

10

The Bagpipe Treks

Small Treks in Lower Hills of Kumaun and Himachal

Harish Kapadia

An advertisement for a drink shows two friends, seating by a fire place, sipping whisky. 'Few sips and you will hear 100 Bagpipes playing in hills' one of them says. After a few sips the other friend extends his glass with a mischievous smile 'Can I hear some more Bagpipes?'

Visiting Delhi, I would often spend an evening with my friend, philosopher and guide, the famous writer, Bill Aitken. As we sipped whisky, watched cricket and talked mountains, he would have several ideas, enough to fill in a year of trekking. Bill specialises and believes in 'A Lateral Approach to the Himalaya'¹ and would firmly suggest 'more of the lesser'. I would tuck the information away in my mind and when an opportunity arose, I would go on one of these small treks from Delhi. Some were 10 days and some were only four days (return). I like to call them 'The Bagpipe Treks'.

Churdhar

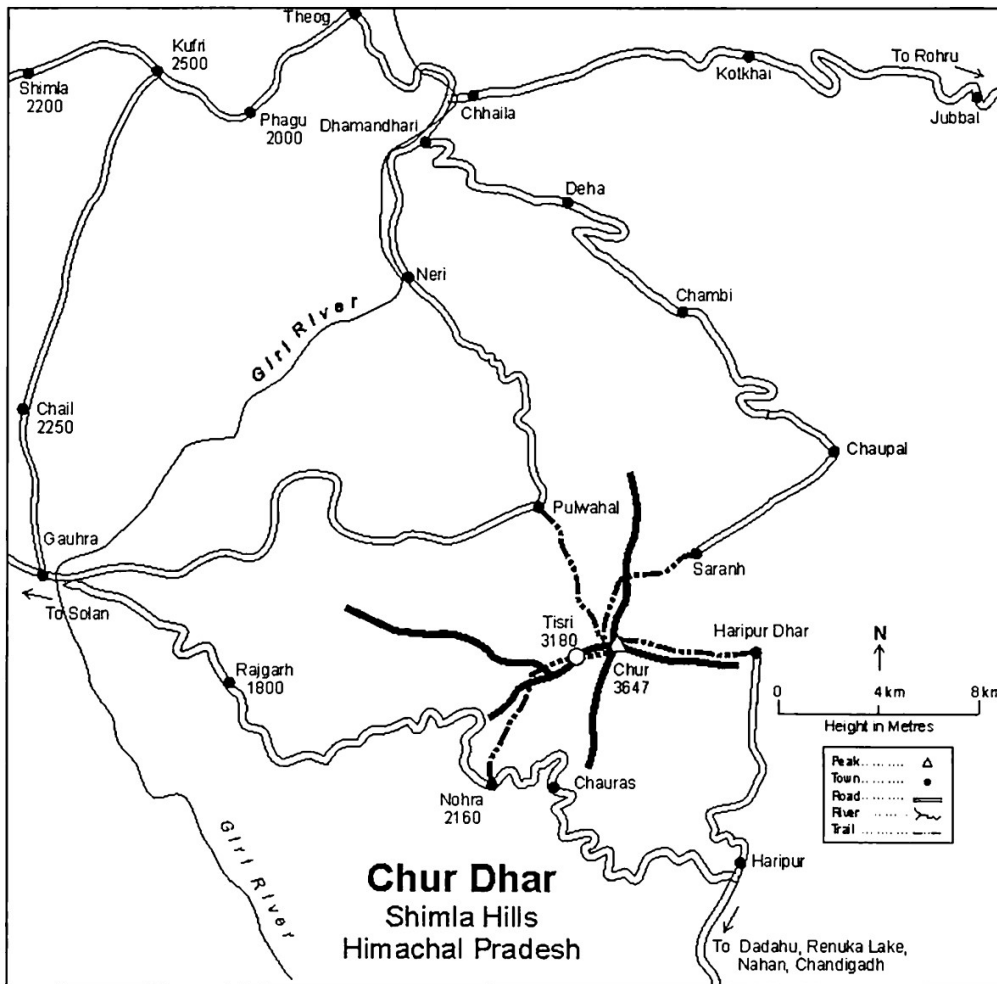
The British called the peak in the foothills around Shimla as 'the Choor'. The Choor according to Lt. White 'is the most lofty eminence belonging to the secondary Himalaya, running south of the great snowy range, from whatever point it may be seen it forms a grand and prominent object, towering majestically amidst host of satellites'.²

I was to see this grand peak in tragic circumstances. Our family friend Major Navneet Vats was killed in an action in Kashmir. He belonged to Chandigarh. I flew from Delhi to Chandigarh to offer condolences to the family. Looking out of the window I could see the Choor, a prominent hill, and the first peak of prominence rising above the plains of Punjab. One early November, keeping aside five days of free time, I planned a quick trip to Churdhar, a well-known point with historical significance and an easy approach.

