
A TALE OF TWO VALLEYS

The Valley of Friends and The Valley of Flowers

HARISH KAPADIA

THE VALLEY OF FRIENDS

A Trek in the Saryu valley, Kumaon

SOME ASSOCIATIONS IN life are lasting. For almost three decades now I have been trekking and climbing with the support of people of a particular valley in the Kumaon, the Saryu valley. They have cheerfully accompanied me to most of the places where I have been in the Himalaya. Carrying loads, cooking and climbing peaks with me, they have served me well. They are travellers like me. They join me not for money but for the fun of it. As Lawrence of Arabia says about his companions: 'Most of them will fight for money, but the best of them will fight for Lawrence.' I can say the same about my friends from the Saryu valley.

A lot has been written about Sherpas and high altitude climbing-porters. I would like to pay a tribute to these simple folks, who have not achieved much in terms of peaks and records but have certainly the capacity to take on the best of them. Many peaks would not have been climbed easily without their support. They are as good tigers as any holder of the Tiger Badge.

In 1962 as a young student I was on my first visit to the Himalaya. Like many my choice was to go to Pindari glacier, a formidable trek in those days. Upon advice from seniors we packed our kitchen utensils in a tea-chest, so that they did not bend. The rest was packed in kitbags. We reached Bageshwar

and Bharadi from where a muleteer was hired to carry our luggage on two mules. Everything went all right on the first day. As we climbed to the Dhakuri pass, the utensils, being loosely packed in the tea-chest, were banging against each other. Suddenly one of the mules decided enough was enough and promptly upturned the tea-chest, littering kitchen-ware all around. At the same time, quite by accident, a light-eyed porter approached us from the other side. He helped our muleteer to gather the utensils.

'I will hire this person to carry the utensils, at my expense, instead of the mule', we were told by our muleteer. This person, by evening, had taken a firm control over the situation and us. He acted as a friend, philosopher and guide to us, the youngsters. He was Pansinh Malgunjar of Chaura village. Ever since this accidental meeting, people from this and nearby villages of the Saryu valley have accompanied me where ever I went.

Pansinh was a muleteer. He loved to sing. He accompanied us to Rupkund, Milam and all the treks that I undertook till 1968. Then in 1969 we organised our first climbing expedition to Tharkot peak in the same area. Pansinh with Laxmansinh was leader of our porter team. Close to the summit we were swept down by an avalanche and Zerksis Boga almost died¹. We spent an uncomfortable night at the last high camp. The sight I most cherish is Pansinh and Laxmansinh climbing steadily up to the tent the next morning. Once we were in their hands I collapsed. Slowly but surely they brought us down. That night as we slept around a large fire without sleeping bags Pansinh was singing a Kumaoni song which, loosely translated meant: 'As a bull is tied to a rope in centre goes round and round, a man is tied by his desires and he keeps going round and round in this world.'

After a decade of trekking, Pansinh was getting old and now could not accompany us. He promised to bring us his relatives when we halted briefly at the Bageshwar bus stand on our way to the Kalabaland glacier in 1979. I was surrounded by porters wishing to be employed our trip. Some produced certificates and citations from previous expeditions. I was about to employ some

¹ See *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XIX, p. 123, for story of the Tharkot expedition. Also see the book *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys* (Harish Kapadia), p. 141.

of them when I saw Pansinh in the distance waving at me and asking me not to employ them. I postponed the decision. We sat down sipping tea.

‘These so called experienced chaps are all cheats. I know them too well. I have brought my uncle’s sons and their friends to join you. Take them with you, they will be most useful.’ He pointed out to four young boys standing shyly in the distance. I took an immediate liking to them and they were promptly employed. This was the beginning of another generation of associations.

