



A Trip to the Himalayas

M. Kamal Naidu*

Flat No. 414, 6th Floor, Alladin Mansion, Begumpet, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh (500 016), India

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Correspondence to

*E-mail: mkamalnaidu@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Owing to its awesome beauty and rich biodiversity coupled with a sense of spirituality the Himalaya has always been one of the most desired destinations for people around the world. For India, the Himalaya is the home of god Shiva and considered as the sacred place where many saints and sages did meditation to realize the Ultimate Truth and for salvation. Being an Indian Forest Service officer, the author shares his experiences of divine serenity on his trip to various parts of the great Himalayas. The paper also describes about the flora and faunal diversity of the region.

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In November, 1974, I took charge of the Special Refresher Course (SRC) under the purview of Indian Forest Academy (IFA). This course was for brushing up of Assistant Conservator of Forests on promotion from Forest Range Officers (FRO), mostly in new trends in forestry after their training at Forest Ranger Colleges (FRC), some 15-20 years back.

Since Mr. DC Pande, Director, Forest Education was from Uttar Pradesh (UP). I asked if there was an alternative to Himachal tour, besides Chakrata in UP. He promptly suggested to see the forests in the outer and middle Himalayas of UP (now Uttaranchal), known as *Dev Bhoomi*, the 'Land of Gods', graced by the two major rivers Ganga and Yamuna, a land in harmony and proportion, and the original home of the Indian culture, giving it a universally rich history and well preserved heritage.

I had seen so many other places of lesser sacredness, but the visit to the Himalayas was the most divine for its sheer majesty and grandeur.

Starting from Dehra Dun we first touched Rishikesh, a celebrated spiritual town on the bank of the Ganga, surrounded by Shivalik range of the Himalayas on three sides. It is said that here when Raibhya Rishi did hard penances, God appeared by the name of *Hrishikesh*, and so the place got its name. Here Rama, Lakshmana and Bharata are believed to have spent a good part of their early days. We saw the Ram and Lakshman *jhulas*, very unnerving swaying suspension bridges, spanning

the swirling, crystal clear Ganga, where the fish could be seen clearly deep within it. These bridges join the famed Sivananda Ashram and the Swargashram and Tryambakeshwar on the either banks. The latter *jhula* is believed to be the spot where Lakshmana crossed the river with the help of a rope. Between these two bridges is the Triveni Ghat, immortalized by Bharat Mandir. Just 15 km away, we visited the Neelkant Mahadev Temple, where Lord Shiva as in our mythology, swallowed the poison being churned by the gods and demons from the sea, and thus saved the life of the world from a great disaster. Starting from here we made a beginning, delving into the divine and divinity of the famed *Dev Bhoomi*. From here we moved on towards Haridwar.

A visit to Haridwar is believed to fulfilling one's life ambition. The place is shrouded with so many mythological stories. One remembers the stories heard as a child, on the lap of grandmothers of yesteryears. It is believed to be one of the seven holiest places according to Hindu mythology, and a major Shaktipeeth of devotees. According to ancient scriptures it was called Gangadwar, Mokshadwar and Mayapuri. It is here the Holy Ganga emerges out from the mighty womb of the Himalayas, through the 'Shiva Hills' called Siwaliks, into the fertile Gangetic plains. Thus, is the most sacred places for the Hindus being the 'Doorway to Hari' or *Hari-dwar*. The whole region beyond it into the Himalayas is called the *Char Dham* or the start of pilgrimages to the 'spiritual source' of the four



sacred rivers Yamnotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath, which have spectacular locations in the snowy Himalayas. Here, Lord Vishnu is said to have left his footprint on a rock called *Hari-ki-pairi*, at the main bathing *ghat*, so that every human being can follow the 'path to salvation' after touching this rock. It is also believed that the Suryavanshi Prince Bhagiratha performed his penance here to salvage the souls of his ancestors, who perished due to the curse of Sage Kapila. In response to his penance, Lord Shiva sent Ganga gushing out, cascading through his matted hair locks, which in today's parlance, we consider was a good soil conservation measure. This bountiful holy Ganga water revived the sixty thousand sons of king Sagara. In the tradition of Bhagirath, devout Hindus stand in the sacred waters, and pray for salvation of their departed elders. It was an opportunity to at least remember them in great gratitude. We waited till the evening to attend the *aarathi* worship, considered very auspicious. We saw the pilgrims in great devotion and sincerity leaving lighted *diyas* floating down into the river by the hundreds, making the Ganga virtually glitter like the starry galaxy on a dark night.

Little away from the city is Daksha Mahadev Temple, the spot where Daksha, Sati's father had a family sacrifice, to which he refused to invite Shiva. Sati was enraged at the insult to her husband Shiva, so immolated herself in protest. Shiva in great sorrow for His beloved wife; carried her body around, performing His Cosmic Dance, threatening to destroy the world. It was then Lord Vishnu came to the rescue of the world by cutting Sati's body into several pieces with his disk, and flung them all over the country. Wherever these sacred pieces of Sati fell, has become important places of pilgrimage to devotees of Durga (Sati). After all these visits at Haridwar, we traveled through the dense forest where the elephants roamed to reach Chilla late in the evening.

