

Hiking Club  
St. Stephen's College

Miscellany  
2009-2010



**AQUATERRA**

A D V E N T U R E S

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## EXECUTIVE COUNCIL 2009-10

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## Year in Review 2009-10

Harshit Narang

The year started off with selections for the College Climbing Team at the Easwaran Bharatan Memorial Wall on 29<sup>th</sup> August, which saw quite a good response from the first years and even some third years, with more interest coming quite surprisingly from science students. The start of the year also saw selection of a separate Organizing Committee for the first time in Hiking Club's history, which took place with selections for climbing team.

The first event of the year was a week end trek to Nag Tibba near Mussoorie from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, which provided an excellent opportunity for both first time trekkers and old hats to get a taste of the outdoors. The trek proved to be an excellent experience for the team, by being both scenic as well as physically demanding.

The October break saw the Hiking Club organize a serious trekking expedition in Panch Kedar area of Gharhwal Himalaya in Uttarkhand from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of October. A team of 7 students, accompanied by our staff advisor, Dr. Sanjay Kumar, and Dr. Bikram Phookun, attempted to catch a glimpse of the elusive Chaukhamba on the Ghia Vinayak Pass trek from Uniana to Urugum. Bad weather prevented them from getting a view of the peak the peak and the more than 5000 meter high pass itself was crossed under snowfall. Despite many hitches, the trek proved to be an excellent experience, with several breath taking sights on the way.

The second term saw the club organize a natural rock climbing trip to Damdama in Haryana on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November. A team consisting of both members and non-members of the climbing team tried their hand at scaling some of Nature's mini peaks in a ruggedly beautiful setting, accompanied by Dr. Barua and the coach of the climbing team, Rohit Chauhan.



The major event of the year, however, was Hike-A-Mania 2009, the hiking club fest, and the 5<sup>th</sup> St. Stephen's Open Sport Climbing Competition, held from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of December. The five day blitz saw a variety of events being held with the purpose of giving students a taste of Hiking Club and the world of outdoor sports, ending with a national level sport climbing event. The fest was a huge success, and provided students with a dose of concentrated excitement and physical activity as a break from the routine of college life, while spurring us on to have it on a much larger scale in coming years.

Year's activities ended with very popular rafting trips. Two team of rafters, of more than fifty members each, went for rafting above Rishikesh during the weekends of 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> February respectively.

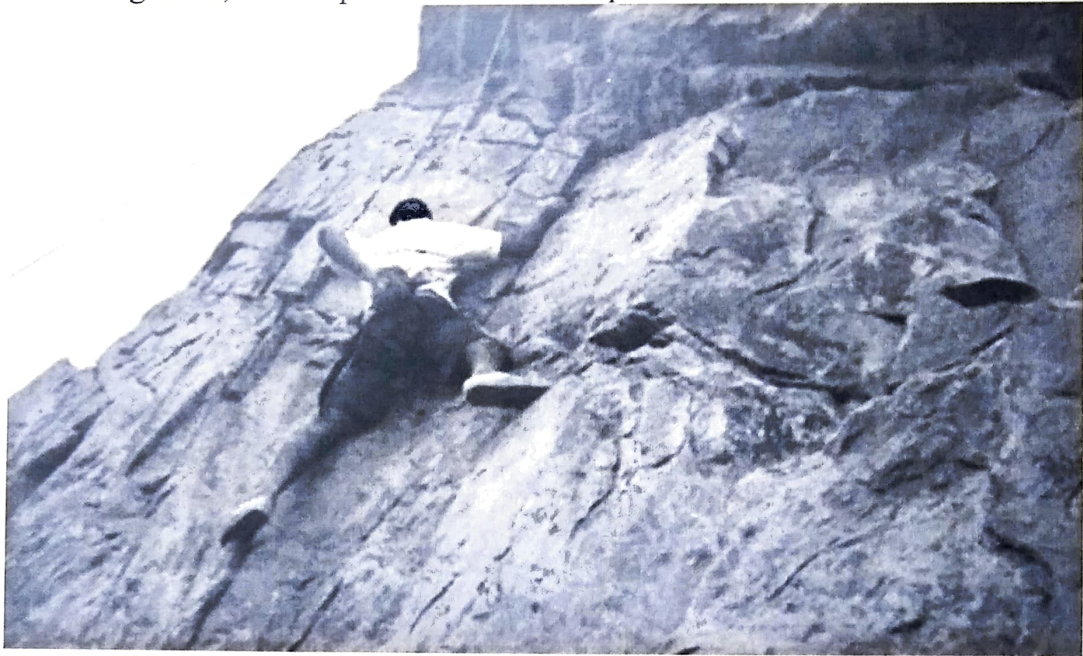
### *Climbing Natural Rock*

*Dipak V.C.*

For all that is said about fun while traveling together, being one of sixteen people in two Innovas is not a position most people are happy to find themselves in. However, the excitement of trying to scale nature's miniature peaks (as we'd like to believe), and the fact that participants had already paid for the trip (which was probably the main reason) quelled any misgivings that anyone may have had, and so, on that not so bright morning of November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, we set out for Damdama. The initial part of the trip was spent in telling the driver to turn off the radio, because the commentary of the Indo-Aus match only elicited regular curses from all of us as the Indian wickets fell like.... ummm..... well like only Indian wickets can fall when our batsmen really set their mind to it. The rest of the trip involved a lot of chit chat and sleeping, with a brief stop at IIT Delhi to pick up three more members of our team, taking the total number of people (in two Innovas mind you), excluding our by now highly irritated drivers, to nineteen.