1. See his article of same title in the *Himalayan Journal*, Volume 57, p.1

2. *Touching Upon Himalaya*, by Bill Aitken, p. 19.

A taxi from Kalka carried us to Rajgadh, which in the early autumn light looked serene and beautiful. Soon we stopped at the small PWD rest house of Nohra (2160 m). That evening to acclimatise we took a short walk to the temple of Kudon devta. A small boy accompanied us as our guide. He was talkative and made good company. As we reached the temple he stopped at the steps below and would not come up with us. When I motioned, 'Why don't you come up?' to him, he smiled and remained away from the parapet. He said villagers would thrash him if he came in for he belonged to a lower caste. Even when we told him that these are things of the past he shook his head, 'Not in this part of the world'.



Early next morning we climbed up steeply to the ridge behind the bungalow and then proceeded along this gentle and lightly wooded ridge to camp that night at Tisri (3180 m). From here we could see much of the Kullu Himalaya, starting from lower peaks to Deo Tibba and

Indrasan. There was light snow around and we sheltered comfortably in a shepherd's hut.

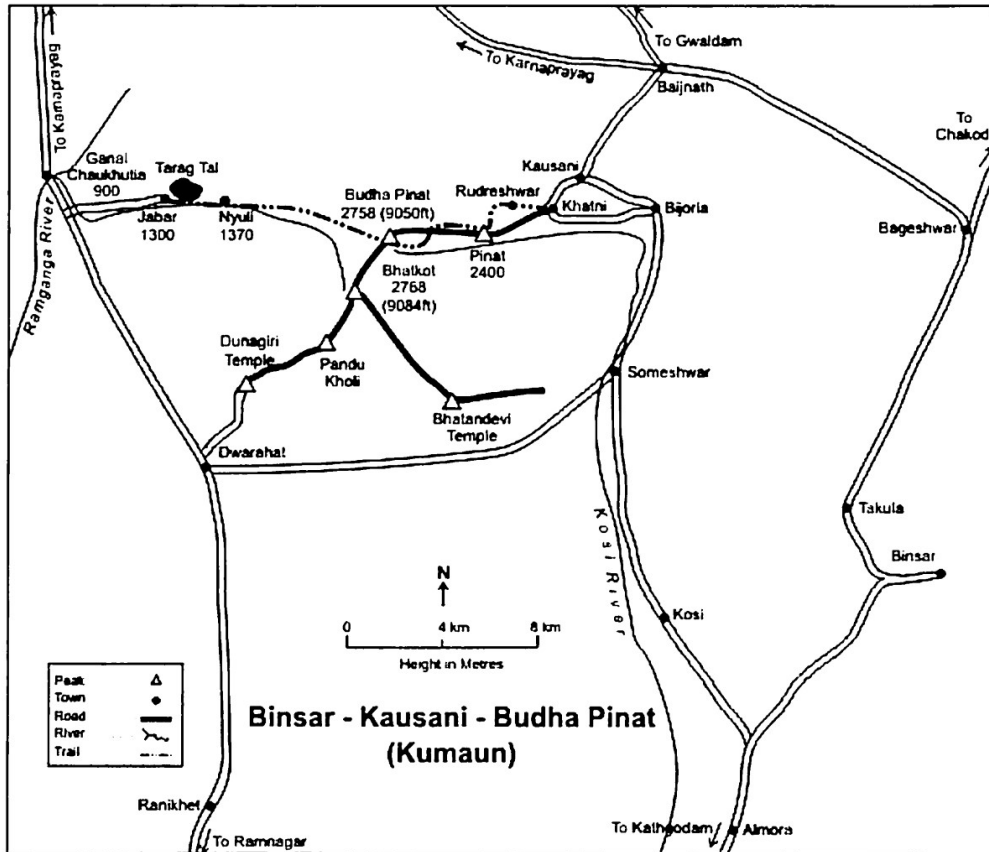
The climb to Churdhar (3647 m) was steep and was more tiring because of snow. We made our way easily to the top to a stupendous 360° view. A statue of Shiva adds those required 5 feet to make it a 12,000 foot peak. We could see the hills of Shimla and completing the view were the peaks towards the south. Legend has it that Churdhar was the nearest point from Delhi where snow could be found even till early summer. The Moghul *Badshahs* (kings) used to organise horsemen who would pick up snow from Churdhar and ride in relay to the Red Fort in Delhi so that the *Badshah* could have a chilled drink in the evening. Whatever may be the truth, the snows of Churdhar were certainly enchanting.