Early next morning leaving Chilla, we traveled through the dense virgin forest to Kotdwar, thence via Kalaghar to Dhikala on Ramganga, the core of Corbett National Park. Enroute we saw a wide array of animals like the elephants, chital, wild boar and barking deer in plenty on the wide flats bisected by a multitude of tributaries of the Ganga, accompanied by shimmering carpets of dizzy butterflies in thousands. At evening the elephant ride at Corbett gave the trainees an opportunity of seeing a tiger for the first time. Oh! What thrill it had sent through them. After the ride, before a late dinner, we were enlightened by the DFO, my batch-mate Mr. Ashok Singh, on the park management, together with spirits for our tired limbs.

Leaving Corbett early in the morning, we drove through the park, hoping to sight the elusive tiger, via Kalaghar. We saw a lot of ungulates, and came out at Ramnagar, and drove down to Kaladungi. This place housed the famed Corbett Museum

with his personal effects, rifles, fishing gear, letters and books. Here I saluted the soul of the greatest of all wild lifers, who enlightened the readers of his books with an excitement and thrill. He ultimately settled down in Kenya at his luxurious 'Tree Top *Machan*', which I saw in recent years before retiring. It was here that he had his proudest moment in 1952, when Prince Phillips and Princess Elizabeth were his honored guests, when King George V died. He wrote of the occasion. *For the first time in the history of the world a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess, and climbed down the next day a Queen.* Corbett died in 1955 a satisfied old man amidst nature.

Leaving Kaladungi, we reached Haldwani, with a large forest complex, training school, etc. This place is renowned to forester for having the first large scale mechanized plantations of eucalyptus and poplars, which I had seen in 1963 as a probationer. It was now a fabulous sight of regimented greenery from the height of the tall watch-tower. After a thorough study and discussions on forest management with the DFO (District Forest Officer), we proceeded to see a few forest-based industries like resin, and its several by-products, before proceeding to ascend the mountain slopes to Nainital via Kathgodam, absorbing the beauty and enormity of the receding view of the plains.

Nainital is famed for the Naina Devi temple, where as per mythology the eye (in Sanskrit 'naina' means eye) of Sati, wife of Shiva, had fallen when Lord Vishnu flung the several pieces of her body in different directions near Haridwar. It was told that the emerald green lake now famous was caused by the blue-green eye of Sati.

We set off fairly early in the morning to Naina Peak (8,560 ft) studying the changing vegetation starting with the 'Himalayan subtropical pine forest' below 1,500 m (4,900 ft) elevation, which we encountered while reaching Nainital from Kathgodam. From here at Nainital up the hill we saw the transition to 'temperate broadleaves forest' to 2,600m (8500 ft) along with deodar, kail and the three species of oaks depending on aspect and altitude. As we got to the peak, we saw the 'temperate conifers' of fir, spruce with rhododendron and the 'western sub-alpine Western Himalayan alpine shrub and meadow' beyond 2,600m (above 8,500 ft) at the peak. This was a very vital exposure to the trainees on the distinct change in the vegetation and their management by the DFO, which made a good understanding of the forests beyond to the region of *Char Dham*. In the process of the climb we went past the Governor's summer residence, a relic of past British style structure. From the top of the peak, the view of the wide spreading Himalayas girdled, the abode of gods, across the horizon was a spectacular sight of the majestic chain of peaks, in pure white of the highest mountains on earth. Nanda Devi



(25,650 ft or 7816 m) considered as the ‘Goddess of Bliss’ towered above all, as the proud highest peak in Indian territory. This was flanked by a cavalcade of sister peaks, stretching to the east and west, with Trishul (23,360 ft) standing out amongst them with its cluster of three peaks, was named after ‘Shiva’s trident’.

Leaving Nainital after a small boat ride in the Naina lake, we went to the Kumaon Regimental Center at Raniket, where in the Regimental Museum we saw the country’s first ‘Param Vir Chakra’ exhibited, awarded to late Major Somnath Sharma of this regiment. Thereafter proceeded and went past Almora (1,650 m), a very old town dating back to over 500 years, famed for the sacred Nanda Devi temple. We reached Binsar (7,910 ft or 2,310 m) fairly late, and however the darkness amidst the deodar trees through which we moved were clustered with scattered fireflies, reminding of the childhood memories of the lighting of Christmas trees.

Binsar got its name from the Shiva temple Bineshwar. Binsar region is now declared a National Park being a very beautiful dense wildlife area with conifers and expansive broadleaves in the valleys, and scattered oaks among the conifers in a greater mix than other areas, with beautiful succulents blooming in scattered wide openings. The highlights of this place are the enchanting melodious music starting off the day with the birds, competing and enticing their loved ones, which makes the place a bird watchers paradise. This was a favorite haunt of late Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The sunrise seen from the heights here of the snow-clad mountains was a great mystic experience giving a brilliant distant view of Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath, besides the much closer gigantic Nanda Devi and its associated peaks, the Trisul, Nand Cot (22,650 ft), Nandaghunti (20,700 ft) and Panchuli, a conglomerate of five peaks, believed to have been used as a *chulla* (clay stove) by Bhima for cooking food for the family, while Pandavas trekked to heaven.