Once we reached, we were quite struck by the ragged beauty of rocks and wilderness around, with Ranoday taking a special liking to the pile of buffalo bones we found there. With tall grass, and an empty sand covered landscape set against the vast expanse of rocks, there was a proper feeling of being in the outdoors. While Rohit, our climbing coach, and Asad set up safety ropes for the first rock face we were to climb, the rest of the group gorged on the food we'd brought along. Once the whole setup had been tested, Gaurav kicked off the actual climbing by scampering up the rock face like it was nothing, and then rappelling down. It was an ideal rock face for someone who was getting initiated into natural rock climbing, with big gaps between rocks in which you could wedge yourself.

and even a spot halfway up where you could stand and rest, while for members of our climbing team, it was quite a nice warm-up.



While the rest of the group tried their hand at climbing up the first route, Rohit and Asad along with some others started setting up the second route. And so the climbing went on, with shouts and screams and constant demands by the person climbing that their photo be taken, especially by Luis, our Spanish companion. We even had an audience, with some local boys with bemused expressions wondering what in the world we were doing, as they climbed up much tougher routes with the ease of mountain goats. However, none of this could persuade Dr. Barua, who had accompanied us, to change his philosophical view of keeping himself firmly grounded, a view that held firm for the duration of the trip.

The second route we tried was easily the most difficult of the trip. It was a flat rock face, with some 1-2 cm wide ridges as the only foot and hand holds available. Even the college climbing team members found this mini peak hard to conquer, while the belayers had a tough time ensuring that climbers who lost their footing didn't fall all the way down and hurt themselves.

By the time we reached the third route that Rohit and Asad had set up for us, the energy levels had started to sag, helped in no small measure by the lack of proper drinking water. But the third rock face was a beautiful sight. With a height of about 15-18 meters from where the belaying was being done to the top of the rock face, it was a flat piece of rock that seemed to have been placed there for the sole purpose of being climbed up, and then rappelled down. The route had an ample number of holds, but not too many, and tested your stamina more than your skill. As I was belaying for most of the climbers, I was too tired to attempt this route, but the people who did reach the top said that the view from the top alone was worth the effort.



As the last of the climbers attempted the third route, route no. 18 at Damdama, the rest set about packing up the equipment. Finally, at the end of the session, tired but happy, we posed for a group photograph then headed towards the cars. As we were discussing the economics of the entire trip one of the Innovas started rolling down the dirt road and finally stopped after climbing up an embankment on the side of the road covered with shrubs. After the ensuing panic had calmed down, it was discovered that the cause of the runaway Innova was that Dr. Barua had accidentally hit the hand brake.

Finally, we set out on the return journey, which had again been delayed by the discovery that one of the Innovas had a punctured tyre. With a stop at a petrol pump, so that the cars could have their fill of gas and maintenance while we had dinner from the adjacent dhaba, as the only break in our song filled return trip, we all headed to our beds tired, but satisfied at having pitted ourselves against Nature's mini peaks and triumphed.



## Trek To Nag Tibba

*Mihir Bhattacharya*

This was the third weekend trek to Nag Tibba by Hiking Club over the past eight years. Unlike the earlier two attempts, we decided to trek up the Tibba and down it on the same route in the interest of saving time and making sure that this week-end trek remained truly a week-end affair, starting on Friday evening and ending before Monday morning.

After much running around to organize sleeping bags and rucksacks and many last minute attempts to get our consent forms signed (in some cases forged!) we assembled at Kashmiri Gate ISBT at 10.30pm on 19.09.09. The comfortable Semi-Deluxe bus reached Ghantagarh in Dehra Dun in early hours of the next morning. We disembarked close to the Hill Bus Operators' Union Office, from where we took a bus to Nainbagh four hours away. The highlight of this bus ride was definitely the legendary Yamuna Bridge. From Nainbagh we hired two Mahindras (Rs. 250 each) to traverse the 17km journey to Pantwari. At this point I must point out that the fairly short drive from Nainbagh to Pantwari under clear sky was one of the most scenic and striking I have ever had. Views of the surrounding hills and the valley transport you into a different world altogether.

