

Mobile With Mobile

A trek in the Pabar

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We were camping in centre of Janglikh village at 2650 m. This was the end of civilization in the Pabar valley for there were no villages beyond. We had travelled from Shimla to Rohru and drove on a narrow to Deudi. After a short trek we reached Janglikh with a traditional temple in Kinnauri style dominating the landscape. The village had a fairly large school as well.

In the evening we came across some ladies and family in a traditional Kinnauri dress climbing above the village with a purpose.

‘Where are you all going?’

‘To the STD booth’ they said with a smile. In India the STD booth is a telephone centre from where you can make calls anywhere in India and an ISD is a term for international calls.

‘Do you have a STD booth so higher up in a remote place like this?’

‘Come with us we will show you, we have the mobile.’

Above the village overlooking the approaching valley was a small ledge. The villagers by experience had discovered that by keeping their cell phones (known here as mobile) in a particular direction they could make calls anywhere in India or abroad. We saw them merrily talking to family and friends down in the valley and we too made telephone calls learning the technique.

Instead of laying wires for landline connections in these remote Himalayan villages, the Indian government had a policy by which any company can erect mobile towers in different valleys which without any land wiring connections would provide telephone facilities. These towers gave a wide coverage till a good height. In fact higher you go better was the coverage. Suddenly these villagers, who had never used or seen a telephone, saw a paradigm shift in their lives and were straight into the mobile age. With such connectivity they were learned to use the internet and other facilities like short messaging services (SMS) and remain in contact with their family down the valley or in cities. Villagers, school teachers, temple priests, shepherds for that matter anyone living in the valleys had a mobile phone which are rather cheap in India. Good connectivity and services are offered at reasonable rates. We were witnessing a mini revolution being surrounded by mobile towers, television disks, electricity and all other modern amenities high in the Himalaya. The Himachal Pradesh was particularly well served by telephone network. A person from their state was a minister for communication in the Delhi government few years ago !

One afternoon I met a chirpy girl, Minu in Tagnu village. In an hour that I spent, she became very friendly and started asking several questions about life in a city, facilities and what all she can expect. I told her about television, telephones, education, transport, water supply and lots of people. She thought for a while and said, ‘we have all these things here, only instead of people, we have trees’ and she laughed. My British friends teased me as ‘Casanova Kapadia’ at this interactions. In the villages an elder is called ‘Uncle’. For an elder with respect or old person a ‘ji’ added, ‘uncle ji’. To amusement of my friends I was addressed as ‘Kapadia ji’. I had arrived at threshold of mature age!

After few days of trekking we were standing at Buran Ghati (4724 m). Immediately the mobiles were out, for at this height, we could get mobile signals from Sangla. Many of us could talk and send short messages to amazement of our friends in India and impressing our friends abroad. We descended to Sangla over ice, clutching our mobiles in hand.

We drove back via Sarahan and Shimla. We travelled in two taxis, one filled with our luggage and the other with us, all talking with a great satisfaction of a trip well done. As we visited the Mahakali temple at Sarahan, several processions of devtas were led through the streets to the main temple. Many people were dancing, priests were leading the way with followers talking on mobiles ! By late evening it was dark and our taxi with our luggage had still not arrived. But no cause to worry, for the driver carried a mobile phone and every half an hour we were informed at what point he is and when he is arriving.

Being mobile on a trek in the Himalaya with a mobile had its advantages. I may add that in spite of mobiles and other developments the valleys are still enchanting, beautiful and people welcoming. As we had left Tagnu village, Minu asked for my phone number, which I wrote down. 'What is this number, it looks weird'. She could not understand that it was landline number in Mumbai.

Looking seriously at me she asked, 'Don't you have mobiles in the city. We have many here.'