of the climate. You sit in the shade of rocks, the part of your body in the shadow freezes, while that in the sun shine, it boils. The heat of summer out in the desert is intense, for the long stretches of sand and the barren glaring rocks seem both to soak up sunshine and reflect it back as it pours out of a sky which so often is cloudless. The short summer from June to mid-September sees the ripening of the wheat, barley, the coarse grained barley being the more important source of food. All this cultivation is entirely kept up by irrigation, dependant on the melting of the winter snow, so that the stream from the Khardong which water Leh, is completely used up and never reaches the Indus bed. The average 2" to 4" rainfall is almost negligible. But now due to mass tree plantation and increased fuel consumption there is some increase in rainfall with more greenery. Although at such an altitude, the snowfall of Leh is also not severe, the snows exhausting themselves on the surrounding ranges. The flame of life on the whole burns brightly in this land of clear skies and bright sunshine.

A small shop on the valley side of the road attracts our attention by its enchanting array of Tibetan and Chinese wares. There are Buddhists ornaments, brittle china bowls

and lovely oriental goods covered with strange embroidered signs, necklaces and jewellery of Tibetan workmanship and silver goods studded with small blue turquoise and other semi-precious stones. This is a veritable Aladdin's cave, and the geni of the lamp, bowing low and wishing "Jule" to us, in respect.

We took an opportunity to visit nearby villages around Leh. In these desert lands a village must centre round a stream, which brings its contribution from the glacier of the great heights, ever in the background to one of the smaller rivers, most of which eventually flow in the Indus. Where such a stream roams through a broadening valley, it is possible to layout a series of terraced fields, which can be irrigated in turn by directing the supply into small artificial water courses. Above the area of cultivated terraces and at the foot of the actual hills, where it is too rocky and steep to plough and sow, the houses are clustered. Approached by stony paths or tracks and so built into the hill side that convenient pieces of rocks are often used for walls or floor, and, where the rock overhangs, even for roof, while a little sunny platform will be enclosed with a rough wall to stable the animals by day in winter. Crowning the chief hill of the village, and dominating its common life, as its position would suggest, is the monastery. The road both enters and leaves the village through a "chorten" gate. They are fascinating and picturesque, surrounded by apricot trees, against a background of azure sky and glittering peaks.

In well-to-do houses, one room is dedicated as a little private chapel, used mainly by the master of the house for reading his holy books and repeating his prayers, where a whole room can not be set apart, a small corner in the best room will be arranged as an altar with all the paraphernalia netted.

Traditionally people are hospitable. But gradually, the

strangers are unwelcome today and the main reason for this is that with modern communications, they have little or nothing to offer. The current price of wool or meat in distant markets is already known and news of distant relatives comes by post. Radio and television now satisfy people's curiosity and the traveller is seen principally as a possible menace, perhaps a thief, or a parasite, or today alternatively, he is regarded simply a source of money.

While staying at Leh we had an opportunity to visit the famous Hemis Gompa which is the biggest Gompa of Ladakh.

We mounted the hill side and saw that the walls are of stone, painted white, the windows which are fringed with coloured frills for curtains on the outside, are latticed in a Tibetan design and painted in bright, simple patterns. This rather crude painting is on every piece of wood both in and out side the building. The gates are carved from wood with a cutout border and painted a gay canary yellow. The dome is square, painted with intricate designs from the life of Buddha, and surmounted with tops in gold leaf.

Inside it is very dark and when our eyes have become used to the shadow we see that at the further end is an alter on which there are numerous tiny carved idols arranged in rows before a glass case containing a life size Buddha. This is carved in wood and painted gold with a background of lotus flowers. In front of all the idols are many rows of small brass bowls, each filled with water; before the alter are cushioned seats for the lama in constant attendance on the spirit of Buddha. The walls are linked with carved and painted pigeon holes, each one holding the manuscript of a scripture. These manuscripts are made of two boards joined by a cloth, which holds the handwritten parchment. A small room above the temple contains two more altars and many more carved images of the Buddha, besides all the grotesque masks and head-dresses used in the war dance and the devil dance at certain times on special occasions of the year. The war dance

is held during the 'Feast of the Snowy Heights' to celebrate the spirit of the demons. So these Buddhists have incorporated in their religion some of the local lore.

We proceed up a very rickety ladder to the top roof room, the inside of the room which measured approximately 8 feet square. It is almost entirely filled with a miniature temple, there being just enough room to walk round it if you keep close to the walls. This model is a marvel of intricate workmanship, it is painted and decorated all over with bright colour and gold leaf, the walls above us are lined with more figures of the Buddha, this time made in clay and standing about 4 feet high. A tiny alter is kept in the corner and before it is a decorated stool and a box, 2 feet by 3 feet by 1 foot high, covered with a fur mat, obviously intended for the lama whose vigil is beside the temple.

We descend the rocking ladder in darkness and come out once more to the sunlit courtyard, polished like a terrace above the village. A swinging path leads down with prayer flags on either side through a slopping meadow to the Indus. At each end of this path stands a chorten. These monuments are often to be found near the monasteries and other holy spots throughout the country. Their structure of stones is formed by a cube at the base, signifying water, next comes a cone, strangely interpreted as fire, and the top is crowned with a crescent and circle of gilded wood which stands for 'the air'.

Between these chortens and surrounded by prayer flags, runs a 'mane wall'. This wall of stone is 120 feet long, two and half feet wide and two and half feet high. It contains the usual carved and pointed stones bearing the formula, "Om Mane Padme Hum".

I was working very hard to turn the prayer wheel which weighs over a ton when we feel that enough prayers have been made to save our soul for to-day, I cease and turn to investigate the painted walls of the wheel house, which are hung with gaily painted tankas depicting incidents in the life

of Buddha. The walls themselves are adorned with a riot of colours and designs in which can be distinguished war-like and religious scenes alternately. Obviously, impressions of a Buddhist heaven and hell.

Now our joint traverse of the Himalayas was complete at Leh. We had covered a distance of about 4700 kms. from Sikkim to Ladakh through the uncharted routes after crossing about 92 high passes between 10,000 feet to 20,500 feet high in 234 days of continuous trekking as close as possible to the great Himalayan range. The New Zealand members would leave for Pakistan to trek up to western Karakoram K-2 (an area where Indians can not go) and we 3 Indian members would go to Karakoram pass (where the foreigners could not go) and we would meet in Delhi after a month.

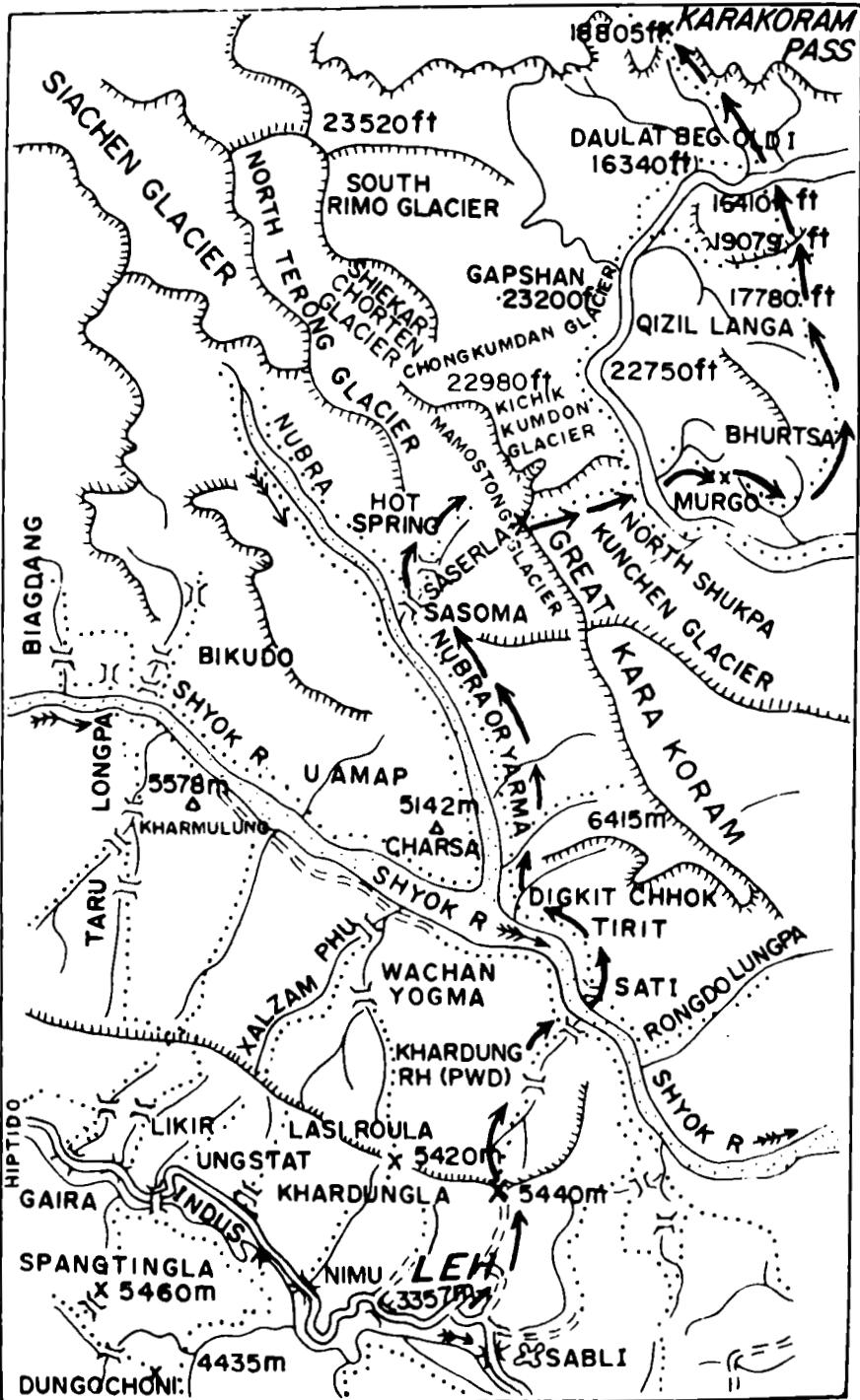
After a short stay at Leh town, the New Zealand members were seen off at Leh airport in the midst of painful and touchy emotional farewell on 12th October, 1981. The morning was clear, sun shone brightly spreading warmth over the wide open Indus valley of this barren land of Ladakh. The long sojourn of over 9 months had brought the team members very close to each other with a close knit companionship and bonds of friendship. Finally the day had come when all of us knew that we were departing after completing this venture for long and would remain separated thousands of miles away in two different continents. The Indian Airlines plane touched the highest air strip of the world at Leh and our emotional feelings also soared high to bid farewell to our friends. We warmly shook hands, hugged each other with thumping pats and warm kisses and finally saw off the Kiwis flying out of Leh.

