

## INTO THE PANGI VALLEY

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Thirty-one years is a long period to wait to return to an area. It was in 1973 that as a young student I undertook a trip to Manali and had planned to trek into the Lahaul valley, at that time remote and unknown. We climbed Shiti Dhar peak quickly (known also as Friendship Peak), but as we returned to Manali, happy but tired, one by one all my companions deserted me. I was left alone and that seemed to be the end of the Lahaul dream for me. But suddenly in the bazaar I met my course-mate (with whom I had done the basic mountaineering course in Darjeeling in 1964), Col. Prem Chand, then a young captain, fit and raring to go.<sup>1</sup> He belonged to Lahaul and his aged mother lived in the Rooding village. He, by a wonderful coincidence, was proceeding to his home place.

We teamed up and crossed the Rohtang pass en route to Lahaul. Lahaul had one central school and Prem had studied there in company of almost all educated and now highly placed people of Lahaul. So it was trekking with 'only a toothbrush' as it is said. We would walk in different valleys for the day and as we approached a village, Prem would point out several of his friends' houses and say, 'All are my friends, tell me, *aaj kisko sewa ka moka de?* (tell me whom shall we give the pleasure of serving us today?). As evening wore on, friends chatted with each other and I learnt a lot about the place. During those years, the road in Lahaul towards the west, ended at Udaipur, a sleepy little village with a lovely temple of Markala Devi. From Udaipur I eyed a narrow gorge proceeding further west along the river Chandrabhaga. 'That is Pangi valley', Prem said, 'a very forbidding and difficult gorge guards the area and not many have visited there. Originally condemned prisoners from Chamba state were literally thrown into the Chenab and if they could manage to swim across, they could settle in those forbidden valleys. Even today, the only approach to Pangi is across the famous Sach pass, that too only for few months in a year.'

With Prem in command we walked up the Miyar nala to Karpat village and looked at some beautiful peaks. That was the maximum I saw of this valley. However, somewhere in the corner of my mind I noted down the word Pangi valley and the Miyar nala for a future trip. Though I passed through Lahaul on my way to Leh or to Spiti several times, the dream to visit the unknown Pangi remained a dream.

Hence for one of our annual trips with Sir Chris Bonington, an old friend, I suggested a circuit of the Pangi valley and the Miyar nala to fulfill both wishes in one go. The Pangi valley is now well connected by a road from Udaipur to Killar and this road extends further along the Chenab river (Chandrabhaga is known as Chenab in its later stages) to Gulabgadh and Kishtwar to join the main Srinagar highway at Batot. The road is rough; once it leaves Udaipur certain portions are carved out underneath huge cliffs. We travelled from Manali to Udaipur comfortably and wisely decided to stay put night there. Hence it was on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2004, almost 31 years to the date of my first eyeing the gorge beyond Udaipur, I was driving with a party of 7 Britishers and 3 Indians, all friends, proceeding towards the Pangi. Soon the road gave us a test of things to come. We crossed two difficult nalas, which were overflowing and our taxis made it across in style. But as I looked back, to my horror, I saw a loaded truck turning to its side. We rushed to help and luckily both the drivers came out unhurt. As we learnt later from their owners, this truck was carrying goods for small villages in the Pangi valley. They would supply goods to small shops, return after 15 days to collect money and supply more goods. The distribution system and commerce in India is well developed and supplies to even the remote valleys of Pangi are made for a profit. We turned into the Sainchu nala valley from village Such Khas and settled at forest rest house of Sainchu (2730 m). Each of remote Pangi valleys have now roads extending for 20 to 30 kms inside of the main road. Thus most of the initial steep climb is taken care of.

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<sup>1</sup> My friend was from the 11 Gorkha Rifles, not to be confused with Col. Prem Chand of Kangchenjunga fame.

