



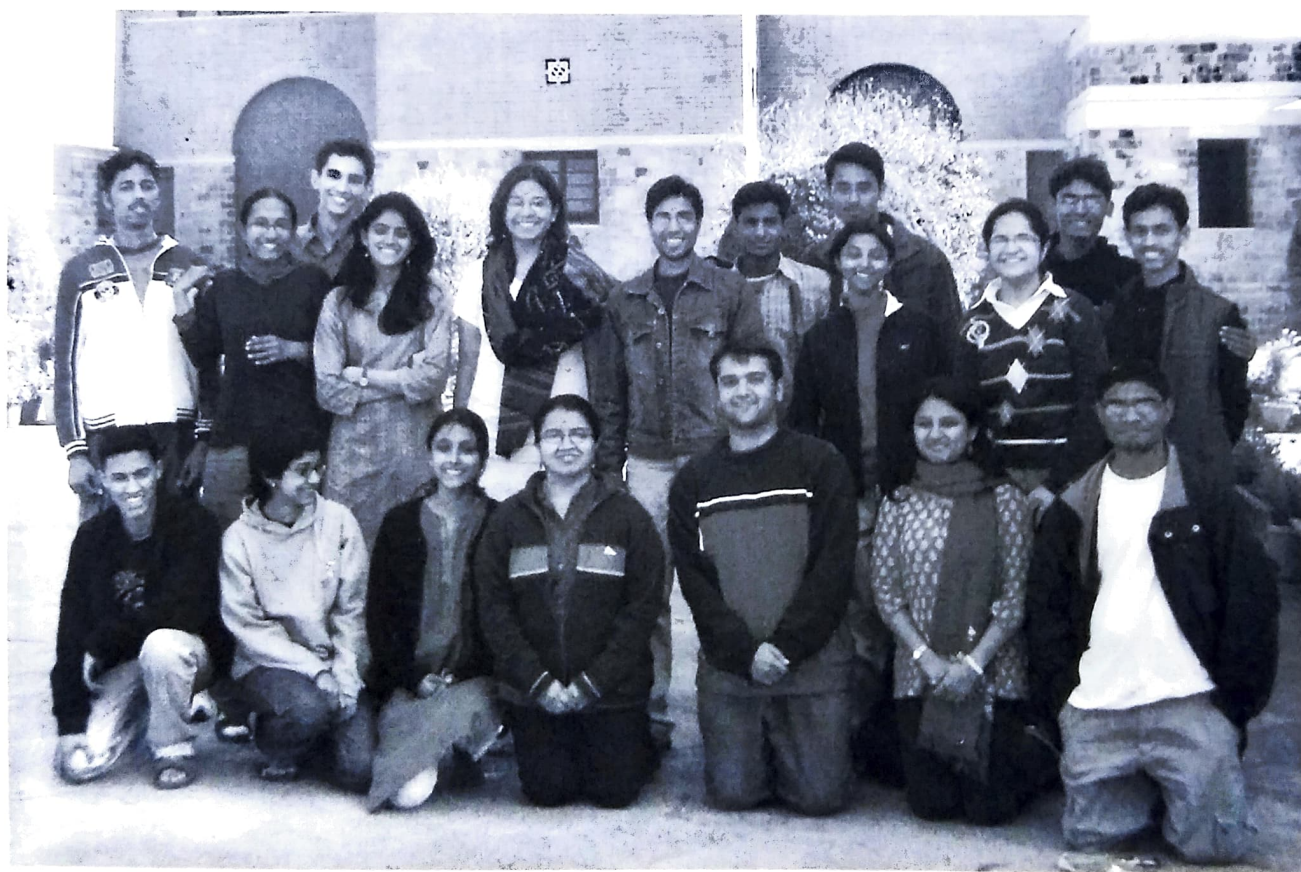
Miscellany

2006-07

Hiking Club, St. Stephen's College

Executive Council

- President Amit Bhura
- Secretary Kalyani Raghunathan
- Treasurer Shashwat Khanna
- Council Members Jethin B. Raj
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Members of the Hiking Club, 2006-07

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The Hiking Club, 2006-07

After the initial slide show, and demonstration at the College wall, the Hiking Club began the year with four straight weeks of open climbing sessions for all those interested. We were besieged by Club members from all three years, whose enthusiasm for climbing at the wall never seemed to wane. Unfazed by the sudden increase in love (if not ability) for climbing at the wall, on the weekends and holidays we also organized numerous trips within Delhi, to Ramjas and Lado Sarai for natural rock climbing and bouldering.

September was a busy month for the Club, as we were all working hard for the Hiking Club Festival week. The week was to culminate with the 2nd St. Stephen's Open Sport Climbing Competition, which, with over 60 participants from all over India - including many fresh new faces from our own college - was widely adjudged to have been a success. In the days leading up to the competition we organised a slide show on adventure sports of all kinds by Mr. Mandip Singh Soin, and a documentary film on white water rafting down the Brahmaputra by Mr. Vaibhav Kala - both Hiking Club alumni. We also screened the popular mountaineering movie - *Touching the Void*. This year we also introduced the navigation game - *Destination: Unexplored*, which was very well received.

Close on the heels of the Festival Week, the Club organised two treks to the Himachal in the October break. The first, led by Dr. Raghunathan and Dr. Phookun and accompanied by our now regular cook-guide Tek Chand, crossed two challenging passes - the Kali Hind and the Thamsar, both close to 15,000 ft - a significant achievement for a group of first-timers. The second group, led by Dr. Sanjay Kumar, our Staff Advisor, successfully crossed the Pin-Parbati Pass and descended into the magnificent Spiti valley.

Along with this, the Club also arranged the regular two white-water rafting trips to Shivpuri (near Rishikesh) in December and February, clearly a big attraction for all members. A trip to Dhauj for enthusiastic climbers was also organised in December.

Currently the Club is planning the summer expedition to Ice-Sail, a peak in the Dibibokri valley, and hopefully a two week long trek for other enthusiasts. This year are determined to end the academic session with a successful summit attempt!

Descending the Son of Brahma

Vaibhav Kala, an old Stephanian and Hiking Club alumnus, is one of India's foremost adventure travel professionals today, with over 16 years' experience on high trails and running wild rivers. He is also the owner of Aquaterra Adventures, one of the leading adventure-sports companies in India.

The Great Descent expedition on the Upper Brahmaputra river was the first open departure on this trip, after the big flood of June 2000 - a veritable first descent.

Ningguing village in Arunachal Pradesh has probably never witnessed such hectic activity as it did on Nov 27th, 2002. A small Adi village nestled in dense tropical rainforest at the confluence of the Purang river with the mighty Siang (as the upper Brahmaputra is called), it offers the first formidable challenge in the form of a very sizeable big volume Class 4+ rapid.