Chapter 18

The Roof of the World - The Karakoram Pass

Only 3 Indians for the last lap of our long Himalayan Traverse. Finally, on 16th October morning Roy, Tashi and I started from Leh for Khardung La (18,680 feet). At Khardungla the wind blows with a tremendous velocity. I shivered with cold yet the grandeur and sublimity over took me and cast out all our bodily discomforts inspite of the small storm with occasional snowfall which was encountered by us. We ascended from the south side between two mountain spurs, presenting nothing remarkable and had encountered little snow. The sign post and a small temple indicate the Khardungla pass (18,680 feet) and the highest road of the world, where the chill wind blasts piercing through to the bones. On the top and for some distance down of the north side lay a large snow field where the motor road had been carved out but requires regular clearing of hard ice in order to keep it open for army convoys. To the south, beyond Leh, some fine rock mountains were visible while to the north were beautiful snow peaks of Karakoram Range looming high. We stood on a high mountain range with deep rivers and precipices to the north and south, which was the dividing line between Nurba valley and Leh. We then descend upto a

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM LEH TO KARAKORAM



place called Khalsar situated on the left bank of Shyok river. Our route bifurcated towards Nubra valley right across where as another route followed down the Shyok river towards Dikshit and further towards Turtuk in occupied Kashmir area of Pakistan. After crossing the bridge over Shyok river at Koyak, the wide and beautiful Nurba valley started. We trekked along the banks of Nubra river and followed the villages namely Tript, Lokjung, Sumur, Tegar, Ping, Ching, Chamsen, Yelkam, Trisha, Panamik and Shushoma well spread over the flat Nubra valley like oasis on virgin land. Since olden times this was also an old Central Asian trade route known as famous "Silk Route" through which the trade from Yarkand in Central Asia and Mangolia used to be carried out via Nubra valley and Karakoram Pass by big caravans of traders from Yarkand to Leh and other parts of India, trading in their famous Yarkandi carpets, wool, silk and marijuana.

People used to go as far as Mecca and Madina in middle east for "haj" pilgrimage by following this route. Big caravans of hundreds of horses and double-humped Yarkandi camels used to trek to Kashmir which was one of the major trade centres on route between Gangetic plains of India and high mountainous regions of Central Asia. This traditional border trade was stopped only in late 50s when the Akasai Chin area came under the control of China. Nubra valley is about 10,000 feet above sea level, width about 3 to 4 miles presents features not seen anywhere in Himalayan valleys. The valley bottom is composed of alluvium sand and stones over which the river flows in a broad bed with many channels and arms, which leave the main stream at various points and soon again enclose in their course a number of islands. The river is fed by many tributaries and streams. Roy and I were struck by the magnificent view, and wondered at Panamik, on how a full circle of peaks surrounded the flat sea of the central plain dotted with its villages. Over here lay a valley cut off from the world, a hidden, secret land of Nubra. Everything here, we

found was near to perfection; nothing, so it seemed, was out of place or unnatural. There was nothing here to tarnish the harmony of nature in which man has his natural place, blending with the earth, dressed and fed by its products, moulded by its demands and dictated by its seasons. Mountains rose on both sides abruptly from the valley in great masses, forming walls of solid rocks broken only by narrow side gorges, that struck directly into the heart of the range dividing the facing wall into enormous sections. The silt and detritus brought down by the floods that pour down the gorges, have formed very perfect and symmetrical fans that radiate out broadly from the narrow openings and extend to the middle of the valley or beyond. On these fans are situated the villages, scattered throughout the valley at fertile spots where the eyes are refreshed by greenery. It certainly is the most beautiful and fertile valley of Ladakh.

The Nubra river originates from Siachen glacier in the north-west and Terong glacier in the east and meets the Shyok river at Lungezhung. This wide open valley is flanked by high barren mountains on both sides. The area is generally rugged, barren with steep cliffs, but the down valley was full of greenery with some forests at the river bed. The hard working people have utilised every possible piece of land for cultivation after constructing irrigation canals. The tree plantations done around the villages, enhances the beauty of these settlements which look like the oasis in a barren desert.

There was a clear impact of Central Asian civilization of olden times, groomed and developed by the old "Silk Traders" of Yarkand who passed through with their big caravans. The important places along this route have been named in Yarkandi language like Chungtash, Murgo, Kazilangar, Dalulatbeg Oldi, etc. There was still a big Yarkandi inn (Sarai) existing at Panamik and there were a few graveyards of Yarkandi traders who died while on their trade missions through this area. The hot water spring at Panamik, is always

tempting to take a hot dip and makes a very good camping ground. The Nubra valley is yet to be opened to foreign tourists, due to its strategic location, holds a good tourist potential for the future.

Our long traverse of Himalayas through Sikkim, Solokhumbo, Manang, Mustang and Western Nepal, Kumaon, Garhwal, Himachal and several other Himalayan regions allowed us to appreciate all that we found in Nubra valley - perhaps the most rugged and unspoiled area of the entire Himalayas. We were surprised that inspite of the high altitude, barren land, cold and hostile climate, people could develop these oasis of greenery in the form of small cluster of houses with irrigated fields. We simply marvelled at the fact that man could survive at such a high altitude in a land that on first sight offered practically nothing but stone, ice and snow all the year round.

The people rear yaks, goats and cows etc. besides growing some barley, potatoes and vegetables. Yaks are prized animals, with many uses. They are beasts of burden, their coarse wool is woven into thick black cloth to provide garments, beddings and often tents; their milk is used to make butter and cheese; dung when dried, is used for fuel - the only fuel available; skins are used for leather and the flesh can be eaten.

The bottom of the valley gradually ascends to Changlung (Susoma) at 11,000 feet. Between Panamik and Changlung, we trekked over long reaches of sand interspersed with rock debris, a wilderness with several large granite boulders, rounded by glacial action, whose smooth surface was covered with skilfully carved "Om Mani" and other Buddhist prayers.

Dressed in their tattered woollen robes, the women wear crudely tanned goat skins on their backs and heavy jewellery around their necks. Several woven sported fancy dog-ear fur flaps and turquoise - studded head straps. Quite a few women wear their finest jewellery even while working in the

fields although their dress might be ragged.

Susoma, a small dwelling at the confluence of Nubra and Tulimpati Chu originates from Siachin Kangri (glacier). Nubra forms a wide glaciated valley. There is hardly any habitation beyond this point and it is a long dry river bed with high barren rocky mountains on both the sides with lofty snow clad peaks. The Tulimpati Chu comes from Sasar glacier from the right. Teram Kangri group of peaks dominate in the west.

On the morning of 19th October, we left Susoma. The path led directly up the steep incline, zigzagging among rocks and projecting boulders in the most tortuous manner. The route towards Karakoram bifurcates, straight right with a steep climb towards Tulimpati La - the high route over Seser La to Karakoram pass, which used to be one of the highest trade routes in the world for Yarkand and Central Asia, leaves the Nubra valley and strikes up the steep eastern mountain wall. This route passes through a grand Himalayan region through the giant precipices, deep gorges, glaciers and moraines, desert river valleys and yawning chasms with majestic beauty. On this barren mountain side, as in many other similar places in Ladakh, there is not a drop of water, nor a sign of moisture, or of any vegetation. While climbing up, the desert monotony was relieved by luxuriant wild rose bushes, so laden with blossoms of every shade of pink to deep crimson colour, that stems and branches could scarcely be detected. The lonely surroundings enhanced the brilliance with which these beautiful coloured gems flashed before the eye. Since Tulimpati Chu (rivulet) forms a very narrow gorge, before a track has been made over the Tulimpati La on a sheer smooth rocky cliff which does not have any stances and only stone walls have been precariously balanced to form the track for goats, sheep and horses. Although, this steep climb of about 2,500 feet is for a distance of 2 kms, it took us 3 hours to negotiate this patch on foot upto the La. Here a glorious view opened before us. To the west, towards the

mighty mountain tongue which was projecting from the north, spreads the Nubra valley from the Shayok valley. There were peaks of many shades of brown, gray and red to rich maroon and purple, whose sides were so steep that snow would not lodge on them, others of gentler slope were covered with eternal snow, looking splendid in the wonderfully clear air without the slightest pollution. Below us stretched Nubra valley, a barren desert, except for an oasis of greenery here and there to relieve the dreariness of the sandy, flat river bed.

A beautiful view of Nurba valley from Tulimpat La upto Arunukh village on the other side, white clad Dagok Kangri peak prominently towering over the valley's fascinating scene. We descended a little for about one km and then followed along Tulimpat Chu. We had the wide spread view of Momostong Kangri (24,690 feet) in the north, to reach Umlung from the pass and further 5 hours to Skyangpoche on the right side of the river at the confluence of 2 mighty glaciers. From the left comes the Momostang glacier originating from the pass of Momostang peak and on the right is the Sesar glacier coming from Sesar La. Both sides of this valley are dominated by high mountain ranges 22,000 feet to 24,000 feet high snow clad peaks. We had to cross the cold Tulimpat Chu to cross over to Skyangpoche. Though the water was only knee deep, yet it was freezing cold at minus 10 degree C. Skyangpoche (15,070 feet) had a small camping ground with few big stone boulders for shelter. Altitude started showing its effect and gusty cold winds blew through out the night and the temperature was below -20 degree C.

Now before us lay a struggle against nature. As we prepared to tackle the Siser La, I realised this was to be the last lap for us, the Indian traverse members, Tashi, Roy and myself. The great summits of Karakoram range that we had seen from afar were now almost within reach as before us lay

the strange world of rock, eternal snow and ice; a forbidden land in to which few dared to venture.

On 20th October, early morning, we left Skyangpoche fully equipped to negotiate the Siser La (17,480 feet) pass covered with perpetual snow. It was too cold, even the moisture from our breath was freezing, instantaneously forming solid ice crystals on our moustaches. The temperature was about -20 degree C. and the sky covered with patches of clouds. We were clothed in our climbing gear, woollen under garments in layers, gaiters, windproofs, hand gloves, balaclavas and thick woollen jerseys, to negotiate the deep snow right upto the snow covered pass. Walking over the snow right from Skyangpoche itself along the lateral moraines, the climb, though gradual, was tough and tiring. Under the snow cover, we saw bones and skeletons of dead animals of caravans indicating that it was the old trade route. Both the sides of the glaciated valley were guarded by towering high snow clad mountains shining in the morning sun. The cold wind blowing so strongly, and the freezing temperature, left us numb with cold. Roy was not feeling well; high altitude was showing its effect. He did not take much food except a little tsampa and tea for the morning breakfast. Above 16,500 feet breathing became increasingly difficult. Looking up we could see the pass half veiled in clouds that soon rolled down to envelop us in a grey shroud. Beyond the first snow slope we climbed on to a patch of loose moraine which covered the glacier and whose ice was visible in gaping crevices. It was a long, slow climb until we reached a seemingly endless slope. On our way up we came to a sudden dip where the ice had collapsed into what was a stream of water that ran under the glacier. We jumped across the crevice, where a small step would mean sliding hundreds of feet down under the glacier to a freezing death. Now the mist gradually lifted and through the clouds we caught glimpses of the snow covered summits around. They were now at eye-level, covered with spotless white snow, pierced by jet black ice covered rocks.

