

HIKING CLUB
ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE



Miscellany 2004

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Cover Photo: Dawn at Shivling from Tapovan

The Other Climbers

Dr. Sanjay Kumar

This is the first issue of Miscellany in more than a decade. All credit for making it a reality goes to student office bearers of the Hiking Club. Seshadri, the Club President, Nitin, the Club Secretary, Sudhanshu, the Editor of Miscellany, and other members Isha, Bhavya, Sahana, Vatsala, Mehak and Aakash have worked on the journal with enthusiasm and commitment. They have brought varied talents, tastes and idiosyncrasies in to making what it is.

It is easy for a staff advisor of a student club to write a moralising note for the club journal, and I am afraid I might end up doing just that. Nevertheless, I cannot help writing what I think is important.

All of us have our own, some very personal, reasons for going to mountains. Though we often dwell over these reasons, we rarely give much thought to conditions that make it possible for us to hike or climb. Perhaps the most important of these preconditions is the presence of mountain men and women who are prepared to ferry our luggage and gear, pitch our tents, cook for us, and guide and help us in tricky situations for a wage, the only thing we give them in return. Over years I have met many such men, and I think it would not be inappropriate to narrate a few tales about them.

Ram Singh was the most business like *pahari* man I have ever met. He was the *chowkidar* of Phurkia rest house on the Pindari Glacier trail. *Chowkidars* we met in other rest houses used to prepare food for guests in return for nominal *bakhsheesh*. Ram Singh however was running a proper dhaba in his rest houses, where he provided meals for a fixed price of Rs. 4.50 and treated the rest house kitchen and utensils as his personal property. Two days ago we had met his father in Khati village. He had asked us to remind Ram Singh to send him money for tobacco. Ram Singh's response was dismissive, '*Buddha sathia gayaa hai*'. My friend and I were on the Pindari Glacier trail right after our twelfth standard exams in the early eighties, long before it was turned into the Mall Road of Himalayan hiking. Phurkia was the last rest house on the trail. We had to walk seven kilometers ahead to have a look at the glacier. I remember Ram Singh not because of his professional air or because I had thought him to be a scoundrel for the way he treated his old father. Ram Singh is etched in my memory because the lunch he gave us after our visit to the glacier remains one of the tastiest meals I have ever had. It was a simple fare with spiced up *aaloo tamatar sabji* and *chapatis* baked on a *chulha*. Yet the aroma of freshly baked *atta* and the sight of his *subji* were very potent appetizers and I polished off a number of *chapatis* in no time.

Last year I was really fortunate to have Fateh Chand and Pyare Lal as our climbing guides. Without them my descent from the camp below Bhrigu Lake with torn ligaments in my left knee would have been infinitely more arduous and painful. They cut steps for me and held me from both shoulders while my feet and stick faltered on slippery slopes. Between Ram Singh and Fateh Chand I have met a number of *pahari* men. Yashpal, the dashing young man of Jagatsukh, who guided me across the rock face on the Indrasan Nullah on way to Chhatru, and who when I last heard was caught up in a police case of smuggling *charas* to Goa. Milon Subba of Pelling in western Sikkim who cooked wonderful noodles for us with just cabbage and garlic at Tsoska when we were rained in for two days, and who told me how he courted and married his Bhutia wife as we drove out of Yuksom in light drizzle with mist rising from oak and pine forests. I have been a buyer of services of these men and perhaps for them I was nothing more than a buyer.

I noticed Kushang Sherpa's name for the first time in the museum at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. He was mentioned as one of the very few climbers to summit Everest