Earlier that morning, our starting point at Tuting was witness to a memorable send-off to the beating of tribal drums, Adi dances and tying of prayer threads to each expedition member's wrist. The Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Mr. Mukut Mithi, flagged the expedition off. Twenty minutes later, four rafts, a cataraft and nine kayaks beached above the monster Ningguing rapid to make the first scout of the expedition. The crackle of radios goes off between the kayakers and raft guides, discussing lines of entry, which the bigger, less maneuverable rafts would run. Some serious action is expected - the kayaks go first into 60,000 cubic feet of water per second, disappearing into deep troughs and emerging through pounding lateral waves and hydraulics, making shore eddies to set up safety for the following crafts. The four rafts follow the cataraft. A huge crowd on the riverbank has collected. Amongst them, four film cameras recording the action, and a MI-17 helicopter taking in the aerial footage, lend an almost festive air to the entire valley floor. The cataraft and boats run through - river guides screaming commands, raft crew flailing paddles (hitting mostly air!), rushing adrenaline and the sights, sounds, and smells of world class white water. We end up with only one flip and a clean house (i.e. the entire crew falling out, but the raft getting through upright) and 3 persons

overboard from the remaining two rafts. A frenzied rescue operation is in place, people and

equipment recovered and we halt for lunch to let the magnitude of this river sink in. We had come through, in hindsight, a huge rapid on the Siang, ("Friggin' Ningguing" as some who faced its intensity at close quarters called it) relatively unscathed, a notion that was to change within that very day.

Another big rapid, 'Pulsating Palsi' awaited us a couple of bends above our first halt near Banggou village. Looking relatively friendlier from the road during our drive up from Pasighat, it was a train of huge, standing, and sometimes exploding waves, more than 20 feet high. The first two 16 foot rafts, climbed out and flipped over crest of one of them, the waves exploding at the instant the rafts were nearly through.

The guides had shouted the "Get Down" command so the entire crew was together and the rescue was quick.

“ ‘Pulsating Palsi’... was a train of huge, standing, and sometimes exploding waves, more than 20 feet high.” ”

We lost one paddle, and Sepp Puchinger, an Austrian journalist and river running veteran, dislocated his shoulder. Guides and expedition doctors helped put it back within the next few minutes, and the expedition continued till our overnight camp near Banggou village.

This first day showed us, yet again, the magic of big volume whitewater. If you look at a big volume river and measured your own blood pressure, you'd probably find out why the lure of the river brings so many adventurers together. Safety boaters from across the world, including well known expedition doctor, Peter Weingarten, having run rivers for more than 35 years, rated it "the best raft trip in the world". Participants who had been on other big rivers - the Colorado, the Zambezi, the Upper Nile, the Bio Bio, the Futaleufu - rated this river as a class apart; it seemed that the effort to bring this trip recognition in the international circuit was paying off. There were rafters who had been on other trips in India and around the world, but in fact, the expedition had a non-swimmer and a first timer as well. All were of one opinion - no prior river experience can prepare one for the absolute Brahmaputra experience. It's a trip of a lifetime, and nothing less is acceptable, even though unexpected!

Support for the trip had come in various forms. Leading USA based whitewater magazine "Paddler" supported the trip with publicity and a leading raft manufacturer, HYSIDE, donated a cataraft for the expedition. Miditech Television signed on to capture this incredible adventure journey on film. And, of course participation from rafters and kayakers, who stayed together like a team through the onslaught of the river, and through the entire expedition. The support from within India, besides the state of Arunachal Pradesh, was surprisingly non-existent despite it being the International Year of Eco-Tourism. It only brings to light the state of adventure tourism in a country which boasts its mountains and rivers to the world; and yet is blissfully unaware of what is being attempted in its own backyard.

It was a trip truly Himalayan in scale – a large team of 55 persons, (comprising 40 persons of varying backgrounds making the river team), together made this huge river descent, on India's biggest river, the Brahmaputra. The first time such a trip was to be attempted without being camouflaged as a joint Indian Armed Forces or paramilitary expedition; a fixed departure which anybody with a "roll with the punches" attitude could join. The first time it has been rafted at such high flows and the first descent after a catastrophic flood in June 2000, when a 63 metre high wall of water left scoured bedrock - telltale marks of the track of the cataclysm - visible from hundreds of feet above the river. And the first time a successful attempt was made to capture an expedition of this nature on camera, to be documented for international distribution. Undoubtedly the toughest logistical challenge in adventure travel in India, participation for which came from all walks of life – doctors, pilots, whitewater professionals, journalists, garment exporters, travel people, geneticists, biologists, economists...all added to the salad bowl.

Our camp for the night is made up of four-season tents and Outfitter Wings to withstand the worst extremes of weather. The last word in water filtration, Katadyn Expedition is used to ensure safe drinking water for all. Hygienic food preparation methods and camp cleanliness is ensured as a trip of this nature demands that all members stay fit. The evening campfire at Banggou was one of mixed emotions - quiet, reflective and peppered with feelings of anxiety and nervousness at what was to follow in the Ningguing and Marmong gorges which the expedition was to enter the following day. Understandably so, after a very intimidating first day on the

river. A call was taken to send in a kayak reconnaissance team to take a look into the gorge which no one had been down since the big flood of June 2000, and looking at the scour line on the river bank, it was more than obvious that some big changes were in order.

A rest day at Banggou worked like therapy – while the reconnaissance was on, the rest of the team washed up, fed, rested, and participated in "Beach Olympics". Kabbaddi, long jump, tug-of-war and other games got everyone's spirits high and did well to bring everyone back into river mode the next day. A chopper came in to make sure we were well. Next day, all camping gear and rations are lashed onto the rafts, and we enter the Ningguing gorge, down lots of Class 3 and 4 rapids. The common factor was the scale of the river, huge waves, boilly eddies and eddy lines, some big enough to flip rafts. A big Class 4+ rapid at Rikor village warranted a long scout, and all boats ran through sunny side up, with the only loss being a broken oar. We floated into the Marmong gorge and reached Cherring by late afternoon, where an un-runable Class 6 rapid awaited us. We camped upstream of the raging Class 6 (this one was suicidal as well) 'Tooth Fairy' rapid (we get to name it as we found it), and left it to be tackled the next day.

At Cherring the next morning, we portage and line down all the crafts quickly and continue downriver to the village of Ramsing. There are some close calls this day as well, but our guiding team is upto the job. We had broken 3 oars, made from aircraft aluminum, in three days of river running. There had been plenty of big rapids in the last two days, and we were happy to be out of the gorge without anybody swimming. Few activities require one to process so much data, so continuously and so quickly, with constant recalibration, once inside a rapid. Big whitewater brings out the best, which is why the country's most experienced on-river guiding crew ran the proceedings on this expedition.

