

## THE TILLEY HAT

### *Trek to Sainj and Tirthan Valleys*

Ever since we had started trekking in the Sainj valley, I had noticed that Chris wore a most expensive sun hat, made in Canada. It was a 'Tilley Hat'. The notice on the label said;

It is the best outdoor hat in the world, it floats, it ties on, repels rain and mildew, won't shrink and will be replaced, if it wears out (Yes, put it in your will).

Gerry narrated a television advertisement. It showed an elephant chewing up a Tilley Hat, but as he spat out, after a wash, it was restored to its original shape. With decades of mountaineering, this hat sat well on head of Sir Chris, both were legendary and durable. In his own way Chris has undertaken adventures, inspired a generation and created mountaineering literature – which can be left in his 'will' for future mountaineers. We have been climbing and trekking together for several years and as age catches on, he has changed gears and has started enjoying smaller but unexplored climbs like the one in the Sainj valley. This was the beginning of our new phase of teaming up, already having been on three serious expeditions together in the Himalaya.

The areas of Kullu Himalaya are thickly populated, especially the inner valleys. After closing of Kashmir, tourism onslaught on this valley is maximum. Some places, like Manali, have been turned into cement townships and much forest has disappeared. To prevent such a catastrophe in the valleys in Sainj, Jiwa and Tirthan valleys, a national park has been established, named 'The Great Himalayan National Park'. Fees are to be paid and one is allowed to trek, climb and visit the park under watchful eyes of local wardens. But this is only a wishful arrangement. On a practical level, nothing much was happening as we discovered during our trip there in June 2003. Six British and six Indians arrived at the village of Sainj (1400 m), which is to the east of the Kullu valley. We were informed that a permit would be necessary to enter the

park and in the same breath, one of the local wardens offered to accompany us for some money on the sly. But we elected to go down to the park office at Bhuntar and paid our dues.

As we returned and started our trek from Neuli (1600 m) we were introduced to the pleasures of the park and pain of the villagers. The pleasures were many with one of the most protected forest in full glory; number of species of birds, flowers and thick foliage. An excellent tract maintained by the park authorities was a welcome sight. As we trekked inside it was evident that despite fees being charged and funds available, nothing much had been done, especially due to protests by the locals. The villagers, quite a few in this area, were asked not to utilize the forest products, which had been their right for generations. Grazing was banned and movement of shepherds was stopped. All this had led to a typical man vs. forest and villagers vs. political authorities conflict and we were constantly observing this, though it did not affect us.

Our progress was slow as intended and after camping at Dhenga bridge (1860 m) we climbed up to Shakti (2200 m). It had a small forest hut and the route passed in sight of a 60 m waterfall, irises and many flowers. We continued our way up to Marur, a village of about 4 houses and braving a thunderstorm in the afternoon camped in the open grounds of Kudal. On 11 June we were established at Parkachi (3020 m), which had excellent views and was surrounded by a lovely forest. This was to be our base for the next few days.

Everybody disappeared into different valleys and soon things were happening. Gerry Wilson, Louis and myself walked till Ratikhola up in the valley at the junction of two nalas and enjoyed walking amidst flowers. Vijay Kothari with a porter climbed up a hill while some preferred to stay at Parkachi and simply read a book.

The team of indomitable Sir Chris Bonington with young Rajal and Radha Upadhyaya were active in the side valley of Chyos nala in the north. With porter support, they established a high camp in one of the northern offshoots and camped at Jaraun Thach. Getting up early, Chris and Rajal climbed steadily to reach a snow bound rocky peak called Jaraun (5205 m).

This is what Sir Chris had to write about the climb.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> we had the only rest day of our entire expedition and the next day we all set out to pitch a high camp below Point 5205 m, which we were to name Jaraun peak. Our gallant porters carried all the gear and Raj Kumar and Supsinh stayed with us that night to do the cooking. Our camp was perched on tiny ledges, which we cut out of the steep hill side at a height of 4500 m. It rained most of the afternoon and through the night but just before dusk the clouds had rolled back to give us a superb view of the surrounding mountains.

We set the alarm for three in the morning but snow was pattering down on the tent and so we dropped off to sleep, to wake at around 6 a.m. to find that it had stopped snowing though was still cloudy. Louise, Radha and Gerry had decided not to go for the summit but Rajal and I decided to give it a go setting out at 7 a.m. We zig-zagged up firm névé to the crest of the slope where the angle eased and we were able to pick our way in thick cloud to the start of the glacier. We roped up and picked our way up it, not at all sure just where our peak was, but we were in luck. At around 10.30 a.m. the clouds rolled back once again to show us our peak, a shapely black spire with a snow gang way leading up one side of it. We also had a magnificent view of the peaks to our north. We were able to pick out the Kullu Eiger and saw a magnificent rock gendarme that must have been at least a hundred metres high.

