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NAG TIBBA, THE HONEST SERPENT

HARISH KAPADIA

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU have to spend three days between two meetings in a large city like Delhi? That was the dilemma that I faced in December 2001. And the answer was simple : go on a trek.

One can reach the Himalayan foothills by an overnight journey from Delhi by train and so one can easily push off to the hills. A meeting with Suman Dubey and Gurdial Singh was all that was needed to suggest going to Nag Tibba, a small but a prominent hill top at 3027 m, from which one gets some terrific views of the Himalayan range.

Nag Tibba lies in the Aglar valley and is the dividing line between two areas. Several students and trekking parties have visited it, and there are various different routes to approach its base as well as its summit. There are new roads now being built as an approach to this small but most vantage viewpoint.

We travelled from Dehra Dun, bypassing Mussoorie, to reach Thatyur in the Aglar valley.

'I have two horses and the rate would be Rs. 200 for the day for each,' Sher Singh told us with a smile on his face.

'Rs. 150 is the rate declared by the authorities, don't you know that?' I said.

'Well tourists have been paying us Rs. 200 and so we are spoilt', he added with another disarming smile.

In fact, he was telling me that instead of the tradition of the official rates, the market rates were ruling as in the plains. He was honestly confessing his dishonesty !

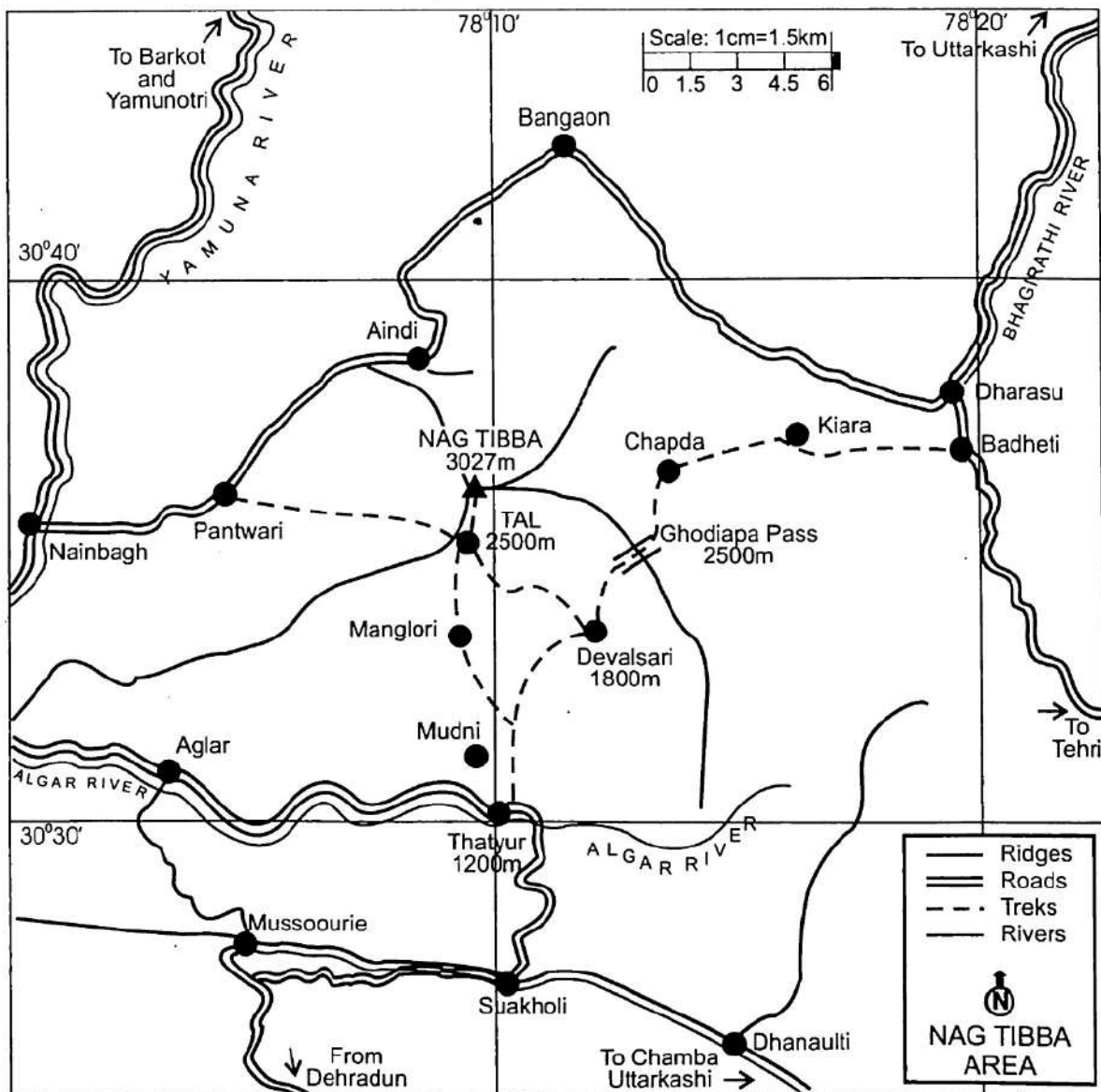
So there we were with two mules walking for about four hours to a beautiful bungalow at Devalsari. The road from Thatyur to Devalsari is a gentle walk through villages. There are plans to build a motorable