We descended to our camp, packed up and were down to Nohra on the same day, tired but very happy. Perhaps the spirit of my friend Major Vats lives there and had called me to pay obeisance.

Budha Pinath

For a trip to this mountain, Bill Aitken, the master himself, accompanied us. It turned out to be a group of nearly fourteen people of varied interests and strengths. We all gathered at Suman Dubey's lovely bungalow at Kausani (1600 m), enjoying flowers in his garden and the view of the Himalaya. Our trek began the next morning and after crossing a ridge we were at Khatni. Next was the gruelling climb towards the lower Pinath temple (2400 m). It was quite tiring due to a hot sun even though it was late winter. Lack of water made it more exhausting. We reached the temple surrounded by small houses, but to our dismay we discovered that there was not a drop of water to drink.

There were only two alternatives, either to go down or ask our faithful Kumauni young boys to bring water up to this plateau. I wonder how many times during all my treks these sturdy companions have saved the day. We took the second option and very soon a restricted supply of water was available to us. The evening was enjoyable as we listened to Bill's stories and the restless prowling of Suman Dubey who wanted to get on to the summit. We did that early next morning as Suman ran like a hare for he wanted to reach the top and back to his lovely bungalow the same evening. Zigzagging through sparse forest, we followed Suman



who disappeared from view and we were completely unaware of his reaching the top and returning - thus causing a minor anxiety. Maninder, who went down too was asked to wave a umbrella if Suman was at the lower temple and well. It was more confusing as tired Maninder waved the umbrella too briefly for us to see. That caused an animated debate on whether to mount a rescue! Luckily we did not, as I was confident that Suman would be sipping beer by the evening in his garden. He did just that.

On the top of Pinath (2760 m) was a small temple, and evidently some Swami lived here but it seemed not to have been used for sometime. We pitched tents few metres lower and brought up water, again from a little distance. Some of us decided to settle in the temple and spread out our sleeping bags watching the magnificent sunset for nothing obstructed the view from this high conical peak. As we were about to sleep, the owner of this *kutia* arrived, having trekked more than 30 km across the valleys. He looked exhausted and very politely claimed his place. After a long chat, we offered him tea and some food and moved down to our camp to spend a crowded night.



12. Temple without water; halfway up Budha Pinat.



13. The plaque for soldiers.

The return was towards the west as we descended to Nyuli (1370 m) and camped a little before Tarag tal. This was a beautiful valley, but again the lack of water all along was a worrying factor. Tarag tal was a seasonal lake so every monsoon the lake would fill up and later this fertile ground was used to plant crops. We walked through rice fields and as we reached the other side, we met a road with taxis leading us to Ganai Chaukhutia (900 m). As we ended our trek at Ganai Chaukhutia, in a busy bazaar, Bill suddenly called me aside. He pointed to a marble plaque near a bridge. It read, 'Pattis of

Chaukot and Gewar. From this village, 134 men went to the Great War of 1914 - 1919. Of these 112 gave up their lives'. A post box hung near it and in between the hustle and bustle of bazaar, Bill had noticed this historical item. No wonder his keen observations have been reflected in his writings which inspire many like me.

Sometimes friends and the people you work with, frown upon such short quick holidays for it disturbs their rhythm, just as it builds up my rhythm to face the rigours of life. They should spend a week as we did, on Budha Pinath for an answer!

Plan B Shaone Gad, Kinnaur

We were all above 50 years of age, an age when people have often reached pinnacles of their professions but have less physical energy left for exertion. This is specially a time when there is a lack of leisure time, (that's probably why they have reached where they have!). This certainly 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.

Our group was very special- we had three Parsis, Dr. Burjor Banaji, a renowned eye surgeon; Kekoo Colah, the head of a property consulting firm and Pesi Dubash, a freelance photographer. The Parsi community is known for its easygoing lifestyle, making fun of people around including themselves and much laughter. This applied to us also but as someone said, three doses of the same medicine may prove fatal! Also amongst us we had Suman Dubey, a leading journalist from Delhi who had climbed till the South Col of 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 to see the map. Even before we started our trek 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 as we have planned and see how things develop'.