from the very difficult Kangshung face. Later, I also found out from a website that he is the only man to have climbed Everest from all four directions. Kushang is an instructor at the HMI. Among the instructor community at the HMI, which itself is something of an elite club, Kushang is deeply respected for his achievements. For the trainees of the HMI though, this toughest of the climbers is also the most accessible. His loud laughter is as appealing as is the sheen in his naughty eyes. He rarely misses a chance to play pranks on trainees. On being asked why go to Everest, George Mallory is supposed to have replied 'Because it is there'. Though this answer is much celebrated in climbing literature I cannot help sensing in it a self-assurance trying to hide its lack of critical awareness with a cut and dry assertion. After all, one does not decide to go to all places that are there. Humans have been seeing mountains for ages and only in recent history have they thought of climbing them. For every man who decides to climb a mountain there have been hundreds who have considered the same mountain to be an object of worship, rather than a stone to step on. Climbing is thought about only in certain cultural milieus and a degree of material resources is a prerequisite for it. It is an expensive adventure. I asked the same question to Kushang Sherpa. It was evident that he did not want to give a reply, but I persisted. '*Kya Karein! Jana Padhta Hai*', he said finally with a very visible irritation. No doubt Kushang is modest to the point of being self-effacing and feels shy talking about himself. Yet his answer was more than just a personal statement. He started his professional life as an expedition porter at the age of fourteen. He never went to a school. Instead, going to mountains was simply a question of survival. There, with a fair amount of hard work and natural flair he fashioned himself into a remarkable mountaineer. Yet even now, he does not think he ever *chose* to be a mountaineer. Very unlike Mallory, who *chose* to be at Everest.

It is men like Kushang who make it possible for thousands of mountaineers and hikers to visit the Himalaya every year. In the Himalaya at least, climbing and hiking remains a colonial adventure. No expedition to any significant peak before the eighties was possible without an army of porter men and women, prepared to put themselves in harm's way, for the sake of someone else's sport in return for a cash wage. And frankly, even middle class Indians can afford to hike and climb in Himalaya only because wage rates are among the lowest due to endemic poverty.

One way to see such men and women is as mere providers of services in return for cash. Yet, do not we mountaineers and hikers kill something of the mountain spirit in us when we see them only as a pole of a cash nexus, standing opposite to us? Would it not be worthwhile reflecting why *they* go to mountains?



President's Note

It has been a wonderful year for the Hiking Club, one that saw it transformed into one of the most active and popular societies in College.

The new academic year began with a bang, with the first serious climbing expedition in almost two decades. In June 2003, a team of eleven members – led by our Staff Advisor Dr. Sanjay Kumar – completed a short trek above Manali from Vashisht to Bhangu Tal, and then moved up the Solang valley to Beas Kund in order to climb **Ladakhi Peak** (5342 m). One camp was placed above Base at a height of 15,500 ft, and on June 7th, the summit party of N. Seshadri and Pranav Chanchani, accompanied by two mountain guides, reached the summit.

When the new term began in July, we headed for the rocks with a new enthusiasm. With the membership of the Club swollen to record highs, almost 70 people – in small groups, and over many weekends – were introduced to rock-climbing for the first time. Many developed a passion for the sport and displayed real talent. Rock-climbing became a regular weekly activity and months of training finally culminated in the hugely successful trip to Dhauj in February.

In our climbing endeavours we were assisted by Mr. Rohan Kanhai Dutta, a former member of the Club, who donated to us a lot of new rock-climbing equipment. Mr. Dutta has also donated an artificial rock-climbing wall to the Club – it is already a major attraction for climbers. We are deeply grateful to him for his generosity. The wall will be dedicated to the memory of Easwaran Bharatan, a member of the Club in the '70s who died on an expedition in the Mulkila range in Lahul.

In the October break the Club organised two treks. One group, led by Dr. Bikram Phookun of the Department of Physics, completed the trek over the Kuari Khal from Wan to Joshimath. The second team, led by Mr. Raghunathan of the Department of Economics, trekked up the Bhilangana valley to the Khatling glacier, and then completed the tough crossing to Kedarnath over the Mayoli Pass at about 16,800 ft.

The Club also held several slide shows and talks. Two of these were presented by members of the Club themselves – one a slide show of the summer expedition, and the other an account of the crossing of Mayoli Pass. A third slide show was given by Dr. P.M. Das, a former President of the Club, on the first ascent of the Lampak peaks in Garhwal. We were also very lucky to get Col. Ashok Abbey, leader of the Indian Everest expedition of 2003, to show us slides of the ascents of Everest and Lhotse by his team.

Other events for the year include a river-rafting trip to Rishikesh, a movie screening, and an irregularly held class on rope-knots and belay techniques. Members of the Club are currently planning next summer's climbing expedition in Himachal.

N. Seshadri

The Ascent of Ladakhi Peak

Summer Expedition 2003

A good expedition is always a nice way to round off the old academic year and begin the new. We were perhaps lucky then that our expedition to Ladakhi Peak (17,600 ft) was so successful.