Pangi is in the district of Chamba in the state of Himachal Pradesh and is generally situated east of the Chandrabhaga river which becomes Chenab after it leaves Pangi. The first major valley in Pangi is of Such Khas or the Sainchu nala. The Hudan valley is to its north and finally the Sural valley, reputed to be the most beautiful of all, completing the major valleys of the area. Killar the district headquarters is a jumble of several houses and few supplies are available here. The road going along the river proceeds north and northwest of Killar to reach Gulabghad in the Kishtwar district of Kashmir.<sup>2</sup> The areas beyond Killar are at present under terrorist threat and one can safely traverse these roads, thanks only to several army security camps. One of the well-known peak in the Pangi area is Shiva (6142 m) which has been climbed few times, while a few trekking parties enjoy these three valleys and the intervening passes between them. We had decided to enter the Sainchu valley which went deep inside to a vast open ground named Guru ka Alias (Guru's cave). Several passes to the Miyar nala lying to its east connect this valley.

With all arrangements made we walked the first day from Sainchu (2730 m) to Hillu village (2870 m) little short of our goal Tuan. No good camping ground was available near this big village. A vast flood seven years ago had flattened the forest rest house at Tuan filling it with boulders of various sizes. That evening we walked leisurely to house of Bhimchand, an 80-year-old villager whose son had gone across passes to sell yaks in the neighboring Zanskar. Being Buddhist, in one of the adjoining rooms, he had created a small temple for prayers. He had migrated from Lahaul several years ago and had paid generous sums here to people to settle down. His story was typical of majority of population of Pangi. Most of them were migrants who have settled here decades ago and still maintain ties with Zanskar over the high passes. As many Zanskaris also settled down here, Buddhism is the main religion in upper valleys. We proceeded up the valley along the Sainchu nala where it bifurcated into two different valleys, Paphita and Tarundi nals. Crossing over a small rough bridge and partly through the nala, we camped at the beautiful Bhani Guru ka Alias, 'cave of Bhani guru who had stayed here for several years and had died about 12 years ago. Guru ka Alias, a few kilometers away and was reputed to be the place where a great Lama from Zanskar had meditated for several decades. From Guru ka Alias a stiff route crossed a high pass into the Miyar nala and across the Munla Jot or the Kangla Jot to Padum. As three of us went up towards this vast camping ground, two locals appeared from nowhere, returning from Zanskar where they had gone to sell yaks, one of them being Bhimchand's son. Guru ka Alias would qualify as the valley of flowers of Pangi, for we came across large number of species particularly, the blue poppies which were growing in abundance. It was enough to allow a person into a natural meditation.

While we were enjoying the lower valleys, our British friends left for a valley immediately due east of the Bhani Guru camp. They crossed the turbulent river next to the camp with some difficulties and went through a vast open ground where we had spotted a huge brown bear two days ago. Camping at 4200 m next day, they climbed the peak Mund Jot (5134 m) on 14<sup>th</sup> July. Unfortunately the weather closed in, otherwise a most magnificent panorama of the upper Miyar nala would have been theirs. Having spent few wonderful days in the Paphita nala we descended to Tuan for a day of well-earned rest.

Tuan was a wonderful place with a monastery housing some wonderful paintings and a gentle Chomo. Some of us stayed in a house in the village. The village itself was a friendly place with a Buddhist population. In some of the places, near the entrance of the houses, there were small holes with honeybees. Once enough honey was generated inside, the outer wood would be carved out after driving away the bees with smoke and honey would be extracted. There were cows, goats, sheep and farming, a contented place amidst mountains with happy people.

We were now to proceed south and southeast along the Jambu nala for our intended route to Miyar nala. We hired two guides, local *gaddies* called Hardial and his younger companion simply called Munda (a boy). Their story was typical of the lifestyle of *gaddies* prevalent in

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Charlie Clark from our party had traversed from Kishtwar across Pangi to Manali decades ago. He remembered the dangerous trail on the right bank, we could see some remnants of the trail.

the area. They belonged to Rakh village near the town of Chamba. Every year as the summer approached, with almost a thousand sheep, they would cross the high Chobia pass on the Pir Panjal range of the Ravi basin and descend to the Chandrabhaga basin near Udaipur. Slowly moving up the Miyar nala, they would cross one of the high passes into the Pangri to stay there for couple of summer months. As autumn approached they would cross with their flock, the Pimu Jot back to the Miyar nala and crossing to Udaipur they would finally cross Kalicho pass to their homes. Such yearly cycles have continued for these *gaddi* folks for generations. 'Now is the time for education', Hardial said, 'my two sons are studying and the elder one has opened a shop in my village. They don't look after sheep and goats at all'. How long *gaddis* would continue this lifestyle is a big question mark. But quite possibly, the educated *gaddi* children will revitalize the system and something better may emerge, as there is no other alternative for the meat of sheep and goats. They are faced with several problems too.