After feasting our eyes of the beauteous Himalayan ranges, we left Binsar through never ending stretches of moss covered stately deodar forests for Kausani via Jageshwar (1,870 m) having a huge ancient temple complex of over 100 temples, representing almost the entire pantheon of Hindu deities, some of these dating back to 7th century AD, set amidst beautiful tall deodar forests. One gets confused here as to which deity one should give importance too without annoying or courting displeasure of another. Playing safe was my sole aim, therefore I did not enter the abode of anyone of the *Mukoti devathalu* (Three crores gods), but passed through the place hoping for the best from all of them, and set foot ultimately on the holy soils at the confluence of Nandini and Surabhi. In this journey we went past a number of large and small waterfalls and cascades hidden in the mountains. Thereafter we reached back to Almora,

where we were explained the management of forests and the several soil conservation activities being undertaken. We then proceeded to Kausani via Someshwar.

At Kausani (1,890 m) the view from the ridge top was breathtaking, especially it having been a clear sunny day. It is often compared with Switzerland. The weather generally at altitudes is unpredictable. The panoramic view of the mountains filled the entire horizon from east to west, a grand 350 km kaleidoscopic landscape etched across the heaven. Looking down into the valley was the young Gomti. Here perched atop the ridge at 6,200 ft into the sky, it exuded a charm unrivalled by any other place in Kumaon hills. The view of greater Himalayan peaks is either soothing or daunting, depending on the way one viewed it. I felt that I could spend hours admiring the Nanda Devi in complete silence. It was here in this serene beauteous surrounding with its healing environs that Mahatma Gandhi spirited away his rigorous imprisonment days and wrote his ‘Anasakti Yoga’. His love for this place has been well preserved at ‘Anashakti Ashram’ by his devoted disciple Sarlaben (Katherine Heilemen). There was a magic in the bracing air of Kausani, such that it remained lingering long after the stay here.

The names of places around like Almora, Mohan, Champawat and Mukteshwar conjured my memory in this soft silent surrounds of my young days at Ooty in the Nilgiris, when I first read ‘Man Eaters of Kumaon’ prescribed as a non-detail in my middle school at Lovedale. I wondered as to how Jim Corbett traversed these places with lesser transport facilities those days, often all by himself, to get rid of the menace of ‘a tiger’ terrorizing the local inhabitants, which was as good as the needle in a haystack. No wonder he was revered and worshipped as a ‘god’ by the people of the territory.

Leaving Kausani on the way to Gwaldam (1,830 m), we passed through Baijnath, famous for its 12th century Sikhara style stone temple, with impressive carvings dedicated to Lord Shiva at the confluence of Gomti and Sarayu.

Gwaldam rest house was a glorious place. The sight from the verandah made us feel that we were right at the foot of Trishul across the Pindar river, originating from the Pindari glacier on the southern rim of Nanda Devi. The gigantic Trisul and the adjoining Nanda Cot virtually camouflaged the most majestic Nanda Devi behind them. It was a almost full moon night, and these silvery snow covered mountains kept us stupefied deep into the night, when sleep overpowered us in their grandeur. The sight is vividly etched in me even today as an aid to meditation, where I could get lost in its grandeur. Trisul at such closeness was awesome; I wondered what it would have been, had Nanda Devi been in its place.

Leaving Gwaldam a little late in the morning after having drenched and soaked ourselves in Trisul’s glorious fascination,



we moved down along the river Pindar to Karanprayag, at its confluence with Alakananda, coming down from Badrinath. At Karanprayag, we left behind the Kumoan region, and got into the Garhwal region pilgrimage route from Haridwar to Badrinath and Kedarnath.

Leaving Karanprayag we set out for Badrinath, one of the four ancient temples, which marks the spiritual source of the most sacred river of Hinduism. These four temples of the Himalayas are referred to as the *Char Dham*, and have spectacular locations, are visited by thousands of pilgrims every year during the *yatra* season. The routes to these places are well organized and connected by roads, transport, ponies, accommodation, etc. One cannot feel lost or inadequate during the season; starting from mid March to early October, unlike the less frequented route, we just traversed from Almora to Karanprayag.

We passed through Chamoli, Gopeshwar along the difficult, rugged and steep route besides the Alakananda, and halted for the night at Joshimath (1,845 m), the gateway to Badrinath. This place is perched high above the confluence of Saraswati, flowing down from far beyond Badrinath, and the Dhauliganga arising at the Milam glacier on the north western rim of Nanda Devi, to become the holy Alakananda. This *Math* was established by Shankaracharya in the 8th century, and has a very brightly painted Narsingh temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu in his lion form, besides the temples of 'Nav Durga'.

Here the DFO enlightened us on the snow erosion, and the impact of glaciers, and gave an insight to 'Valley of flowers' and the vegetation in general. He explained the highest elevations are covered by ice and bare rock, and below them, between 3,000m and 5,000m (9,800 and 16,000 ft) occurred 'Montane grassland meadows and shrub-lands' where many high altitude animals like snow leopard, Himalayan bear, ibex, etc. are seen.

Leaving Joshimath, enroute to Badrinath, we diverted at Govind Ghat to the famed 'Valley of Flowers' nestled in the valley framed by the high snowy ranges on either side, peaking at Kamet peak (7,756 m) and Mana peak (7,272 m). As we neared the valley, we experienced the beauty of the shining peaks fully covered in snow, and the beautiful view of the immediate surrounding greenery, and several streams with crystal clear water. This valley became renowned for its meadows of endemic alpine flowers, of outstanding natural beauty. The gentle landscape of this Valley of flowers complemented the rugged mountain wilderness of Nanda Devi, stretched over an expanse of 87.50 km².