The rousing welcome we received from the Adi population during our journey was touching - local dances were held at numerous places, with participants walking many miles to reach us in their tribal finery. On our drive up, we had stopped at Riga village, and met up with the village elders. The expedition received many gifts of oranges and pineapples, grown in ample quantities in this region. The evenings were quiet, with everybody filling their logbooks, with the occasional group discussions and lighthearted

banter. It got dark by 4pm and we were all in bed by 8pm. The next day we moved on past Alubadi beach and Yinkeong. At a rapid below Alubadi beach, a friend received news of his father's illness. I accompanied him on a walk out to Moing to get him back to Delhi as soon as possible. A feeling of anticipation on tackling the rapid below Karko village permeated that evening's conversation. However the "Karko Killer" is renamed 'Karko Killed' as all rafts run through

without incident. The rapids have changed, since our last run, nearly 9 years back, partly due to the flood and partly due to the level of the river, which was much higher than expected.

The next two days are spent in a leisurely float with the occasional big rapid. We float past

“ We flipped a raft on a big breaking wave in the middle of the rapid, a reminder of the fury of a great river.”

Geku and under the bridge at Ditte Dime, and pass the confluences with the Simang River near Boleng, the aquamarine Siyom River upstream of Pangin, and the flood rutted guesthouse at Yembung. Suddenly it's the last night on the river, near Rotung village. A huge dinner is on - an evening of rejoicing and drinking the locally brewed, yet alarmingly potent 'apang'. Pasighat is only 20 kilometers away, and the last 'biggie' on the trip at Pongging village. It turns out to be a pretty difficult scout - and radios could only do half the work. We flipped a raft on a big breaking wave in the middle of the rapid, a reminder of the fury of a great river, of hot flushes through one's innards, the flat before the churning cauldron and of the several tons of water pushing the raft into the chaos below.

As we close in on the ferries at Pasighat, it seems an early finale to us, being so completely overwhelmed by the Siang, now called the Brahmaputra. The joy of living and traveling on the river, the impenetrable hillsides, remote gorges, the long floats, the camaraderie developed between our team of guides and the crew combined in one magical moment as we beached our boats for the last time. And more so, the thrill at having descended one of the world's great rivers in an area which would easily rank as one of the most inaccessible regions in the world.

Vaibhav Kala

Village Hopping

It was a hot and humid day, and we were off, with sweat pouring down our foreheads! Travelling in a semi-deluxe bus (a luxury by Hiking Club standards), 11 of us – Srinivas, Manisha, Kunal, Ritika, Pallavi, Mahesh, Dr. Sanjay Kumar, Sudha ma'am, Harriet ma'am, Pranjal Sir and I made it to Dharchula in the Kumaon Himalayas after 26 hours. Raghu sir joined us at Dharchula with our tent bags, which we had inadvertently left behind at his place.

Feeling refreshed after a night's rest, we all woke up in high spirits at the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam, hoping to do some serious trekking. After the big 'drama' of getting our permits, we left the Nigam by jeep on a very *kaccha* road, the journey being marked by an overdose of plums. That night was the first 'real' night in the mountains for some in our trekking party. With Pranjal sir's help, we spotted Jupiter, Saturn, Leo, Virgo, rising Scorpio, etc. To put it in Raghu sir's words, it was *Nakshatra* taking over.

As dawn spread its wings over the Darma valley, revealing sun-kissed peaks and snow-capped mountains, we kicked off our 12 km walk to Sela. The long and winding path led us through Bongling, Urthing along the gushing Dhauliganga, the path being lined with stinging Bicchoo bootis and healing Charas plants. Sela is the centre of the mule industry and is a very organized village.



The Darma river at Sela

By the third day, some of us had already begun to miss civilization, so much so that we managed to enjoy some disgusting music enroute to Baling. Srinivas and I had started having the usual "whose bag is lighter?" arguments (Later on, Raghu sir declared my bag to be the lightest!). Our

night at Baling was one of the most exciting nights on the trek – we had a campfire and, joined by some friends of Dr. Sanjay Kumar who had just returned from Anchari Tal, we made music.

Just when we thought that everything was working according to plan, we had to face the worst – our mules ran away during our night at Baling. The next day was, hence, wasted at Duktu, waiting for the rest of our party to arrive with all our stuff on substitute mules (all the women, along with Kunal and Mahesh went ahead). We slept in our tents for the first time.

Starting out at dawn the next morning after a meal of 'bitter' oats, we headed for Panchachuli Base camp. It was a steep climb. The base camp offered us a beautiful view of the Meola and Sona glaciers and the Panchachuli saddle. We also spotted a 1500 ft waterfall. That night, it rained. Our tents shook violently; it also rained inside Sanjay sir's tent. I actually spent the night awake and praying that the tent wouldn't collapse about me!

To make up for the lost day, we planned to walk to Sipu the next day (19 km on paper). Compelled to walk in the rain with rainhoods on, it wasn't a very pleasant walk. Dantu, Dhaakar went by; we didn't even pause to click pictures. A surprise awaited us at Tidang. The villagers showered their hospitality on us by offering us tea and a fire to warm ourselves. Tidang is where border permits are checked. Incidentally, thanks to the rain, no one checked ours (we were to discover later that it was sheer good fortune). Leaving the Dhauliganga behind and walking along the Lassar-Yankti, which Harish Kapadia describes as "a young girl in a turquoise blue dress", the climb to Sipu was quite pleasant.

Sipu, with its numerous raastas and the nal, served as a home-away-from-home for the next four days. An entire day was spent playing cards by a dhoop fire at No. 26, the house of Kushal Singh. Srinivas and Dr. Sanjay Kumar took turns at cooking up ghost stories, some of them being genuinely scary. Raghu sir narrated stories from his past treks, leaving us mesmerized! The next morning, we made a trip to Sipu Tal (as we call it), which was about 2 km from Sipu. During the latter part of the day, some of us tried our hands at cleaning wool, the pastime of majority of the womenfolk of Kumaon.

Our prayers were answered on the third morning as the clouds parted and the day dawned clear and bright. We decided to celebrate Harriet ma'am's birthday (on the 6th of June) by making a day trip to Anchari Tal. It was a long *long* day. We walked a total of 28 kms. Walking past Dangadhar and Halbudhar, we crossed the Jhulan glacier and reached Anchari Tal (13,500 ft) by noon. The tal left us mystified. From every angle, it shone a different colour. Although our guides expected to find Black Ducks there, none of us managed to spot any. Since time was a constraint, we got to view the lake for exactly 8 mins. The walk back was a bit trickier. We couldn't have crossed all those landslide hit areas without the help and support of our guides Padam Singh, Arvind and Kushal Singh.

After that, it was village-hopping all over again. We were caught by the border police at Duktu. It turned out that we had made an illegal trip to Anchari Tal – we only had permits upto Panchachuli Base Camp. After a bit of begging and pleading, we were allowed to carry on. We reached Sela after two days, and were overjoyed at the sight of proper beds and quilts at the Sela Paryatak Nigam.