Initially we did not believe that Hardial and Munda knew the route ahead for they were not able to express exactly where the pass lay. When I persistently asked them Hardial finally said 'To come to Pangri I have to obtain a permit for which I have to pay a bribe. I may not be educated but do you think I am fool to pay a bribe for a pass which I do not know how to cross', and he laughed. As we went up the valley and across the pass, it was evident that the *gaddis* knew every inch of the area. They would return back to the same place within a month with more than thousand sheep. We climbed up the upper Jambu nala valley in three camps. To take advantage of a rest day, Chris Bonington and Charlie Clarke pushed up to climb a peak of 5105 m, which we christened Jambu peak. From there they could observe the Urgus pass (5090 m). This pass was our initial aim but the *gaddies* and the local villagers discouraged us saying that this pass, consisting of small glaciers has now fallen in disuse, as there were several crevasses. The route, which was traditionally followed, has threatening rock cliffs above and in one case in the past, about 20 sheep and goats were killed due to falling debris. Moreover a decade ago, a team of surveyors was trapped near the pass. One of them had fallen into a crevasse and died, wedged between the ice walls. The situation had obviously deteriorated further as we could see so it was certainly wiser to follow the circuitous, higher but safer pass to the northeast. This would entail a 40-km detour but apart from safety it would allow us to observe the upper Miyar nala and its peaks. Thus going up a side valley from foot of Urgus we crossed the Duggal Jot or Pimu pass (5223 m). The upper valley was full of rocks with some ice tongues, which were easier to climb, and the finally a steep slope. The real tiring bit was on the other side of the pass as we had to descend over huge boulders and rough scree to the Pimu glacier.<sup>3</sup>

Not to be satisfied, our approaching 70 years Chris with Charlie decided to stay on the pass literally as we waited in the valley. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July they attempted a peak to the north of the pass, 5480 m, the Pimu peak. It was hard progress as they traversed a long ridge full of gendarmes and the final rock climb was a test of nerves. Traversing the peak at its foot, it was Chris with his enthusiasm who reached the summit alone as we gave out loud shouts from the bottom. We proceeded to a little lower camp below the glacier and finally they caught up with us. It seems they don't make stronger 70 year olds now a days than Sir Chris Bonington !

It was now time to enjoy and relax as we reached the wide-open maidans of upper Miyarnala with several peaks seen in the horizon. We descended along the right bank (though a wide valley and well-trodden track was seen on the west bank) as there was no way to cross the turbulent Miyar and we had to go through a difficult gorge. Once outside the gorge, we passed beautiful villages and crossed the Miyar on an iron rope wire bridge to its left bank. Walking was now much gentler, through forest.

A day before we reached Urgus, Chris, had rushed through that difficult gorge for a long distance causing much anxiety, and some anger in all of us. Next day we gently asked him, 'Shall we have the pleasure of walking with you, Chris?' To give credit where it is due, Chris

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<sup>3</sup> The valleys of Pimu and Miyar have a plethora of peaks to climb from steep rocky peaks, gentle Shiva and high Menthosa (6443 m). Baihali Jot and Dhupeli Jot are other options in these valleys.

who, a day before, was running as if the Indian Air force was after him, walked with all of us as slowly as a revenue official inquiring about taxes in the villages, the next day. That was the hallmark of a true mountain lover who can be as hard as required and as interested as desired. Two days under the poplars in the Urgus valley revived us completely and we were down to the waiting taxis at Tingrat on the way to Manali. The forbidden Pangi still remains a major attraction in my mind and hopefully I will return there someday – hopefully before the next 31 years.