Slowly but vigorously we struggled up, stopping even more frequently to catch our breath, we negotiated one after the another snow covered mounds and yet the pass appeared to be an unending climb. As is usual in the high altitudes, distances are so deceptive. Every peak looks so near and yet, in actuality, is so far. After hours of gruelling plodding through snow, we finally reached Siser La (17,480 feet) at about 12 am - one of the great Himalayan passes across the world's highest land mass. We saw a small heap of stones surrounded by snow and bush branches and twigs from which fluttered prayer flags - the mementoes of pious travellers who, like us, had toiled up the Siser La.

The La was completely snow covered with a flat glacier on top and we could only recognise it by the two small heaps of stones (cairns) piled at the centre and almost buried under heavy snow at the top of the La. These stones, as usual, have been accumulated by the caravans of traders who used this route for centuries. For a few minutes Roy and I gazed intently at this grand scene of nature. It is impossible to describe further the effect of this sublime scene on my mind. On the other side of the La was a different landscape with brown and black mountains across the Shyok river which immediately attracted attention. They were completely barren except for a few patches of white snow on mountain tops.

After crossing the La, we descended down and reached Siser Brangsa (15,200 feet) camp within an hour, just 1 km above Shyok river. At Siser Brangsa there were some stone memorials and graves of soldiers who died there during 1962 Sino-Indian war. The Shyok river flows, west to east, originating from the perpetual snow of Central Rimo glacier, out of Teram Kangri group of peaks. The Shyok, carved out the sharp and narrow 'U' shaped loop flowing for about 50 kms south west around the great Karakoram range near Shyok village and then flows north west towards the Pak-occupied Kashmir. From Siser Brangsa, the left track follows

along Shyok river and its tributary Chipchab river upto Daulat Beg Oldi and then finally to the Karakoram pass, but one has to cross the freezing cold river 25 to 30 times a day and is hence generally not preferred by the people. The other turns right after crossing Shyok river along the narrow gorge of Chungtash nullah through the open ground of Chungtash to Murgo and then to the Dapsangla plateau to Karakoram.

Crossing the freezing cold blue water of the mighty Shyok river was a nightmarish experience, and then we entered the narrow gorge between two walls of black rocks, rising to the height of 1,000 feet making it difficult at times to get even a glimpse of blue sky. We preferred this second route, of Chungtash nullah, through this narrow gorge of black rocks. In summer when the nullah gets flooded due to melting snow, the track followed 2,000 feet above the nullah, avoiding the gorge. After a climb of 1,000 feet a flat wide ground of Chungtash, surrounded by barren high features covered with snow tops. The flat ground of Chungtash is spread over 5 to 6 kms. At the extreme right corner is Murgo (14,600 feet) on the bank of the Burtsa nullah.

Murgo (14,600 feet) means "The gate-way of death" in Yarkandi - rightly named so, as the route beyond Murgo, towards Karakoram pass, passed through the desolate, barren narrow gorge at 15,000 feet height. Difficult and dangerous without any habitation or shelter where constant snow-storms, gales and blizzards invariably, trapped the big caravans on their way to this roof of the world resulting in death of thousands of men and animals every year. Only a few lucky adventurous souls and the fittest could survive, whereas the rest formed the heaps of skeletons which are still visible along the trail upto the Karakoram pass. There is a mineral water spring with warm and palatable water. The large stone heaps indicated its use as camping site by big caravans since olden times. Not even a blade of grass grows

in this area and the land-scape is barren, naked black and red mountains all around.

In these higher Himalayan regions, everything is fashioned on such a grand scale, and the atmosphere is so clear that individual features seem dwarfed, and it is difficult to realise the enormous size of the mountains, till one attempts climbing them. Then one realizes that distances are illusory. Ordinary standards fail and what seems like one mile is likely to prove two or three. From Murgo, we followed along the Murgo nullah. There was another hot water spring oozing and spreading over the flat ground below. The minerals in the water formed stalagmites and stalactites upto the river bed. Walking over the small boulders along this dry, windy and barren land-scape with high cliffs on both the sides added to our fatigue on our way up to Burtsa (15,000 feet) about 24 kms away from Murgo.

At Burtsa, the river was frozen and we walked over it. The land scape of Burtsa with its sedimentary rocks in their layers have distinctive folds due to geological pressure. This unique formation, clearly indicated that the Himalayas have emerged out of deep sea in the ages called "Tythes geocyncline". The typical fossilized round stones found in plenty, were different in shape than those found in central Himalayan regions. In the evening, when we came out of our tents at Burtsa an awe-inspiring sun set unfolded before us. With its last flames of fire on the towering barren rocks and the purple fangs of what might be called the Himalayan aurora shot upward from the dull horizon to the blue zenith, as the twilight silence of the Arctic regions fell on the snow land. We felt, not only the over-whelming beauty, but also the tantalising scene, that seemed in no way part of this world.

We followed the silk route, all along the river bed, and barren, naked, brown rock features on both the sides of the flat and open river bed extend from 1000 yards to 2000 yards all along. There was no sign of any existing track, but only the

river bed indicated the direction. After walking for about 18 kms we reached the flat ground of Kazilangar (16,400 feet) which in Yarkandi suggests that the Kazis coming from Yarkand to India in olden times used to cook their food at this place, where water was easily available. These places from Susoma onwards, are the names of camping grounds, with no population or settlement even worth the name and they are all dry and barren patches, named by the travellers and caravans.

After the gradual climb from Kazilangar to Deptsang La, took us to a wide open flat Tibetan type plateau spread out for miles and miles, thus rightly called "The roof of the world" as the snow covered high Himalayan mountains are far away to north and south and appear to be lower than this plateau. A very strategic place, where the routes from Aksai Chin, Baltistan and Central Asia converge from all directions. The general height of this plateau is from 17,000 feet to 18,000 feet covered with stones and sandy gravel, completely barren with not even a blade of grass. The small mountain features, 8 to 10 kms away, in the north and south-east are occupied by the Chinese. Constantly cold winds of a speed of 60 to 70 kms per hour, blast this wilderness. One of the coldest places of the world where the temperature goes down to -58 degree C. in winters. A wide open barren black mountain features, extending towards far distant Akshai Chin area, the heart of Asia, crosses the highest mountains in the world forming the bridge between India and Central Asia. It is only during the few summer months that traffic is possible on this once highest caravan route in the world. Icy storms blow across the plains even in the height of summer, and in July and August the temperature often drops to below freezing point. A cold wind blows all the time down from the 26,000 feet peaks of the Karakoram, driving the clouds across these lofty plateaus. These clouds sweep across the sky, while their shadows flee even faster across the ground.

This Karakoram route, via the roof of the world along which so many men and animals have travelled may be imagined by the number of skeletons here. For ten long days one sees nothing but boulders and bare rocks, roaring mountain streams and blue glaciers. The caravan animals, after crossing this desolate region used to reach Ladakh in a dreadful and emaciated condition. It is a cruel land, and yet, there are wonderful and magnificent scenes to be found there. Where else in the world can you find such a picturesque place as the Dapt sang plain, 17,600 feet high, and overlooked by a circle of ice-bound peaks from 23,000 to 26,000 feet high and whose crystal pinnacle seems to push through the clouds? I raised my eyes to the hills, and beyond them to the snows. A few white clouds shadow the mountains and valleys. Tomorrow we shall be somewhere within those sweeping folds.

Thoughts of personal futility creep into my mind and spoil my appreciation of the surroundings. Although some of these rolling mountains were breathtaking and awe inspiring in their loveliness, procreate in us some of the fire of glory and permanence, a fragment of their timeless and immeasurable supremacy.

Roy and I felt senseless with the grandeur of the scene before us. We searched for words and phrases with which to describe it, or lines and tones and lights and shades with which to capture it. And both moments have their value, for a while as we were silent and awe-struck, we were living in precious harmony with the mountains and rivers and their changing lights and shadows. But Tashi kept silently admiring the beauty and always compared it with land of his forefathers.

We slowly trekked through the barren Daptsangla plateau, where, here and there small glacier tongues peep out between the steep crags. Hurricanes from the south prevail here; fine red dust from weathered sand stone, flies like clouds through the valley. Everything up here was so dreary and cold at

16,824 feet. There was no living plant or animal in this desolate land. At the end of the plateau there was a depression and on the north bank of Chipchap river was Daulat Beg Oldi (16,500 feet). Oldi means cemetery for here is a stone masonry cemetery of one Daulat Beg who died here. A brave trader from Kashmir who fought and died here. We camped here with our ITBP jawans. Not a sign of organic life here, except for a few Indo Tibetan Border Police personnel who brave the solitude and cold in this barren land. But certainly these places must have been alive with activity in the olden times when big caravans of traders from Central Asia used to camp here while going and coming over the Karakoram Pass, the gateway between Indian sub-continent and Central Asia. That night I could not sleep, strong winds blowing from Karakoram, were a constant reminders of their bone-biting chill. Fear, fatigue and excitement at having almost completed our mission, haunted me.

Finally the day had come to complete our long traverse from Darjeeling to Karakoram pass. We all were excited and enthusiastic that at last our dreams, through hard toil, were coming to realization and we were ultimately completing our long venture by reaching the historically well-known Karakoram pass. This was the last day, the end of the first ever traverse of Himalayas. We started from Daulat Beg Oldi at 7 am on a clear day made cold by the icy winds. We were protected by our heavy woollen garments and windproofs against the bone-biting chill of Karakoram. The dry river bed, north-west from Daulat Beg Oldi, dominated by gentle mountain slopes with white snow peaks, prominently dominated by the snow clad white mountain ranges forming the boundary of occupied Kashmir. There is a long gradual walk of about 16 kms all along this river bed. One can never miss the 16 kms route to Karakoram pass, if he follows only the trail of bones and skeletons of dead men and animals. The path leading upto the Karakoram pass gradually rises up a valley towards the right; snow lay in many places and patches

of snow looked as though they had been lightly sprinkled, and presented a zebra like appearance. Even here, I saw traces of the early glacial period.

The last part of the way winds up to the right from the river bed towards Karakoram pass and the gradient is gentle and not particularly difficult, but it was the rarified air which made the crossing of this pass so arduous. At the end there was hardly a climb for about 1,000 feet and one km in the distance towards the right was the depression of Karakoram pass. But certainly the effect of altitude, the lack of oxygen, made us labour to reach it, gasping for oxygen. Finally we reached Karakoram pass (18,290 feet) on 25th October 1981 having completed our historic Traverse. The pass of our dreams was formed by a saddle between the two gentle mountain tops (only 50 yards wide). On the other side there was a gradual descent, barren and gentle mountain features between 19,000 feet to 20,000 feet in height. We could not believe that the water flowing to the other side now travelled towards Yarkan river and formed part of Siberian water system.