The Panchachuli peaks from Duktu

We finally reached Dharchula back on the 9th of June. After a brief visit to Nepal (2 hrs.), 50 paise per piece paani-poori, ice cream and a good night's sleep, we began our journey back home.

Amidst the 123 km of walking, the rain, the photographs, the looting of shops –for cream biscuits (particularly by Srinivas), ghost stories, the anti-dalia squad, the hajmola trades with Raghu sir, and, not to forget, the cheese and the crackers, we had a great, great time together.

Nitya Ramanan

Into Spiti

This year the Hiking Club organised two treks in the October break, one to Bada Bhangal and the other to Pin Parbati Pass. Preparations began, and while the rest of the college celebrated Harmony ... people going for the treks were busy buying rations, hiring equipment, locating woollens and airing their sleeping bags! 30th September finally dawned... the kitbags were ready and the rucksacks had been weighed, with a lot of excitement and a little anxiety we were finally sitting in the night bus to Manali. Conti parties having taken their toll, Jethin (a.k.a. Pappu), Aakash and Lokesh slept from the word go. The rest of us were kept busy with the *huge* box of food Arushi's mother had so thoughtfully provided, though most of it didn't make its way past Raghav's seat. We reached Manali the next morning, and having met up with our guides and porters and booked ourselves into a hotel, we set out to finish up the remaining provisioning. Things like atta, rice, dal and fresh vegetables were purchased in the Manali market, and then carted back to the hotel to be packed into the kitbags and trunks.

The next morning, after a hasty breakfast of bun-anda and tea at a roadside tea stall, the two treks parted ways. We reached the bus stand with all our *saaman* only to find that one porter was sick, his friend reluctant to come without him, a third porter absconding and we...we were missing



Morning exercise at Odi Thach

our direct bus to Manikaran. Finally we caught the bus to Bhuntar minus guide and porters – with the feeling that a more inauspicious start could not have been possible. Things started to look up when Moti Ji arrived at Bhuntar with the required man-power, and in a slightly more cheerful frame of mind we boarded the bus to Manikaran, parking ourselves on the roof of the bus. The journey was uneventful, apart from Loki's close shaves with electric wires, and our Israeli junkie friend who had to literally be hauled off our sack of vegetables. A quick lunch at Manikaran (the last mutton Jethin would see in ten days) and we boarded another bus to Barsheini, reaching there at 5 in the evening. It was

too late in the day to trek to where we had planned, so we simply crossed the river and set up tents in the first clearing we could find.

The real trek began the next morning. We broke camp and started walking at about 9:15, an hour later than had been planned. The walk to our next camp, Khirganga, was just the kind of trek walk that is everyone's favourite. Forested and green, with waterfalls to be seen on either side. The first half hour in the hot sun helped us get used to the ascent, for though we didn't climb very much, it was enough to make us appreciate just how unfit we were. The entire walk took just about 4 hours.

Khirganga, famous for its hot springs, had meadows dotted with numerous tea stalls and restaurants. We pitched our tents and after a quick lunch took off to take a dip in the hot springs at the top of the meadow, passing on our way shops with signboards in Hebrew, occupied by Israelis. The weather was turning, and by the time we arrived back to camp it had begun raining quite heavily. Horror of horrors – Sahana and I discovered that our tent leaked, and so were forced to shift to the other tent, leaving Raghav to the mercy of Pappu's smelly feet.



*The Pin Parvati Pass (5319m)
marked by prayer flags*

Late starts were beginning to become the norm. We only set off from camp at 10:00, and the walk was considerably harder. There was a continuous uphill climb through forest initially, and then meadows dotted with patches of pine. Tundabhoj was a sloping meadow and the valley on the opposite side of the river, made up of impressive rock faces, had a beautiful waterfall which compelled us to have many popularly named 'kodak moments'. We managed to set up camp just before it started raining, and the rest of the afternoon was spent 'productively', playing bluff in the boys' tent.

The next day we were planning to go past the next campsite so as to reduce the amount of walking on subsequent days. An early start was imperative, and 'early' it was at a quarter to nine. Thakur Kuan, the next established campsite, was barely 2 hours walk, and much to Raghav's disappointment, the remains

of the crashed helicopter mentioned in the Lonely Planet guide were nowhere to be seen. The rope bridge across the river provided the first bit of real excitement. Naturally Raghav was given the honour of 'testing' the bridge. Much frantic photography (the entire ride lasts about 2 seconds) and some squealing later we were all on the other side. We walked for a further two hours, meeting on the way a kurta-pajama clad man on his way down. Questioning revealed that he was a spurned lover who had trekked to Mantalai to pray for success in future endeavours with the girl in question. Apart from a few slightly tricky landslide sections, the walking was fairly straightforward. We arrived at the first natural rock bridge, which was a pretty hair-raising unprotected traverse above the frothing river, with rucksacks on. Hearts hammering, we walked another five minutes to Pandav Pul, another rock bridge. Raghav had his first real life threatening experience – cries of "bachao bhaiyya bachao" – which were re-enacted by Loki for those of us unfortunate enough to have missed it. One last steep climb after the pul, and we came upon camp much to everyone's relief. It had been a long 7 hour walk, and after pitching the tents and indulging in a long (and revealing) gossip session in the boys' tent, everyone was ready to call it a day.

Following this extremely tiring day were two very short and relaxing days, where we simply followed the river on its winding course. The walks were almost level, and the scenery astonishingly beautiful – with the deep blue of the sky, the view of the valley behind us and the silver river making for a number of 'Neha Kohli' photographs of scenery. We reached Mantalai on the second day, and duly paid our respects at the small shrine that had been built on the edge of the river. On reaching camp the first thing on everyone's mind was the route for the next day, for we had all heard how hard it was and how much we would have to climb. Moti Ji did nothing to assuage our fears, pointing us to the steep climb up a side nala that constituted the beginning of the walk to high camp. We solemnly divided up the dry fruit and peanut ration, and played some very subdued games of bluff before turning in:

The next day's walk proved to be all we had expected. The initial climbs were so steep you were practically in danger of banging your nose on the slope ahead of you. Far ahead of us we could see the porters silhouetted against the sky. Steady relentless uphill grind till we stopped for lunch at about one. After a tiring walk over moraine and huge boulders we reached the camp only to find the porters' tent pitched and they themselves sitting and playing cards. In not the best of moods, Jethin, Raghav and I set about putting up our tents, receiving

help from the porters only after they were shouted at by Moti Ji. The pass was still not in sight, and we drank our soup wondering what the next day would have in store.