Mules to carry our tent equipment and kitchen utensils were arranged from Pantwari village. Our muleteers were Amit and Ankit, studying in class VI and VII. Amit's father was supposed to join us later. He showed up only for few hours in the evening. But he was not missed as our young muleteers managed the mule fairly professionally with some help from us. It's advisable to fill all available water bottles at the village (water purifying tablets are further advised as only tap water is available). Water, though easily available from springs through the trek, is always a handy resource and under the hot mid-day sun that we started the trek, it was greatly appreciated. Though locals recommend guide as an essential, one can do well without one. Most of the local youth have been to Tibba for Nag Temple fair. Pantwari villagers' summer houses, cattle sheds and fields go nearly half way to the Tibba top, up to which there is some chance of taking side trails to other villages. Beyond that the trail leads straight to the forest dept building at the Tibba base.

After a quick lunch of Gwyer Hall paranthas, carried from Delhi, we started the trek to Nag Tibba at close to 1pm. Soon I was cursing the clear day and warm sun that I was blessing earlier in the day. The steep gradient of the trail mixed with the hot sun meant that the trek was more challenging than most of us had anticipated. However, the whole group, which was made up of a complete spectrum of trekkers ranging from experienced trekkers like Dr. Sanjay Kumar to complete amateurs like this writer, managed to make it through the trek. The trail to the

Tibba base is well laid. It rises from near 1300m to 2800m in a little over 10km and took about 5-6 hours. Three hours after starting the trek we entered a thick forest of Ban Oak and rhododendrons, where the gradient seemed to ease. Following this forest trail we reached the Tibba base.

There is a three roomed forest department building at the base of Nag Tibba that, apparently, can be used without booking. It also has enough flat ground around the building to pitch tents. The initial euphoria of reaching the camp site, where we got an ephemeral sight of Bader Punchh, meant that no one was keen on setting up tents too quickly. The darkness, however, crept up on us and this meant tent pitching became a lot harder as we had to do it in the dark. The Nag temple is located close-by and served as our source of water. Ankit and Amit waded through the small pool of the temple to fill our bottles. Dinner was made on kerosene stoves and consisted of soup, noodles and pasta. The leftover pasta also served as a portion of our breakfast the next morning.

The trail for Tibba top leaves from behind the forest dept building. Barring the initial part the trail is well forested, mainly with Kharsu Oak. It took us an easy one and half hours to reach the top. Tibba top on the north-eastern side is a beautiful rolling meadow, with excellent wide views of Swargarohini and Bander Punchh in clear weather.

But alas! Like the evening before we managed only fleeting views of peaks under clouds. Villagers have put up a pole on the highest point on the Tibba top, an ideal location for photo-ops, but interestingly from where snow covered peaks are not visible.



After some rest, dismantling and packing tents, preparing tea and breakfast we left camp for Pantwari at about noon. The trek down was, obviously, far easier and quicker and enabled us to enjoy some of the truly spectacular views that greet trekkers of this route. We reached Pantwari at 4PM, and left for Mussoorie immediately in a Mahindra mini-bus whose fare we managed to reduce from Rs 3000/- to Rs 1700/-, courtesy hard bargaining by Harshit and Arjun.

## Hike - a- Mania 2009

Deepak.V.C

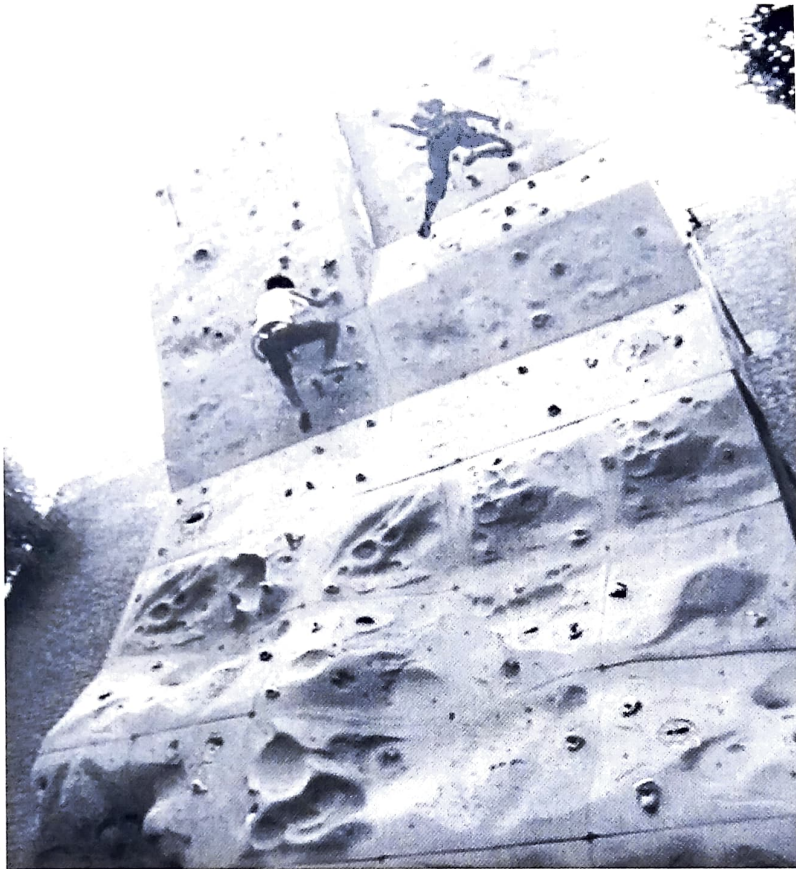
That's what we called the Hiking Fest for the year 2009 – 'Hike-A-Mania 2009' – the fourth hiking fest ever to take place at St.Stephen's College. And manic it was. For five days from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> December, there was ceaseless excitement and activity, physical in most cases, as we pushed the participants to the limit with a variety of events that culminated with the 5<sup>th</sup> St.Stephen's Open Sport Climbing Competition held at the Easwaran Bharatan Memorial Wall on the last three days.