One of them was Shersinh, of Khaljuni village which is a little further up the Saryu valley. He was quiet and never complained at all. In fact whenever we asked him anything his standard reply was, ‘as you say.’ Once in the Darma valley we double marched, almost 30 km per day, for four days. Shersinh, was the only porter with us carrying heavy loads but he never complained. On the third day he lagged behind. It was then that Muslim Contractor noted that Shersinh had hurt his back which was badly bruised. We immediately took sometime off. Shersinh accompanied us for 8 years. But then the search for greener pastures brought him to Vapi, an industrial complex little to the north of Bombay. Once here his attitude changed. Of course we did not expect him to come to the Himalaya but his greed for more and disappearance of that Himalayan village contentment was evident. Perhaps this is what civilisation does to us !

By early 1980s we had a large circle of climbing friend in Bombay whose children had grown up. Hence decided to organise a sort of camp in the Himalaya where all of us could enjoy ourselves and some could climb. The group consisted of almost 25 persons, aged 6 to 66 years - membership restricted ! A contingent of porters from the Saryu valley met us at Delhi and accompanied us. In that group was Harsinh Mangalsinh (Sr.) and Harsinh Balaksinh (Jr.). Harsinh Sr. was put in charge of the kitchen, the most formidable task on this venture. A breakfast for 25 ! He would start dishing out hot parathas at 7 a.m. and would continue till noon. By then it was time for lunch ! But without a murmur Harsinh (Sr.) continued tirelessly. Ever since he has been our chief cook, having served with distinction the likes of Sir Chris Bonington.

I have never known anyone like Harsinh Sr., someone almost devoid of material desires. You just cannot offer him anything that seems to tempt him. On international expeditions gift of the best Goretex jacket means nothing and he refuses anything that's useless to him. After an expedition many times I have offered him all the left over food like packed dal and expensive dehydrated foods. He would always refuse stating that they 'smell' in comparison with the fresh potatoes they eat and that no one likes them. The commercial value of the object offered never attracts him.



Harsinh Sr., my faithful companion
(Harish Kapadia)

Once in Manali after a long trip we walked together in streets. There were fresh sweets being prepared at a stall. I suggested we celebrate by feasting on them. He looked at the watch, past noon, looked at the others and firmly passed the verdict, 'It is lunch time. We will have simple rice and dal only.' Typical of this man. He is unmarried and with a simple life-style he has almost conquered temptation.

The junior Harsinh is another of my favourites. He is a shepherd and spends almost three-fourths of the year with his herd on high mountains. As a result he is the strongest of them all and carries the heaviest loads. It is a treat to see him jumping across rivers with a full load and scrambling up slopes like a goat. If there is a difficult section and I stop and look around for a track, and sure enough there will be a whistle and Harsinh Jr. pointing out the route from a distance. Whenever there was any difficulty this shepherd's whistle was around. He has three brothers. All have now been educated and have obtained government jobs. With everyone in the family out of the village the entire

responsibility of the family, herd and fields is on him, a burden he carries philosophically. He quoted a Kumaoni saying:

*Pahad ka pani aur Pahad ki Jawani
Kabhi Pahad ke kam nahin aati.*

'The water and the youth of the mountains are never useful to the mountains'. (Water, because it flows down in the valley and the youth, because young go out to cities to earn, are not useful to the mountains)

These hardy supporters have seen us through many different terrains. With prior arrangements we meet at Delhi railway station for each trip and travel further to our destinations. They have seen Spiti, Ladakh and almost the whole of Himachal Pradesh with us. Going to Ladakh we had to fly by aeroplane. We were wondering how much excitement that would produce in these porters travelling for the first time by air. As we reached Leh a relaxed Harsinh Sr. summed up the feelings, 'Good show, we reached in an hour instead of three days.' A very functional reaction, typical of this man.

In 1985 I organised an Indo-British expedition to the formidable Siachen glacier. We had three Kumaonis with us. From Ladakh we employed 15 Ladakhi porters, known for their temper and reluctance to work. Three days after we entered the Terong valley, Ladakhi porters came screaming out. Stephen Venables walking behind them quietly in a green outfit had frightened them. They thought he was a Pakistani spy ! This was as good an excuse as any to desert us. Thus we were left with the entire expedition luggage a little short of our base camp and with only three Kumaonis. We started to ferry loads. Harsinhs Sr. and Jr. accompanied by Paratapsinh would do a double ferry in a day. Between the three of them they carried the entire international expedition luggage on the Terong glacier. Pratapsinh was toughest of them all. Handsome and fair he was reputed to eat meat of an entire sheep alone in one sitting. He was temperamental, unlike the others and required special handling.