The day we had to cross the pass started off badly. No one, it seemed, had slept well the night before because of the intense cold. What with breakfast, and waiting for the sun to come before unpitching the tents, we only started out at 10, which for a big pass crossing is extremely late. A couple of minor slips on the ice caused much hilarity. Our porters were far out of sight, and so we pressed on, crunching the ice beneath our feet, coming upon the last stretch of scree to the top of the pass at about 12:30. The view from the top was breathtaking – on one side snow capped peaks of the Parbati valley and on the other the typical red and brown shades of Spiti. We descended across the snow field, passing and even crossing some rather nasty looking crevasses. A 1000 m below us we could see the Pin River winding its way across the valley floor, and the glinting trunk on a porter's back, urging us to hurry up otherwise we would never make it. We reached the valley floor and finding no way to cross the river, took our shoes and socks off and waded across. No words can describe the pain of wading across a freezing cold river with sharp stones beneath your feet! We stuffed our numb red feet into shoes and hurried on, reaching camp at the late hour of 4. By the time everyone had made their way in, it was almost 5:30.



Crossing a big crevasse

The trek was almost over now. The next day was downhill all the way. Though we were unable to make it to our targeted village of Mud, we arranged for a car to take us to Kaza the next day, which cut down our trek by one day. An extremely entertaining day was spent in Kaza – buying prayer flags, tasting seabuckthorn juice and Nutella pancakes, and savouring mutton after 10 days of vegetarian fare. A 4:30 bus to Manali saw us reach there just in time to have a quick meal. We caught the 8:30 bus to Delhi, complete with a boisterous bus driver and insane driving speeds. Sleep being a distant prospect; we awaited eagerly the break of day, and the return to civilization!

Kalyani Raghunathan

A Beginner's Guide to Advanced Trekking

The 7 of us had no clue what we had in store when we signed up for a 'moderate' level trek in September. We were forewarned of all the possibilities (indemnity bond and all) but I don't think any of us registered it fully. We started for Manali on a Saturday night along with the other team (that had proper, professional, seasoned trekkers.....so we kind of felt like midgets in front of them) that was headed for the Pin Parbati Pass. However towards the end we found out that our trek was tougher than theirs because we had 2 passes to cross, meaning steep descents, and even steeper climbs.

Anyway, after a day of buying supplies and meeting our cook and guide, Tek Chand, and porters in Manali, we were packed into a Max pick up truck that took us to Dungri, our starting point. After rubbing on some sunscreen, we hauled on our rucksacks and began climbing some very steep steps. Almost everything was new to us on the first day – adjusting to the altitude, pitching tents, 'bonding with nature', digging out our cups (that were hidden way down in the rucksack) for soup and Milo at night and quickly rinsing them in ice-cold water early the next morning for chai.

After several breaks, we reached our first camp site - Lama Dugu – that was encircled with silver birch, oak and some other varieties of deciduous trees. Just as the sun was setting, herds of sheep appeared out of nowhere and filled the mountainside – a shepherd helped by 3 dogs followed close behind. Our first night was more than we could ask for – full moon, raging bonfire, steaming kehwa ... It gave us a taste of what a trek has in store. The following day was pretty gruelling and tough going for several among the party. It was a steep climb, up the side of a mountain and once we got up we had to go down the other side to reach an amazing campsite where we got to see a beautiful sunrise the next morning. In one and a half days we reached the Kali Hind base camp. Our 5th day was pleasantly adventurous. The pass (4600m) itself was exhilarating with plenty of sunshine and snow. On our way down we had to walk carefully over the ice, we could hear the river gurgling beneath us. Once we reached the rocks, the gaping crevice at the base of the snow was breathtaking. After a satisfying lunch, we moved beyond the Lake camp site and kept walking only to realize that we'd lost sight of our porters. Spread out over god knows how many kilometers, some of us decided to just stay put. Gaurav and Arjun went ahead to

find the porters and caused several landslides on the way!!! Finally after walking 10 hours, we were united again, tents pitched, ready to crash! The next day's camp at Danku Thatch brought some surprises – Nutella on crackers, custard and jelly, apart from the "fair play" in sharing tents. After 2 days we reached Bara Banghal (finally!).

Bara Banghal was our Sabbath. We rested, bathed (our one and only bath), washed clothes, called back home and enjoyed plenty of sunshine among other things like roasted corn and MEAT!!! (Arushi can testify to the fact that for the next 2 days, it kept her close behind Tek Chand who was usually half a kilometer ahead of the rest of us.)

Thamsar pass (4380m) was more severe. After walking over plenty of moraine and dirt we finally reached the ice and it began snowing. By the time we got to the top, it showed no signs of stopping, so we had to move down quickly before it got any worse. The way down was slippery and scary and so we had to walk very carefully. We stopped for a good lunch - cheese, crackers, dates, nuts, aam papad, roti and sabzi - and the sky cleared up a bit. We made our way down over the meadows and set up camp. The next day we made use of our only unused item – our rain capes. It began raining and we had to halt a bit to wait for the rain to stop.



*Indrasan and Deo Tibba from
base of Kali Hind Pass*

We walked and walked the next day to reach Bada Gaon from where we had to catch a bus to Mandi, only to find that by the time we reached, the bus was long gone. Thank god for the local dhaba – with maggi and omelets and Pepsi – reminders of the civilized world we had been cut off from for so long. A pick up truck was hired (again).....we were all jammed in – all in all about 15 of us, I think, plus our rucksacks and tent bags and trunks. After a n extremely bumpy, rickety ride we finally caught our bus to Mandi that reached us just in time to board the 6 o' clock bus to Delhi. All of us got in and breathed a sigh of relief. We were going home...

Shema Kallimel

Kang La

North of Manali, looking up the Beas valley, is the striking rock and snow ridge known locally as the Shiti Dhar, not very high, all pretty much at about 17000 feet except for a few minor features. Although the Shiti Dhar is not very high, and no matter how maddeningly noisy and full of bustle Manali bazaar is, on a clear day in April or May it is a sight that never fails to take one's breath away, etched against a beautiful blue sky, flat planes of dark rock and sweeps of gleaming snow and ice, for all the world a painted stage backcloth.

The ridge is technically part of the Pir Panjal, not the true Great Himalayan range, which lies beyond it. The motor road crosses the Pir Panjal over the Rohtang Pass. From the top of the pass, for those who can be diverted from pony or yak rides and toboggans, there is the first clear view of the Great Himalaya: the peaks of the Bara Shigri system to the east, the endless tangle of the Mulkila and Chandrabhaga ranges in front, the *very* odd-shaped Gepang Goh peaks to the west. This is Lahul, the land of the Chandra and Bhaga rivers. The two meet at Tandi to form the Chandrabhaga which then flows north-westwards, past Udaipur and Kilar and Kishtwar, getting renamed the Chenab at some point; bounded on the southern side by the Pir Panjal and to the north by the Great Himalaya.