The fest kicked off in the morning on the 9<sup>th</sup> with a photograph exhibition, a display of our amateur attempts to capture the enthralling beauty of nature witnessed during the various trips – rafting, hiking, natural rock climbing and cycling – organized by the Hiking Club in the past few years. The pictures, excellent as they were, were no match however for the images forever fixed in the minds of those who had had a chance to experience Nature at its purest and most pristine.

The fest then jumped headfirst or, in this case, backwards into an adrenaline rush with the rappelling event in the late afternoon. The event was originally supposed to be held on the Easwaran Bharatan Memorial wall, but could not be as the overhang of the upper panels was at too great an incline. So, thanks to some quick decision making, the event was shifted to the side wall of the gymnasium, adjacent to the climbing wall. There were some tense moments as our staff advisor, Dr. Sanjay Kumar, came to inspect how safe the complex rope system set up by our climbing coach, Mr. Rohit Chauhan, was. Rohit's experience, however, eased all fears, and with a few extra beds set at the base of the wall where the rappelling was to take place, the event was given the green signal.

And then started the screams of terror and pure exhilaration as people dared to not only stand on the edge, but lean *backwards* over it as they rappelled down the wall. A mindblowing experience!!

The Geocaching event later that day was the start of the competitive activities of the fest. Armed with just a compass, the participants in teams of two roamed all around the North Campus of Delhi University, guided only by cryptic clues, in search of the elusive prize. A throwback to the treasure hunts of old, the participants had a lot of fun and wracked their brains at the same time as they discovered places they didn't know existed in North Campus.



However, the event of the day was undoubtedly the slideshow and campfire in the evening. The idea behind the event was to give a feel of a campsite to those who had never stayed outdoors, along with a slideshow presentation of the activities of the Hiking Club. Out in the lawns, sitting on mats and logs, with a drywood fire to one side, and hot soup being prepared over a makeshift brick 'chulha', and added to that the atmosphere created by the tents (normally used on hikes) pitched around and the slowly falling darkness, there was truly something magical about the evening, like a scene stolen from one of those stories told by men who have traveled the world. As the audience sat munching samosas and drinking hot tea or soup, they were guided through some of the past treks organized by the club by Dr. Sanjay Kumar, while the pictures flashed on the makeshift screen. It was, undoubtedly, an evening to remember.

The first event of the next day was the monkey rope competition. A test of mainly upper body strength, it involved climbing up a 10m long rope suspended from the ceiling of the Gymnasium as fast as possible. And the participants didn't disappoint, with the fastest time being a mere four seconds. Never had monkeying around been so competitive.

The toughest physical test of the fest, however, was the obstacle race that took place in the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup>. A crazy course set up using items easily available in and around college, the race tested the participants' speed, agility, balance and stamina, involving a hop through a tyre course; a rope walk between two trees; a walk over a not very stable arrangement of logs, bricks and upturned earthen tea cups or 'kullads'; a set of athletic hurdles; and finally a crawl through below ropes suspended a foot and a half above the ground to reach the finishing point. And if all this was not enough, the race was timed, and a stumble at any section involved repeating the entire section, with the second stumble leading to disqualification. The participants, however, rose to the occasion, putting in a lot of effort and getting down and dirty, while at the same time giving the organizers dirty looks.

The obstacle course marked the end of the first part of Hike-A-Mania, which saw more than a hundred and fifty students participate in the various events and competitions as they were introduced to the world of outdoor adventure sports on a small scale. The participation was in no small way bolstered by the excellent prizes in the form of tickets to an aerial adventure trip provided by one of our sponsors, Flying Fox.