On our return the Terong river was in flood. There was no way we could cross to the left bank. After an intricate rope fixing the entire team came out climbing dangerously up and then

rappelling down expertly. But the final crossing of the river remained. Our liaison officer had thrown an aluminium ladder across the torrent and as each person crossed, the ladder bent in the centre. It almost drowned Dave Wilkinson. As I came near the crossing I saw the incident. Pratapsinh was already on the other side, while Harsinh Jr. was about to cross. I shouted to him to stop and come back. In the confusion and may be owing to his nervousness he did not listen and with great difficulty went across. I was furious with anger. Hungry for the entire day and trapped on the other side, as I reached the other side after crossing the glacier from above with heavy loads I was raging mad. I vented my anger on poor Harsinh Jr. Pratapsinh joined in the act and ordered a mutiny. He asked all three of them not to carry and walked away. Harsinh Sr. came forward and lifted his load but Harsinh Jr. walked away with tears. We finally managed to reach the army base camp at the Siachen glacier with great difficulty.

With my ego hurt and my anger at its peak I was harsh with the two deserters. They were taken to task and even the army gave them a dressing down. Pratapsinh never came with us again and Harsinh Jr. took two years to forget the incident. This was our first difference and I had failed to understand the simple fears of simple people, something I always regretted.

One shortcoming these people have is that they cannot tolerate altitude too well. Once on snow and above 5500 m (18,000 ft) they start melting. Even with a good deal of equipment and good tents they simply cannot tolerate the heights. Once an entire contingent of 10 of them was snow-blind on Pin Parvati pass. They did not appreciate the value of wearing dark glasses. Hence for some climbing trips these Kumaonis looked after the kitchen and valley portering while for the high altitudes we called for climbers from Manali.

Our relationship with the Kumaonis also acts like an insurance. These villagers work more for the fun of it. Of course they are paid all the expenses and normal wages, but more than that, during times of emergency they know that there are friends in Bombay who would respond. In any serious medical emergency, severe financial crisis or whenever they need us we support them. Thus it works out well for both of us. The area they come from

is called 'Danpur' (the area of generosity). The name is derived from the fact that earlier whenever any traveller from Tibet was stranded in these valleys he was looked after by people of these villages without any charges till the passes open once again and he could go back. They are known to be some of the finest load-carriers amongst Himalayan porters and even Shipton and Tilman during their explorations of the Garhwal and Kumaon used porters from this area.

1995 was a special year for our association. During the year we climbed in Rupshu, near Tso Moriri lake in Ladakh. Both Harsinhs were flying out to Leh with us. This year, as we climbed higher both of them seem to be taking the altitude better. Finally we roped up to climb Lungser Kangri (6666 m). On the final slopes Kaivan Mistry led across a deep crevasse. Harsinh Sr. following him suddenly disappeared from view. Holding him on a belay I shouted.

'I have fallen', came a calm reply with a straight face. Soon he was up and about and with both these charming people we were standing on the second highest peak of Ladakh².