From Tandi, if you go northwards up the Bhaga, beyond Keylong and Darcha and past places with names like Zingzingbar, lies the Baralacha La over the Great Himalaya. That is the route that the amazing road to Ladakh takes. At Darcha a trekkers' route bifurcates from the Manali-Leh road, crossing into Zaskar over the Shingo La (4980 m, 16400 feet). This is the easiest of the passes over the Great Himalaya into Zaskar, and is the one routinely used by the many groups of foreign trekkers who visit Zaskar. These parties typically consist of more mules or ponies than members and nobody carries anything other than a jacket and the day's sandwiches: what my son, who now affects the idiom and lofty disdain of the British rock-climbing fraternity, calls "the ethical equivalent of top-roping at Stanage". Actually, the Shingo La is a demanding enough pass, hard climbing especially from the Lahul side, and over glacial moraine and boulder fields. When Hiking Club groups crossed it in the 1960s and 1970s, they really *were* venturing into the wild. But now during the trekking season an easy-to-follow track gets beaten down by the hundreds of people and ponies, and there are simple shelters at several

places; the sense of adventure is largely gone, and you would get along fine if you spoke not a word of any language other than French.

But if you go further west *down* the Chandrabhaga below Tandi, and then follow valleys to the north, there are three more difficult passes over the Great Himalaya into Zaskar. These are the Umasi La, Poat La and Kang La. The westernmost is the Umasi La (5340m, 17600 ft), for which one has to go up the Padar (or Bhut) Nala, a right bank tributary which meets the Chenab at Atholi above Kishtwar. This is the most used and best established of the three passes. Although for years now the uncertain situation in Kishtwar has been a very active deterrent for trekkers, the upper Padar villages are Buddhist, and there is regular movement of traders and monks to and from Zaskar across the Umasi La.

The Poat La and Kang La are far more desolate. The route to Poat La (5490m, 18100 ft) also goes up the Padar, and then bifurcates eastwards along a tributary stream called the Dharlang Nala before turning north to cross the main ridge into Zaskar. The Kang La (5470m, 18050 ft) is the eastern-most of these three passes. To get to it, you have to go up the Miyar Nala which joins the Chandrabhaga at Udaipur. The road ends just short of the large village of Urgos, and from there 3 or 4 days undemanding walking leads to the snout of the glacier at the head of the Miyar Nala. Then the difficulties start. The Miyar Glacier is one of the longest in the Western Himalaya, 28 km from snout to the pass at the head; probably *the* longest after the Siachen and the Gangotri glaciers. Nearly two full days at the lower end are over the most horrible, unstable boulder fields and moraine. Then another two days are over the clean glaciers on either side of the pass, and the worries about a boulder as big as a car deciding to move because *you* have unwarily placed a foot on it are replaced by worries about crevasses. "Kang" means ice in Miyari speech (a variant of the Bhotia dialects common to the entire region bordering Tibet, from Ladakh and Zaskar through Spiti or upper Kinnaur right across to Sherpa country in Nepal and then Sikkim and Bhutan), and the pass is called "Kang" La because of the very long approach on ice which distinguishes it from all the other passes in the area.

How did I land up there? My son Seshadri was going to be in Delhi at the end of June 2006, and wanted to go somewhere in the mountains. He could do with company. I had just finished admissions work, and felt I could badly do with clearing the resulting cobwebs in my head. My daughter Kalyani

was at a loose end, and having just come down from an Advanced Course at Uttarkashi was very fit and game for anything. So we had a "team".

You think of Lahul or Zaskar automatically at that time of year, because they are relatively free from monsoon rain; the Pir Panjal shelters Lahul, and Zaskar is even drier because the Great Himalaya constitutes a further barrier. And Miyar principally because an old friend, Tek Chand, who works out of Manali now, belongs to the last village Khanjar in the valley; and he said he could guide us over Kang La, as he had crossed the pass some years before. He would also cook for us, and he is a genius at turning out great food in adverse circumstances and with minimal supplies, using his hillman's knowledge to locate chives or edible ferns or rhubarb long after all fresh stores have been used up. I especially remember one bitter evening in the Dibibokri valley in June 2005. Thunder and lightning marched up and down the valley, hailstones had ripped the kitchen tarpaulin which was collapsing anyway because of the wind and weight of wet snow, and Tek Chand, labouring over the stove with the dripping tarpaulin pressing against his head, gently said to me that it was high time I spent money on a proper kitchen tent: through all this he produced a fine meal. The Kang La was going to be hard, but the three of us completely trusted each other's capabilities and endurance, and with Tek Chand with us it seemed an ideal group for a difficult crossing.



A side nala just above Khanjar village

Actually friendship with Tek Chand had led to a Hiking Club trip to the Miyar valley in October 2005. On that occasion we had gone up only to the snout of the glacier. The upper Miyar valley is a series of astonishingly large meadows, the reason why so many *gaddis* from Kangra bring their flocks of sheep and goats in the summer. That October, with winter coming on, the grass in the meadows was turning brown, the snow had all melted away and the little streams were dry. But the sheer extent of open ground, ringed by high mountains, was very impressive; and I had resolved I would come back one year in July or August when the grass would be green and the meadows full of flowers.

Seshu had also thrown in exploration of future climbing possibilities in the Jangpara glacier which meets the Miyar glacier some distance above the latter's snout: he had in mind a possible visit the following year with English climbing friends. The upper Miyar and Jangpara valleys abound in lovely rock peaks, between 5500 and 6000 m and therefore allowing alpine-style climbing of a high technical standard for small teams with a still-smaller budget: Chris Bonington describes the area as "the Yosemite of India".

Of course, after entering Zaskar, we would have to get out. Our route would bring us to Mune village, a day's walk from Padam and access to buses. But the bus journey from Padam back to Manali and Delhi is an appalling prospect: a day to Kargil over the Pensi La, another to Leh, another two days from Leh to Manali, and *then* the tedious journey back to Delhi. (Zaskar is nothing if not both big and remote.) None of us wanted to face that, so we decided we would certainly *walk* out from Zaskar, and thought we would do that over the Phirtse La (5250m, 17400 ft): this would bring us to the valley of the Lingti Chu and, after several river crossings, to the Manali-Leh road north of Baralacha La, from where we could hope to get a ride in a truck.

We left Delhi on a steamy evening at the end of June, and met Tek Chand at Manali next morning. He had a surprise for us: he had rounded up two young and very strong nephews, Lal Chand and Rinchen, both from Urgos, to accompany us. After a largely sleepless night in the bus, the day went in a haze, shopping and preparing loads. Very early next morning we were off in a Sumo taxi and by the evening, having negotiated several more or less hair-raising stream crossings (at one all of us got out leaving the hapless driver to take the risks by himself, while we crossed on foot), we were at Urgos. Over the next three days we made our way to a pleasant camp site at about 13500 ft, near the glacier snout. (The first day was very short, but, well, we had to stop at Khanjar, where we enjoyed the hospitality of Tek Chand's family and imbibed substantial quantities of *chhang* and *arak*.) This time the meadows were green. The full glory of alpine flowers on them would have to wait till later in July and August, but there were enough even then to make one smile foolishly.