The 11<sup>th</sup> saw the start of the 5<sup>th</sup> St. Stephen's Open Sport Climbing Competition. With around fifty climbers from different parts of the country, and even a couple of foreign students who were studying in DU at the time, the event saw a decent turnout, though not as high as we had hoped. The competition was spread over three days, and went off remarkably well, thanks in no small measure to the excellent work done by judges and route setters. There were four categories in which the competition took place – Men's Open, Women's Open, Boys and Girls.

There were no separate categories for lead and speed climbing, and the climbers were judged on the basis of their cumulative points in both styles of climbing, ensuring that the climbers who won were not only fast, but skilled and with considerable stamina.

With considerable crowd support, and fist pumping music playing in the background, the three days of the competition passed amidst a lot of effort and excitement, and came to an end with the Prize Distribution ceremony on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Anjali Rao from CLE Education bagged the top honours in the Girls Category, while Rohini Chib from J&K Mountaineering Institute came first in the Women's Open Category. Amit Tiwari from Youth Adventure Club scaled the peak in the Boys Category, while Sandeep Maity from the Vinay Nagar Bengali Senior Secondary School was top man in the Men's Open Category. The home crowd also had something to cheer about, with Jitender from St. Stephen's College



winning bronze medal in the Men's Category. The top three climbers in each category were given cash prizes and gifts sponsored by PETZL and Allied Safety Equipments Pvt. Ltd. And so ended a five day blitz of fun, excitement and sport in the form of Hike-A-Mania 2009, leaving behind a promise of something much bigger and much more exciting next year. So till then, Climb On!!

## *In Search of Chaukhamba*

*Dr.Sanjay Kumar*

From any place that affords a panoramic view of Kumaon and Garhwal Himalaya the great mass of Chaukhamba massif looming over the eastern horizon is an impressive sight. There are few vertical walls of ice as long and as high as Chaukhamba. I had witnessed its grandeur far away from Binsar and Bedni Bugyal. Getting closer to it had perhaps been an unconscious desire for long. Hence, this October, when time came to plan a trek in central Garhwal, Nandi Kund was the automatic first choice. It is the closest one can get to Chaukhamba via a normal trekking route. Enroute to Nandi Kund, the trail also affords magnificent views of the mountain from Budha Madhmaheshwar, and Kanchani Tal. So, I had little doubt that it was the best bet and my expectations were naturally high.

The journey however, did not begin on a high note. 9:30 PM, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009: Nine of us at Kashmere Gate ISBT are quite perturbed, and I am mightily hassled. Lugging in tents, ration, kitchen equipment and back packs in, or on a bus is always a chore. Our problems have compounded because the driver and conductor of the semi-deluxe bus to Rishikesh have flatly refused to open the rear storage area of the bus. They are asking us to stuff in our luggage inside the bus. I am enraged and poking around in shady corridors of upper floors of the bus depot, looking for any official of Uttarakhand Roadways to file a complaint. I know expecting any official to be around at this time is foolish, and more stupid is to expect any punishment for errant driver and conductor. But even more overpowering is my sense of being wronged. There is no way, and I am again at the bus. The elderly driver approaches me in a conciliatory tone. 'Please, do believe me. It is my responsibility to get your luggage safely to Rishikesh. Every thing will fit in. Do let us earn a bit extra.' Shivasheesh, Alby, Arjun, Anurag and Ankit ferry our tents in the small side compartment besides the bus battery. Back packs are pushed in the overhead luggage shelf inside the bus. Ration and kitchen equipment are pushed down behind driver's seat. Only pieces of worry are our carry mats which have been removed from backpacks and some of which are rolling under our seats. I must admit, I am surprised by how much nooks and corners of a bus can take in. Even more is in store as the scheduled departure time approaches. Just a few seconds before the bus is to leave, Bikram signals towards a mountain of a sack carried by an army of porters towards the bus back. Well, that was the extra bit of earning for our driver and conductor.

Next day morning I loose my cool again. This time the source and target of my anger are auto rickshaw drivers of Rishikesh bus stand, who have monopolized the traffic out of the stand, and are objecting to our getting the bus to Rudraprayag on the road outside. However, soon we are moving along the Ganga



. Devprayag and Srinagar pass by in a breeze. From Rudraprayag we take the main pilgrimage road to Kedarnath. The road has been made a national highway and is being broadened. State Bank of India has a number of signboards announcing its services. The most unexpected is 'Next ATM 50 KM at Gauri Kund'. Another new-technology entrant to the Uttarakhandi lexicon is 'Tower', which is available on interior hill tops, and refers to mobile phone signal. At lunch time we are at Okhimath nestled in a forest atop the ridge overlooking confluence of Madhmaheshwar Ganga and Kali Ganga. This small and beautiful town is the winter seat of Kedar Nath deity. We chance upon our guide Devender Panwar of village Ransi and leave at 4:30 PM for Uniana 20 km away. Madhyamaheshwar Ganga is crossed after Mansoona (Silent Heart, what a name!). It starts to rain rather heavily even while we are getting our luggage down from the bus roof. We stay in a lodge right beside the road in front of village school and panchayat office. The lodge is manned by a rather lazy old man who openly declares that only if we help him with cooking there is some hope of getting dinner.