After acclimatisation we climbed up the valley to Mathia thach (4150 m). We camped on a vast open ground and like small children, our three Parsis played 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: ‘sprinkle talcum powder liberally on your body so that the human smell does not reach the bear, show a constantly moving torch to scare him and make 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.



14. Preparing ‘Plan B’. L to r: Suman Dubey, Louise and Gerry Wilson and Harish Kapadia.

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 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 means 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, 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 directly to south. Suman immediately wanted to make that route Plan B but we all had to oppose as it would have taken three extra days and for the professionals,

3. See ‘A Winter Foray’ in *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*, by the author.

time is always at 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 plan A. We rapidly descended the Supin valley and that night camped at Vishkhopri thach (3650 m). This was the most romantic name that I had ever come across in the Himalaya. *Vish* is poison and *khopri* is skull (or brain). The story goes that this grazing ground in height of summer is full of flowers and the fragrance is very strong. Any young boy or girl of Jakhol or Lewari village who comes here is intoxicated. Their heads get filled with the poison of love!

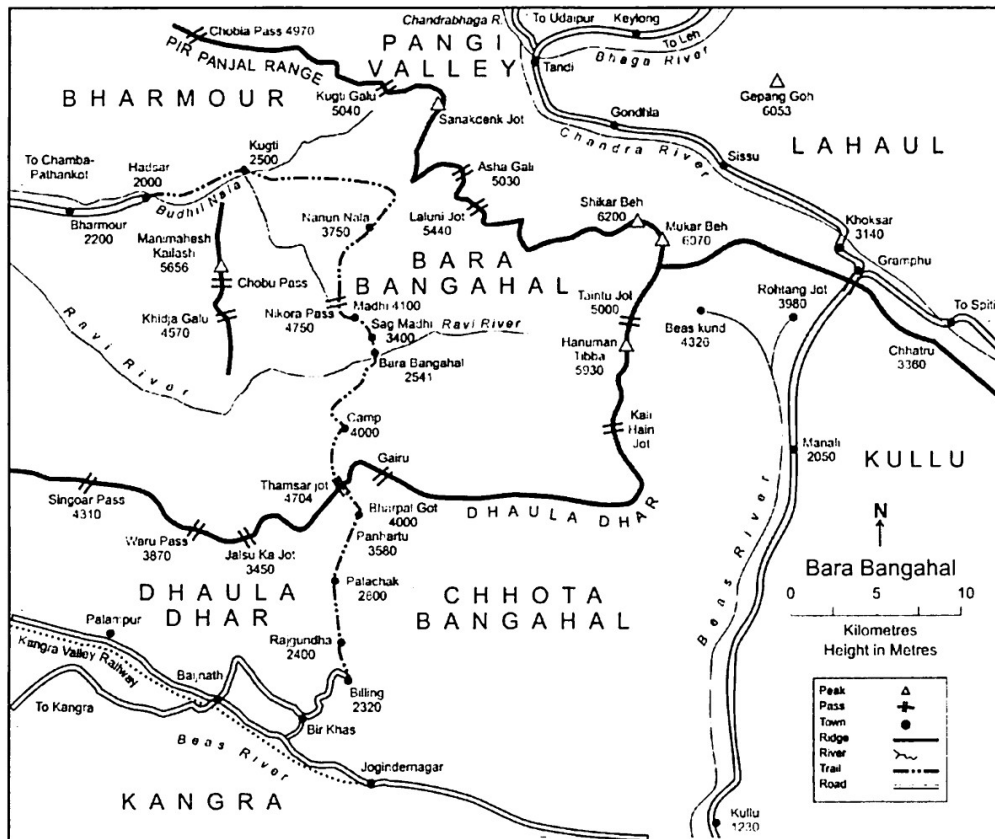
Next evening we were at Lewari (2700 m). The race against time began on 24 September morning. Starting from the remote Lewari we had to reach Dehra Dun the same night for our train to Delhi. In next six hours, by noon, we were at Jakhol and caught a taxi to Sankhri and onwards to Dehra Dun. We kept checking our watches but as we neared the railway station Plan A again 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 the 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 the help of 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' had to travel by this morning's 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 compartment and everyone eagerly waited for the 'Minister' to arrive. And there he was, Suman with a long wooden staff

in his hand walking slowly towards the compartment, acknowledging salutes of the bewildered railway staff. They had never seen a senior minister like him! As he sat down and began eating breakfast, Suman gave the final edict with a grin; ‘Well plan B worked. It always does, doesn’t it?’