We were at the valley a little before the season, in May, when the flowering had begun and was spectacular, but not yet literally the 'Paradise on Earth'. It was just getting to be carpeted with an astonishing variety of wild flowers, with splashes of color taking on various shades, as it bloomed with hundreds

of different beautiful flowers. The valley is home to many celebrated flowers like the Brahmakamal, Blue Poppy and Cobra Lily, besides others, mostly orchids, poppies, primulas, caledulas, daisies and anemones. Alpine forests of birch and rhododendron covered parts of the park area. The local graziers believed the valley was inhabited by fairies in the garb of flowers. This valley was declared a 'National Park' in 1982, and is now one of the 'World Heritage Sites', and forms a part of 'Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve'. We were told to come again in July-August, when it would be spectacularly beautiful. We were told that this area is the place where *Hanuman* (monkey) scooped out the mountain harboring *Sanjivani* to cure Lakshman (a character in an Indian epic, *Ramayana*), when he was injured by Indrajit (Meghnada, a character in an Indian epic, *Ramayana*) son of Ravana (a character in an Indian epic, *Ramayana*). I wished there was a nice temple, or a huge statue of Hanuman, carrying the mountain, to commemorate his legendary visit.

After this breathtaking feast to the eyes, while getting back to Govind Ghat, we took a detour to the high altitude lake Hem Kund at 4,329 m, where the Sikh Guru Gobind Singh is believed to have meditated. Our Sardar drivers were overwhelmed, and gave us a treat at their expense, for having got the opportunity of visiting the place for their first time. At Govind Ghat, we once again joined the convoy of vehicles to travel the remaining 44 km stretch to Badrinath, along a very narrow and steep single road, often on top gear to cross the several causeways in snow bound valleys. We reached Badrinath at 3,415 m (11,204 ft), about 300 km north of Rishikesh at late evening, and set about exploring and gathering details of the place. The weather was salubrious, we never felt tired at any point of time in the entire journey. Truly as the verse goes 'Mountain air is sweet, pleasant, cold or hot'.

The town was situated between the Nara and Narayana mountain ranges, which went of to flank the stupendous, awesome towering Nilkantha peak (6,560 m). We gathered that Bhagavata Purana (in verse 3.4.22; Indian epic) states 'There in Badrik-ashram of Vishnu, in his incarnation as the sages Nara and Narayana (a character in an Indian epic), who underwent great penance since time immemorial for the welfare of all living entities' and the Padma Purana mentioned the area around abounds in spiritual treasures, particularly with Vishnu (a character in an Indian epic) in His dual form of Nara-Narayana. The Pandavas (characters in an Indian epic) are said to have passed through Badrinath on their way to *Swarga* (heaven). There was a cave nearby in Mana, where the great scholar sage Vyasa, was said to have written the Mahabharata. However, the name of this place is of a very simple origin having been derived from *Badri* (the Sanskrit name for the Indian Jujube tree), an edible berry, which was once said to have grown



here in abundance. However another legend we were told was that goddess Ganga, when she descended to earth to help the suffering humanity, descended with great fury. The earth was unable to withstand the force of her descent. She therefore split into twelve holy channels, Alaknanda being one of them, sacred to Lord Vishnu.

According to the local legend, Shankaracharya discovered a black stone image of Lord Badrinarayan, made of *Saligram* stone in the Alakananda River. He enshrined it in a cave near the hot spring 'Tapt Kund', on river Saraswati, arising from the Manas pass, at the Tibetan border, in the 8th century. This *Saligram* stone was shifted to its present site by a Garhwal king in 16th century, and he made a temple to enshrine it. The temple underwent several major renovations because of age and damages by avalanches. In 17th century, the temple was expanded considerably by the latter kings of Garhwal. It was again badly damaged in the great 1803 Himalayan earthquake; when it was rebuilt by the King of Jaipur. This present temple is approximately 50 ft tall, having a small cupola on top, and covered with a gold plated roof. The temple has a broad stairway leading to a tall arched gateway, which is the main entrance. The architecture in general resembles a Buddhist *Vihara* (temple), and is brightly painted as in typical Buddhist temples. The walls and pillars of the *Mandapa* are covered with intricate carvings.

Early next morning I got up at 4.00 a.m. for we were told one could see the true glory of the Neelkanth Peak at that time. It was very dark all around. I went to the rear window of my room, Wow! What a spectacular sight I saw, it was awesome. Neelkanth stood out in the midst of darkness as a massive golden peak. It was all commanding and captivating. The morning rays of sunrise from some unseen distance lit it up, and I was wonder struck. It was sheer Divine; for a moment I was mesmerized at sighting the Divine. I stood at the window watching for more than forty minutes, till when the surrounding brightened; during the time it gradually turned from golden red to golden, and finally to shimmering silver, merging away with the surrounding snowy mountains. This is a sight to be experienced; it cannot be described, for as the adage goes 'Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder'.