The morning of October 3<sup>rd</sup> is bright. Last night's rain appears to have cleared the sky except for a patch in the north, towards the snow covered peaks. Devender arrives with six porters. Gopal Khoyul, Bhim, Vinod, Gajendra and Gopal Rawat are from Ransi. Guddu is from Uniana itself. Our plans have become more ambitious than just going up to Nandi Kund and turning back. We are planning to cross the Ghia Vinayak pass which lies ahead of the Kund and is around five thousand meters high. The pass and the route beyond are not shown in our maps, but we have some information from a couple of internet sites, and more importantly, Devender has been on the trail many times. Our trekking area from Uniana to Urugam lies between Kedarnath and Alaknanda Valley, in the region of



Panch Kedars. Our general direction of movement will be North-East before the pass and then East. Uniana is high above Madhmaheshwar Ganga at an approximate altitude of 1500m. At Bamtoli we will pass the confluence of two tributaries of Madhmaheshwar Ganga. Morkhanda river drains the south of Chaukhamba Massif and Mandani Parbat (6190m). Madhu Ganga (can there be any river with a more sweet name!) comes from the Nandi Kund. The trail after Bamtoli basically lies along the ridge separating these two rivers. After the Ghia Vinayak pass we will enter the valley of Mena Nala, which joins Alaknanda near Belakuch. We will cross two ridge tops transverse to the main valley, both nearly 4000m high. After Bansi Narayan we will enter the valley coming from Kalpnath Glacier. The trek will end at Urugam, altitude 2000m, 10 km before Helang on the Alaknanda on National Highway to Joshimath. Day after next we are planning to make a dash for Buda Madmaheshwar from Madhmaheshwar to soak in the imposing view of Chaukhamba. Two days later we are hoping to pitch tents on the shores of Kanhchani Tal, literally in the mountain shadow. Such are our plans. There are few experiences as pregnant with hope and excitement as starting on a trail leading to regions one has never seen.

We stop for tea and breakfast at a small dhaba half a kilometer before Ransi, after walking for nearly one hour. This proves to be a long stop. Making Paranthas for all nine of us takes some time. But with delicious subzi of meetha karela they are polished off in no time. Suddenly there are shrieks of excitement from outside. Alby is pointing towards a group of peaks in distance, barely visible under haze. No, this is not Chaulhamba. But the first sight of snow covered peaks on a trek is as good an opportunity for photo-ops as any other. At 2:30 PM we reach Gironda. Two kilometers beyond is Bamtoli which is but a group of extra houses belonging to Gironda villagers. Our campsite is along the Madhu Ganga in a house owned by somebody from Lucknow. Technically we are trespassers, but the site is beautiful.

Uniana to Madhmaheshwar is the famous trail to Madhmaheshwar temple, one of the Panch Kedars. It is a 'Chheh Futia' trail with distances to Madhmaheshwar marked in PWD signs. Nearly all travelers on the trail, and there are quite a few of them, children, young couples, and old men and women, are Bengalis. Even some of the dhabas along the way have signs in Bangla. The eighteen kilometer trail is well provisioned with dhabas and places to stay and can be a comfortable outing. Uniana, Ransi, Gironda and Bamtoli are nearly at the same altitude. The real climb for Madhmaheshwar starts after Bamtoli.

It starts raining even before we are at Madmaheshwar (altitude 3120m). The small settlement contains the famous temple, its guest house, a few dhabas plus lodges and a building of the forest department, where we stay for the night. Two kilometer trail through open meadows leads to Buda Maheshwar.



Rain continues throughout the evening and night. Next day morning (5<sup>th</sup> Oct) we find Madmaheshwar floating in mist and intermittent drizzle with heavy sky. We drop the idea of walking to Buda Maheshwar. On Devender's suggestion the idea of walking all the way to Kanchani Khal is also dropped. Camping there would put us in rain under exposed conditions. Instead we decide to go only till Dhola Chhetarpal (altitude about 3800m), two thirds of the way to Kanchani Khal. Dhola Chhetarpal is a rock over hang. It has a small temple of Bhairon. The steep and narrow trail is slippery in rain, otherwise it is straightforward. About a kilometer before the rock shelter we cross shiny metal pieces scattered over a wide area, remains of a helicopter crash. The overhang is nowhere as spacious as the image we had formed from the description given by Devender. It is hardly a shelter and only after trying a few creative suggestions for tent placements and ropes we finally have a modicum of a camp site. Six of us squeeze in one four-man tent. Chhetarpal is a ledge formed in a rock outcrop on a steep grassy slope. Mist and drizzle have followed us, and their play in the seemingly bottomless valley in front of us is captivating. The sky opens up at night and brings up another surprise. Far to the south we notice a cluster of lights floating in the sea of darkness, the town of New Tehri.