Bara Bangahal - The Land of Passes

The Dhauladhar range rises abruptly from the Kangra valley (there are no gentle Shivalik ranges here). This has always been an attractive proposition for those with less time, to visit the Himalaya. It is seen as a long white ridge from the plains of Punjab at the height of summer and hence the name Dhaula (white) Dhar (ridge). Having visited different areas, I was always curious about the land of Bara Bangahal in this range. The map showed a small village surrounded by several high passes, many glaciers and few peaks, which rose from these valleys. Most of these passes were used by gaddies (shepherds) to cross from the Bara Bangahal into Lahaul. From the glaciers emerges the Ravi river which passes the village and through a gorge goes to village Holi and finally to Chamba.



In 1981, with my friend Muslim Contractor, I approached the area hoping to follow the Ravi river upwards from the village Holi. It was early winter and as we proceeded to the first village, they looked at us meaningfully and stated, 'Well if there is no frost or snow on those dangerous slabs you may be able to get into Bara Bangahal'. Before he could complete the sentence, the other villager looking at the cloudy sky emphatically stated, 'You won't be able to come out anyway before winter is over. The first snow will block the route'. Inhabitants evacuate Bara Bangahal village by late autumn leaving only a few caretakers behind. Following the dictum, never ignore local advice, we decided to climb near Jalsu pass and leave Bara Bangahal alone for a future date.

The time for Bara Bangahal finally came only in 2004. I always wondered how it would be to get in or get out along the Ravi gorge, for several villagers seemed to be doing it. But my young climbing friend Monesh Devjani, who had crossed that gorge stated, 'That's the most difficult and dangerous thing I have done in my life', and he had climbed Panch Chuli little before that. I decided to be wiser and we selected to get in from the well-trodden Thamser Jot, one of the most popular routes to enter the Bara Bangahal valley. Shepherds with thousands of sheep (no exaggeration) and mules use it and so do most of the population of Bara Bangahal. We (Drs. Girish and Rekha Lad and I) travelled from Pathankot to Baijnath (via Palampur) and Billing on a clear sunny day.

Crossing Chhanai pass (2800 m), across which lay the wide valley of Chota Bangahal, we tried to find out who the Bangahalis were and why the names Chota and Bara Bangahal existed. We heard several stories. Some thought that Bangahal means high peak and the village Bara Bangahal lies beyond high peaks, which according to them are at least one metre higher than any peak in the Dhauladhar. Rajgundha, which we reached soon was also the seat of one of the Rajas and was part of the Mandi state. Once the Raja of Bara Bangahal attacked and conquered Rajgundha, and established the Chota Bangahal. The Raja of Mandi ultimately defeated the Bangahali Raja but the name and the legend remain.

The valley from Rajgundha (2400 m) leads in easy stages to Palchak (2800 m) and Panhartu (3580 m) to cross Thamser Jot (4704 m). We were there in the middle of June so there was almost a traffic jam on Thamser

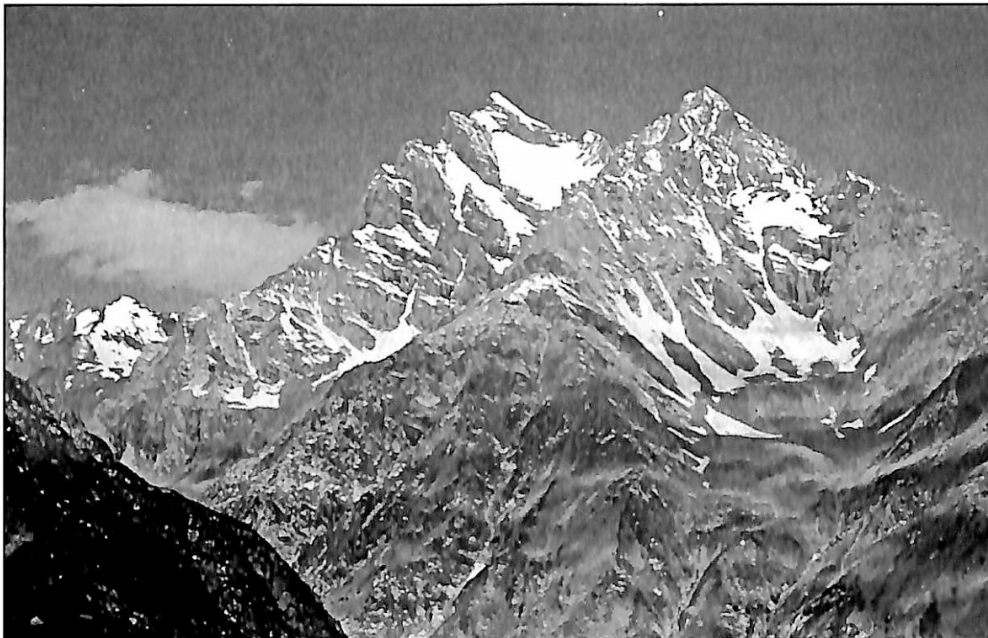
Jot as sheep, mules and several locals were crossing over. After a camp we descended to the main bowl of the valley. A village north of the Ravi stood in an elongated line with a lovely rest house amidst pines nestling in the southernmost part. It was sparsely populated and everybody went about their work hardly noticing us. Time was of essence and the two summer months had to be utilised thoroughly. The Bara Bangahal remains out of bounds for six months and is approachable only when the passes open, so anyone trapped inside has to remain there for the whole winter. There is electricity and a well run primary school. The valley people shift every six months from the Bara Bangahal (2541 m) to Kangra.