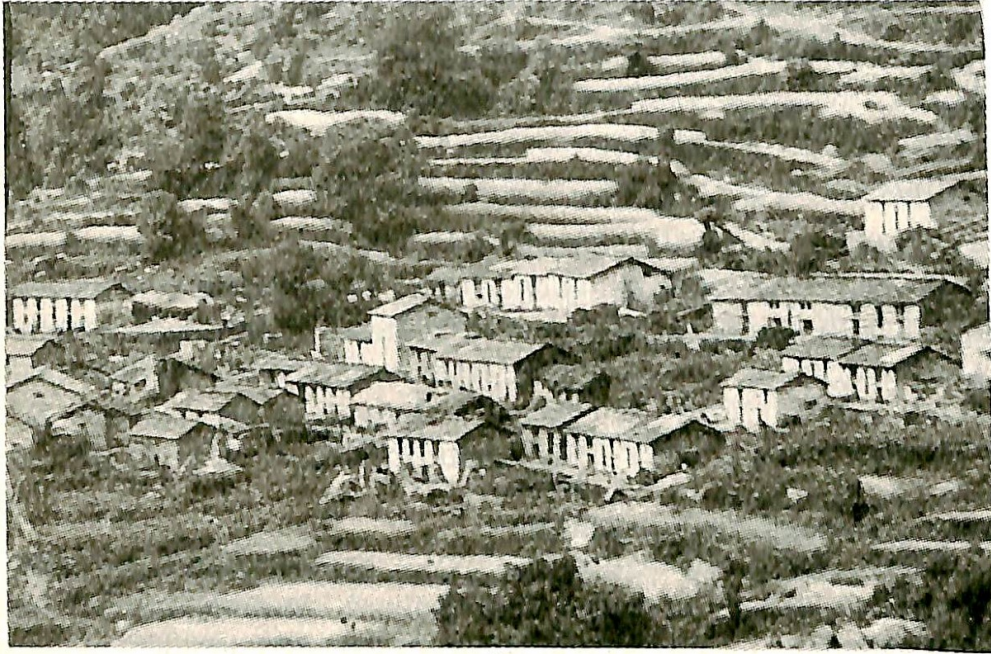
The Harsinhs had invited us to visit their village many times. This became possible after many years. What better occasion than to celebrate their climb, I thought. So 1995 saw us approaching their village.

Each mountaineer has many friends who, though not mountaineers themselves, are very supportive and interested in what their mountaineer-friend was doing. Sarita and Vinnie Chaudhury in Delhi have been supporting our expeditions for many years. Large teams have been feted in their home and many dirty mountaineers have taken their first shower after many months in the mountains in their bathrooms. Vinnie has a heart as large as his stomach and Sarita has spiritual interests. So for a visit to home of the Kumaonis what better group than to mixed bag of all friends together.

We reached Bageshwar from Delhi and finally arrived at Song, the last roadhead where Harsinh Sr. was waiting for us. That night

² See *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 52, p. 86

we spent at Loharkhet which is on the popular Pindari glacier trail. The route to their village, Harkot bifurcates from here and climbs steeply. Halfway through Diwansinh, who was accompanying us gave a whistle and shouted.



Harkot village, Kumaon

(Harish Kapdia)

'A signal to them to prepare tea and start warming the sweets as our party is arriving'.

The village postman passed us, smiling. 'I deliver your letters to them you know. I read them if they are in English.' He told me proudly.

Soon we were there. The entire village had gathered there and they had made for us to stay arrangements in the village school. There was tea, followed by *halva* to eat, and sweet curds. The entire school was around and the children sang a welcome song.

By evening I saw a fit figure approaching the school. Swinging his arms in the air and smiling it was Harsinh Jr. He had been up in the hills with goats and had walked almost 45 kilometres to meet us ! We went to his house and were introduced to the family. He rolled out another round of tea and food which at first I refused.

'This is Harsinh's *swagat* (welcome), you cannot refuse.'

It went on like this in most of the houses and by the end of the day we were bloated.

The next day the school teacher visited us. The children had a special holiday declared as we were staying in their school. The school teacher showed me an insignia from the Second World War.

'This is the badge of the Indian National Army. My father Ramsinh was serving with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in Burma.' He was referring to the Indian National army which fought the British. Bose was their charismatic leader.

'Netaji Bose stayed in this valley for six months, hiding from the British', he proudly told me.