road. A small but comfortable and beautifully located forest rest house at Devalsari is a great place to stay. It is situated next to thickly wooded forest of deodars. In fact all around, there were rice fields and suddenly we had this large crop of deodars.

It is said that once a sadhu stayed in these fields when there were no deodars. Some of the locals made fun of him and he was asked to vacate the plot. He was angry but did not want to destroy everything so his curse was, 'You will not be able to grow any rice or food here and only deodars will grow'. His curse today has turned into blessings and this forest is a great treat. In this forest there was a small temple dedicated to Nag or the Serpent, which is worshipped in this valley. It is said that cows from Kinsu village grazed around this temple. One of the cows used to shed milk on a Shivling, a round stone, as an offering. When the shepherd saw that the cow was giving less milk everyday, he quietly followed her and he saw the cow offering the milk to the Shivling. In anger, he picked up an axe and chopped the Shivling stone, representing Shiva, into two. God ordered him to build a temple here as repentance. So today, amidst the deodar forest we have this lovely Shiva temple with the stone, representing lord Shiva split into two.

These were the lovely fables from people of these small villages around. After enjoying an evening walk into these villages, next day we walked to Ghodiapa pass which was on the ridge towards the north, and leading down to Chapda village. Some villagers were carrying a heavy cupboard made of solid wood across the ridge as a dowry for a girl they had married into the next valley. To keep up traditions across such high ridges was certainly challenging. As I walked up to the pass, one villager, Gwanulal walked with me in the dense forest. He kept a distance from me and when I asked him, he said, 'My guru has advised me that in this kaliyug (dark age) be afraid of men not animals'. He laughed and we teamed up.

From the pass we had excellent view of the ranges from Bandarpunch to Himachal and the trees of this forest at the top of the ridge were a treat. Both of us sat down and exchanged information about our families. As I offered him some of my food he tasted it and asked, 'Can I take this with me and not eat here? I would like to share it with my daughters. They have never tasted food from Bombay. They would love it.' He asked me about my family and I told him about my two sons. The younger one, Lt. Nawang Kapadia had joined the Indian Army and was killed by the terrorists in the bloody conflict in Kashmir. Gwanulal suddenly got up asking me to wait. He came back with small



cones of deodar and rubbed them in his hands. There was only yellow powder left, looking like pure saffron. He put a mark on my forehead.