On one side of the Greater Himalayan ridge lies India, on the other, China. We unfurled the Indian national flag to mark the completion of the first successful Traverse of the Himalayas. We took a memorable photograph of the 2 small heaps of stones (cairns) indicating the pass and the boundary, one being used by the Indian side and the other by the Chinese, hardly at a distance of 50 yards from each other. To mark the successful completion we wanted to light incense sticks at the pass but the intensity of the cold winds was so much that we were freezing and were not even able to light the matches. I gazed at that farthest pinnacle beyond the unfathomable space that separated us. I tried to focus back on ourselves standing there and thought of ourselves, standing on the verge of a wondrous region. And with this immeasurable splendour I was lulled with only the lurking

feeling of how desolate the parting would be, were it not for the memory that will linger in my heart. We could hardly stand erect as the cold winds were blowing us out. So ultimately after hugging and congratulating each other, we thanked God Almighty and then returned back to Daulat Beg Oldi rejoicing the completion of this long venture. Tashi, Roy and I covered about 350 kms distance from Leh to Karakoram Pass within 10 days and stayed at over 12,000 feet height throughout, crossed over 7 passes between 15,000 feet to 20,000 feet and 3 passes between 10,000 feet to 15,000 feet during this last section of traverse from Leh to Karakoram pass.

We all were happy that we had successfully completed the first ever traverse of the Himalayas from Kanchandzonga to Karakoram within 250 days from 17th February to 25th October 1981, after trekking through the long and difficult Himalayan terrain for more than 5,000 kms and ascending and descending roughly about 14,00,000 feet of height. During this long trek our team crossed over about 3 passes over 20,000 feet and 38 passes between 15,000 feet to 20,000 feet and about 61 passes between 10,000 feet to 15,000 feet in alpine-style fast moving traverse technique for the first time—a great feat of human endurance in the history of mountaineering.

Chapter 19

Kiwis Meet Again at Delhi After Trekking to Baltoro

The 5 New Zealanders again met us at Delhi on 16th November, 1981, after completing their trek to K-2 in occupied Kashmir in Pakistan. The Kiwis had gone to Pakistan from Amritsar and resumed their traverse from Skardu to K-2 Base passing through a fantastic land of giants like the legendary Tarango Towers, Masherbrun, Muztagh, Gasherbrums, Broad Peak, Chogolisa and K-2 ending their journey at Concordia - the junction of great glaciers. Peter Hillary describes the journey thus :

“At last our preposterous quest—Traversing the Himalayas seemed ominously close to becoming a reality. We had travelled through the high valleys and over the high passes from Mt. Kanchendzonga in Sikkim, across Nepal to the Indian Himalaya and were now on the brink of our final state - going north from Indus river into the fabled Karakoram mountains, for the foot of Mt. K-2 the world’s second highest mountain and our journey’s end.

Since we were unable to cross the cease-fire lines just west of Lamayuru (the western most point we reached in Indian territory in Ladakh) we travelled by public transport to Rawalpindi in Pakistan on the circuitous route. Based at the

Mrs. Davie's Private Hotel, a relic of the old British Raj, we made arrangements for travel to northern region of Pakistan and the town of Skardu, just across the cease-fire line on the Pakistan side, from where we could resume our journey.

A number of things would be different about this 10th and final sector. Tashi, S.P. and Roy were unable to continue with us to Pakistan due to the restrictions placed on Indian citizens there. They had gone north from Leh to the Karakoram pass. The support team - Doug, Ann Louise and Corrina would travel with us along with our Pakistan Liaison Officer, Major Muhammad Mutlub-ul-Hassan Nuri, so for the first time all five New Zealanders would travel together on the Himalayan Traverse and what it might mean for the style of travel that could consequently be imposed on us. We had heard a host of uninspiring rumours about Pakistanis. Nuri, as we called our Liaison Officer, was a far cry from all these fears. With an adventurous spirit and a congenial name, he intrepidly set out to join us and complete the trek into the mountains in the not entirely comfortable New Zealand-do-it-yourself style.

He must have wondered, however, as to the sanity of our adventure for on the first day of the trek, a villager told him, pointing at our head, that we must all have nuts and bolts loose ... it's winter, there was deep snow; none goes into the Karakoram at this time.

We flew to Skardu past the massive snow clad faces of Nanga Parbat and from there drove in a four-wheel drive jeep to the road end at the little village of Dassu in the Shiga valley about 150 kms from where our trek had temporarily halted across the cease-fire line in India. Apricot trees ablaze with the rich, golden red colours of late autumn were scattered around the village and the bare fields told of already harvested crops. We clambered out of the jeep and heaved our heavy loads on to our backs and set off up-valley.

A short distance beyond Dassu the track bifurcated and

taking the lower road, we found ourselves on the banks of the river where a flying fox type of cable crossing was suspended above the rushing water. A bearded gentleman with pale grey eyes, Aryan feature, and a woolly cap, typical of the Moslims of Pakistan, soon appeared and claiming to be the owner of the cable that spanned the river demanded the extortionate rate of twenty rupees each for crossing it. At this point he was led aside by Major Nuri to debate the charges resulting in a rate of twenty rupees for us all being agreed upon.

What a ride ... rushing across the broad Braldu river suspended high above in a tiny wooden box, clutching one's pack and with the cool air of early winter streaming through your hair.

Soon afterwards we erred from the main track, climbing steeply up the mountain side to an isolated village far above the river. Through a stand of bare trees we marched on to a field where three tiny people were working. Two men and a woman all of them no more than four feet tall, stood thrashing grain and when they saw us they stopped work and looked quizzically at us, the giants, the new arrivals—I couldn't help thinking of Gulliver's Travels, as everyone in the village was a dwarf and the houses all had low doorways and roofs. Nuri tried to communicate with one of the tiny men but found their language to be quite different from anything he knew, so with various gesticulations and repeating the name of the village, we wished to reach further up-valley, he convinced him to lead us back to the right track. With a huge smile on his face, the tiny man led us back down the hillside, looking behind and up at us frequently to see that we were still following, till we reached a promontory from where he pointed out the way. Doug slipped a little money into one of his pockets for his kindness to which he chuckled and exclaimed, "Bakshish" (a gift) and grinned ear to ear. We shook his small hand and followed the track down to the river

again.

The valley narrowed. Steep and unstable scree slopes swept up from the river to the jagged mountain tops above. We hopped from boulder to boulder as we followed the river bank till the distinctive smell of sulphur filled the air. Calcite cemented the rocks into a mass where scalding water flowed across the ground over wads of bright coloured algae and lime, and nearby lay a pool of hot water. Suddenly, it was like a race, stripping off most of our clothes to a stopwatch, to be the first to step into the incongruously receptive warmth of the mineral water amidst the landslide ridden mountainsides and cold dry air. "Who want the backrubbed?" asked Greame who was perched on a stone in the middle of the little pool with steam rising all round.

Our little group marched on, crossing broad alluvial flats and passing through the tiny villages of the tough Islamic people who live in the upper valley. Groups of people would throng around us and ask where we were going, how many of us were there, did we need porters or guides, and whether or not we knew that winter was coming with its snow and cold. Some instructed us to halt at the terminus of the Baltoro glacier and not to proceed to Concordia and K-2 but with smiles and salams we would part, they to their toil in the fields, and we to trudging beneath our loads up the track towards K-2.

A day's hike above the last village brought us upon a large side stream through which we would have to ford. The water was icy cold and the current swift. The smooth round boulders that formed its base, were extremely slippery. We lined up on the bank with pants rolled up and arms linked. Into the freezing swift flowing water we stepped, slipping on the slippery boulders and leaning on our immediate partner for support while reaching out with the other foot like a blind man feeling for purchase a stable spot to place the foot beneath the cold and murky water.

“Take it slowly; make sure your feet are secure”, commanded Ann Louise while Doug squawked some indecipherable lines in regard to the biting cold of the water that was lapping well above his knees. In a state of nearly frozen disarray we reached the far bank and collapsed on to the stony shore where we pulled on warm clothes in a frenzied rush and forced our frozen feet into dry woollen socks.

That night we halted at a large cave where we unrolled our sleeping bags and collected firewood from the thickets of thorny bushes nearby. Over the fire Greame cooked the dinner, the usual dehydrated beef and beans with a bowl full of stew, billie-tea to wash it down with and by the considerable hour of 6.30 pm the camp was silent.

I rounded the bend in the valley and looking ahead, found myself gazing at the terminal moraines of the Baltoro glacier and above the red brown buttresses, lofty walls and turrets of the elegant Trango Towers cast defiantly along the skyline their bold colour blasted against the azure sky. I was ecstatic as the Karakoram is a mountaineer’s paradise and they are a place where nature has, perhaps, exceeded itself by creating, to quote the American, Galen Rowell, “a throne room of the Gods”.

Just short of the glacier we stopped in a surprise dell of willows and birch with a bubbling stream flowing throughout the middle and in a grassy glade we prepared lunch of the usual ... It would be over a week before the lovely scent of trees and streams and the twitter of little birds would be returned to our experience here at Paiyu.”

Greame Dingle wrote in his diary :

“For me the Baltoro was not only the culmination of ten month’s westward effort; to see the spectacular peaks above this glacier had been my dream for nearly 20 years; the mountains where four worlds meet-Russia, China, Pakistan

and Afghanistan - the mountains which are the high point of the great plate movement that has thrown up (and is still forming) the Great Himalayas a logical, if perhaps unstable, place for our journey to end. We had trekked and climbed 5,000 kilometres, climbed and descended nearly 1 million, 500 thousand feet, and traversed past, through or over every major mountain area of the Himalayas from Kanchendzonga to K-2. You could say we were jaded (we called it something else) and it would have to be something pretty spectacular to move us but we were moved.

The Baltoro glacier itself is perhaps one of the most unattractive places in the world. The mountaineer is confronted with 50 kilometres of depressing grey rock-covered glacier that looks a bit like a construction company's gravel yard. But the consolations are great. Probably nowhere on earth will you discover such fortress like mountains and towers. In fact, there seemed to be too many mountaineering wonders for one area. Here many peaks rise over 7,000 metres, 5 rise over 8,000 metres and these culminate in K-2. This horribly clinical survey name does not do justice to the bastion which is the second highest mountain on earth and was for us the journey's end.

On the first day of November we left our third frigid camp on the glacier and began almost automatically onwards, plodding in deep snow. It was winter again, as it had been when we had begun in Sikkim 265 days before and once again we were just surviving on the breadline with little margin for error.

We had passed the legendary peaks - Trango, Unnamed Tower (thought to be too beautiful for an earthly name), Masherbrum and Muztagh Tower. Now ahead rose the giants-the Gasherbrums, dominated by the flat top wedge of Gasherbrum-4 and to its left the massive Broad Peak. Our objective was Concordia, junction of 3 glaciers near the base of all the giants, including K-2. But by mid-afternoon

Concordia looked as far away as ever over the hummocks of white ice and moraine. On our left the 7,000 metre peaks Chogolisa (final resting place of the legendary mountaineer Herman Buhl) and the Golden Throne were prominently clothed in snow and ice in contrast to the other brown rocky giants. As the sun fell low behind us and camp time approached the temperature fell well below zero and we began to worry that we would not see K-2 after all. It was still out of sight to our left and cirrus clouds had raced in giving promise of a storm. At this altitude with our minimal gear we simply could not withstand a storm and the best we could do would be to flee to relative safety of lower altitude, even that is not easy in this area.