Urgos is at nearly 11000 ft, and *beginning* a walk at that height is usually a recipe for high-altitude headaches and some misery. Surprisingly, the height did not seriously affect any of us, then or at any later stage: no

headaches and we covered ground briskly. I was by far the slowest, but everyone was patient with the "old man".

The fun started on the fourth day. We left camp in the morning on 5th July up a rib of the lateral moraine on the true left bank of the glacier. The terrain consisted entirely of boulders piled upon each other, and the walking got progressively tougher as they increased in size and instability. Some were as large as a car. All were dreadfully unstable, and the walking demanded great care and concentration. The monotony was broken only by the occasional sight of a Himalayan blue poppy (*Meconopsis*) – a delicate flower which flourishes only in such inhospitable terrain (if you have seen it, you know you have worked for the sight!).



The impressive icefall at the head of the Jangpara

One steep snow gully which needed step-cutting, and by early afternoon we had reached the point where the Jangpara glacier merged with the Miyar, bringing vast quantities of rock debris with it. We negotiated a hair-raising descent down a loose scree slope onto the glacier itself, and then proceeded over more rubble. Solid waves of ice towered around us, covered with mud and stones that periodically and noisily slid off. On and on, absolutely no sign of any place where one could camp; 2:30 or 3:00 and I was tired and beginning to despair, when fortuitously we found a flattish spot which allowed two tents to be pitched, after some strenuous work clearing rocks. A small pool of muddy glacial melt provided water. To the east was the Jangpara valley, shattered ice and mountains of rubble. The sight, with the evening sun slanting onto the fantastic cirque of rock peaks at its head, was stunning.

I rested the next day, while Seshu set off with Tek Chand, Rinchen and Lal Chand to take a closer look at the rock peaks of the Jangpara. We moved on from our uncomfortable camp on 7th July, walking along yet more of the terrible rubble before finally, gratefully, reaching some clear ice. The harsh sun was melting the ice around us, and several large streams running on the glacier surface and between the rocks demanded careful crossing. Soon,

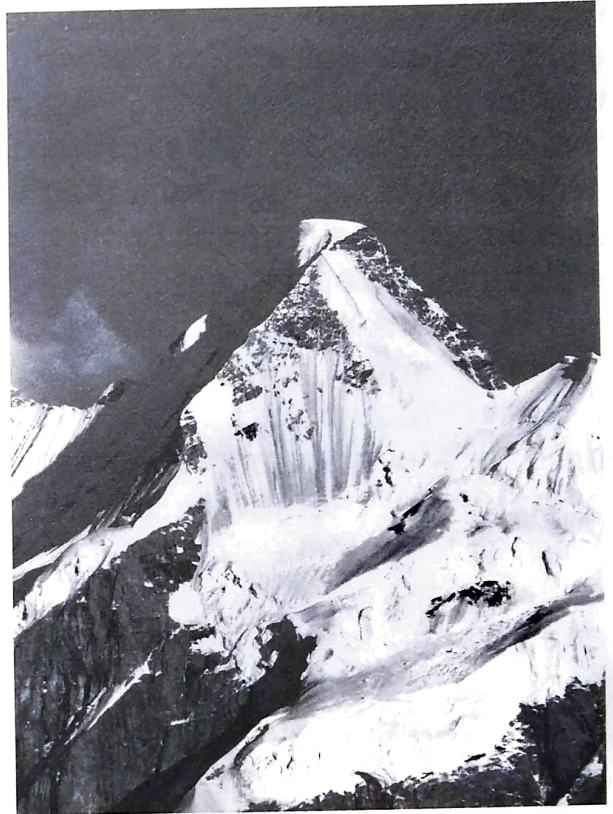
however, we managed to clear the side moraine of another large tributary glacier entering from the left, and then finally we were on the Miyar glacier proper, which ran for miles like a flat white road with fantastically shaped peaks on either side. Narrow crevasses here and there, but the line of the crevasses was obvious and we could jump across them. Eventually, just as I was getting exhausted and irritable, on another rib of moraine we found a place with flat stones. Some levelling work and we could pitch tents. Lal Chand set about building a kitchen shelter, searching for exactly the right shape of boulder to heave into a gap in the wall or to make a comfortable seat for the cook, completely unaffected by the altitude of close to 5000 m.

We left very early next morning, hoping in a general sort of way to cross the pass in one long day from this camp. (I had doubts about whether I could push myself so hard at this altitude, but as with marriage so in the mountains, hope always triumphs over experience.) We made good ground initially on ice covered with a crisp layer of snow. Then mid-morning Lal Chand went into a crevasse. Luckily his load jammed in the opening, and we hauled him out without much drama. But it was sobering (Tek Chand had broken out into a distressed "Hoo, hoo, what will I say to your mother?" when Lal Chand went in – Lal Chand's mother was Tek Chand's sister). The crevasses were no longer narrow enough to step over safely, and there was more snow cover too, so out came the rope and we tied in. Whether it was the rope that broke our rhythm and tired us out, or it was just the rarefied air and the effect of the sun beating down from above and reflecting off the snow from below, movement thereafter became painfully slow and rests more and more frequent. The approach to the pass could be seen, but finally, at the bottom of a daunting ice and snow slope at its base, we decided we could move no longer, and would complete the crossing the next day. Tents were pitched, tea and soup. The evening was still long and beautifully clear, so Rinchen, Lal Chand and Seshu set off up the slope, cutting steps for use the next morning. Lal Chand appeared to be labouring under the impression that a tent would be pitched in each step, but he was utterly indefatigable. They returned to camp having made it much of the way to the top.

That night there was lightning to the south. Evidently a front of the monsoon was breaking far down behind us. Dawn on the 8th was clear, but soon clouds began rolling up the valley. We moved as fast as we could but still got caught by a white-out by the time we reached the top of the slope. There had already been some discussion about the correct point at which to cross the ridge. To my shame, I had doubted Tek Chand and, emboldened by that, Rinchen also questioned his uncle. There was no way to resolve the issue in

zero visibility, so we sat on the snow and waited for the cloud to lift. Eventually it did, and of course Tek Chand was right. The snow and ice slope had been clear of crevasses, but we were welcomed at the top by one yawning in front of us. So out came the rope again, the usual delays that that causes, a short walk and then finally around 9 am we could look into the mountains of Zanskar. It was an exhilarating moment.

Down and down the crevassed glacier on the other side, past ever more fantastic icefalls and fairy-tale cascades of ice, the rope preventing each person from finding his own rhythm. Finally, around 11 am we could get off the crevassed section and onto moraine and boulders at the side. A halt to put away the rope. The frustration and irritation of walking roped up came to an end, but the boulders actually required more concentration. At some point, one rolled under me and deposited me on my back, rucksack wedged between boulders and unable to move till a highly amused Seshu hauled me out (in defence of his abominable behaviour while watching his father undergo a near-death experience, he said it was like watching a slow-motion film). I was less irritated by his laughter than by the fact that I had hurt my ankle badly: not good news when ahead of you there are 10 more days of walking with a pack.



