

ON THE 'TOURIST DRAIN' TREK

(1995)

Nepal had followed a 'closed door' policy for trekking and climbing in the kingdom for several decades. No foreigners (and very few Indians) were allowed to visit the Nepal Himalaya. When they opened the range for trekkers it was done with some wisdom, or at least so it seems to someone like me who had trekked mostly in the Indian Himalaya. First of all there was an effort to develop the infrastructure, prepare and distribute information about trekking routes to welcome all the tourists with open arms. This was done by developing a few selected treks, what came to be known as, 'Tourist Drains.' Every facility and information was developed for those few selected treks, the rest of the treks were open to enterprising visitors only. This allowed a stricter control over the chosen treks and preservation of a majority of other areas. It brought in trekkers (and dollars) but preserved the environment. The trails to the Everest Base Camp, Gosainkund, Muktinath and Annapurna Circuit were amongst the few that were developed. On these trails locals were encouraged to build lodges for trekkers to stay in, kerosene depots were established to supply fuel, maps and information made available and local population was trained to help the trekkers at a profit. Of course like many things in this part of the world everything did not progress as intended but the main objective was mostly implemented.

Kathmandu, capital of Nepal, has developed as a major tourist centre. It is also a popular place to hold business conferences. I found myself invited to Kathmandu for one such conference.¹ At the end of it I had about a week to spare and decided to trek to the Annapurna Base Camp. These 'tourist drains' were specifically designed to offer a lot to a trekker in a hurry like me. I had to carry only a sleeping bag and personal clothing. Food, porters, lodges, and all other requirements were available on the trail. So after the conference was over I picked up a map and was on my way flying to Pokhara.

The last time I had visited Pokhara had been way back in 1965. At that time we had walked from the Indian border to Muktinath and returned to Pokhara. Except for one restaurant at the airport no readymade food was available in the town and we as young students stayed with a 'local'—the beginning of the 'lodge culture'. Now Pokhara had choices of several hotels to suit all pockets and the ambience offered to the tourists was of a high order. The 'resort' where I stayed organised Nepali hill dances and songs every night and after the show performers promptly sold cassettes, both audio and video, of similar cultural fair.

I began my holiday by spending an evening in Pokhara with J.O.M. Roberts who was a legend in his life-time. He had lived in Nepal for many decades. One of the first trekking agencies, 'Mountain Travel' was started by him and many have given him credit for developing Nepal as a trekker's paradise. Jimmy, as he liked to be called, was a soldier in the British army and was posted to India.

During his years in the army he explored many parts of the Himalaya. I had corresponded regularly with him and found myself following his journeys and climbs to many unknown valleys. He was the first foreigner to visit Spiti, in 1939. He had visited many areas. He had been to Saser Kangri in Ladakh, he had climbed in the Kullu valleys. The first ascent of Chau Chau Kang Nilda in the Spiti was by him. He was the transport officer on the successful British Everest Expedition in 1953.

I was particularly fascinated by his small week-end climbs, in the thirties, in the Dhauladhar range. Whilst posted at Dalhousie, Jimmy and friends would finish the Friday evening parade and drive to Dharamsala, MacLeodgunj. By nightfall the party would be up at Triund. The next two days would be spent climbing in the Dhauladhar range and return was ensured by late Sunday night to the waiting car. A drive, a shave and a quick change into uniforms and they would report for the Monday morning parade! I worked upon their same idea to visit the range for week-long outings, by travelling by trains from Bombay.²

After retirement Jimmy shifted in Pokhara to live on a pheasant farm. When I met him, he looked frail but was alert in mind and spirit. On his table was a map, an altimeter and a compass kept handy. He showed me the Annapurna range from his gallery and talked of several of his exploits.

'I have two requests to make,' I told him. 'Why don't you write an article or a book recalling your experiences and meeting with so many persons.'

Jimmy smiled and almost dismissed the suggestion.

'What is the other request?'

'Will you please write a Foreword to my next book on Spiti?'

He readily agreed to that, to my good fortune.