Out in front, Peter and I put on a concerted burst of speed, taking turns to plug steps in the dry old snow and speaking glances to the left every few steps, sun dangerously low, "Peter shouted" spin drift coming off something big to the left. Sure enough the blue sky high above was smudged with wisps of wind-blown snow. Then a few minutes later the dark outline of a high mountain ridge came into view followed immediately by the white south face of K-2. We plugged just as quickly, hardly daring to believe that our mountain marathon was almost over.

A million emotions and memories, a salad of the last ten months sped through my head. Tomorrow every step would bring us closer to that longed for paradise—home, hot baths, furry kittens, bacon and eggs for breakfast. No more wiping bottoms with rocks or snow, no more squalor, no more intolerable cold, hunger or bone tiredness. At home we could have almost any food we desired, whenever we wanted, at least, the staple requirements and we could be warm and dry when we wanted. At least until the next time we went in search of reality, peace of mind or a knowledge of what was necessary for a good life, and then we would go to the hills again. But at the moment such a thought was almost abhorrent.

I let out a cry of joy behind to Corrina, Nuri, Ann Louise and Doug. To Peter in front, I wanted to shout "stop, you bugger - I want to hug ya", but I said "drop down to that flat on the left, it's time to camp".

"Let's go on until we can see better", he replied, and for a moment it looked like our mighty adventure may end in disagreement, but a moment later he seemed to notice how cold it had become now that the sun had gone and he threw off his pack and stoically began stamping out a place for us to lie on. Our journey from Kanchendzonga to K-2 was over - probably the longest alpine journey ever done by man.

A wave of emotion rushed tears to my eyes as I hugged Peter, then Corrina, Dough, Nuri and Ann Louise. Then sadly we went about the business of survival—six people in the middle of a desert with the temperature plummeting to around minus 30. We were still a long way from home but in our discomfort, we were savouring that fabulously warm emotion - success."

Chapter 20

Mission Accomplished

What is it that drove us from one end to the other of the Himalayas? In spite of all the physical tortures and hard sweat of over 9 months continuous trekking we came out fully rejuvenated and happy. From the Himalayas we returned refreshed in body, in mind and in spirit to take the broader view of life and face it more strongly. Was it then true that the old Rishis and Munies used to go to Himalayas to revitalise their physical and spiritual energies and returned invigorated with power? But it is certain that apart from adventure, it was a spiritual journey for all of us.

Call it a spirit of the Himalayas, call it any thing, but no one has yet explained why it has a power over men, why people have been fleeing to the Himalayan caves to find peace and happiness there. Some times while in the mountains, it is better to feel than to think. As regards happiness, thought can achieve nothing that faith can not achieve easily. In the mountains we are led time and again through beauty, and through our reaction to beauty, towards the conception of God.

Mountaineering is a happy pursuit, because it provides through climbing and contemplation a union of the physical and mental qualities. The hills not only take men away from a complex mode of existence, but they teach them that to be

happy it is only necessary to have food, shelter and warmth. They bring them face to face with realities and in doing so inculcate a valuable lesson in the association of simplicity and happiness. It is true that Himalayan mountaineering should never be anything but a pleasure. It should never become a duty. We should never approach them with the challenge to conquer them or subdue them. But we should approach them with humility and respect. Because mountains are so big and we are so small. Human beings are so fragile that even a small stone can destroy them what to talk of a rock or, so to say, of a mountain.

I still remember well our daily routine while on this traverse; our morning started with preparation of a small hot brew, off towards a new and unknown pass; a bivouac camp; again trekking and adventuring and again establishing a new camp among an alpine meadow with flowers or under a stone cave; some hard days, some easy days, busy days, and days among the villagers, shepherds, and among the alpine flowers. Days of early spring in Sikkim, cool and comfortable summer in central Nepal and days of monsoon rains and low mists in Himachal and Kumaon. Then the blue sky with cold winds of Karakoram are varied experiences in our minds.

I cannot forget the pleasure of the company of Sir Edmund Hillary, the grand old mountaineer in Kunde in Solukhumbu of Nepal, where he benefitted us with his guidance and experiences of his historic climbs. In the evening we would sit by a great log fire. Sometimes we would discuss the people and places far away; current International politics of New Zealand, India and Pakistan, and some times sit without speaking. And outside the circle of firelight the stars would look down on peaks and passes still to be crossed, and the air would be sweet with the scent of flowers.

There had been a vast contrast in the Himalayan landscape from east to west and every valley was new to us in all respect to its formation, vegetation, cultures, architecture

and dialects. Where as in Sikkim Himalayas there had been thick green tropical forests covered with green foliage and under growth, and every household made of bamboo; central Nepal was denuded and there were only a few pine, blue pine and deodar forests, with stone masonry houses. Whereas in Garhwal and Himachal Himalayas, high ranges with deep valleys and barren gorges, few conical forests with marvelous stone and wood and masonry architectural houses. But while proceeding towards western Himalayas beyond Zanskar to Ladakh and Karakoram, the semi cold desert plateau with rare vegetation and flat roofed houses offered variety in almost everything.

Now the Himalayan highlanders are gradually waking up after their long sleep of many centuries. For the last two decades there had been a massive road construction work going on in the entire Himalayan ranges through the river valleys from plains towards the higher regions. The road construction has exposed the hill people to the so-called, inevitable dangers of modern man with his technical advancement creating a direct imbalance between nature and the inhabitants of these hills; where the roads have already reached, new townships, shops, machines, electricity, saw mills, industries have started coming completely changing the environment and economy of the local areas. With this has come the large scale denudation of forests, floods, and landslides. This has also given birth to such ecology movements as "Chipko" movement in Garhwal Himalayas. Where the roads have still not reached, there is a craving for them like in Nepal and Bhutan and are likely to come under the grip of modernization within a few years. But the hill folk have already changed in their quest for modernity and succumbed to the advancing economic pressures, losing their self reliance and natural freedom in the bargain.

We could notice the large scale influx of so called modern tourists and trekkers in the Himalayas. Every

Himalayan state is vying with each other for tourist attractions. Nepal has made mountaineering and trekking as their main industry and major source of their foreign exchange earnings and with this large influx the pollution and filth is bound to come to the Himalayas unless this 'industry' is properly channalised and managed on scientific lines. We could see some efforts being made in this direction by organising national parks, like Sagar Matha national park, Langtang Rara National Park in Nepal, Nanda Devi Sanctuary in Garhwal, etc. which will go a long way in protecting the ecology of these fragile Himalayan regions.

Due to rapid changes in altitudes and the tropical and monsoon climate, Himalayas are the source of many type of vegetation. One passes through different botanical layers from the Terai in the lower valleys to the tree-line and grassy meadows and then the snow line, which can only be discovered after travelling a few thousand kilometres in America. If the temperature in the valleys is 80 degree F. it could well be -40 degree F. at the summit of a peak. Almost the whole range of the world's climate and hence every kind of flora and fauna are concentrated in the Himalayas within a small stretch of four to five vertical miles from tropical jungle to coniferous forest.

Above the tree line, flowers grow in such profusion and variety that every valley can be named as the valley of flowers, and they are the greatest horticultural treasure house on earth. We were lucky to have seen the Himalayan flowers in all the seasons from spring to autumn. The primulas, purple, pink, blue, white and yellow push up in early spring at the base of great cliffs or under the shelter of giant boulders. During monsoon, the meadows between 11,000 to 15,000 feet are carpeted with potentilas in their millions, many species of aconite and edelwise, saxifragas, asters, blue lilacs and white gentians carpet the ground. Himalayan rhododendrons are their pride at low altitude which start blooming with red

clusters of flowers in early spring from February to April and their colour and sizes starts becoming pink, purple and white on dwarf sized bushes as the height increases. Similarly, wild white rose fill the spring atmosphere with their enchanting fragrance all over.

In our urge to climb hills and high passes in the face of difficulty, hardship and danger, we were actuated by the most complex of motives - the search of beauty. Mountaineering is search for beauty. There was a beauty about our mission and the more we developed our vision, the more we perceived it. Every pass, every valley of a ridge was new and beautiful. Every day was different and even the morning and evening view was different. The Himalayas are beautiful. They are beautiful in line, form and colour; they are beautiful in their purity, in the simplicity and in their freedom. They gave us repose, contentment and good health. In spite of our varied back grounds, cultures, nationalities, tastes and different religions, living habits, and thinking, resulting in inter groups, and intra group tensions, turmoils and emotional surcharges at times, but one thing was common, and that was, while on the move, we forgot all these lower human feelings and appreciated the unlimited Himalayan beauty which recharged us with tremendous energy to continue our long march, one after another stage, and kept all of us together as a team up to the end to accomplish our mission of Himalayan traverse. The Himalayas provide an ideal medium for our physical, mental and spiritual development. At times we talked philosophy, religion, laws of nature governing the universe, and even big ideas like measuring our earth on foot. Like Himalayas, every thing was big, our ideas were big and our actions were big.

From the jungles of Bengal, from the luxuriant vegetation of the Ganges valley, and from the plains of the Punjab, wooded heights rise up to bare, steep cliffs and precipitous ramparts, to wildly-fissured, jagged mountain massives, and

finally to the domain of the petrified kings, crowned with eternal snow, that look down over suffocating, steamy India. Out of reverence to this mysterious, icy cold and inaccessible world the ancient Hindus, the people of the plains, located the habitation of their Gods and their holiest places in those high regions which were beyond the reaches of mortals.

I frequently gaze with pleasure at the high ridges around Mussoorie. Now flooded with the sunshine, now overshadowed by heavy rain-clouds, the glittering Himalayas display their wonders around me. Some time I am stranded by the distant horizon and search the snow covered mountains. Beyond the ridges to the north, I know lies the holy mountain where lord Shiva enthroned in his heaven, dwells in his paradise with his beautiful consort Parvati, and innumerable gods and goddesses. And beyond the darkness of legends my royal Himalayan traverse, life lay hidden in snow clad ranges.

Southwards, the crests of the Himalayas sink down to low hills, which finally pass into the boundless Gangetic plains.

On the edge of the horizon these waves fade away like petrified surf on the coast of a desert sea. Amid the yellow haze at the top ends of the Shivalik ranges, two white ribbons are seen in the distance meandering past - the Ganges and Yamuna. The roar of its water still lingers in my ears. The song of the high, wild and lovely places still rings in my ears. The Himalayan beauty lives eternally in my memory and it has become inseparable part of me and a constant source of my happiness.

Appendix-I

Trekking Technique in Himalayas

The Himalayas have always attracted trekkers, mountaineers, pilgrims and ascetics.

Since time immemorial its rugged height crowned with snow and draped in vast glaciers has lured man to pit his courage and ingenuity against its dangerous challenge.

Below the snowline at 18,000 feet, nature appears to relent and from the austere magnificence of the heights brings down to a different world of cascading water falls, lush green forests, flower-bedecked meadows and a variety of rare flora and fauna. Here the rivers flow clear blue and icy cold.

