

## THE FREEDOM WALK

*A Trek in the Lake District of the Garhwal*

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**A**S INDIA CELEBRATED the 50th year of Independence, on 15 August 1997, I discovered that there were several extra holidays to celebrate the event. Many politicians were descending to Bombay, many events were planned and all the brouhaha was bound to lead to traffic jams and noise. So what could be a better way to spend the week than in the mountains. After all mountaineering is also all about 'Freedom of the Hills', is it not ?

'Uttarkashi is wet, more wetter than you can imagine'. We ran into two Principals of the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) in Delhi.

With this ominous information, on 12 August five of us reached the NIM in Uttarkashi. Its sprawling campus amidst pines were a perfect starting point for us. Till we reached Uttarkashi it was



raining heavily, and had poured for the preceding week confirming the warning we had received. In fact we purchased umbrellas and plastics for all. Shekhar was carrying a fancy 'double' umbrella and to tease his wife Sheela, that piece of fancy gadgetry was nicknamed 'second wife'. But behold, all through our trek except for a sharp shower or a wet afternoon, the weather Gods did not trouble us. Well, one does not mind unpredictable weather if it's in one's favour!

With all the arrangements made we travelled to Malla (1500 m - 24 km by road) to begin the trek. Crossing the Bhagirathi river the track climbed steeply to Sila (2040 m- 6 km). We were housed in the village school. There were some preparations on for the 15 August celebrations, children were singing patriotic songs and preparing for a *prabhat pheri* (morning walk) on that historic day. But we were worried about our walk the next day. The track relentlessly climbed steeply, in fact too steeply for enjoying the beautiful forest that we were in. Many gaddis (shepherds) were climbing up with us for above were the most fertile *bugiyals* (meadows).

Kush Kalyan, our goal for the day, was almost 1600 m above us and each of our co-trekkers, even the gaddis, found it tiring. We went across Chuli la (3580 m), a small pass on the ridge and the climb ended. By late evening we camped a little before Kush Kalyan. Amongst us, Arnav found the going exhausting, may be something to do with eating too many steaks and burgers in the USA, where he came from.

That evening we were treated to a most beautiful panorama of the Bandarpunch massif. My thoughts were with J.T.M. Gibson, who in the fifties had attempted each of these peaks and climbed several of them. He introduced young Indian mountaineers to the sport of mountaineering in these ranges. On our right was Kalanag (6387 m), the highest of the lot. It rose like a 'black serpent', as its name implied. In the centre rose Bandarpunch (6316 m), the 'monkey's tail'. Both these peaks were tried several times by Gibson with different parties from the Doon school, where he was the headmaster. Bandarpunch was climbed by his team. R. Greenwood, Tensing Norgay (in his 'before Everest' form !) and Sherpa Tsering reached the summit, in 1950. Kalanag defied two attempts by Gibson, in 1953 and 1955, and it was finally climbed by another party from the Doon School in 1968. Today it is perhaps the best-known (and most climbed) peak in the Garhwal. The peak that beat Gibson and Tensing Norgay narrowly was Bandarpunch West (6102



m) now seen to our left. They had followed the sharp south ridge but had to stop. It remained inviolate till 1984 when the first ascent was made by a Bombay team led by me. We followed the northern route. Having climbed Kalanag we were well acclimatised and could go through the highly crevassed Bandarpunch glacier. The final slopes were fun to climb. Today many, like us, enjoy this Bandarpunch range but it must be remembered that this was the range where the real freedom to roam the hills began for generations of Indian mountaineers.

Our trek continued on 15 August, the momentous day. On the radio there were patriotic songs and speeches galore. It reminded me, in a different vein, of an Italian movie.<sup>1</sup> As the war had ended, while the sound was broadcasting the great victory marches and speeches, the visual frames showed farmers working routinely in the fields, unmindful of the great day. Our situation was almost similar.

We were in the company of some elderly shepherds, many of them born before Indian Independence. None of them remembered the effect of the historical event. They lived in the hills and the area was then in the Tehri State. As there were no roads they were almost 10 days away from 'civilisation'. Without a radio or any means of communication, they just 'heard' from the pilgrims that India was free. It made no difference to their lives. And frankly even today they had not much knowledge of the brouhaha enacted in the plains for this day. They walked, as always, with their flock, smoking a bidi and listening to the radio with amusement.

