

## THE PLAN B

### A trek across the Shaone Gad, Kinnaur.

We were all about 50 years in age, an age when people have reached pinnacles of their professions but have less physical energy left for exertion. Specially when they are faced with lack of leisure time, that's probably why they have reached where they have! This applied to my companions, on this trek which began when Suman Dubey suggested, 'How about going to Kinnaur for a short trek? There is a lovely valley called Shaone Gad between Sangla and Chhitkul going south to cross over into the Supin valley. So in September 1999, we were at the Rakchham rest house.(via Shimla, Sangla to Rakchham, little before Chhitkul, in Kinnaur). Flowers were in bloom; colourful fields were ready for harvesting and people were preparing for the forthcoming Dushera festival.

Amongst our group we had one special combination. We had three Parsis, Dr. Burjor Banaji, Kekoo Colah and Pesi Dubash, each from a different profession; a renowned eye surgeon, the head of a property consulting firm and a freelance photographer respectively. This community is known for its easy going lifestyle, teasing their companions and much laughter. This applied to us but as someone said, three doses of same medicine may prove fatal !. Also amongst us we had Suman Dubey, a leading journalist from Delhi who had climbed till South Col on Everest in his hey days. He had restless energy, enough to wheel through any situation. Every now and then he would pace up and down like a tiger on the prowl and would ask us to see the map. Even before we started to move he came out with his diktat; 'Harish just in case we are unable to cross the main pass, we must have Plan B'. We all looked at him and said, 'Suman lets try to go through that main pass we have planned and let us see how things develop'.

We spent 15 September walking to Chhitkul and back on a road, helping us to acclimatise quickly. We started climbing up in the Shaone valley to the south of Mastarang village. After initial steep climb the valley flattened out and a long moraine and scree slopes took us to lower Shaone (Rathia thach) (3850 m). On the 17<sup>th</sup> we shifted to Upper Shaone thach (Mathia thach) (4150 m), which was almost at the foot of a glacier. We camped on a vast open ground and like small children our three Parsis played out their game, 'here comes the bear'. At night as we were all inside the camp, the 'bear' slowly crept towards Pesi Dubash's tent. As the tent shook Pesi was shouting in panic. The second Parsi Kekoo advised defensive measures against a bear attack: to sprinkle talcum powder liberally on the body so that the smell does not reach the bear, showing a constantly moving torch to scare him and making loud noises by banging a plate to shoo him away. As all these measures were not possible with just two hands, we ultimately found our friend with a torch tucked in his mouth,

head vigorously shaking to make the light flash and banging a plate with a mug, having sprinkled powder all over himself. Needless to say the bear was the third Parsi, Burjor Banaji.

Along with these games, we made one recce of the upper reaches of the glacier reaching 4520 m. Our plan was to cross the Singha ghati, ('steep pass') which was to the northeast (left). As we reached the junction of two valleys, glacial moraine and steep walls covered every side. Suman spread out maps and first we looked towards the Singha ghati. I looked through binoculars and murmured 'the pass looks quite severe and the walls are steep. I do not think that this will lead us anywhere'. Before I could lower my binoculars, Suman was at it, 'What's our plan B'. And so Plan B came to be.

The adjoining valley led us to Lamea pass, which literally meant the 'longer pass'. Both the passes led into the Supin valley, but at different points. Looking at the terrain, we decided to follow the longer pass. Slowly making our way up the glacier, each at his own pace and timings, we camped at the foot of the pass at 4680 m. Going up some steep slopes, we reached Lamea pass at 4920 m and we eyed the lovely green valley of Rupin ('the beautiful valley') leading down to south directly. Suman immediately wanted to make that route Plan B but we all had to oppose it as it would have taken three extra days and for these professionals, time is always premium. We traversed towards left and camped at 4630 m. The worst was still to come. A horrendous rocky terrain led us to Ratangdi ghati (4820 m). We had to jump over boulders, a major challenge for someone as heavy as Burjor. The only thing that kept him going was stories of cricket and that too local cricket, how our state team Mumbai had won the national championship several times. He kept nodding and finally we were across.

The traditional route of decent from here was from the right and down through steep but easy grassy slopes. In our eagerness to reach the beautiful valley of Nishani thach seen below, we cut across a steep route leading us into a mire. We had to fix ropes to descend. The head of the Nishani thach valley led to Singha ghati, our original plan. We rapidly descended the Supin valley and that night camped at Vishkhopri thach (3650 m). This was a most romantic name that I had ever come across in the Himalaya. *Vish* is poison and *khopri* is skull (or brain). As the story goes this grazing ground in height of summer is full of flowers and its fragrance is very strong. Any young boy or girl of Jakhhol or Lewari village who would come here would be intoxicated. Their heads would be full of the poison of love !

A trail from Vishkhopri thach led to Obra gad to the north and in to the Har-ki-dun valley, a popular trekking destination. Next evening we were at Lewari (2700 m) The race against time began on 24 September morning. Starting from the remote Lewari we had to reach Dehra Dun the same night for our train to Delhi. In next six hours, by noon, we were at

Jakhol and caught a taxi to Sankhri and onwards to Dehra Dun. We kept checking our watches but as we neared the railway station plan A finally failed. The train had left about quarter of an hour ago. We all looked at Suman, jumping again with another Plan B, to stay in a hotel overnight and catch a train next morning to Delhi. This would be far preferable than driving all night on the highway. But to catch a train in India without reservations is an ordeal. There we had to play act with our Parsi friends. One of them reached the station early and informed the train conductor that we were accompanying an important minister from Delhi, who 'himself' I was travelling by this morning train. It is one thing that any minister's staff is travelling but the greatest panic is when the Minister 'himself' is on the train !

Immediately room was made for us, six seats were allotted in an air-conditioned bogie and everyone waited eagerly for the 'Minister' to arrive. And there he was, Suman with a long wooden shaft in his hand walking slowly towards the compartment, acknowledging salutes of bewildered railway staff. They had never seen a senior minister like him ! As he sat down in began eating breakfast, Suman gave the final edict with a grin; 'Well plan B worked. It always does, doesn't it'.