After dawn we went down to the bathing place, where the natural steaming hot springs were canalized to join the Saraswati, to moderate its temperature for an exhilarating bath. After bath, we followed the queue entering the temple, and had a nice *darshan*. Frankly speaking, I did not get that divine feeling one should get after all that we are impressed upon. I felt the Lord had deserted the temple, and resided atop the Neelkanth I saw in the early hours of the morning. Yes, He was there spreading all His radiance.

We left after breakfast, buying myself a memento of Shri

Hanuman carrying the mountain made of brass, which I had wished was set-up at the 'Valley of Flowers'. The memento still adorns my study room, taking my mind of frequently to Bhadrinath. We visited the few places around, about which we gathered information, before getting into the convoy going down to Joshimath.

Leaving Joshimath very early, we came down to Chamoli, and had a sumptuous lunch of hot *puri* (indian dish) and *subji* (cooked vegetable) followed by hot tea. This was, for we were advised, this shorter route we proposed to take, was very isolated and rugged, though had a very rich beautiful pristine deodar and related forest, with great chances of seeing a tiger. We took this deviation for Kedarnath at Gopeshwar via Anasya Devi, through a much curving, rising and dropping gradient route, but missing the tiger, reached Ukhimath, on the Mandakini river, coming down from Kedarnath. After cooling the car engines, and refueling ourselves with hot *chay* (tea), proceeded on towards Gaurikund. Here we left our vehicles, and proceeded on the 14 km trekking to Kedarnath on foot, while porters carried our limited baggage.

The route from Gaurikund was littered with tea stalls selling snacks, so we could trek up easily and leisurely, though we kept a pony as a standby. As we approached Kedarnath, we could sight it from a distance, but actually it was far, with having to traverse a lot of ups and downs, not visible to the eyes. As a result we always felt so near, but it was yet long way off, until the last lap, when we heaved a sigh of relief. We reached Kedarnath temple, a very scenic spot, situated against the backdrop of the majestic Kedarnath peak (6,970 m) in the background, and so also our place of stay. Here we got to know that Mandakini actually originated at a place yet another 12 km up the mountain ranges of Kedarnath. However it was only on ascending this mountain slope to the temple, we could absorb the beauty and enormity of the view around. 'Kedar' is another name of Lord Shiva, the protector and the destroyer. The Kedarnath shrine is reputed as one of the *Twelve Jyotirlingas* of Lord Shiva. This temple we were told opens on *Akshaya Tritiy* (April end or 1st week of May) and closes on *Bhai Duj* (October end or 1st week of November) due to heavy snowfall, and extremely cold weather during winter.

We heard another legend about Kedarnath as being named in honor of King Kedar, who was said to have ruled in the *Satya Yuga* period. He had a daughter named Vrinda, who was a partial incarnation of goddess Lakshmi. She was said to have performed austerities for 60,000 years. The land around was named *Vrindavan* in honor of her.

This temple is however revered as the source of Mandakini, and is dedicated to Lord Shiva, and is located at the highest elevation of the *Char Dham* at 3,548 m. Here we realized that the temple was on a protruded dome shaped hillock, which was



said to be the hump of a bullock, for Lord Shiva had taken the form of a bullock at this place, in trying to hide away into the ground to escape the Pandavas on their passage to heaven. The legend behind the hiding was, since the Pandavas after having won over the Kaurava in the Kurukshetra War, felt guilty of having killed their own brothers, and so sought the blessings of Lord Shiva for redemption. However the Pandavas ultimately pleased Lord Shiva by doing penance here at Vrindavan. This reminded me of a similar hide away act by Lord Shiva at Srisailam, when Sri Rama was searching for his consort Sita Devi. Probably here also it must have been the clever advice of Sage Narada to Him, for keeping out of controversies of destiny. It was in the process of hiding, the hump was left behind. The remaining portions of Lord Shiva are seen at four other places, and are worshipped there as his manifestations. The 'arms' appeared at Tungnath, the 'face' at Rudranath, the 'belly' at Madhmaheshwar, and his 'locks (hair) with head' at Kalpeshwar. Thus Kedarnath and the four shrines are treated as *Panch Kedar*.

The temple here was built by Sankaracharya in 8th century, after having traversed the entire country starting from Kerala to Shankaracharya Hill in Kashmir, and he was ultimately buried here behind this shrine. This place gave a feeling of great humbleness at the greatness of Sankaracharya in bringing our great teachings to the common man in a nutshell. I prostrated and saluted this great mortal on earth, though considered as an immortal. Here the holy water of *Udak Kund*, written in 'Kedar Khand' of Shiv Mahapurana as being a mixture of all the five oceans. It is said this water remains fresh even when kept for many years, and is used for purification rituals. After a bath in this water of Mandakini, we had the *darshan* at the temple, once again enjoyed the superb surrounding scenery, admiring the massive Kedarnath peak frequently at its immensity, made our descent down to Gaurikund.

On reaching Gaurikund, which was fairly easy going and fast, we drove along the winding road along the river Mandakini via Ukhimath to the confluence at Rudraprayag with the turbulent Alakananda coming down from Joshimath. Here I stopped for several moments, recollecting about the *Man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag* by Jim Corbett, again read by me in childhood after being fascinated by *Man-eating tigers of Kumaon*. I recollected the towers at the gate to the suspension bridge, where Jim Corbett spent several sleepless nights waiting for the elusive leopard, moving in the terrain on either side of the bridge, and its ultimate tame ending.