Next day morning we climb the ridge top behind Dhola to get views of snow covered peaks. Chaukhamba is still beyond us, behind a ridge projection. When questioned, Devender suggests walking along the ridge towards Buda Madmaheshwar, which we can see in the distance below us. No Chaukhamba; however, we get good and clear views Mandani Parbat across the valley, and a side of Kedar dome behind, which seems to be a clear and vertical black rock face. We also see the trail going from Ransi to Kedarnath, which crosses the ridge between Morkhanda and Kali Ganga below Mandani Parbat. We decide to stay put at Dhola for a day. It would have been impossible to reach Pandusera before

nightfall, besides we are not sure of the weather. Forty hours in a ledge of a campsite, in cramped tents can be disquieting, but our spirits are high. Gopal, Guddu and Bhim decide to walk upto Kanchani Tal. They found clouds all around. They bring back hazy pictures of the lake in their mobile phones and beautiful Brahm Kamals, glistening silvery flowers that apparently survive the harsh weather right up to the first snowfall. Arjun, Jyoti, Anurag, Mahima and Ankit concoct a chocolate dish on Bikram's suggestion that has 'Nandi 2009' as the icing. Alby goes for a bath, taking a half-hour steep trail down. Shivasheesh is a storehouse of old Hindi film songs. I insist him to sing 'Chalo Ik bar' from Gumrah again and again. Mahima is an accomplished Indian classical music singer. Her notes of a gazhal linger late on the campsite that has rock and sky all around.



The trail to Pandusera next day (7<sup>th</sup> Oct) is a long and tough eight hour affair. Kanchani Khal (approx 4000m) is reached easily. But after that it is a series of steep ascents and descents all the way on rock and mud. Some stretches are very slippery and require hand holds, plus patience and help from our guide and porters. The trail claims two pairs of boots. Alby and Jyoti are right in front with the first lot of porters, while I with my badly mauled ankles am the last. Pandusera is visible from Kanchani Khal, as the only level stretch in the valley below glaciated regions, but its nearness is deceptive. Madhu Ganga valley is rugged and steep all the way above Bamtoli. Pandusera is the only alpine meadow villagers in the valley can use. Surprisingly they manage to get even un-laden mules up to the meadow. Pandusera at 3800m is an idyllic campsite. The two km by one km meadow is nearly level with some huge boulders left behind by retreating glaciers. Madhu ganga flows in the east nearby and forests of Bhojpatra are close by for fuel. It is not difficult to imagine that Pandusera in rains will be a carpet of flowers. Devender and porters put the kitchen under a rock overhang while our tents are in the open.

Next day is the big day for trek. After the bad weather and trail to Pandusera we had decided to go only up to Nandi Kund and retrace our steps. But

Devender and porters assure us that Ghia Vinayak is but one climb up from the lake. The most difficult part of the trek was the trail to Pandusera, and once it was behind us turning back made little sense. Besides, the trail and valleys on the other side of the pass are much better and worth visiting. We must thank them for helping us change our mind, and all that they told us about the trails on the other side of the pass turned out to be true. Despite much urgency we manage to pack up and leave Pandusera campsite only at 9 AM. Temperature during the night drops below freezing and there is frost in the morning. The trail goes along the meadow for first two kilometers. A side stream is crossed on a substantial wooden bridge. And then the trail becomes steep requiring scrambling up a near vertical slope, while the river descends in water fall and cascades to the right. Just before the climb, Bikram twists his knee on an innocuous looking step. It does not look serious at first, but later it becomes clear that some ligaments have been affected, and he has to take every step with extreme care. We pass some resplendent Brahm Kamals on the climb, the last of the season before winter snow smothers every living thing under its blanket. We hope that Nandi Kund will be behind the first hump after the climb. But like all high Himalayan lakes, Nandi too does not admit a straight and easy access, and is not visible till you are literally at it. After the upper glacial valley, the trail leads to the valley coming from the right, which has Madhu Ganga flowing mostly underground and then it turns with the valley to the left to reach the lake. One route to Rudranath branches off from near the underground section of the river. We are at the lake shore by 1 PM. Nandi affords stupendous views of Chaukhamba under clear sky. But now, under the cloud laden sky, and with barren slopes all around, it feels desolate. Ghia Vinayak is in the direction of approach to lake, atop a clear snow slope. We stay at the lakeshore for barely twenty minutes. Snow fall starts while we are still at Nandi. It is necessary to cross the pass as soon as we can. In his authoritative tone Gajendra has predicted that it will be at least four hours till we reach the campsite on the other side, and after his correct predictions for the trail section to Pandusera, we have no reason to doubt his judgment. The snow fall of the past few days has covered the trail, and our porters are leading us with more of a guess than assurance. Fresh snow gives a nice crunchy feel. The snow field is not glaciated (at least it did not appear so) so there is perhaps no reason for alarm, but we do go around boulders in, well if not in circles, then certainly some semi-circles. Gopal and Bhim vaguely indicate different points on the ridge as the pass, till we find Devender waiting for us after one turn. He had gone down from Nandi to retrieve the bag containing his personal belongings left behind near Brahm Kamals on the steep slope. It is straight up on the snow slope two hundred or so feet up where we meet Devender. The pass is reached at 3PM. Fierce wind and bitter cold greet us at the pass. It is an occasion for much deserved jubilations, but then again, given the weather, our celebrations are short and we descend quickly on the other side. The camp site of Brahm Vaitarni (Uttarakhandis do have a knack of picking heavenly place names )