The expedition team, consisting of 11 members, first completed a tough warm up trek to Bhriгу Tal (14,500 ft.). The trek started from Vashisht village on 29th May in blazing late morning sunshine (which took a heavy toll on the members) and the trail moved straight up the slopes on the left bank of the river. We were in better form the next day, but several steep snow gullies again slowed our progress towards afternoon. It was at this point that tragedy struck, with Dr. Sanjay Kumar suffering an unfortunate injury. He bravely struggled on, but progress was inevitably slowed, and it was a tribute to the cheerfulness of the team that their good humour survived another trying day without lunch.

Bhriгу Tal was reached on the next day. We spent much time mastering some valuable snow skills near the frozen waters, as a result of which we were forced to postpone departure from our second camp. The following morning we set off down for Gulaba, with Dr. Sanjay Kumar bravely managing a torn ligament with the help of two sticks. It was obvious he must return to Delhi for immediate medical attention.

From Gulaba we reached Solang by road, and after a day spent retrieving supplies and climbing gear from Manali we moved on again, this time up the Solang Nala to Bakar Thach. The various large boulders surrounding the campsite proved to be an excellent training ground for enthusiastic young climbers keen to master small overhangs.

On reaching Beas Kund we set up our base camp on a large flat meadow, and the serious business of climbing began. On the 5th of June, the climbing team – N. Seshadri and Pranav Chanchani – together with the mountain guides Fateh Chand Thakur and Pyare Lal, and accompanied by a porter and two other expedition members (Abhishek and Nitin), set off up a steep snow gully to establish Summit Camp at 15,500 ft. Many standard (and some entirely new) glissading techniques were used on the return to base camp.

The next morning, the climbing team and the guides returned, this time to occupy the summit camp. Encouraged by the previous day's reports, those who had stayed behind the last time also ventured forth and arrived at camp by mid-morning. All members of the team had now reached the summit camp, which was a creditable achievement since many had never climbed on snow before.

The climbers left summit camp at 6:00 am on the 7th of June, and by 11:00 am the summit had been reached. The route was up a very steep gully, skirting the glacier that came down from the summit. After gaining the ridge, we roped up and enjoyed a very pleasant climb with several mixed pitches of snow and rock. We were rewarded by terrific views of all the surrounding mountains. Whereas the ascent had been pleasantly challenging, the descent soon became difficult and frustrating as snow conditions deteriorated, with climbers several times sinking in waist deep. A hurried lunch at camp rejuvenated us just enough to reach Beas Kund by evening.

After the euphoria of the climb, the descent down the valley was tiring and very hard on the feet. But descend we had to, and by pushing ourselves after a late morning start we managed to reach Solang by evening.

Many were the voices excitedly discussing the various pleasures of Manali and the plains, but as always happens in such situations, we soon found that we had greatly overestimated the joys of civilization...



Seshadri & Pranav on the summit of Ladakhi Peak

Summit

N. Seshadri

It is 5:00 am on the morning of June 7th, and I am wide-awake. Not that I slept much at night – last night was our first above 15,000 ft. on this trek, and sleep is hard to come by. I have been opening my eyes every ninety minutes since nine o'clock, each time surprised that it isn't yet time to rise.

Beside me, Pranav is almost ready. In the other tent, our guides Fateh Chand Thakur and Pyare Lal are lighting the stove for a quick breakfast. Both men are good mountaineers and are vastly experienced. Fateh Chand refuses to say how many times he has been up Ladakhi Peak; but the count must surely exceed five. When we met him in Manali, he was neatness personified. He was neatly dressed, moustache neatly

trimmed – even the way he walked was neat. Pyare Lal has one bad eye, which gives him a drunken leer, but he is every bit as competent a climber and shares the same slightly rolling gait – maximum speed with minimum effort.

A cupful of Maggi is all the breakfast there is time for. I hate being late, but once again it seems the others are ready to move before I have got my crampons on. Pranav offers to take the rucksack with our water bottles, extra warm clothing, first aid kit and dried fruit rations. The two guides have shared out most of the climbing equipment between themselves.