We were to hear of this story at almost every village in this valley. They showed us the place, Bhenkali, where Bose had stayed. As per the legend, Netaji appeared in the middle of the night and his two companions, Krishna Kant and Radha Kant supplied milk and food to him. They were the only ones allowed to meet him. Finally one night he went out of the valley and said he would not return.³

After a day we started on a trek going up the Saryu valley. Passing Supi village, the largest in the valley, we reached Khaljuni. This was the village of Shersinh and Pratapsinh. Both were out and we could only meet their families. In the evening came a well-dressed person whom I could not recognise at first. He was Jagatsinh, who had accompanied me for three trips. Armed with some education and luck, he had joined the government service as a *patwari*, a revenue official. He had always been totally squint-eyed and on an expedition he was called 'looking London, going Tokyo', for when he looked to his right he was talking to someone on his left ! Jagat always laughed at this.

The next day we approached Juni village. From the fields a worker shouted to us. It was Charu Ram who had joined us on a trip to Kinnaur in 1986. He was an artisan, an expert weaver

³ I checked about this story with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's son. He wrote to say that he is tired of such claims about Bose originating from many places. For the record Bose never went to this part of the Himalaya and he did not visit

and potter. We saw his work and met the family. Anywhere else his work would have commanded a good price but here, a four - day walk away from civilisation he had meagre resources. Now we left the village track and entered a forest on our way to the upper Saryu valley. We camped amidst forest at Dholibita (*huge rock*) Rauli (*small nala*). An ancient temple of Sahastradhara (*thousand streams*) was situated here. An open ground, about 800 m above the falls is called Rikheshwar. It is believed that during the Vedic ages Indian sage Vyas Rishi stayed here. A huge stone there marks the site of his meditation. Everyone was in high spirits and as Harsinh and company dished out several great dishes, the happiness was tangible. Sarita busied herself in painting and observing the surroundings, Vinnie was fond of taking baths and meditating. There were camp fires and chats which enlivened the group. The villagers were great company. I was learning that there was more to the Himalaya than simply trekking and climbing !

Returning to Juni village we separated to climb steeply to Bhenkali (*a tank for buffaloes*) where Netaji Bose had supposedly stayed. A steady but steep climb continued the next day till we were on the top of the ridge. This was Ratamati (*red sand*) camping ground. This ridge was called the Pankhwa dhar. On both sides of the ridge rhododendrons line the slopes. A wide vista now opened before us, from Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot to Tharkot. In front of us was a *kutiya*, a small house built by Swami Purnanand who had stayed here meditating for almost 7 years. After he left, this place had been used by other holy persons regularly. It had a divine view for sure.

On the last morning on the Pankhwa dhar the sun rose in the clear sky. Far in the distance was Panch Chuli. It was here, in 1992, that we had been climbing with the British. On Panch Chuli V, Stephen Venables sustained a fall and was stranded high on the mountains. He needed food and supplies till a helicopter could pick him up. Steve Sustad, one of the finest alpinists in the world persuaded Harsinh Jr. to accompany him on steep ice, with a

Kumaon. That was end of the matter. But I never had the heart to break this news to these simple village folks. Why destroy the simple faith of these simple villagers in their simple story.

heavy load. Harsinh Jr. was fitted with large size climbing boots which were stuffed with paper in the front to fit his tiny foot. Harsinh Jr. rose to the occasion and climbed brilliantly to help the stranded climber.⁴ The British were impressed.

'We will sponsor him to undertake a mountain training course at any of the mountain training institutes in India.' the British offered Harsinh Jr.

'That will be a little odd. These courses are undertaken by army officers and others. A villager will be a misfit.' I replied.

'In that case we will sponsor him to do a course in England at some leading institute. He can be turned into a fine mountaineer with some training. Ask him if he will take a free trip to England for two months?'

After I translated, Harsinh Jr. replied quietly, 'At present I simply want to return to my village and goats. They have been unattended for a long time. Just let me go.' It was difficult to tempt these simple friends away from their happy way of life.

Finally we came down and our 9 day trip was over. It had strengthened memories and enhanced our long association. It was a celebration of our friendship with the people of this valley.

THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS

A Trek to the Bhiundhar valley, Garhwal

To the southeast of the shrine of Badrinath, in the Garhwal, there is a small village Bhiundhar⁵. Frank Smythe and his team, which included Eric Shipton and R.L. Holdsworth, had climbed Kamet (7756 m) in 1931. Like true explorers they decided to return by a high pass instead of the usual trade route. They crossed Bhiundhar pass (5150 m) and descended into the northern Bhiundhar valley. This valley, like many valleys of Garhwal was in full bloom. With its wide meadows and lovely layout it must have appeared as a paradise to them after their hard work on the barren slopes of Kamet.

