

# A TREK TO KALA PATHAR

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(1972)

I was little sceptical about going on a trek to the Everest Base Camp. I had read so much about, seen so many pictures that it all sounded too familiar to be exciting. Besides the place had been frequented by far too many trekkers and the interior had begun to get expensive and commercialised. Yet the charms of Everest won me over and I decided to go.<sup>1</sup>

We, the five-member team, reached Kathmandu on 11 May 1972. We had arranged to fly to Lukla (Nepali Rs. 500 for return). The first day we took off in a twin-Otter aircraft; the view was grand with majestic mountains in front of us. We could not land at Lukla that time due to cloudy weather. So we spent two idle days at Kathmandu. We landed at Lukla on the 16th, on our second attempt. On the flight, I was sitting next to an American. Seeing the air-strip from the cockpit, he exclaimed, 'Oh, Jesus'. It looked very scary. This small air-strip was built only a few years ago and had transformed the Sherpaland like nothing before. It was a very short, uneven grassy air-strip, with the plane having to stop short of some houses.

Our porters and Sherpas were arranged for immediately. Ang Norbu was our Sirdar-cum-cook (NRs. 20 per day). I casually asked him about his experience. He had been on expeditions to Makalu, Cho Oyu, Gaurishankar, about ten to fifteen times to the South Col of Everest and three to four times to the last camp. One received this sort of a reply from many in the Sherpaland.<sup>2</sup>

After lunch, we started off. Two hours of walking through Himalayan potato fields brought us to Phakding. As it had started drizzling we decided to halt there. We were put up in a warm Sherpa hut. Made out of wood planks, this hut had two parts. In the lower half, animals and some materials were stored. During harvest time, this was the main storage room. Once inside, one climbed up a tiny ladder, which led to a huge room with a warm fire. It was customary for trekkers or village folk to halt at any of these houses. The host was normally paid a little money for the fire wood and food. That luxurious warmth of the Sherpa huts could be often enjoyed.<sup>3</sup>

That night as we sat around fire with our host, we heard about a tragedy on peak Manaslu. Our host was the mail runner and therefore the carrier of the sad news. The whole community, he said, was badly shaken by it.

We started early next day for Namche Bazaar. We went along the river Dudh Kosi all the time. Its waters were not clear, but thick with sand and mud and hence the name Dudh Kosi (milky river). As we climbed a steep and zigzag slope we met a German party all of whom were over 50 years of age, returning from a tough trek. I talked to some of them and was amazed at their energy and initiative. Maps were handy and we talked about the region for a long time.

A little ahead, we came to a resting point and suddenly there was the Everest range right in front of us. This was the 'Everest Point', about 300 m below Namche. Its small platform can take about 20 people. It was the first view of the peaks for us. On our return we had our last view from here. From now on we were always in the presence of Everest.

We reached Namche, about an hour's walk away. Namche Bazaar was a comparatively big village situated in a bowl-like valley. One could enter it from any direction and view the whole village, spot every single house. Here, too, we stayed in a Sherpa house. This was the commercial headquarters of the district. Prices were about three times more than that at Kathmandu and naturally the tourists were always the target.

A small climb on the right side of Namche gave a view of Everest and then as we went along the well-trodden path towards Thyangboche, we saw the magnificent massif of Ama Dablam, whose peak was constantly visible throughout our trek. In fact we saw it from almost all angles as the days went by. Our path was well cut all along the mountain slopes. Dudh Kosi now flowed far below us but was always parallel to our track. We gradually left the forests behind and entered the region of the *bhojpatra* (birch trees) and rhododendrons. Away on a hill top one could see Thyangboche monastery. It disappeared from view when we descended to cross the Dudh Kosi; the climb was steep towards the end, but the surrounding jungle was heart-warming, with its flowers and green leaves. The weather was at its best, the mountain air had increased our appetite, so every half an hour we would munch on a little snack from our tiffin. From the silver *bhojpatra* forest emerged the silver monastery of Thyangboche.<sup>4</sup>

Thyangboche monastery was the sister monastery of the one at Rongbuk in Tibet. After the Chinese invasion the monks fled and built this one at Thyangboche, about 32 years ago. Incredible! how such workmanship could be done at 3660 m almost two weeks away from the nearest roadhead.

We were fortunate enough to meet the Head Lama of the monastery. He was one of the most learned lamas. His brother (himself a lama) was well versed in English and had studied at a leading University in England. Nearby was a little hut, built for the trekkers, by the Indian Everest expedition team.

Next day we proceeded towards Phalung Karpo via Pheriche. We descended from Thyangboche to the most beautiful part of the trek. Nature was generous here with its bounty of flowers and trees. But the treat did not last for very long and we soon entered an area of rocks and sand. Then onwards we saw nothing but grey and white stones all around us. Dudh Kosi was of course by our side, and so was Ama Dablam.

Altitude sickness now began to make itself evident, and our speed was reduced. Pheriche was not very far away. It was deserted. We could spot Phalung Karpo in the distance. We reached Phalung Karpo the same evening. We decided to take rest the following day, for acclimatisation. The three ladies—my wife Geeta, Peena Shroff and Thrity Birdy were all coughing. In the morning some of us went to the nearby Chhola lake and others climbed up to get a better view of Makalu which the clouds did not permit.