From Rudraprayag we moved to Uttarkashi, 175 km away, via Garhwal Srinagar on the winding path along the precipitous Alakananda, and thence reached Devprayag, where it meets the Bhagirathi coming down from Gangotri to become the Holy

Ganga. Seeing the turbulent Bhagirathi, and the legends of its descent from Mount Kailash, roused my passion to follow it to the source. From Devprayag we proceeded up the Bhagirathi to Uttarkashi, and halted. This was the headquarters of the DFO who briefed us on the forests and their management of these areas as being replete with alpine, semi-alpine, temperate and sub-tropical vegetation, and supporting an extensive variety of wild life. He explained about glacial erosion and landslides being common. The landslides he said had caused irreversible isolation between forest patches including the alpine vegetation. We halted there for the night and visited Lord Vishwanath temple at the DFO's suggestion. This was very significant for a massive iron trident erected in it.

Leaving Uttarkashi, traveling via Dharasu a good 100 km along the Bhagirathi, to Barkot on the bank of Bhagirathi; an important junction point 220 km from Haridwar. We left after a short halt, and proceeded on to halt at Janki Chatti, about half way between Hanuman Chatti and Yamunotri. We traveled up the very difficult winding route along the Yamunotri to Hanuman Chatti, at the confluence of Hanuman Ganga and Yamuna. This is where Hanuman was said to have set his foot after leaving Sri Lanka, before starting on his search for procuring the medicinal herbs for Lakshman. There was nothing spectacular at this place for Hanumanji, to commemorate the event of his safe and important landing; probably he landed very softly, and never left his footprint. I wish he had left his footprint, for it is said that he had crushed 'Sani' or Saturn under his feet, and kept him under control. It is for this belief that we are told not to worship Hanumanji's feet, probably fearing the 'Sani' tries to escape and catch hold of the person who so worships, and puts him to the long rigor of a troublesome period. However in this part of the Himalayas greater attachment and remembrance was for Surpanaka, who shed her tears after having been severely punished by Lakshmana at Paranasala, on the bank of Godavari near Bhadrachallam, in trying to entice Sri Rama. I for a moment wondered why Surpanaka had come here for shedding her tears. Was it to start off the river Tons, her gift to the region. Probably it is a question of loyalty to her for being revered here. However there is a small, rather insignificant temple, to commemorate the place for Hanumanji landing in the area. We then proceeded on some distance till the cars could go, and then footed the 8 km to Janki Chatti for the night halt. This place had nothing to do with 'Janaki', as Sita, the consort of Lord Rama was called, who was deeply revered by Hanumanji for the blessings bestowed on him as mentioned in Tulsidas Hanuman Chalisa:

*Ast siddhi nav nidhi ke data;
As bar din Janaki mata.*

[Mother Sita bestowed on you the blessings of the 9 wealth (nine types of devotions) and 8 supernatural powers]



Early morning, leaving Janki Chatti we trekked up to Yamunotri, walking amidst high ridges, deep gorges and precipitous cliffs, rocky craggy glaciers and narrow valleys characteristic of the area. In this visit, travel starting from Mori, we saw a high variation in the elevation gradients from 1,800 to 4,500 m, which reflected the diverse biomes, from sub-tropical communities to alpine meadows, ending up at a rather plain looking temple of goddess Yamunotri. There was not much of forestry, but the scenic grandeur and the changing vegetation from chir pine at Mori to deodar, spruce and fir at these heights was of special significance to the trainees, culminating into stunted meadows at the snowy heights.

Nearing the temple, on the right bank of the river, we visited Markandeya Tirtha, where the sage Markandeya is believed to have written the *Markandeya Purana*.

The Yamuna, the second most sacred river, rushed down from the frozen glaciers ahead of the impressive Kalinda Parvat (4,430 m), on the south-western slopes of *Banderpooch* (Monkey's tail tuft, may be referring to Hanuman) peaks, in the Mussoorie range of Lower Himalayas. Yamuna is therefore named here as Kalindi, which forms the backdrop of the 'Krishna Leela', which talks about its water being of the dark blue color of Lord Krishna. Yamuna finally merges with the Ganges at 'Triveni Sangam' at Allahabad.

In Hindu mythology, according to popular legends, Yamuna is the daughter of Sun god *Surya* and his wife *Saranyu*, and sister of *Yama*, the much feared god of Death, and so is known as 'Yami'. Bathing in its sacred waters is said to free one from the torments of death, i.e. the death of the mortal body or the immortal soul. No mortal became immortal barring as said only Hamunmanji with the blessing of Rama and Sita residing in his heart.

Yamunotri literally means *twins* in Sanskrit, as it runs parallel to the Ganga. Its name is mentioned at many places in the Rig Veda, written during the Vedic Period between 1,700 to 1,100 BC, and also in the later Atharva Veda, and in the *Brahmanas* including *Aitreya Brahmana* and *Shatapatha Brahmana*.