Unnamed peak of the Miyar Glacier

I continued with difficulty at a much slower pace, and Seshu – probably feeling guilty that he had laughed so loudly and so immoderately – stayed with me (otherwise I had got used by then to seeing him and Kalyani as small specks in the distance). Finally we were off the glacier and arrived at a very windy campsite just below where another moraine-filled valley joined the one we had come down. (This is the valley that the route over Poat La follows on the descent; beyond our campsite the two routes merged.) Tek Chand got the stove going, and I got my ankle strapped up. After eight long days over nearly 100 km of difficult terrain, we had crossed the Kang La and arrived in Zanskar. An amazing profusion of blue poppies was the reward.

A long march the next day took us to the Tsarap Chu valley and the village of Mune. Cool and enjoyable in the early morning, with one major stream crossing (which served to keep one focused and the adrenalin flowing, even though I dearly wished I could do without the taking big heavy boots off, then the crepe bandage, and then strapping up again, and stuffing a badly swollen ankle back into said boots). But by noon, we had descended a lot; much hotter, much drier and the last hour or so of steep descent to the road along the Tsarap Chu was very tedious. Then the painful trudge along the road to Mune.

We stayed at the gompa (monastery) there, where a group of boy monks in crimson robes played cricket with an old football. There were also two young Frenchmen, who were at Mune charged with teaching English and arithmetic to young monks with whom they had no language in common. Presumably they taught English in French; certainly all the monks greeted us with superbly accented "Bonjour".

My ankle hurt abominably, especially when it was not held together by the big climbing boots. We had just crossed what is possibly the hardest non-technical mountain pass in the whole of the Western Himalaya. I was very tired, and wanted above all a day's rest. But we couldn't afford to halt. The beginning of the new term was looming for Kalyani and me, and we had at least another nine straight days of walking ahead of us, over another 5000 metre pass. We could have reached Padam in a day, but the prospect of the endless, nightmare bus journeys was worse than stuffing one's foot into a boot and plodding on. We did make a concession to the situation, which was to abandon the idea of crossing the Phirtse La. The Shingo La would be easier, and would bring us out at Darcha where we could reasonably hope to find transport to Manali immediately. The Phirtse La would take us to the road *north* of Baralacha La, and we might have to wait for a lift to Darcha.

And so we trudged on, from Mune to Raru where we restocked on basics and then to a delightful campsite below Ichar village. Kalyani and I braved the steep climb up to Ichar village and the gompa there in the evening. Tek Chand and the Miyari men with us spoke the same language as the Zankaris, and seemed to have relatives or friends or friends of friends in every village. Ichar was no exception, and we were welcomed into houses: tea, *tsampa*, *chhang*. Next day on to Purne, where the Tsarap Chu and the stream from Kargiak and the Shingo La side meet. The sun was too sharp, it was hot and arid and dusty, there were endless ups and downs in the reentrants and to cross streams, the flies were large and bothersome. That was a long,

bad day, and I viewed even the rose bushes in brilliant bloom all the way with a jaundiced eye, and cursed Zanskar for being so big.

Very early the next morning, we made a small side-trip from Purne of about 6 km up the Tsarap Chu to the magnificent monastery at Phuktal. Built high up on sheer limestone cliffs, it was a breathtaking sight, and again the presence of our Buddhist porters saw us welcomed. Back to Purne by 10:00, a quick meal, and then up the Shingo stream to Testa, in the afternoon through a misty light drizzle (the only rain we had in Zanskar). Lal Chand is 26 or 27 and unmarried and wants to get married (very much). He scouted around for a possible bride in every village. At Yal on the way to Testa, some villagers insisted we halt and offered *chhang* and *tsampa* (one doesn't refuse hospitality in Zanskar, which suited me fine, though Kalyani and Seshu who waited in the rain for an hour about a kilometre ahead were probably not amused). A lively girl of 18 or 20, face completely covered against wind and sun except for her dancing eyes, was among our hosts. Lal Chand popped the question. She refused with friendly laughter and banter, adjusting her dupatta and eyes flashing all the while ("You? You are an old man.") It was a delightful encounter. Things were looking up again. Perhaps it was simply that we were out of the sun-trap of the Tsarap Chu, and we were walking in cool conditions.



Phuktal Gompa

Next day on from Testa to Kargiak. The valley got lovelier all the time, though I remember the wind was vicious and one had to huddle behind boulders or stone walls at every rest. Beautiful sedimentary strata were visible in the bare hillsides around us, which took on ever stranger colours – red, orange, pink, purple, green and blue were all visible. Kargiak was beautiful, made still more so by the large number of rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed small children who generously offered us roasted *jowar* from little pouches they seemed to carry with them while out to play. Ahead of us stood the majestic granite monolith of Gumburanjan (5800 m), marking the beginning of the Himalayan chain again.

Another day to Lakhang at the base of Shingo La, and then the long climb to Shingo on the 16th. Glaciers and moraine rubble again, but this was easy stuff after Kang La. At the top were dozens of foreign trekkers, mostly French, on their way to Padum, and many more visible on the steep slopes leading to the pass from the Darcha side. Luckily we were past them quickly and none were moving in the same direction as us. To polite questions about where we were coming from ("Oh, Padum" was probably the expected answer), it was fun to say "Kang La". Some of the trekkers and all the pony-men and porters knew what that was, and we got second looks and (after some moments of complete silence) "Ah! How was it?" Even at 56, I am not above ridiculous ego-booster, so I enjoyed this. We camped that night on some steeply angled meadows at the foot of a mighty peak called Ramjak (6318 m), and reached Palamau the next day. From here a short couple of hours in the morning took us to Darcha and the road. It was the first day we had descended below 3500 m since leaving Urgos.



Children in the tent door at Kargiak

The rest of the journey was anti-climactic, over bumpy roads through hot and dry Lahul, and then, across Rohtang – as though by magic – the damp coolness of the monsoon and trees and vegetation, every leaf glistening with rainwater. Manali provided some of the minor luxuries of civilization that we had missed (chocolate in particular), but also all the noise and dirt and heat and crowds. After the high-altitude paradise we had just come from, we just could not wait to get out of there. We stopped only long enough to pay off our porters and visit Tek Chand's family before jumping onto a bus and hurtling overnight towards Delhi.

Phirtse La perhaps next year, though I will now be better prepared for the sheer size of Zaskar and will budget for rest days!

N.Raghunathan



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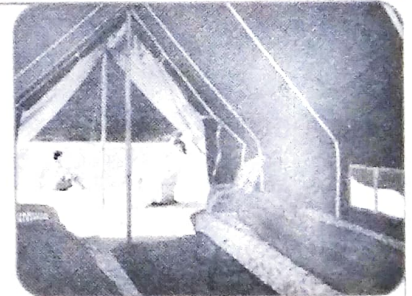
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