⁴ See *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 49, p. 71 for the full story. This event appears in several books and articles on the Panch Chuli Indian British expedition 1992.

⁵ Smythe called this village and the pass and the valley as 'Bhyundar'. On the recent maps it is changed to the correct Indian spelling, 'Bhiundhar'.

To us the Bhyundar Valley will always remain the Valley of Flowers. It is a place of escape for those wearied of modern civilisation..... True, it would be necessary to descend in winter to warmer and less snowy levels, but for half a year the lover of beauty and solitude could find peace in the Valley of Flowers. He would discover joy and laughter in the meadows ; the stars would be his nightly canopy; he would watch the slow passing of the clouds; he would share the sunset and dawn with God.

Beyond the hills, nations might fly at one another's throats; Mussolinis rise and fall ; anarchy and revolution rot the nations ; but in the Valley of Flowers the only strife would be that of the elements, the only sounds the wind in the flowers, the voice of the stream, and the rumble of the avalanches.

Peace and contentment were ours as we sat around the camp fire. Felt rather than seen were the peaks about us. A million stars eyed us. The voice of the mountain torrent lulled us to sleep.⁶

Smythe wrote eloquently about his time in this valley in two books, *Kamet Conquered* and *The Valley of Flowers*. Thus a legend was born and this sleepy obscure valley today holds a special place in Himalayan folklore. Most pilgrims visiting the shrine at Badrinath detour to visit this valley, which has now been declared a 'National Park'.

In 1996 we travelled by road from Haridwar to Joshimath (276 km) and Govindghat (18 km). September first saw two of us trudging our way up from Govindghat (1800 m) to Ghagria (3080 m - 13 km). There were many pilgrims and tea-stalls. But they made colourful company under grey skies which were to accompany us throughout this trip. Bhiundhar village is halfway up on this route. Originally this village was near a huge cave, hence it was named *Bhui-* cave, *dhar-* place. Despite the heavy rush of visitors little seems to have changed for these villagers. But the state

⁶ *Kamet Conquered*, Frank Smythe, p. 252-253.

of the route and staying places certainly needed much looking after. Tetrapacks, aluminum foils, bottles, plastic and other garbage littered the path. The route to the well-known place of pilgrimage of the Sikhs, Hem Kund, lay along this trail and it bore heavy traffic.

Hindus had been visiting a lovely lake, at 4150 m, called Lokpal for centuries. It was believed to be the place where Laxman (the younger brother of Ram, in the epic *Ramayana*) had meditated. His other name is Lokpal, 'protector of the masses.' In the holy script of the Sikhs, *Dasham Granth*, Guru Govind Singh mentioned a lake with seven peaks surrounding it as a place where he had meditated in his past life. Scholar Bhai Bir Singh of Amritsar decided to search for such a place. In 1932, he visited Badrinath. He observed many Hindu pilgrims climbing up the Bhiundhar valley to Lokpal. He returned in 1936 to make further inquiries and reached this lake, which is at the foot of seven peaks, marked on the map as Saptashringi. He declared this to be the lake where Guru Govind Singh had obtained Nirvana in his past life and decided to build a Gurudwara here. Havildar Sohan Singh, who was deputed to this task in 1939, built a small place next to the ancient Laxman temple and this was expanded in 1974 and wide footpath built leading to it. Today it bears heavy traffic and is christened 'Hem Kund' (lake of solace) after the mention in the Sikh scriptures. It is an important place of worship for the Sikhs. It is 6 km and almost 1000 m above Ghagria.

The Valley of Flowers is about 8 km from Ghagria. As one enters the valley a vast meadow unfolds before you. With the backdrop of Rataban and other snow peaks it makes an enchanting site. Flowers bloom here from August to October and the flora, a wide variety of which has been catalogued by Smythe in his books, changes every few days.