Here too nestle small villages and hamlets with their diverse local customs, dances, folklore and architecture. Their people being as vibrant as their surroundings and in most cases innocent of the sometimes dubious benefits of modern civilisation.

Since ancient times, ascetics have climbed into these inhospitable heights in search of peace, and in doing so have established places of pilgrimage that have become more than household names since their fame has spread to all part of the world. Names like Kailash Mansarovar, in Tibet, 'Thyang

Boche' in Nepal, Pemayangzi in Sikkim and of course our own Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri, Gangotri of Uttarakhand. Then there is Amarnath in Kashmir and Hemis in Ladakh.

Those first mountaineers, whether ascetics, pilgrims, traders, hunters or shepherds had no special training or climbing techniques, but acquired a high degree of skill from necessity and constant practice. Having to cross the mountain passes at heights ranging from 1500 mtrs. to 5,800 mtrs., they designed ingenious equipment, food and clothing from indigenous material to help them combat the intense cold and negotiate snow and ice.

For a vast number of people, the Himalayas appear to be "Shangrila", to others the abode of God. Whatever else they may be, this much is certain that a spiritual force emanates from these mountains that finds a responsive chord in the soul of man and impel him onwards.

Trekking in the Himalayas is now quite enjoyable and has become comparatively easy with the development of lightweight equipment and clothing with booming tourist infrastructure. There are difficult treks as well as easy treks, long and short treks. Vehicles, helicopters and aircrafts are also available to explore the Himalayas according to one's resources, taste and leisure time. But you still find people in remote mountain villages who still maintain the age old traditions and have not changed for generations. There is much that is new and interesting in the Himalayan villages. Stan Armington has rightly said that "Trekking is neither a wilderness experience nor is it a climbing trip". Even at a height of 12,000 to 14,000 feet in secluded valleys, there are small village settlements tending their flocks of sheep and goats and/or herds of Yaks of nomadic shepherds and Gujars, and as a result, there are people on the trail to guide and help trekkers. Articles of daily necessity are also available in these small hamlets. Even in the remote areas one can mix with

people and "live off the land". Most westerners find it difficult to comprehend this aspect and visualise their trekking trips to be the same as those organised in their national parks or in wilderness area of their respective countries. Almost all the Himalayan valleys are full of rural settlements and the population gradually thins out with the rise in altitude. One always finds people on the trekking trails and there is no dearth of information as to trekking routes and directions. Hill people are traditionally hospitable which adds pleasure to trekking in the Himalayas more than anywhere else. Some people think that trekking in the Himalayas is a climbing trip where they have to negotiate rocky cliffs, thick jungles and uncharted routes. But this is not so. In almost all Himalayan regions, the local people have well developed trails and village routes from village to village or from mountain pasture to pasture and across well defined high altitude passes, where people travel from one valley to other for trade, cultural exchanges, religious activities and inter - marriages. These mountain trails and high passes normally do not require any mountaineering skills or artificial climbing aids. Even though, at places, they are covered with snow and may have crevasses, but usually they can be crossed without the aid of ropes and pitons. There are only a few difficult treks which need mountaineering techniques or equipment like the trek to Nanda Devi Sanctuary or across a few passes which require special equipment to negotiate the glaciers.

Trekking is more enjoyable than climbing the peaks and offers scenic beauty. The Himalayan region being away from modern city life with its industrial pollution, provides an opportunity to be in natural surroundings and provide a different kind of satisfaction and internal happiness and takes the trekker back home rejuvenated with new enthusiasm to take up the challenges of city life.

Appendix II

Essential Prerequisites of Trekking

Trekking is a strenuous physical exercise and hence only those who are physically strong and in good condition should opt for this. Trekking involves many stretches of ascents and descents. A days walking of 10 to 15kms, can only be enjoyed, by persons who have special aptitude and love for mountains. One should love the surroundings, friendly people and mix with them to enjoy and feel comfortable among the hill people who are totally different in their approach to life. The interest in people will reduce the strenuous walks and physical exertion will not be felt. The long treks can stretch from 100 kms to 500/ 600 kms with heights varying from 3000 fts to 8000/10000 fts. There are steep descents which sometimes create knee problems. At times a small extra weight can create a problem on the climbs and hence one should carry a light ruck-sack to be self sufficient with cooked meals and personal garments. Before venturing for trekking, one should make mental and physical preparations in advance and trim up ones body and muscles by taking long walks. Similarly one should also develop a liking for out door living. One should be adaptable and be able to mix with different people and accept variations in schedule and changes of plans/ moves as per unusual situations. The way of life of people also differs from one another. Life styles of occidentals, of Westerners, Europeans, Americans and other are different

and one should get used to this to feel more comfortable. Westerners should make an effort to understand the level of industrial development, education and economic development of the people of the Himalayan regions who have still not been exposed to so called modern living. Amenities like roads, electricity, telephones, etc. are only now gradually being introduced into these areas. The people had been nearly self sufficient till recently and are not familiar with many things we take for granted. Hence if trekkers go with pre-conceived notions, then they will certainly be disappointed in not finding the ordinary day to day necessities. It would be advisable to get used to local food and drink as far as possible and use them as the hill-man does.

It is always advisable, that people should make use of local resources for shelters, to make trekking cheap and comfortable; rather than to arrange treks through trekking agencies that are able to provide 5 star trekking facilities like mobile hotels, unless that is what is particularly wanted.

Geographically, the Himalayas stretch from east to west having marshy land called the Terai along its southern end. This area has thick forests. The Himalayan ranges run parallel to each other and stretch in a 200 kms. wide and 2,000 kms. long chain of hills and mountains finally terminating in the outer Himalayan range which is covered with perpetual snow and merges with the high Tibetan plateau on the other side. These mountain chains have been cut across by the several rivers originating in the perpetual glaciers and flowing in a north south direction and merging into Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus river systems respectively in the plains of India.

Most of the trekking trails pass along these river valleys. Few treks or trails cross over high passes connecting one valley to another. In the Indian Himalayas, a large road net work has been constructed all along the river valleys and

upto the remotest corners which had reduced long approach marches and here smaller treks, can be selected depending upto the time available. But the Nepal Himalayas still maintain virgin conditions and there are hardly one or two major roads in the country and hence necessitate long treks involving 15 to 20 days, like the ones to Everest Base Camp, Manang, Mukti Nath, Rara and Jumla Treks. But in almost all the areas of the Indian Himalayas, the Shivalik, Doons and Middle Hills are inhabited by different types of people like Niwaras, Rajput, Kumaonies, Garhwales, Kinnauries, Lahaulies and Ladakhis. People of Bhotia and Tibetan stock, like the Sherpas, also inhabit the northern region of the Himalayas, bordering Tibet. Therefore, it is important to understand the hill people. There is lots of cultural, architectural and social variations in each valley of the Himalayas which provides an enthralling subject for study.

In the eastern Himalayas the vegetation is predominantly dense bamboo jungle; village homes are built of bamboo and are spread around tracts of tilled land. In these areas of Assam, Sikkim and Bhutan, the Nepali influence dominates. On the other hand, in western Nepal, Garhwal and Kumaons and as far as Kulu, the climate is temperate with forests of pine and deoder. Here the houses are built of wood and slate in compact villages. Still further west the climate is more frigid and the landscape dry and barren, hence there is very little vegetation. The houses are built of stones and wood with flat roofs. In this area, the Tibetan and Ladakhi influence predomiates.

With the development of road net-work in the sixties and seventies, the old trekking trails in the Indian Himalayas have been over-shadowed. The old pilgrim trails and trekking infrastructure like old Chatties and Dharamshala should be looked after in the Indian Himalayas with government assistance. Various infrastructural bases like Kumaon & Garhwal-Mandal Vikas Nigams, Himachal tourism, J & K &

Ladakh tourism development departments and various private trekking agencies have created facilities to organise treks in the Indian Himalayas and tourism in the Himalayas is gradually picking up and becoming popular with Westerners who were, till recently aware of trekking facilities in only a few places like Ladakh and Nepal. Recently Nepal has developed good trekking tourism and the trails have been developed having small tea shops, hotels on the trail which can provide food and shelters at a regular distance.

Trekking Methods :

There are several trekking methods viz :—

1. Through organised trekking agencies/tour operators.
2. Trekking on your own.
3. Live-of-the -land approach.
4. Self organised group.

Any one of these can be chosen, depending on personal inclination, financial resources, physical fitness and the time element.

1. Through organised trekking agencies/tour operators:—

There are a large number of trekking agencies in India and Nepal that organise treks in Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, Kumaon, Garhwal and Ladakh Himalayan regions. These trekking agencies are mostly based at Darjeeling, Kathmandu, Thimpu, Delhi, Dehradun, Nainital, Simla, Srinagar and Leh. They normally make trekking arrangements through their guides and agents and send organised groups to the mountains. Most often trekking groups are from Europe, United States, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Indian trekkers from Bengal, Gujarat and Maharashtra have also started taking part in organised groups as also trekking parties consisting of college and school students. The arrangements are made according to demand like arranging

ponies porters, camping equipment and food. Otherwise they simply provide guides and equipment on hire. The government is promoting trekking as an important part of tourism and a vital source of foreign exchange. The trekking agencies normally plan completely self sufficient treks carrying their own food, stoves for cooking, utensils and tentages. They also plan and cater for the different stages as per the trekking groups and do not depend upon local food and accommodation. Hence the camps are established at predetermined points and the trekker is left with plenty of leisure to enjoy scenic beauty and study the culture, flora and fauna en route. In the evening some trekking agencies organise camp fires and cultural activities to add to the pleasure of the trip. Members of the trekking group also inter act with each other creating an interesting bond of togetherness and lively exchange of points of view.

Trekking agents also attend to minor medical problems and help in emergencies as in case of any accident, if rescue is required.

The expenses of organised treks are ordinarily not high as trek operators make arrangements for large numbers which lowers the cost per head. Normally booking is confirmed in advance by paying a part of the cost of trek. The organised treks can cost 15-20 dollars for ordinary treks to the Deluxe treks costing upto 200 dollars per day. 15 to 20 dollars a day however is the normal. Nepal has definitely organised their trekking facilities much better than India, where few new trekking agencies are well established. The main drawback of organised trekking is that one has to stick to the trekking schedule of the group and can not deviate for interesting side trips on the way. But on the whole an organised trek is very rewarding and enjoyable.

2. Trekking on your own

The well defined old pilgrim routes in Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas are still being followed by millions of

pilgrims and trekkers. Further on, in the higher altitudes many people carry their own stores of food, etc. and so manage their trips. But actually there is no need to carry food stuff and tentage as there are villages and hutments and local food can be made available on payment and the botheration of carrying heavy loads can be easily avoided. In case a high altitude trek is planned, then either a firm base should be made or help from local porters to carry loads and work as guide may be arranged for difficult treks. This certainly provides more adventure and the thrill of trekking in the high altitude Himalayan meadows is an experience not easily forgotten.