It is 6:00 am before we leave. The snow has frozen hard overnight and as we move off towards the glacier coming down from Ladakhi Peak, our

crampons bite into the snow with a satisfying crunch. Pyare Lal quickly moves off far ahead, as he has done so many times on this trek, and Fateh Chand and I follow more sedately, with Pranav far behind. Although the sun has risen we are still in shadow, and the temperature is low.

Soon we reach the bottom of a very steep snow gully and I take the rucksack from Pranav. Immediately I feel weighed down and the good form of the morning is lost. Pranav, however, has now got a spring in his step and kicks his way straight up the gully at a fast pace. I am struggling and must take a breather after every few steps. The others are pulling away... it takes a lot of effort and will power to stay within ten yards of them. Who would have thought that such a light sack could make such a difference at altitude?

As we climb, the first rays of the sun come creeping over the sides of the gully, glinting on the slopes and lighting up the snow like a thousand sparkling diamonds. There isn't time to stand and admire the view. The slope is getting steeper – it is now so sharply inclined that it seems almost natural to place my free hand on the snow in front of me as I move up. The rocks on the side of the gully offer some support when I need to rest.

And then suddenly we are out of the gully, the slope is gentler and I can give the sack back to Pranav. The weight off my shoulders is invigorating and now it is Pranav who is lagging behind. We are nearing the top of the Shitidhar ridge and the snow now has a thin crust on top that cracks with the sound of tearing paper at each step, sending hundreds of pieces tinkling hollowly down the slope behind us. The snow below this crust appears increasingly insubstantial, but at this time of the morning it is still able to bear our weight.

Soon we are at the top of the ridge and we stop to take in the view and munch slowly on some of the dry fruit. A host of peaks in Lahul are now visible to the northeast, and Mukar Beh still towers above us to the north. Looking back down the ridge, we are level with Shitidhar Peak, which appears no more than a little bump on the main

ridge. It is now 8:30 am.

From this point on we rope up together. Pyare Lal is in front with Pranav and I behind him and Fateh Chand bringing up the rear. Coming to a quick decision, the guides decide to leave behind everything except an extra length of thin rope and our pitiful collection of various pitons. Pranav and I are quite happy to leave behind the annoying rucksack and stuff our pockets with the *really* necessary items – that is, cameras, water and a small amount of dried fruit.

Progress is now slowed. A rope of four is not well suited to fast movement as each pitch is so short. Besides, the ground is now tougher and more demanding of attention. We are making our way along the top of the ridge and there are several small cornices to avoid. Each pitch is mixed rock and snow, and the rock increases both in steepness and in difficulty as we go along. I have never climbed rock while wearing crampons before. It produces a general feeling of instability and a tendency to mistrust one's footholds – quite disconcerting at first, but manageable in the final reckoning.

Even with the difficulties of balancing on small spikes of metal, the climb is challenging and fun rather than excessively demanding. We proceed climbing free and the extra rope is never used to fix any sections. At no point do our guides bother to anchor themselves while belaying us – they seem to have perfect faith in our ability to avoid falling, or, perhaps more likely, in their ability to hold us if we do.

Finally, after several false alarms, we arrive at the very top. The summit of Ladakhi Peak is bare rock, just big enough for all four of us to sit somewhere and feast our eyes on the view. To the left is the rocky face of Punorbu Peak, suddenly and dramatically revealed as being knife-edge thin and looking rather insubstantial. Beyond it is Hanuman Tibba, the Solang Weisshorn, which has increased in grace and steepness as we ourselves have gained in height. In front and below is the Raisingh glacier, the source of the Ravi, looking far larger and more imposing than

its counterpart on the Solang side of the dividing ridge. To the right, a ridge from Ladakhi descends and then leads up to Manali Peak, carrying on beyond up to the imposing mass of Mukar Beh, from whose summit a sheer wall falls all the way down to the glacier below. Further around are the myriad peaks of Lahul, and then Dharamsura and Papsura in the Tos valley, the fortress Indrasan and the snow-covered Deo Tibba, Inderkila and the mighty rock pinnacles of the Parbati valley. In every direction there are peaks, peaks and more peaks, as far as the eye can see ...

We are high enough up to see the seemingly infinite beauty surrounding us, and yet we are tantalisingly short of it; our summit is lower than the rest, perhaps a little too low to aspire to the dignity and grace which our minds confer upon the other, larger mountains. If ever there were a sight seemingly calculated to draw one back to

bigger and higher peaks, this must be it.

