

A VISIT TO SACH PASS

(1971)

There are some advantages of living 'near' the Himalaya. Though not in the Himalaya, or even in the foothills, being in Bombay is sometimes like being 'near' the mighty range at least for me. Many times have I combined a couple of holidays, week ends and taken the advantage of fast trains from Bombay to Pathankot in the north to climb in the Dhauladhar or the Pir Panjal ranges. Here, away from the Shiwalik range, one can be in the Himalayan mountains without much travelling by road. Heights are limited but the pleasure this area offers is comparable even to a long trip to higher mountains. Many trips followed the pattern of the trip to the Sach pass in 1971.

30 April: Reached Pathankot at 9 a.m., having started from Bombay exactly 24 hrs before. Started for Chamba (122 km) via Dunera and Banikhet. After five hours of journeying by bus, we (Zafar Vasi, Girish Lad, Sheyas Munim and I) settled comfortably in the Youth Hostel.

1 May: Off to Tissa-Bhajrung (68 km) by the 5 o'clock bus. Reached there at 11 a.m. Ponies were available at Tissa but not at Bhajrung which was 4 km ahead and about 300 m higher. We decided or at least threatened to camp near the local jail because there was an open ground near it. The police did not like the idea at all. We bargained: get us ponies and we will move on. After 'strong persuasion' by a police officer our pony-wallah Jantaram started off on the jeep track towards Trela at about 2 p.m. We reached the village Kurthala (10 km) for the night.

2 May: Reached Trela (5 km) early. Arranged two Pangri porters immediately (Rs. 10 per day, and they would get their own food along).¹ After lunch we continued on the jeep track to Alwas (5 km). From there we climbed up steeply through a very delightful forest full of birds. We occasionally came across green pastures. Camped at village Bhanundi (4 km), temporary home in a perfect setting.²

3 May: Climbing gradually we went through another wonderful forest at the end of which a view of the Sach pass and its surrounding peaks was visible. We crossed a snow bridge over a nala. After a steep climb we were above the tree-line. We plodded to Shatrundi (8 km; 3350 m) and reached there around mid-day. As the small dak bungalow was dirty and crowded, we slept in a nearby rocky shelter that was equally dirty and cold to the boot.

4 May: The snow was firm and we enjoyed our climb towards Sach pass, 5 km away. The climb was steep but with impressing surroundings. A clear day and the firm snow made it fun. We reached our destination, the Sach pass (4420 m), at 11 a.m. after 4 hours. Strangely, though this pass permitted no view of the other valley, it led to a subsidiary ridge. I climbed about 50 m on both sides to

take a better look of the Pangni and Tissa valleys. Many high and small peaks were seen, promising plenty of climbing opportunities. We sat on the pass, tired. When Zafar was asked to move for the group photo, he just refused to budge. Instead the rest of us had to arrange ourselves around him to complete the formality.

Three long glissades brought us down to Shatrundi in 55 minutes, in time for a hot meal. We packed in a hurry and rushed down to Bhanundi in high wind and snowfall. A total of 20 km were covered in one day.

5 May: Rest at Bhanundi among conifers, with the music of our own choice on the tape recorder beside us.

6 May: Down to Trella (8 km). Changed the set of porters and rushed to Tissa (23 km).

7 May: Took the 5 a.m. bus to Chamba and were on our way to Pathankot. Back to Bombay in the next 24 hours.

We were four on this trek—Zafar Vasi, Girish Lad, Shreyas Munim and I. *The cost:* Pathankot to Pathankot Rs. 125 each (8 days). *The area:* Easily approachable, no permits, willing porters and a variety of small and big peaks to climb. Bharmour and Pangni valleys could be visited by a round about trip over various passes. Kishtwar (J & K) and Manali could be reached too. Interesting for bird watchers, botanists and rock collectors. After the middle of May this particular pass may be crowded with locals crossing over to the Pangni valley.

Not a bad trip in just a week from Bombay!³

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Yes, that was the rate. Those were the days before 'inflation' took over. Moreover the 'human qualities' of these porters were also unpolluted by commerce.
2. In two decades, the road has reached Bhanundi and this once lovely walk has been ruined by rusty, dusty buses.
3. This was the beginning of many such 'A week in the Himalaya' trips. There were many possibilities for a week-long treks and of course a lot more if you can squeeze out 10 to 14 days. I enjoyed many such trips and a few are covered in my book *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*.