A little ahead from Phalung Karpo the route climbed up and turned towards Khumbu. We rested at a small point called Dukla. Seven silent pillars stood there in the memory of those Sherpas who had lost their lives in the Japanese Everest expedition of 1970.

At the time the trek was not pleasant at all. We were dragging ourselves; everyone was complaining of some minor ailment or the other. The sight of Pumori made us forget all our discomforts. What a beautiful peak! Ama Dablam was left far behind in our memory, and now this 'daughter of the Himalaya' took its place in our hearts.

We reached Lobuje; here another surprise awaited us: we met three famous British members of the International Everest team on their return journey. They were: Don Whillans, Doug Scott and Hamish MacInns. The weather was bad and we invited them inside for some coffee and snacks. We were excited to talk to them and the topics varied from the Alps to the south face of Annapurna and the southwest face of Everest.<sup>5</sup>

Next day we accompanied the Khumbu glacier from Lobuje to Ghorakshep. We were at least 4 km away from it, even then we could sense the fierce opening of crevasses in the icefall. Chilly winds greeted us at Ghorakshep. The white dome of Everest's west shoulder was shining in the night, Nuptse towered over us, throwing

roaring avalanches down every now and then in a display of its power. We all waited for dawn, to see for ourselves the great majesty of Everest.

The climb to Kala Pathar (black rock) was steep. In about three hours we reached right in front of Pumori at Kala Pathar. We turned around and the Nuptse wall seemed to have moved aside to let us view Everest. Most of the party were tired and returned after the view. I climbed little ahead with Thrity Birdy and we sat struck dumb by the vista.<sup>6</sup> We were reluctant to move, the sight impressed us so much. Eventually, we had to bid farewell to it.

We started back from Ghorakshep to Lobuje. We diverted a little, and instead of getting down to Phalung Karpo we went straight ahead from Dukla, in the direction of Dingboche, a peaceful but deserted village. This vacant village was something new to us, but very common in mountain villages. Villagers move according to the season with all their livestock and belongings and the routine goes on year after year. Things stood still in this particular village. Green potato fields and stone houses were spread all over, but there was not a single soul in the village; not even a stray dog.

A day of relaxation at Thyangboche and we were on our way again. On the way back we made another diversion towards Khumjung and Kunde villages. We also visited the new Japanese Five Star Hotel—a fantastic project. Back at Namche, we were in time for the Saturday bazaar.

Next day we walked leisurely to Thami. Many of my Sherpa friends from Darjeeling originally came from this village and I was glad to meet some of their families. The Head Lama of Thami monastery was a six year old; it was amusing to see all the learned and elderly lamas bowing down to this *avtari* lama.<sup>7</sup>

Back at Namche, we were in time to join the celebrations for the return of the Sherpas from the Everest expedition. Local wine flowed freely with *momoes* and dancing. The safe return was considered to be a new beginning in their lives and that was reason enough to carry on drinking from morning till night.

We walked back to Lukla, to another Sherpa house. Our small five-seater Cessna plane arrived and it was time to bid good-bye to the mountains. The valleys below were full of clouds and the ranges rose in the distance. I reflected and considered myself fortunate to have come here and enjoyed myself so much, so thoroughly. I had made friends, with Sherpas and mountaineers; that friendship has lasted a lifetime.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

1. This was the case in 1972. If one considers the present scene, with lodges, a thousand trekkers per day and all the development, the situation then could be called primitive.
2. These Sherpas were simple folks then. Ang Norbu wore a watch that did not function. He wore it all the time. In a way time had not much meaning for him but the growing status that it provided was essential.
3. That was the beginning of the lodges being built in this area. The old custom prevailed for many years till, due to influx of more tourists, lodges were built and not all the above services were provided commercially, at fixed rates and with more choices.
4. The monastery was the most famous landmark in the area. It was gutted in a fire in the early 1990s, but was rebuilt by donations.
5. These mountaineers had left the controversial international expedition to Everest and were returning home. We had a common friend, now unfortunately dead, Ian Clough, a British mountaineer who had stayed with us in Bombay in 1970. I had climbed with him in the local hills, learned a lot from him and we had planned

joint trips for the future. He left for the famous Annapurna South Face expedition and was killed on the trip in a serac fall.

I met Doug Scott few times after this chance visit. Last meeting was in 1998 and I was impressed to see him fit as always and as if the years had not affected him at all since our meeting in the Khumbu.

6. Thrity Birdy was tough lady mountaineer from Bombay. She participated in several major expeditions, and climbed Kamet and Abi Gamin with the joint Japanese expedition. She could have been amongst the best lady mountaineers, but unfortunately she died in 1979. This is the only trip we undertook together in the Himalaya.

7. I returned to Thami after six years. I was happy to meet the Head Lama again. In six years he had grown, naturally, but the respect and knowledge he commanded was very different. From a young playful child he was a mature lama, blessing all expertly and conducting services with authority. It was a unique transformation.