3. "Live of the land" approach :

This style of trekking is only to carry your sleeping bag, ruck-sack and personal clothing and for other essential requirements, to depend on local food and shelters. There are plenty of local tea shops, small hotels in private homes which provide food and shelter cheaply. The people are normally hospitable to those who come for help and guidance. Of course one can not expect a rich variety of food as the local staple diet of rice and lentils (Dal-Bhat) and green vegetables only is available on these trekking routes. One has to plan the day-to-day moves and anticipate arrangements at next halting places by enquiring in detail so that one does not go hungry or without shelter. This "Live off the Land" approach can certainly allow faster movement and provides more manoeuvrability for side trips and changing of programme according to ones own interest. Recently different types of hotels are coming up on the road sides which may have the facility of only a shelter—comfortable rooms without the dunlop beds and bath rooms. It entirely depends upon the township en route. But certainly this method of trekking gives a greater opportunity to observe the local culture, food habits and the living style of the locals.

4. Self organised group trekking :

Another method of organising treks is by the group itself in which, as done by a trekking agency, complete arrangement for porters, transport, food and equipment etc. are made by the group themselves and then they proceed on trekking. This requires advance planning and contacts at road heads through local people so that on arrival the porters and Sherpas are available in time. Otherwise it will waste time at the road head for arranging porters/other transport. Experienced mountaineers and trekkers can organise such trips easily as they have past experience of trekking, equipment and food required to be carried. The bargaining/negotiation with the porters and labourers is a complicated affair and needs handling with patience, specially during the work seasons from March April and Sep-October. These porters are engaged in the harvesting at this time and normally few are available; for this reason, they ask exorbitant rates. The preparation of loads and weight also poses problems and can become a headache, moves can be delayed for some time, otherwise a small number of porters and labourers are always available at the road heads. Normally these porters carry 20 to 30 kgs of weight, but their loads should be made properly in advance. The trekking group carries light rucksacks while on the trails, and camping arrangements are to be done by the porters under the direction of the group leader of the trekking party. But one important point should be kept in view, that porters/ Sherpas normally cannot walk along with the trekkers; they follow them in the rear with their heavy loads and might reach late with the loads at the next camp. The detailed list of cooking and camping equipment including food items should be prepared in advance and a lot of patience and understanding is required to handle the porters/ Sherpas and local shopkeepers while trekking on the way. Once trekking starts then gradually things get sorted out by themselves and the systematic drills are followed with more

understanding by group and porters alike and the trip becomes rewarding. The trekking becomes more leisurely and side trips to scenic places can easily be included in itinerary.

Preparation for Trekking :

Whenever any individual or group intends to take a trekking trip in the Himalayas he has to start mental and physical preparations for the trip to make it more enjoyable and pleasant. In the beginning, it should be decided whether it is a low altitude trek or long and difficult high altitude trek. This choice will affect the entire preparation for the trek. Since the preparations for both these types of treks require different approaches/preparation and physical stamina. Those who have no experience of outdoor activities, camping, tramping, bush craft, etc., should start with the low altitude treks for which very simple physical as well as mental preparation is required. Normally the low altitude trekking upto 10,000 ft. is done in inhabited areas where food and shelter is easily available and help of any kind can be availed of from the local people. In the beginning this type of trekking is recommended for youngsters or new-comers from the plains to tourists in the Himalayas who are visiting there for the first time.

High Altitude Trekking :

Trekking above 10,000 ft. to 20,000 ft. requires special preparation both mental as well as physical. One should have sufficient knowledge of high altitude problems, mountain hazards and some knowledge of mountaineering and snow crafts requires special type of trekking equipment.

1. Footgear : Trekking boots/jungle shoes/Tennis shoes
or

Boots : Camp shoes-light weight, PT shoes/ slippers.

Socks : Nylon thermal (3), socks woollen for high treks above 12,000 ft. socks-light cotton for trek below 12,000 ft.

2. Clothing : Down-filled jacket, down-filled pants, woollen shirt or sweater, nylon wind-breaker, nylon wind pants or ski warm-up pants for treks above 12,000 feet, hiking shorts for men, long underwear, poncho, sun hat, wool hat (balaclava), gloves gaiters, underwear (3 changes) cotton or corduroy pants optional, T-shirts, cotton for men (2 changes), blouse-for woman (2 changes).

3. Other Equipments: Large duffle bag with lock, stuff bags, ruck-sack, goggles or sun glasses (2) water bottles, flashlight, batteries and bulbs, sun cream (barrier cream).*

4. Additional items: Insect repellent, diary and pencils, toilet articles, soap, toilet paper, toothpaste, shampoo, towel, laundry soap, medical and first aid kit, small knife, sewing kit, nylon card, head band, umbrella.

5. Other optional equipment: First aid kit, binoculars, altimeter, camera and lenses—lens cleaning equipment, film, thermometer, compass, books and games, tape recorder and blank tapes.

Note : * Required only for treks exceeding 4000 metres.

Selection of Equipment :

If one is an experienced trekker or has been occasionally going out camping then preparation for trekking becomes very simple. One should be aware of the climatic conditions of the mountains which can change very fast, from low altitude to high altitude or morning to evening, hence one has to be prepared to meet extreme cold as well as hot climatic conditions. For meeting this, one should have personal clothing which can be put on in layers when it is cold and can be taken off one by one while walking as the body gets warmed up so that sweating is reduced. Therefore, for under garments, woollen shirts, synthetic fibre, soft clothing and wind proof-jackets should be preferred for outer garments.

1. Boots :

Trekking shoes and boots are a very important item and should be selected carefully so that no inconveniences are caused during march. Now for low altitude, trekking shoes like Bata, Action shoes, Gola shoes, even boots with rubberised soles are comfortable and light enough. They have a good grip and can be used over slippery ground. The shoes should be water proof and preferably broken in so that blisters are not caused. They should be loosely fitted so that toes etc. are not compressed during the long march and walking is not painful. For lower altitude even normal running shoes and tennis shoes are also comfortable. There is a special type of trekking shoe with hard vibram soles and ankle protection which are good for high altitudes. In case one intends to trek across glaciers and passes, then good trekking shoes with water proof arrangements like short gaiter etc. are also recommended. Normally a light pair shoes i.e. P.T. shoes is also recommended for comfortable change over at camps.

2. Socks:

Nylon/woollen socks are normally comfortable but now synthetic prolioplin socks are more comfortable. Socks should be dried whenever there is a long break. One extra pair of socks should be carried. Dirty socks normally become uncomfortable and cause blisters. For high altitude two pairs of woollen socks with inner nylon socks may be worn in snow bound area.

3. Climbing/Trekking trousers :

It is better to carry half pants or woollen climbing trousers for long trekking trips. Half pants are quite comfortable in day time, especially while trekking in low altitude areas. Loose fitted trekking pants made of tough cotton cloth are recommended.

Nylon wind breakers/wind cheaters are very helpful while trekking. They are very light weight and can be carried

in rucksack. They protect from the strong cold wind, rain, etc. and give good insulation for warming the body. During warm weather it should be taken off.

4. Woollen Shirts :

Woollen garments are necessary while trekking in the hills. Light weight shirts while sleeping can also be used. Woollen shirts are multipurpose/comfortable which can be used with sleeves rolled up during day time and rolled down during evenings and nights. Carry light sweaters which can be put on in one to two layers for warmth and protection.

5. Down Jackets :

Feather jackets are helpful and light weight to carry in high altitude areas. Parka coats and woollen jackets can also be used in place of a feather jacket.

6. Sun Hat/Monkey cap :

During day time there is scorching heat, whereas, at night it is biting cold. So head gear is essential. Two different types of hats may be used for protection during day and night.

7. Balaclava :

Balaclava is ideal as it can protect the face and can be rolled up during day time to double as a hat.

8. Gloves :

Light gloves are recommended for trekkers going to high passes. Normally, only morning and evening are cold, but in case one is going beyond 14,000 ft. in snow bound areas in winters then only woollen gloves will serve the purpose.

9. Gaiters :

If the trekking trail passes through a glacier or a soft snow zone then gaiters are recommended which can be helpful while walking over snow. These nylon gaiters act as a protection against snow/water getting into the shoes.

10. Under Garments :

Synthetic under vest and cotton/loose nylon under wear is recommended. Sometimes tight fitting can cause bruises which can be very uncomfortable while on the move.

11. Sleeping bags :

Light weight down sleeping bags are recommended for trekkers. Now synthetic sleeping bags are also available in the market but they should be used for low altitude treks, otherwise nights can be very uncomfortable in high altitude area. Down feather filled sleeping bags are required for snow bound area.

12. Rucksack :

Rucksack is a very important item and should be selected properly, which can be carried comfortably. The whole journey depends on the quality of rucksack which should be tried in advance before finally setting off the long treks. Specially the shoulder straps should be padded and easily adjustable, side pockets would be helpful for keeping various small items, while on the move. The packing of rucksacks is also done with special techniques so that weight and balance is equally divided round the body and rucksack does not pull the weight on one side.

13. Mattress :

New nylon carry mats are light and easily available at very cheap rates and are a good substitute for air mattresses. They are light weight and comfortable for trekkers.

14. Water Bottle :

Plastic water bottle with good cork is recommended. Water bottle can be of multipurpose use. This can work as hot water bottle at night, if it is a cold place.

15. Poncho/Umbrella :

Nylon poncho is helpful against rain and wind. It can also work as wind cheater to some extent. Umbrella can be a substitute for poncho as it protects from rain and is also helpful during sunny days to work as sun shade. Umbrella should be carried while trekking in Himalayas as the weather can change swiftly during any season.

16. Torch:

Two cell torch is best to carry while on the move. One should remove the dry battery to prevent any leakage/ discharging of the battery.

17. Camera :

Camera is a part of a trekker's kit. Camera should be properly secured with cover and lense caps to protect from dust and water. The professional should carry special type of wide angle, tele lense and zoom lense also. For beginners a simple box camera will be more useful. 35mm cameras are generally used. Reels are not available at most places.

It is better to trek with light equipment and clothing. A few items like small pocket knife, sewing kits, safety pins, buttons, toilet articles should be packed in small bag and kept separately. Small diary & pencils should be carried for making notes on the move.

Medicines :

Small first -aid kit for minor cuts, medicines for stomach disorder, fever, cough and cold should be carried. Normally there is lot of demand for medicines by the locals while on the move, but unless one is a doctor it is not possible to give prescription for medicine. Few suggested medicines are as under :—

1. Chloroquine or Paludrine tablets for malaria.
2. Sleeping pills for use at high altitude.

3. Pain relief tablets with codeine for high altitude headaches.
4. Amenid and S.G. tablets or other medicine for diarrhoea.
5. Moleskin or felfa pads for blisters.
6. Tape and band-aids.
7. Decongestant/antihistamines for high altitude congestion.
8. Throat lozenges and cough drops.
9. Asprin for mild pain and discomfort.
10. If you are allergic to any medicines, bring your own substitutes.
11. Any special medicines you require. Have your doctor prescribe them on the medical certificate.
12. Foot powder to be carried to avoid footrot.