Once inside the valley we had to get out, but where from was the question. We had just about five days to return to Pathankot so time was of essence to us. By crossing the Ravi gorge to Narayangaon and Holi, in about three days we could be at the road head to catch a bus. Various views and advice about that gorge route were offered to us. 'My district forest officer came by that route, a little plump gentleman, but he managed'. As we felt little hopeful, he added, 'but he could not sleep for six days after that!' The local shopkeeper, a very unfit gentleman who comes here every year, almost rolled his eyes 'Oh! The Ravi route, oh my God, I was sleepless for months after that. I have done it only once'. But several villagers assured us that it was not as bad as its reputation. 'Women, school children and even goats come across this route. It is only that you must hold your nerve and don't look down at the Ravi 600 m below the rock slab. You have to traverse with your heart in your mouth and you will be there. Up to now not a single child or a person has fallen to their death in the gorge.' We debated for a while, finally mustered courage and with a few local supporters decided to go across the Ravi gorge, which even the guidebook declared to be very dangerous and difficult.

As both Girish and Rekha were doctors, several villagers visited them for medicines. The evening before our departure, came an elderly lady. When she was given her dose of medicines, as a parting 'blessing', she said, 'So you are returning tomorrow by the Ravi gorge. Please be careful, it is very dangerous. I will pray for you'. Girish, Rekha and me looked at each other aghast. Here is how a kindly lady blesses you after being looked after... surely there is something wrong with this route. Instantly we rushed to the village, hired two guides and decided to go

across 4749 m high Nikora Jot into the Kugti valley through which the map showed an exit.

Nikora pass is a steep and high climb followed by a steep descent on the Kugti side. On 20th June, with two guides we climbed first on grass and later on rocks, camping at Sagmadhi (3400 m) and the Nikoramadhi (4100 m) at the foot of the pass. Both were traditional camping places but what lay ahead was a high barren ridge. On the 22nd we reached the pass, situated on a small depression between two rock points. Weather was poor and the descent on the other side, took our breath away. But after a camp we descended the Nanun nala, camping at two places, with view of Chamba Kailash (5656 m).



15. Chamba Kailash (5656 m).

We managed to reach Kugti (2500 m) late in the evening. When I was here in 1983, the road to Kugti was under construction and I had assured my companions that with 20 years of progress this road would be ready so we could expect some transport at the Kugti village. But to my horror, the road was still under construction! We could not get any transport before reaching Hadsar. So we walked again on this so-called road with several ups and downs to Dron (2200 m), a half way stage where we spent a miserable night with several insects swarming over us. Starting at 4.00 a.m. we reached the bridge below Hadsar where to our great relief, a jeep had just arrived with pilgrims. We immediately

hired it and drove towards Chamba. His diesel ran out 2 km short of Chamba and we had to change taxis and drive fast to reach Pathankot station in time for our train.

The steep rock face of high Nikora pass, the incomplete road to Kugti and a diesel less taxi - are all part of the adventure of trying to exit from Bara Bangahal. The choice is either that or crossing the Ravi gorge over dangerous slabs and not sleeping for six nights after that. What would you prefer? I hope to find out someday soon.

After all such enjoyable ventures I can extend my glass like Oliver Twist and ask, 'Can I have some more?' And also hear more tunes of the Bagpipes!

Summary :

Four short treks in the Indian Himalaya.