is visible from the pass, near the edge of the valley floor below. We reach it at 5PM. The night at Brahm Vaitarani is the coldest of the trek. A thick layer of ice is found next morning encrusted in patches on tents. But luckily, the wind has not picked up.



Our target next day is Monpai Bugyal four hours away from Brahm Vaitarni. With the pass and most difficult parts of the trek behind us, there is a languid abandon in our morning chores, and we manage to break camp only at ten. The first hump behind the campsite greets us with the first grand vista of our trek. In distance stands Nanda Devi (the chief deity of Uttarakhand Himalayan Peaks) with her unique hood tall above all her associates (Dunagiri, Nanda Ghunghti, possibly Trishul too, though its trident profile was not visible from where we stood). The trail descends down to Menda Gad in loops through open meadows. Across the valley to the south we can see Rudranath (another Panch Kedar) above forests in open grassland. From the Gad we ascend steeply to Panch Jula Top and then descend to Manpai Bugyal. We pitch tents in the shadow of a rock overhang, not much above thick forest of Rhododendrons and Kharsu oak, in rolling meadows. Our trail for the next day to Bansi Narayan is visible high above on the mountain slope on the other side of the valley. It is forbidding at places.

Next day we descend to Biter Gad through a thick forest. It is here that we see pug marks of a big cat. It is a stiff two hours climb from the stream to the Jagdula Pass. This pass is closer to the central Himalayan peaks than the hump after Brahm Vaitarni, and it also affords a broader view. This is our last climb. The weather is perfect, and with one of the grandest vistas of snow covered peaks in the background, it is an ideal place for much jubilation and group photographs. I distribute the last pack of roasted chana I have been saving for an occasion like this amid much celebratory shouts from Devender and his comrades. I also manage to get 'Tower' here and talk to my father in Delhi.

The small temple of Bansi Narayan (altitude 3600m, arrived at 2:30PM) must be among the most beautifully sited Hindu temples. It is located amid a forbidding spread of rocky outcrops with huge boulders placed randomly. Temple shikhara is half gone, and its top is covered in soil and grass. We saw one kamalakha (lotus top for shikahara) lying in the temple courtyard, while the other larger one laid half buried in the soil below temple. The temple structure is in bad shape, but that too perhaps adds to its charm. The temple is dedicated to Krishna. However, looking below the small statue of the deity, Ankit correctly argues that at one time it must have been a Saivite temple, before being given to Vaisanavaite pantheon. Could that explain its dilapidated state in the prime land of Panch Kedars? The revenge of Shiva! While standing in temple courtyard, turn your back to the temple, look east and you have grandest of central Himalayan peaks welcoming you, from Hathi and Ghoda Parbats towards left to Nanda Ghunghti in the right. Our kitchen is set under the low rock overhang, where Gajendra and others fry pakodas. It snows all through the evening and continues late into the night.

Last day of the trek dawns brightly. Trail descends steeply through a thick broad leaved forest. The forest shade, dampness, under growth of ferns, moss and aerophytes hanging from oaks above give it an ethereal feel. Two kilometers before the village Bansa, the trail opens to a meadow. Some of us including Guddu and Devender can not resist the temptation to indulge in an impromptu game of ball-throw with Alby's ball, while others lie on the grass seeping in the mountain view. Villages of Bansa, Devgram and Urugam are a continuous and prosperous habitation. Fields are wide and irrigated and continue uninterrupted for three kilometers below Bansa. A diversion from Devgram takes one to the temple of Kalpeshwar. The last day from Bansi Narayan to Urugum is a good descent of nearly six hours from 3600m to 2000m.

At six o'clock next morning we are packing our luggage on the roof of a Tata Sumo in Joshimath. And, I wonder what is it I have with drivers, I again loose my cool, this time for the Sumo driver asking us extra for the luggage. But I soon realize that while twenty rupees per head are not worth a wrinkle for any one of us, the total sum can be more than the daily wage driver gets from the vehicle owner. He turns out to be a cheerful fellow. At Piplikot he guides us to a restaurant. Obviously, no Chaukhamba here, but the place serves us some of the tastiest tandoori paranthas I have ever had. *(Hiking Club October 2009 trek across the Gbia Vinayak Pass)*



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