Physical Condition :

Before starting for a long trek in Himalayas one should ensure that he is physically properly conditioned to take a long walk. For 10 to 15 days one should take long walks and do some physical exercises to tone up the body muscles so that one does not feel uncomfortable while on the journey. Initially it takes 2-3 days for the body to get adjusted to the new physical strains and routines, and by the second or third day gradually walking becomes easier and one starts enjoying the trekking.

Walking is also a technique in the mountains. In the beginning one should walk slowly and rhythmically and gradually with the warming up of the body automatically speed is attained. One should not move fast or climb quickly which may put strain on the lungs and body muscles. For longer treks it is recommended that one should keep a

normal pace and take long halts to cover the distance. Inexperienced trekkers normally move fast while descending a slope but this is dangerous and also may cause trouble. So controlled and gradual descents are the best principle in Himalayas/hill trekking.

Acclimatization :

If the trekking is above 9,000 ft. then one should keep in mind that acclimatisation of the body due to rarefied atmosphere and shortage of oxygen is essential. One should not move fast unless the body has adjusted to the high altitude conditions; it may take one to two days for the body metabolism to adjust to the new atmospheric pressures and less oxygen.

High Altitude Sickness :

Due to lack of oxygen, there are certain symptoms like headache, nausea, vomiting, etc. which get reduced after acclimatisation at that particular height, but if the sickness increases then the individual should be sent to a lower altitude. Work high and sleep low is the normal principle of acclimatisation and at least at every increase of 2000 to 4000 ft height acclimatisation halts are required. High altitude sickness can become fatal if it is not attended promptly and carefully otherwise serious problems of evacuation of the casualty may arise.

Food and Water :

While trekking, normally water from open sources like nullahs, rivers etc.. should not be used as they may be contaminated and create stomach disorder. Boiled water or tea should be consumed mostly to avoid dehydration. Water from regular supply schemes or taps may be used. In rare cases water from a spring source may be taken. Water sterilisation tablets are useful during the treks to avoid stomach disorder. Similarly, always hot food be taken and open and

cold food be avoided as this again may create stomach disorder. Contaminated food, due to flies, during summer at the road side tea shops and hotels should be avoided. As far as possible hot and fresh food should be used. Drinking water can also be treated by iodization. Mix a small quantity of iodine, shake it for a few minutes and then let the crystals accumulate at the bottom. This method kills minor bacteria and purifies the water.

Exchange of Currency :

Normally, trekkers are advised to take travellers' cheques instead of cash. But to exchange foreign travellers' cheque may pose problems at places in remote areas of Himalayas where banks do not accept foreign travellers' cheques. Hence before leaving for the mountains foreign travellers' cheques may be exchanged for Indian rupees or Nepalese currency.

Trekking Permits/Permission :

There are certain border areas adjoining Tibet which have been declared as a inner line and needs special permits. Restriction of movement is imposed by the government of India as well as Nepal and Bhutan where foreigners are not permitted. For Nepal regular trekking permits are issued to foreign trekkers on payment of charges. But Indian and Nepalese are exempted from payment of trekking fees. In India there is no trekking permit system and no trekking fee is charged. But inner line permits are issued for foreigners as well as Indians for entry into the inner line area. The details of inner line are as under :—

Restricted areas in Nepal for all foreigners as well as for Indians

1. North of Taplejung.
2. North of Golago.
3. North of Lambagar.

4. North of Rasua (Langtong area).
5. North of Jagat.
6. North of Mukli.
7. North West of Kag Beni i.e. Mustang.
8. North of Dhorpatan
9. North of Dolpa.
10. North of Mugo.
11. North & North-Fast of Rara Lekh.

Restricted (Inner Line) areas in Himachal Pradesh

From Sewa Degri to Buras Pass to Shuttle Pass along Panuri Khad to Bagtu and then Baba Khad to Pin pass.

Uttar Pradesh inner lines :

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| From Singa Ghati | 31° 16' 47"N | | |
| | 78° 18' 48"E | | |
| Rubin Gad Stream | 31° 10' 42" | | |
| to Sewa Dogri | 78, 04' 20" | Rupin to 72 | 31°21' 15" |
| | 31° 23' 10" | | 78°09' 25" |
| | 78° 08' 53" | | |
| To Sharanghu | 31° 24' 50" | To Baran | |
| | 78° 06' 14" | Pass | |
| Along the ridge | 31° 25' 12" | Shathal | |
| to Hansbeshan | 77° 55' 38" | Pass TA 31 | |
| Peak point 17190 | | | |
| in TA | | | 31°28' 46" |
| Upstream to Point | | | 71°58' 59" |
| 14781 in TA 32 | 31° 32' 20" | and along Panvi Khad | |
| Khad meets Sutluj | | | 78° 01' 72" |
| River | 31°32' 36" | Along | |
| | 78° 00' 54" | Sutluj River to the point | |
| TA 35 Upto Wangtu 36" | — | -31°46'35" | |
| | | 77° 49' 41" | |

meets the Sutluj
River Traikhange PASS

The inner line permits are issued by the respective District Magistrates or a consolidated permit can also be issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The major problem for trekking the entire Himalayas is the need for entry permits for entry into Assam, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, India and Pakistan. Recently Government of India has liberalised its policy and extended the inner line to the Indo-Tibet border upto 20 kms. from border.

Most of the trekking areas have been opened for tourists in Sikkim, Kumaon, Grahwal, Lahaul Spiti and in Ladakh and Trekking permits are needed only for few places.

The Lahul Spiti valley in Himachal Gongotri region of Grahwal, Milam valley in Pithoragarh and North Sikkim has been opened for tourists. Similarly Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura have also been opened for tourists.

TRAVERSE ROUTE FROM KANCHENDZONGA TO KARAKORAM (Followed by joint Indo-Newzealand Himalayan)

TRAVERSE EXPEDITION - 1981





S.P. CHAMOLI is a well known mountaineer, skier and river runner.

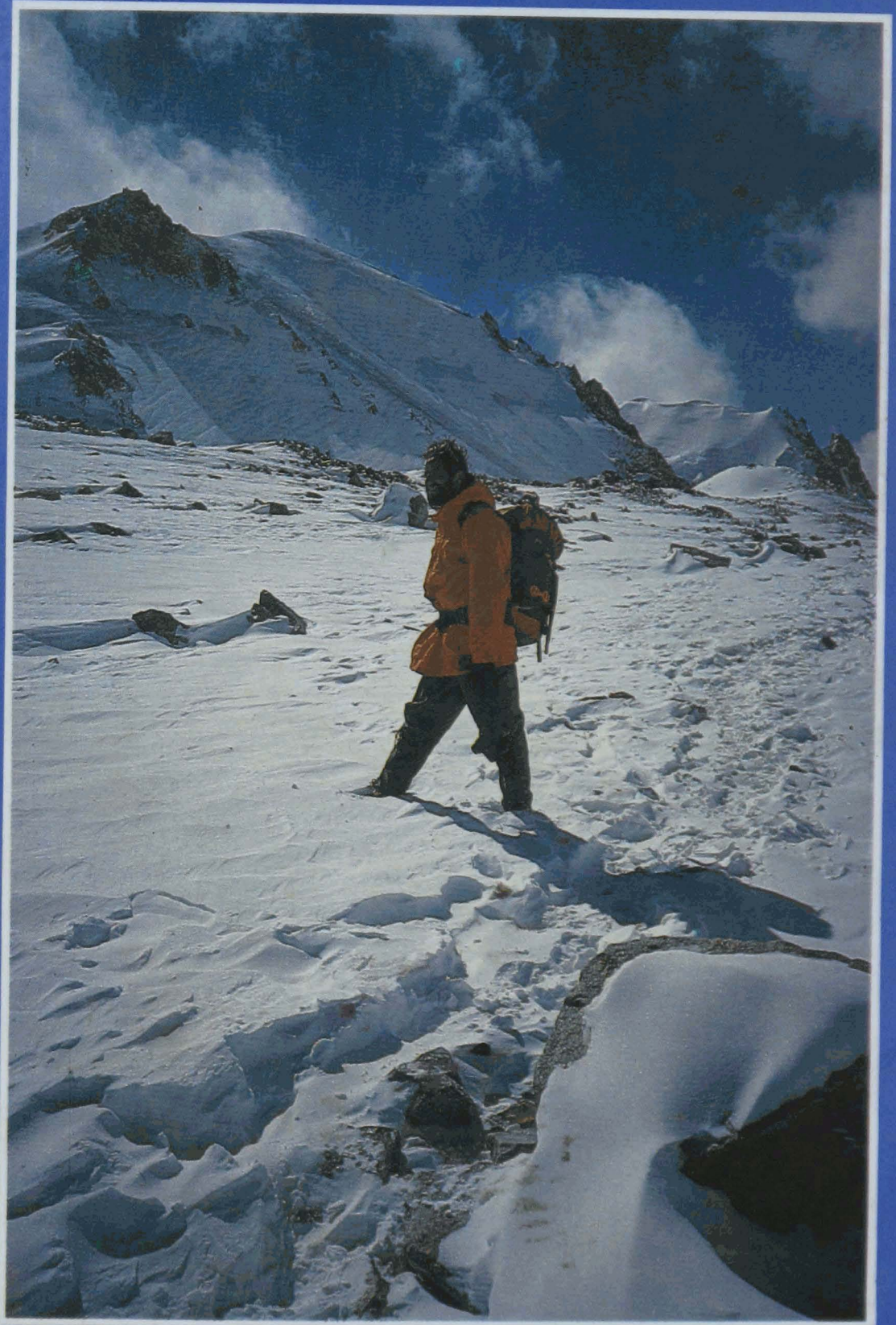
His outstanding achievements included the successful leadership of various expeditions to challenging peaks, Neelkanth (Ht. 21640 ft.) Kedarnath dome (Ht. 22410 ft.) Saserkangri-III (Ht. 24695 ft.) Nanda Devi East Peak (Ht. 7434 mts.) and Swarga Rohini (Ht. 6252 Mtrs.). He successfully led many International Joint Expeditions, which include, Joint Indo-New Zealand Himalayan Traverse expedition, Indo-Polish-Nanda Devi East expedition, Indo-Japanese Brahmaputra Rafting expedition.

In 1986, he rafted down the Ganges, Indus and Zaskar rivers and carried out maiden rafting down of Shyok river in Karakoram ranges. He was Captain of Indian Rafting Team to World Rafting competition held in Nantahala in USA and he was leader of the successful Indo-Japanese Brahmaputra Rafting Expedition which was the maiden rafting of this mighty river from Gelling (Tsangpo gorge) to Dhubri on Bangladesh border.

S.P. Chamoli has been commandant of ITBP mountaineering and skiing Institute, Auli and is at present serving on deputation to Sikkim Police as Deputy Inspector General. He is also member of IMF Sponsoring Committee, Himalayan Club, and Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Darjeeling.

He is recipient of Samar Sewa Star, Sainya Sewa Medal, Raksha Medal, Sangram Medal, President's Polie Medal for meritorious service and President's Police Medal for distinguished service.

He is also author of "Rafting Down The Mystic Brahmaputra".



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