That afternoon it poured heavily as we crossed Bhowani Bugiyal and later went across Kyarki Khal (4077 m). By late evening we camped at Kyarki (3900 m-12 km). Our neighbours were a family of gujjar's. They migrate to this ground every year, for about 5 months, have done so for more than a generation. Amongst them was a young couple, married only for a few months. Life was simple and happy for them. The husband charmingly put a shawl on the young wife when she felt cold, and she knitted special caps for him. They had horses which roamed about in great abandon. A dog barked constantly in the distance. Even after three decades in the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Christ Stopped at Eboli', Italian film by Francesco Rosi. It was based on the book of the same name (1946) by Carlo Levi, painter, doctor and writer banished to a small primitive village of Lucania in southern Italy at the start of the Abyssinian War. He stayed there throughout the war, observing that that historical event had no effect on the simple life of villagers.



Himalaya, and five decades in this world, for me there were things to enjoy and learn !

The views were staggering as we climbed further on to a ridge. A ridge full of flowers had the Bandarpunch massif in background, while the Jaonli peak was seen rising in the north. It was a magnificent setting on the lush green bugiyals with several goats and sheeps grazing. Once on the Kukhli Dhar we reached a well-made footpath.<sup>2</sup> This path was constructed from Buddha Kedar, from the Tehri district in the south. It was built several years ago for the pilgrims to visit Shashtru Tal. Similarly a small *dharamshala* was built on the ridge, now in ruins. We camped little ahead, overlooking Lamb Tal (4300 m-6 km).

Next morning was brilliant. We hoisted the Indian flag overlooking Lamb Tal in a sentimental display of patriotism. Mehernos and I left early and scrambled up a small peak, 'Lamb Peak', 4550 m. The view of Shashtru Tal was magnificent.<sup>3</sup> Going to the shores of Shashtru Tal would have taken about 2 hours. Being situated in a bowl it could not offer any view. Shashtru Peak (5154 m) rose behind the lake like a sentinel. Dodhi Tal was in the front. Several lakes were seen en route and were marked on the map on both sides of the ridge, amply justifying the title 'Lake District of the Garhwal' awarded to this area by the prolific writer Bill Aitken.<sup>4</sup>

That evening we camped near the gujjar couple again, now joined by their old father. I could not resist asking these nomads what they thought of the Indian independence and that historic day exactly fifty years ago.

'I came to Kush Kalyan then'. The old man replied. 'That time we used to travel on foot from Saharanpur, and even today we do the same. We have our flock with us.'

'What about the future?', I asked.

2 This is locally called *chhe phuti path* (the six foot-wide path). It follows the route from Tehri to Buddha Kedar by road, and then to villages Jhala, and Pinswar to reach Shashtru Tal. It links Masar Tal, the lake above Pinswar village. It has beautiful views and a gentler gradient.

3 The name 'Shashtru' seems to have originated from the Sanskrit word '*Sahastra*' which means 'a thousand'. It refers to a thousand *brahma kamal* available in the area. These were the most beautiful flowers to be seen at that altitude and there were at least hundreds of them, if not a thousands.

4 See article by Bill Aitken, 'Monsoon madness and seven lakes', in the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 42, p. 168.

The young gaddi interjected, 'As long as I am alive I will be here and the yearly migration will continue in the same style'.

'What is the effect of the fifty years of the Independence, what about freedom?'

He thought for a while and replied with a smile, as if it was a state of mind,

'We were always free'.

**Members:** Sheela and Shekhar Jaywant, Arnav Sheth, Mehernos Jehangir and Harish Kapadia. Period: 11th to 22nd August 1997.

**Summary :** A short trek to Shastru tal, Uttarkashi in the Garhwal.

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*Colour plate 6*





5. 'Arwa Tower' (6352 m), in the Garhwal.

*Article 10*

(Harish Kapadia)



6. Lamb Tal with Bandarpunch range in background.

*Note 10*

(Harish Kapadia)

# SHASTRU TAL TREK

- Town/Village
- Camp
- - - 1997 trek
- ≡≡≡ footpath
- ▲ Peak

Height in Metres