In Rig Veda, the story of the Yamuna describes her 'excessive love' for her twin Yama, who in turn asks her to find a suitable match for herself, which she does in Lord Krishna. This tale is detailed in the 16th century Sanskrit hymn, *Yamunashtakam*, an ode by philosopher Vallabhacharya, which describes the story of Yamuna's descent to meet her beloved Krishna, to purify the world. This hymn praises her for being the source of all 'spiritual abilities', while Ganga is considered an epitome of 'asceticism and higher knowledge', and can grant *Moksha* or liberation. It is Yamuna, which being a holder of infinite love and compassion, and grants freedom from death, which is in the realm of her elder brother. Therefore the river Yamuna is connected to the religious beliefs surrounding Krishna, and

various stories connected with Him found in Hindu mythology, especially the *Puranas*, like that of 'Kaliya', a poisonous Naga snake, which had inhabited the river and terrorized the people of Braja. Incidentally in Mahabharata, Indraprastha, the capital of Pandava was also situated on the banks of Yamuna, which is today the modern city of Delhi.

At Yamunotri we were told that the place was considered as the source of the famed mythological Vedic Saraswati River in the ancient past, which was 'the cradle of early Indian civilizations'. The rivers constituting Saraswati were collectively known as *Sapta Sindhu* or seven streams. Saraswati changed its course following a tectonic upheaval in north India, and became a tributary of the Ganges. It is believed that after this upheaval, the original Saraswati river dried up, and so also the many settlements of the Indus Valley civilization ended, and resulted in the creation of the present Thar desert.

Yamunotri temple is dedicated to the goddess Yamuna, one of the holiest shrines in Hinduism, and part of the popular 'Char Dham Yatra'. At Yamunotri, worship is normally done after taking bath in the warm springs of Jamunabai Kund at the *Divya Shila*, a rock pillar near the temple, before entering the temple for *darshan* of Yamunaji. This place did not draw so much of crowds as Kedarnath and Badrinath, probably due to inaccessibility, than divinity. I was thus lucky that way. Here there were several hot thermal springs around the temple, which flow into numerous pools, the most important being *Surya Kund*. The water of this *kund* is hot enough to cook potatoes and rice in cloth bundles, which the priests dish out as a gimmick in the name of *Prasad*. People also are rather thrilled and astonished like I was and accepted the *Prasad*, having been naturally cooked. Thereafter we retreated back to our vehicle for our journey back feeling divine.

At the suggestion of the DFO, we decided to halt at Gangotri, so as to visit the actual source of the river at Gaumukh, at least for the sheer grandeur of the trek passing between lofty snow peaks, the path being often covered with snow at several points. He encouraged us stating that after all we may never again visit the area, and desired we make the one time attempt, though it would be strenuous. The trainees were all game for it, but required me to take the decision to extend our tour schedule. I was all game, further being the youngest of the lot with an eagerness for the Himalayan air. We traveled along the shrinking Bagirathi, both in size and fury, and enjoyed the most magnificent view of the Himalayas. Rounding the mighty Mahla (4,590 m) at its base we came to Harsil, and reached Gangotri FRH. The place was not very big, had a small modest temple built in the 18th century at 3,200m, and is said to be the source of river Bhagirathi. The surrounds were magnificent amidst the mountain peaks of Shivling, Satopanth and Bhagirathi sisters as believed, and the attractive temple compound had a *ghat*



leading into the river. We did not dare to bathe as some devout pilgrims do, but just dipped our feet into the freezing water, and hoped we are adequately purified for this generation.

We visited the 'Bhagirathi Shila' a rock on which Lord Shiva was said to have received the furious Ganga in his matted locks to minimize the impact of her fall, and to tame her into docility. According to Hindu mythology, goddess Ganga, the daughter of heaven, took the form of a river to absolve the sins of King Bhagirath's ancestors, following his severe penance of several centuries at Hardwar. According to this legend, King Sagar, grand father of Bhagiratha, after having slayed the demons on earth decided to stage the *Ashwamedh Yagya* to proclaim his supremacy, just as Shri Rama did at Ayodhya when the horse was detained and challenged by the young Lava-Kusha at Valmiki Ashram. The horse which was to be taken on an uninterrupted journey around the earth was accompanied by the King's 60,000 sons born to Queen Sumati. Indra, the supreme ruler of the gods feared that he might be deprived of his celestial throne if the *Yagya* (worship with fire) succeeded, so persuaded Asmanja, the only son born to Kesani, the second queen of King Sagara to take away the horse, and tie it in the ashram of Sage Kapila, who was then in deep meditation. The sons of the King Sagara searched frantically for the horse, and finally found it tied near the meditating sage. The angry sons of King Sagara stormed into the ashram of sage Kapila, who opened his eyes in rage on being disturbed in his meditation, and cursed the 60,000 sons to perish. Therefore Bhagirath meditated to bring down Ganga to cleanse the ashes of his ancestors, and liberate their souls, and grant them salvation or *Moksha*.

We attended the *aarathi* (worshiping God by firing dry woods or lightening the candle) ceremony at Gangotri, which was very impressive like the temple, on the banks of the rushing Bhagirathi, though very narrow. About 100 m above the Ganga Temple, Kedar Ganga starting from Kedar Valley met the Bhagirathi. We carried water from this confluence in our large, just then exhausted whisky bottle to be shared back at home as *thirtham* (Holy place). The river Bhagirathi becomes the Ganga from Devprayag, where it meets the Alakananda. This temple gets closed on the eve of the Diwali every year and reopens in May. During this closed time, the idol of the goddess is shifted and kept at Mukhba village, near Harsil.