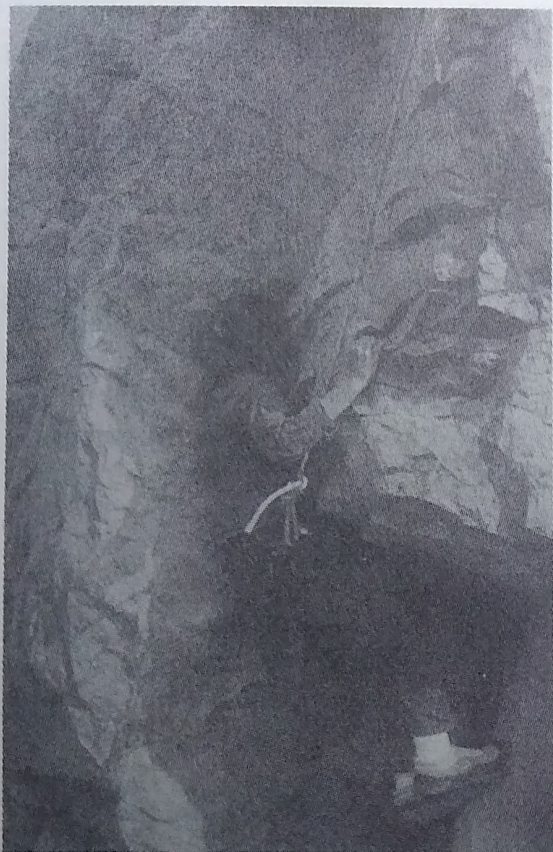
Pranav and I sit together, sipping a little water, munching a few biscuits, trying to take in everything that we can see. Then we take our photographs, Pranav gathers up his paraphernalia and tightens his crampons, and we are ready to move down again. Already we have spent half-an-hour on the summit – it is now 11:30 am and time has slipped away without our realising it, leaving us merely with splitting headaches.

Climbing down is perhaps tougher than climbing up in any situation. With crampons on rock, it is even more difficult and consequently time consuming. Our rope management, never very good, is now distinctly ragged.

We are back down by the rucksacks at 12:30 pm. From here on, the snow conditions are not just bad but atrocious. Several times in quick succession I go right through the thin crust and sink

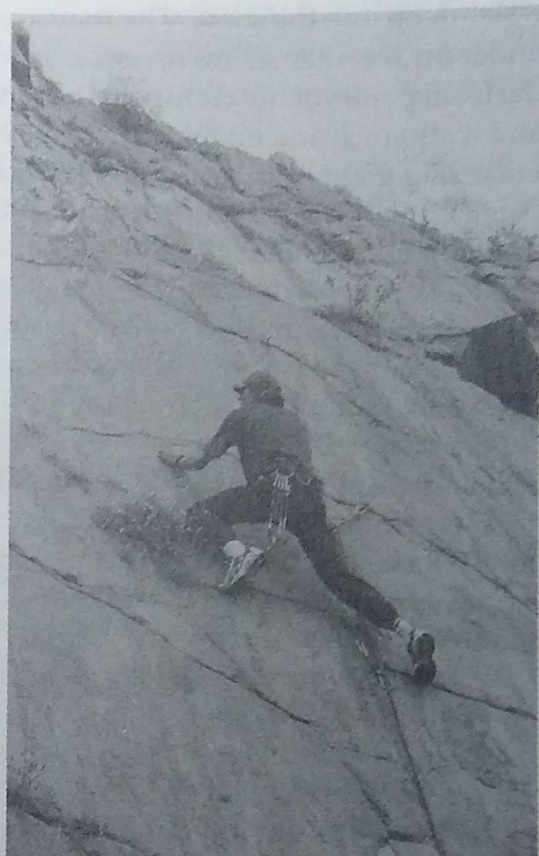


View from the summit of Ladakhi Peak



Clockwise from top: View from the summit of Ladakhi Peak; Justin lead-climbing at Ramjas rocks; Climbing on the 'Prow' at Dhauj; Camp at Tapovan after snowfall; Maser Tal, on the way to Mayali Pass; Mehak trying a tough move on 'Aquarius' at Dhauj