(‘An Adventure with Kapadia’, *Himalayan Journal*, Volume 60, p. 80)

The entire team regrouped at Shakti having spent an enjoyable week in the upper valleys. We had decided to cross a high ridge towards south to cross over into the Tirthan valley. As we started in a drizzle, crossing a bridge opposite Marur a steep

climb through forest faced us. At first a trail zigzagged up but after 3 km there was no trail and we had to traverse right and descent steeply for about a km to a nala. We climbed another steep slope and went on and on like this until we reached our camping place at Bhedi Thach (2820 m). The same sort of trail continued passing a cave and finally it opened to a huge thach (grazing ground) at Dhel. There was a hut here, an observation point under point 3737 m. The route traversed a grassy plateau through flowery meadows and as we reached the extreme end, we decided to camp amidst great view at Upper Dhel (3650 m).

All through this climb I trekked with Radha Upadhyaya, my young friend from Nairobi, who came to the Himalaya not too often. We spoke the same language, Gujarati. Her family had strong Indian connections, having migrated from India generations ago. Having grown up in Kenya, she felt more like a Kenyan rather than a Gujarati or an Indian. I distinctly remember asking her about how she could do something for India, her place of birth. But in a truly patriotic tone and spirit she said, 'Harish Uncle, I am not an Indian, I am a Kenyan and I would like to do something for my country with Indians'. It was an unmatched spirit that she brought with her. As we climbed up steadily she demonstrated her main characteristic - we called her the 'Question Lady'. Her eagerness to know about everything was so strong that anything you mentioned and she would have a supplementary question for that. 'Why do you think Indian politics is so dirty?' 'What do you think of world affairs?', 'Why was the Great National Park formed?', 'When did Eric Shipton come to Himalaya?'; And it went on and on, on a variety of subjects. One admired her quest for knowledge, but while climbing a steep slippery slope through forest and panting heavily, I had to tell her several times, 'Radha I am tired, enough is enough', but then there would be another question to that 'What is enough' and there we were starting all over again! As we camped at Dhel, her uninterrupted questions continued but now at leisure, it was a pleasure.

Next day we all walked up to a small point on the ridge Rakhundi (3954 m) and enjoyed a grand view of hundreds of small peaks towards the Kullu. Then the real stuff began. We had to descend from Dhel plateau towards the Tirthan valley in the south. We could not locate a trail to descend. We had employed a guide, Vishnu Singh. He, with a disarming smile told us, 'I don't the route from here. I have come

only this far'. He tried desperately and finally led us on a completely wrong trail. Finally we decided to cut through downwards wherever it was possible and finally we were down to Ghum Padao (3540 m). Camping here we had wonderful views of Kand Mahadeo, a well-known peak worshipped by the locals. It looked rather different from what I had seen from Sarahan and it was now in the shape of a triangle. We continued our descent cum traverse crossing four small rivulets and finally descended to Nara Thach. It was a long traverse and by evening everybody was tired. But the worst was still to come, as it always does, on the last day. From Nara Thach (3300 m) the trail descended, without exaggeration, almost vertically and for a very long time till we reached the Tirthan river at 2175 m.

As we sat down a religious procession of Kali Nag, the local deity was being carried across and we could partake some of the festivities. It was a large procession and as we were photographing the God, we were asked to make a wish. If it's answer was yes, the God being carried by people on their shoulders, would jump front to back. And if the answer was no, it would move left to right like the shake of a head. Radha was now in total questioning mode with the villagers; about the significance of Kali Nag, about the area, about their traditions and the valleys ahead. To all these questions Kali Nag jumped front and back giving a positive yes. But when she asked about the areas closed off by the national park, efforts at preservation, the conflict with authorities and their desire to protect the park, Kali Nag was jumping right and left giving a vehement no. The villagers were not happy with many aspects, wanted a change but did not know what and how. It was a classic case of the usual livelihood vs. protection issues.

Now we were bound for Gusheni (1500 m) in two days and stayed at the forest rest house high on a ridge, with a great view but many bugs. As we looked around to the great forest spread out before us, we hoped that it would be preserved. At the same time apprehensions of villagers needed to be addressed -- a difficult balance. We ended our wonderful trek with memories of great mountain views, unspoilt valleys, virgin forests and our laughter lingered on. We only hope that these can be left for the next generation in our will -- like a Tilley Hat.