As we walked on the pilgrim trail, we met an old man. In fact having read about him, we were looking out for the old historian of this area. He was Nanda Singh Chauhan of Bhiundhar village. Aged 82 today, he walks up to Ghagria everyday to chat with his friends. He narrated stories, telling us of his involvement in the history of this valley and his associations with legendary visitors.

After his first brief visit in 1931, Smythe returned here in 1937, with Holdsworth, and stayed four months. Each week specimens were collected and sent to Joshimath for onward transmission to Edinburgh. A hot-house was created in the Botanical Garden of Edinburgh and these flowers and seeds were nurtured there. Nanda Singh and other villagers carried these specimens to the post office. He vividly remembers 'Dr Smythe' as a pucca British Sahib and talked fondly about his association with him.

'The Sahibs had a very comfortable and huge camp for months. Supplies used to arrive from Ranikhet regularly and everything was well organised.



Nanda Singh Chauhan of Bhuintdhar village. He was a guide with Frank Smythe and Margaret Legge

(Harish Kapadia)

Not surprising, I thought, for Smythe was known for his taste for the good life.

Most mountaineers have, I think, and affection for 'ruggedness'- for toughness at all times; a pride in indifference to discomfort and in a capacity to endure in all conditions. Frank (Smythe) would have none of this. In face of tradition, and sometimes of ridicule, he preached his faith in 'be comfortable while you can, then stick it when you must.' So at the beginning of an expedition we would behold an apparently unmuscular, soft and almost pauchy Capuan, appreciative of the lush hospitality of the Planter's Club at Darjeeling and blandly unconscious of such a thing as training.

But we saw a different Frank Smythe once we were at the base camp.⁷

But of course Smythe dismissed any suggestions of too much comfort in this valley.

To my mind, the acme of mental and spiritual discomfort would be to live in some super-luxury hotel in the Valley of Flowers. Happiness is best achieved by adapting ourselves to the standards of our environment.

In Garhwal, I met true civilisation, for I found contentment and happiness. I saw life that is not enslaved by the time-factor, that is not obsessed by the idea that happiness is dependent on money and materials. I had never before realised until I camped in the Valley of Flowers how much happiness there is in simple living and simple things.⁸

There was talk of building a helipad and a hut in the valley when a former Prime Minister of India had decided to visit. Luckily wiser counsel prevailed, simply because the P.M. could not find time to visit !

The Valley of Flowers had another claim to fame as well. Smythe in 1937 had 'discovered' foot prints of a Yeti.

But when I came up to the tracks I saw the imprint of a huge naked foot, apparently of a biped, and in stride closely resembling our own tracks. What was it ? I was very interested, and at once proceeded to take some photographs. I was engaged in this work when the porters joined me. It was at once evident when they saw the tracks that they were frightened. Wangdi was first to speak.

"Bad Manshi!" he said, and then "Mirka !" And in case I still did not understand, "Kang Admi (Snowman)".

7 Hugh Rutledge writing obituary on Frank Smythe in the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XV, p. 102.

8 *The Valley of Flowers*, by Frank Smythe, p.90.

They were unanimous that the Snowman walked with his toes behind him and the impressions at the heel were in reality the front toes.

In order to descend the face, the beast had made a series of intricate traverses and had zig-zagged down a series of ridges and gullies. An expert mountaineer could not have made a better route and to accomplish it without an ice-axe would have been both difficult and dangerous, whilst the unroped descent of a crevassed snow-covered glacier must be accounted as unjustifiable. Obviously the "Snowman" was well qualified for membership of the Himalayan Club.⁹

He took prints, made affidavits and prepared to shoot the beast upon his return. But the report from England declared it to be the foot prints of a bear. Thank God for that. The Himalayan Club would have had a most unusual member on its rolls.