waist-deep into the snow. The snow compressed under my feet then seems to refreeze itself around the front points of my crampons, leaving me well and truly stuck and unable to free myself. At first I take it in good humour, laughing and joking as Fateh Chand digs me out, but by the fourth time I am screaming with frustration and kicking myself loose with furious energy. At this point the descent steepens again down the snow gully. My confidence is destroyed by my frustration and tiredness. I remove my crampons, although the others keep them on, and descend backwards, facing the slope and kicking footholds with my toes. We make all possible speed down this gully, for the loosening of the snow and the angle of the slope suggest that it would be an ideal candidate for an avalanche.

Finally we are down near the glacier again and without crampons I slip and slide my way back to camp over the hard packed snow. My gaiters, never perfect, have risen up over the backs of my boots during my struggles, and now my boots are filled with snow. My trousers too are sodden, and my glasses keep steaming up inside my ski goggles, making it hard to see. I am now so annoyed that it is all I can do to be polite to Pranav. Luckily he doesn't have much to say either. The two of us have been on the move for close to ten hours now, and the only thing I want is a good, hot lunch. Pyare Lal appears to have read my mind because he has the stove lit before I make it to camp.

Lunch and a short rest, and it is time to break camp and descend further to Base Camp at Beas Kund. Rucksacks are heavier now, leg muscles are aching and some knee joints are creaking, and minds are dulled. We fairly run down the slope, not stopping or resting anywhere, our entire being focussed on the thought of a bath, dinner and rest at Base Camp. What took us four hours to get up takes barely an hour to get down.

Down at camp we are received by people who are surprised to see us down so early and pretend to be annoyed with us for interrupting their card game.

Across Mayali Pass

Sahana Ghosh

Life conceals enviable experiences for all. The October break revealed one such to us. Nine Hiking Club members led by Mr. Raghunathan completed the challenging trek across Mayali Pass from Bhilangana Valley to Kedarnath between September 30th and October 11th.

Moving beyond bumpy bus rides and chaotic ration packing, the trek started from Ghattu (5,500 ft) in good cheer and sunshine, the destination being Reeh. The entire group reached in good time and that evening there was a great deal of merriment by the rapid current of a nearby stream. The next morning, once we survived the first few hours of trekking overcoming perilous landslide areas, the day was an enjoyable one with mountain children frequently accosting us with their incessant 'namaste' and demands for 'meethi' (our toffees). Gangi was particularly special in our trek – rainbow-watching, potato-buying, playing truant in exotic pink cosmos bushes! Leaving Gangi behind, we embarked on a long and seemingly unending walk to Kharsoli (9,000 ft) through the dense forest on the banks of the river Bhilangana. Following the course of the river upstream, it was a lovely walk through a cool, shaded stretch with dense vegetation, rapid progress somewhat delayed by the continuous and very artful dodging required to avoid fallen tree trunks. Tents were eventually pitched at an appropriate site and that night for the first time on the trek, everyone unanimously agreed – it was cold!

From Kharsoli our path grew steeper steadily and in amazingly little time all vestiges of even a dirt track vanished. We came to realize how crucial the mid-day cheese and cracker halt was! We lunched fleetingly at Tambakund and shortly afterwards crossed a rickety contraption – a sorry excuse for a bridge – over the raging river Bhilangana. Cold, hungry and exhausted, we arrived at an alp called Simli (12,000 ft) and set up camp with brisk efficiency. The following

day was to be devoted to acclimatisation and relaxation. Following a late breakfast and a scandalous acrobatic display in freezing river water by our 'macho' men, we walked towards the snout of the Khatling glacier. As we progressed, a hush descended over our boisterous group as each one was captivated by the magnificence of the surrounding mountains of the windswept valley.