Having been connected with the development of mountaineering and mountain tourism in Nepal from its inception, I have developed a theory of 'tourist drains'. According to this theory (classification yet to be proposed) a main route or track through a beautiful country is not necessarily a bad thing as it draws off most of the visitors onto a single route, leaving the country left and right of it more or less unspoilt. A good example is the 'drain' of the 'Round Annapurna' trek. (We run into difficulties however, when the main track runs into a mountain side, like the Annapurna Sanctuary, and the trekkers tend to spill out into the surrounding country).³

I was lucky to have spent a few hours with him in his domain. Jimmy died on 1 November 1997 in Pokhara and his ashes were scattered on the banks of the Seti river. I wished he had accepted my first suggestion also, for a lot has been lost with him.

On 27 August 1995 I started from Pokhara (915 m) for short trek on the Annapurna trail. I was alone but met several trekkers on the way and there was always company. I drove in a taxi to New Bridge (1200 m)⁴ which is on the highway. There were no defined stages to be followed for there were lodges everywhere en route. 'Tea House Trekking' was fun. One can walk a little, halt for tea and snacks wherever one likes. Anytime during the day, at any place one can

eat lunch, relax or stay for the night. There were plenty of lodges to choose from each offering almost standard fare and rates. That day I walked till Savani Bazar (1235 m; 6 km) past Lamakhet.

The next day the track climbed a little. Leaving the bifurcation to Ghandruk I traversed on a new trail to the right of the river. The trail went past a thick forest. That evening, having walked for only five hours I decided to stay at Himal Kyu (1550 m; 12 km). On the following day I was at Chhomrong, the central place on the trail (2200 m; 7 km).

I observed the various facilities these lodges offered. The 'Chhomrong Guest House', where I stayed, had a solar-heating system. On arrival I was able to take a hot shower. This was followed by a cold beer with pizza. The rooms had glass panels and I could see the Annapurna range whilst lying in bed. Solar heating is provided inside the rooms too and service boys are always on call to take an order from the large menu. The prices for lodges and food rise as one goes further into the valley. Voluntary agencies had trained villagers in providing services, running lodges and preparing western dishes. Some trekkers do miss interaction with the ethnic Nepali culture, cuisine and customs, but this has brought in dollars and that's what the tourist drains were all about.

By evening the trekkers staying in the lodges generally get together in the dining-hall in groups. Many solitary trekkers like me can join in the fun and the atmosphere is cordial. I played games with a German group, discussed politics with the British and by the time I was through, the evening had been an enriching and memorable one. Meeting locals and interacting with other tourists has its own charm and advantage.

I recalled my trek to Muktinath, exactly 30 years before.⁵ That time as young students we had trekked on these trails. Little did we know then about the changes that were to follow. Many are heard complaining about the loss of culture and commercialisation of the treks. But I for one found these enjoyable and trails clean. Of course like all activities price has to be paid. What we spent in 1965 for a 45-days trek was the cost of my 4-day trek now in 1995. I was in the area for a few days only to comment on other 'price' paid by the people, if any.

On the last night I stayed at a lodge near the road. Talking to the owner I understood the economics of the trade. His young son, well-educated in Nepal, was inquiring about computer education in India, about different avenues and openings in the employment sector. It seemed that the locals were gaining far more than simple economic benefits. If opportunities such as these allow locals to live in their villages and have gainful employment then the trekking culture has served its purpose for both guests and hosts. That may be the last word on the development of trekking in this part of the world.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. This was a conference organised by the cloth manufacturers I deal with. This resulted in an article in *Himal*, published from Kathmandu, titled, 'A Cloth Merchant Who Knows His Ropes'. See *Himal*, February, 1997

2. These forays are described in 'Weeks in Dhauladhar', in my book *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*.
3. From the Foreword to *Spiti: Adventures in the Trans-Himalaya*.
4. It was called 'New Bridge' when it was built on this highway. Though now it is several years old, the name remains the same.
5. See article 'Muktinath' in the present book.