'This is *deodar ka tilla*, the mark of deodar, and it is made from *deodar ki pithai*. These small cones are considered holy and are available only during these times, in early winter.'

He got a handful of *pithai* and stuffed it in my rucksack, 'Take these home and put it on the photograph of your son. He will be blessed.' In this four-hour walk with this simple Garhwali villager, I had formed a lifelong friendship. Such are the ways of trekking in this land of gods. We said goodbye to each other on the pass as he descended towards his village to the north of the pass and I returned back towards Devalsari.

We spent that evening again in the village. An old man welcomed me with a smile and wisdom.

Whenever guests come it is both *harja* and *kharcha*' he said. 'It is *kharcha*, expense, as you will drink tea and eat some food, and *harja* as you will disturb my family from work'. But he received us warmly, offered tea and spent plenty of time with us. The lady of the house introduced us to the family members and later to her cows and mules also who were lined up outside the house. They were almost like her family members.

Thatyur, the place from where we had trekked up, was formerly a jail for the animals. If an animal trespassed into the field of another villager and caused damage, the latter had the right to catch it and would take it to Thatyur where a large fenced yard was constructed as a jail for these animals. Until the owner of the offending animal paid a fine for the damages, the animal would not be released. As cows and animals were a centre of life, Thatyur was an important place. Today the word Thatyur is used almost like a bad word or curse. When two villagers fight, they say in anger, 'let your animals go to Thatyur, to jail'.

The night was full of stars and we sat around a fire till it turned amber. I was with my good friends Sarita and Vinnie Chaudhury. Their son, Vishal had married Ekta only about a week ago and joined us with their friends. We teased him about how he was spending his honeymoon. In Indian philosophy, a lot is written about serpent-worship and many Indian films are made on the subject, wherein a serpent turns human (hero or mainly a heroine), blesses the good and devastates evil. We had to be in the good books of Nag devta and to make sure that he blessed the newly-weds and us.

On the final day, came the time to climb up steeply to the summit of Nag Tibba. The route goes up and up, at first through some forest, but later on barren slopes. Finally, we reached a small temple. This was again just a stone. It is said that a shepherd from Mudni, regularly came to this spot with animals to graze. He worshipped a rounded stone (*staya* - truth) by applying *pithai* on to it. This holy action turned the stone into Lord Shiva, (*shivam*). When people later worshipped it, the beauty behind the stone was seen (*sundaram*). In this gesture on Nag Tibba, almost the entire philosophy of Hindu idol-worship of gods carved in stone, (*murtipuja*) was demonstrated. The final climb was steep, but never difficult. The view from the top was an uninterrupted endless beauty of mountains, spreading across, almost 200 km wide. After absorbing this, we rushed down to Thatyur, took a taxi to Dehra Dun and a night train back to Delhi.

As we had started with 'honest dishonesty', we ended with unbelievable honesty in this commercially crazy world. It amazed all of us. The old chowkidar (caretaker) at Devalsari Forest Rest house

calculated our charges and informed us, 'You have to pay me Rs. 200 for the two days stay.' He had been very helpful, bringing us wood, food, some oil, was also doing some cooking for us.

'Here take Rs. 500 and keep the balance Rs. 300 as your tip'. He looked at me thoughtfully.

'Why are you giving me such a large tip? I cannot accept so much. I will keep only Rs. 100', and he returned back to me Rs. 200. He smiled and added, 'Accepting too much as tip would spoil me so I would not be able to serve the next guest honestly or with full attention as I have done to you'.

Many have discovered the pleasures of Nag Tibba, just three days away from Delhi. No sooner were we back in Delhi any sense of ego we may have had about doing such a quick trip was flattened to learn that Bill Aitken had done it in two days flat, Delhi-to-Delhi and a Rolf Kleiner, a master at Woodstock School had done it one day from Mussoorie'. Even the great serpent will not be able to match their records.

Summary: A short trek to Nag Tibba, Garhwal.