We resumed our fairly steep climb the next day ascended almost 3,500 ft to Masar Tal (15,500 ft). A tiring but satisfying day of trekking concluded with stifling clouds descending on us as we were setting up camp. We

welcomed the next day with great enthusiasm and optimism – the Mayali Pass beckoned us. But fulfillment of our shared aspirations was not easily achieved as the initial climb to 'Masar Top' turned out to be unexpectedly annoying. Leaving behind the spectacular hues of the Masar Tal, we had to climb straight up the steep slope covered with loose rocks. Nothing however, prepared us for the visual treat that awaited us once we reached the ridge from where we first saw Mayali Pass (16,800 ft). Cameras clicked feverishly in hasty attempts to capture the beauty of unspoilt snow that lay ahead for miles around. We were unfortunately pressed for time and our experienced guide urged us to move quickly. We had to descend to a glacier, cross it, and then ascend again to the pass. Negotiating crevasses and rocks and ice we climbed to the pass up its final challenging snow slope, suitably awestruck. Breathless congratulations and high

spirits were followed by an exasperating descent of over 3,000 ft to Vasuki Tal over entirely bouldered terrain. Needless to say, lunch was brief and much delayed.

We finally reached Vasuki Tal at about 4 pm, with horribly tired feet but unflagging spirits in rapidly worsening weather. That night you



The group at the top of Mayali Pass

could hear purrs of contentment escaping from every tent! A very steep and uninterrupted descent from Vasuki Top to Kedarnath awaited us the next day. A cloudy day deprived us of what would have otherwise been an incredible view of the entire range of peaks including Kedarnath,

Sumeru, Neelkanth, Chaukhamba from the ridge overlooking the Kedarnath valley. We walked into Kedarnath feeling quite pleased with ourselves for having finally accomplished our goal of crossing over to the Kedarnath valley across Mayali Pass, found rooms and then located relatively sumptuous lunch.

Faced with the prospect of the final descent of 14 km from Kedarnath to Gaurikund, we set off cheerfully and found ourselves nearly swamped by pilgrims along the littered semi-road. Disappointment greeted us in Gaurikund in the form of empty hot spring tanks every time we went all prepared to plunge in. The excess of cacophonous tourists made us yearn for the eloquent silence of the mountains. Paradise was lost to the compulsions of our city lives. As the bus took us further away from the mountains, our animated reflections anticipated forthcoming ventures along the long and winding road.

Trek to Kuari Pass

Divya Cherian

Kuari Pass (or 'Khal', as it is locally known) lies in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal and is the high point (literally and metaphorically) of the popular and picturesque trekking route that has come to be known as the Curzon Trail. Aiming to follow in the footsteps of Lord Curzon, an intrepid group of twelve Stephanians braved the long and bumpy road to the village of Lohajung in Chamoli district. Arriving on a starlit evening, we began our trek the next morning, October 3rd. Being the first trek for most members of the team, the road ahead was looked upon with nervous anticipation. Inder, our guide and cook during the trek, led us along the route.

As we walked along the path, the sights, sounds and the fleeting glimpses of snow-capped peaks made concerns like the burden of the rucksack and the distance to cover seem trivial. On we marched to our destination, the village of Wan where we recruited two mules along with two muleteers whose help we needed to transport our provisions. From Wan we went on to the village of Sutol, scaling Kokina Pass on our way – providing a panoramic view of a series of Himalayan peaks. We flung our sacks onto the soft green grass here and allowed ourselves a long break, a few bottles of Sunfill and some Glucon-D biscuits. Looking around, we took in the azure sky, the brilliant white of the peaks and the lush green beneath our feet.

At Sutol, we spent the night in a school building. This brought with it a barrage of hyperactive children who swarmed around us and took immeasurable delight in every small gesture made by us. The night sky brought with it a discussion on a variety of topics ranging from extra-terrestrials to rock climbing. From Sutol, we proceeded to Aalla, where we had our first vegetable (other than potatoes) in days – a fat pumpkin, glowing golden in the field right below us. Never has a pumpkin tasted so good.

We then moved on to Ramni – a short trek, leaving most of the day free to perform such urgent tasks as washing our grimy bodies, hair and clothes in the stream running by our camp, lolling around in the sun on the lush, green meadows, having long, detailed, mouth-watering discussions on fine cuisine and of course, procuring eggs to make 'Spanish' omelettes.