Tragedy befell a member of the Himalayan Club here in 1991. Firdaus Talyerkhan was a reputed lawyer and a charming person from Bombay. While trekking with friends he intended to descend to the Valley of Flowers from Bhiundhar Khal. As he was standing on the pass, alone and unroped, a crevasse gave way beneath his feet. He fell in it and was wedged in the ice between the walls of the crevasse. His companions tried to rescue him by different modes for few hours and went down towards Gamsali, leaving him alive in the crevasse. When they returned, naturally he was dead. His body was abstracted after almost two years when the crevasse widened naturally. Locals remember the incident and attribute it to the supernatural forces in this valley.

The Valley of Flowers was visited in 1862 by Col. Edmund Smith. In 1907 T.G.Longstaff with Arnold Mumm and Charles G. Bruce passed from this valley. But it required Frank Smythe's botanists eye and philosophers heart in recognising it as the Valley of Flowers. Many have since then passed through the high passes of this valley and literally thousands visit it every year.

⁹ *The Valley of Flowers*, by Frank Smythe, p. 147.

We arrived in the centre of the valley to a place called 'Bamani Dhaur' (*cave of Brahmin*). As the legend goes a brahmin sat here telling the fortunes of all visitors, drawing up their fortune charts called the 'kundali.' This he did by observing shadows on the long meadow across the river. At what day and time to observe the shadow depended on the date of birth of the person and other factors. This meadow is called 'Sri Kundalisain.'

A little ahead of Bamani Dhaur is a small meadow where stands the grave of Joan Margaret Legge. Inspired by Frank Smythe's work here, the Botanical Garden of Edinburgh deputed her to spend few months in the Valley of Flowers. She arrived in Ranikhet and met the local representative of the Himalayan Club, Mr. Brown. With porters she trekked across the lower foothills and reached Joshimath and finally Govindghat on 25 June 1939. Nanda Singh Chauhan accompanied her as a guide with her porters from Ranikhet and she, walking up slowly and collecting samples reached Bamani Dhaur in the Valley of Flowers. On 4 July she went up the slopes towards Khulia Garva to collect sample and slipped. She died instantly. The Ranikhet porters brought down the body and with villagers from Bhiundhar informed the local magistrate at Joshimath and Chamoli. A police *thanedar*



Epitaph to Joan Margaret Legge in the Valley of Flowers

(Harish Kapadia)

was deputed to visit the site. He ordered all the villagers to gather in the valley and made a *panchnama*. While some villagers stayed with the body a report was sent by wireless to Ranikhet and England. Legge's sister requested the body to be buried in the valley. All the items were listed and sent to England and a small grave was erected at the site. Next year her sister visited the site and erected a small memorial for Legge which stands today. It has an inscription.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills
From whence cometh my help.¹⁰

This grave being the only point of reference in the valley most visitors reach till here and many believe, rather erroneously, that it was Legge who discovered the Valley of Flowers. Maybe a memorial to Frank Smythe should stand in this valley for it was he who introduced Himalayan flowers to the multitude. This is what he wrote about last day spent in the valley.

Beauty, health, good comradeship, peace, all these had been mine in the Valley of Flowers. For a while I had lived simply and happily and like to think, indeed I know, that those about me had been happy too.

So I spent some of my last hours in the Valley of Flowers, seated by the camp fire, until flames died down and stars brightened beyond hill-tops ; and all about me was the serenity of God.¹¹

It was drizzling as we returned from this valley. A party, including a middle-aged housewife from Bombay, was on its way up. I tried to dissuade them from going up due to the inclement weather.

'We have come this far to see some flowers. We must see them. After all this is the Valley of Flowers.' And like true pilgrims, they trudged on, unmindful of any hardship.

This valley is the tribute of Frank Smythe to the flowers of the Himalaya. Because of this catchy name and easy access many

10. Inscription on the Legges grave in the Valley of Flowers.

11 *The Valley of Flowers*, by Frank Smythe, p. 286.

Indians, non-mountaineers and common pilgrims, now know that there is more to the Himalaya than shrines and snow. This valley is a celebration of the Himalayan flowers.

SUMMARY

Treks in the Saryu valley, Kumaon (May 1995) and the Bhiundhar valley, Garhwal (September 1996).