We set out very early from Gangotri trekking with the forest guard (FG) leading us. It was a tiring climb, but absolute grandeur as assured by the DFO. It was an experience we did not regret. The path was flanked by high mountain ranges, which culminated at the Kedarnath peak. Each turn in the mountains left us anticipating what the mountains withholds beyond, until we hear the water rushing over rocks, sometimes as distant trickle, sometimes a heavy surge nearby. The scene of adventure provided was unique to these mountains. I had seen the

Kedarnath peak earlier, on the southern side from Kedarnath, from which arose the Gangotri glacier on the northern side. Just three of us reached Gaumukh, which as the FG said was not all that great beyond, but it was the feeling we got to see where the Ganga originated that gave a mysterious joy. We went a little further towards Tapovan, from where the FG pointed out the Kedarnath peak, which was then covered amidst clouds. We retrieved back from there, without going further ahead to Tapovan, and still ahead towards the Gangotri glacier. The guard told us there was a dense forest near Tapovan, which surrounds the Bhavishya Badri, up the Dhauliganga River, a holy spot, where an idol of Narsingha (the lion headed god) is enshrined. He stated that there was a traditional belief that a day would come when the present route to the Badrinath will be inaccessible, and the Lord Badrinath would be worshipped here, and that was the reason why the place is called 'Bhavishya Badri', which is about 17 km east of Joshimath. This area provided a majestic beauty of coniferous forests, amidst the grandeur of glacial world combined with lush green meadows.

The place around, what we trekked through was declared as the 'Gangotri National Park'. It is typical of high altitude ecosystem, with decisive influence from Trans-Himalayan biodiversity system, in both physical and biological characteristics. The landscape here is dominated by alpine scrub and meadows at higher altitudes, with forests of chirpine, ban oak, kharsu oak, deodar, spruce, fir, betula and rhododendron ranging from lower to higher elevation. The mountain sides along the entire route from Gangotri to Gaumukh were steeper, and were distinctly broken up by landslides. Here 15 species of mammals and 150 bird species have been documented, which include some of the rare and charismatic species like the snow leopard, black bear, brown bear, musk deer, blue sheep or bharal, Himalayan tahr, Himalayan monal, koklass, Himalayan snowcock, Himalayan barbets, etc.

We reached back very late evening at the Barkot FRH (Forest Rest House) for some real hot food, with emptying of another whiskey bottle to give us the warmth and relaxation, after the tiring day out in the extreme chillness.

Leaving Barkot early morning after a heavy breakfast and a packed lunch, we crossed the Yamuna for Purola, and thence forward to Mori (1,130 m) on the Tons river, the chirpine zone, and saw the Tons rapidly winding its way down to the plains. Here the FRO informed us the interesting legendary background of the Tons river as being a part of the Jaunsar-Bawar region. As mentioned earlier Tons is said to have originated from the tears of the demoness Surpanaka, sister of Ravana. He further explained the very interesting aspect of the people in this region, between the Tons and Yamuna. Here people worshipped Duryodhana, considered the villain of the Mahabharata, and the arch enemy of the Pandavas. There



was a beautifully carved wooden temple dedicated to him at a nearby village named Jakhol, to which we could not make it. He had asked us to see a temple dedicated to Karna, an ally of Duryodhana at Netwar (1,400 m) on our way to Sankri, via Osla (2,560 m). He concluded very philosophically that it was the Hindu '*dharma*' to give safe haven to the downtrodden. He also told us about the interesting prevalence of polygamy and polyandry in the matrimonial custom of the region, relating it to the Pandava legend. This practice was prevalent in Chakrata region, and so our instructor Mr. Kirpekar warned us to beware lest we get ensnared into the system, and never return back to Dehra Dun a bachelor.

We drove beyond Sankri as far as the Sardarji drivers could take us towards *Har-ki-Dun*. At the furthest point possible by the car, the forest guard of the area decided we start trekking up. He suggested that we go as far as we can towards our destination at 3,570 m. We walked up for about three hours enjoying the gorgeous, beautiful scenic surrounds of deodar, spruce and fir mixed with oaks and rhododendrons, and merging into snowy meadows with wild flowers, though not so spectacular as the Valley of Flowers, but it had its own grandeur, and was

mesmerizing. This area is now declared as 'Govind Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park'. At this stage the forest guard stated that most of the terrain thereafter would be similar, with the tree growth gradually thinning and stunting, giving way to the meadow. This was a new experience for the trainees from Kerala, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, all having been trained at SFRC. We observed and enjoyed the smell of the mountain air, the surrounding snow capped mountains, and the rivulets meeting to form the Tons. We retraced back to the vehicles for our late cold packed lunch, and got back to Barkot for the night.

Reminiscing the trip at Barkot FRH, my mind went wandering to the ridge after ridge of untouched pristine vegetation, crevices in the mountains with gushing waters, birds chirping on tree tops, and the trees themselves towering over the trails and roads, all provided a refreshing time spent in the mountains. The enormity of the mountains and the insignificance of the visitors, both in stature and time span, was a contrast that awed me. With this we hit for Mussoori, and thence to FRI (Forest Research Institute), Dehra Dun, after a very satisfying trip very late at evening, richer in our mythology.