The next day after celebrating Kavita's birthday, we stuffed Maggi noodles down our throats and marched on towards our destination – Jhinji. This we did via the Chechni Vinayak Pass. After a long uphill climb we reached the pass, the view from which was obscured by clouds. Stopping here for a while, we proceeded along the path, which turned out to be an unending stretch of downhill through a dense, moist forest. In Jhinji, we stayed at a local house for an evening and had the chance to take a closer look at life in rural Garhwal. The house had intricately carved woodwork, tiny, low doors and a long balcony on which cobs of corn lay drying, appearing golden in the light of the setting sun. Here we ate warm pasta over a game of '20 Questions', sitting in the courtyard of the moonlit house.

From here, we moved on to our next campsite, Siartoli. After walking uphill for around six hours, we found ourselves at an open field dotted with thatched huts. It was in these huts, made by nomadic shepherds, that we spent the night, lulled to sleep by the sound of a rodent squeaking and foraging around us. The sight of the mountains taking on the hue of copper at sunset along with the banter over the campfire, however, has left good memories of Siartoli.

From Siartoli, our next camp, Dhakwani, was visible. "Ooooooooo...", said Inder, our guide, pointing to a distant spot. We set off, down a perilous path to a stream and then uphill for a few hours, until we reached that spot. At Dhakwani, we spent the night in caves and under rock shelters – a first for all of us, but exciting nonetheless. Some of us trekked up to Kuari that afternoon and watched as the sun set on the row of magnificent peaks before us. The rest waited for the next day, when we all began the long but exhilarating climb to Kuari Khal. The trees around us had given way to short, yellow grasses that carpeted the slopes.

Upon reaching the Pass we walked to a higher point for a better view. Before our eyes stood peaks like Dunagiri, Hathi Parbat and Ghori Parbat. Each had a distinctive shape, almost a distinctive character, which made it stand out despite being surrounded by snow-capped mountains. From one end to another, across the horizon, all that the eye could see was a series of snow-clad peaks which appeared deceptively close. On that bright, sunny day, we sat there at 12,500 feet, tiny dots in the ocean of golden grass, each with a different reaction to the experience...

While some were driven on to climb a further thousand feet or so, others chose to sit back and introspect. Cheese and chocolate were brought out to celebrate the occasion and cameras were employed to document it. Finally, as the clouds began to hover right above us and hours had passed, we decided to move on along our path. Down we went and descended several thousand feet until we reached Khulara.

Our cave dwellings-to-be however had already been occupied by other trekkers, and so on the advice of locals, we decided to move on to a village called Karchhi. Karchhi *gaon* unfortunately turned out to be much further than the locals had estimated and soon, we found ourselves in the middle of a misadventure. Due to a confusing path and varying walking speeds, we became separated into two groups. The sun was setting, the forest seemed to be conspiring against us and habitation seemed far, far away. The group that was with the guide found its way to the village, but did not find the rest there. In reality, there weren't too many places they could have wandered to and our guide, with local help, soon located them. Within an hour, we were reunited much to everyone's relief.

In all the excitement, we all paused to admire mount Dunagiri glowing a pale pink, luminous against the evening sky.

The next morning, we rushed to get our things packed since we were camping in a school. By 8 a.m., we had an audience of wide-eyed primary-schoolers observing our every move as we prepared for our departure. After clicking a few group pictures, we began our last day of trekking – a short walk to Tapovan. Such luxuries as a tarred road and an STD phone were now available and most of us were delighted to use them. Anxious parents were pacified and news exchanged. We bid farewell to our muleteers and piled into jeeps to begin the first leg of our 36-hour journey back to Delhi, which took us through Joshimath and Rishikesh.

Looking back at that fortnight, I think we all agree that we learnt a lot, not least of which were the quirks of each of our companions. We fought, we laughed, some cried, we 'made fun', played pranks, cooked together (often only to spoil the broth), coaxed each other up mountains, rolled down them, compared blisters and bug bites, had exhaustive discussions about exotic food while ingesting *daal* meal after meal. With all its ups and downs the trek to Kuari Pass was unforgettable, to say the least.

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Standing: Rajdeep, Arjun, Seshadri, Justin, Bharat, Vageesh, Vatsala

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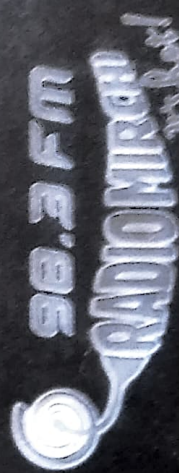
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Source: IMRB Listeners Track (Dec 2003)

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