

Many a slip..

Dr Burjor Banaji

‘Hey Harish, I’ve found the path’.. This as I stepped over the lip of a deep rock filled gully in the Kumaun.

The rock under my right foot started sliding - not an uncommon occurrence on such terrain. Surprisingly, my next mental impression was the cloudless blue sky. In a split second, I went down head first, somersaulting in the air thrice and landing each time on boulders of varying size and sharpness. Each landing was accompanied by loud animal sounds as the air exploded from my lungs. There was no panic, other than the thought of ‘when the hell will this stop’ and amazement at my utter inability to arrest the incredible momentum of my descent. Funnily enough, it was a frantic though peaceful experience.... but one who’s after effects I am still reminded of each day.

I finally came to rest about forty feet below, face down on a large granite boulder and inches away from a razor sharp rock’s edge. I was



36. Surviving the fall..

aware of an irritating droning sound, which for some reason I mistook for a goat – soon realising that the inhuman sounds were my own interrupted groans of pain. The right side of my jaw hurt like hell and I couldn't close my mouth. A steady stream of blood dripped from my nose and gently trickled on the sparkling grey granite inches from my eye, contrasting bright red against the grey flecked stone in a surreal parody of modern art. I was in trouble.

'Shit! This is serious stuff.' I started assessing the damage to my body. I closed one eye and then the other and checked my vision. All well.. brain ok. Then I wiggled my fingers and gently moved my arms an inch or so..They moved. I then wiggled my toes.. to my great relief, they moved too. I had not severed my spinal cord. All the time I could hear Harish and Vijay Crishna calling my name but was in no condition to respond. I gingerly moved my left leg. Harish saw this from the ridge and heaved a sigh of relief. I could hear them descending. I lay still waiting for help.

It all started when Harish Kapadia sent me an e mail. 'What sort of a chap is Vijay Crishna? Should we invite him for our trek?' With a two thumbs up endorsement, our happy party of three trundled off the Delhi railway station toward the hills and adventure. Half hour into the journey, loud expletives from Vijay's cubicle. 'I've forgotten all my f...g money in Mumbai!!' Ten minutes later; 'Oh, here it is. Fancy that.' Shades of Chris Bonington. It was going to be a great trip.

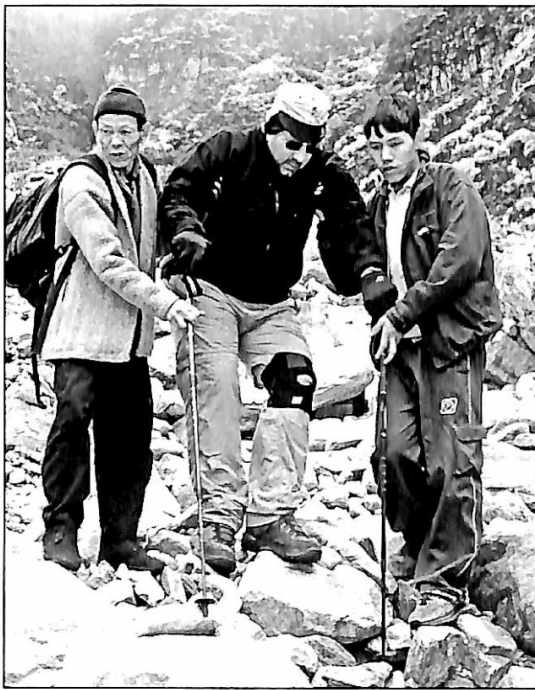
Harish and I share an easygoing, happy relationship based on mutual irreverence much to the amusement and delight of his other buddies, for whom he assumes an almost divine and Himalayan significance. Make no mistake, in the hills, Harish's writ is law (right or wrong!) and I am very happy to shuffle in his footsteps when he is conducting the symphony. Why reinvent the wheel?! Shamefacedly, I must admit too often not even knowing in which area of the Himalaya we are trekking, until after we are significantly deep into the hills. Vijay, on the other hand was deeply seized of local lore, customs, villages, history and everything short of the toilet habits of the indigenous fauna. You can therefore imagine his reaction to my opening salvo of 'I say Harish, where the bloody hell is Nainital on the map?'

The sound of measured footsteps and his characteristic cough heralded Harish's approach. The evening before, we had together

climbed this long broken gully after fording a swift river. I hate walking on this lose, precarious boulder filled terrain and mentioned it to Harish. 'Oh I love it! When I see these boulders, I just shoot up them like a Bharral.' I laughed out loud at the delicious image of my stocky friend prancing nimbly from rock to rock like a mountain goat.

By now Vijay had called the porters and asked them to bring up my bag containing a comprehensive first aid kit. Harish and Vijay managed to get me in a sitting position. I was cold, in shock, and constantly assessing my injuries. I knew for sure that the trek was over. I was certain that I had broken some ribs. If one of them had punctured a lung, I was a gonner. I inhaled deeply. Short of excruciating pain, airflow in and out of my lungs was good. Pain, I would manage. There was a constant buzz of activity around me. Someone put on my duvet and Harish asked the porters to whip up that universal specific so beloved of us all, the cup of 'chai'. I swallowed enough painkillers to anaesthetise a herd of buffalo. They would take effect shortly and help me overcome the ordeal that was certain to follow. The evening before, I was worried that the river crossing would infect a recently operated ingrown toenail. How priorities change.

I was slowly lifted to my feet. I could stand without pain but needed support. When I tried a step, the pain unrolled like a carpet, in a cascade



37. Crossing the rocks.

from my neck down to the back of my calves. So much so that I needed to be held up and my breath came in short spasmodic gasps. This was the first time I felt momentary fear. I looked down this waterfall of boulders, tumbling to the distant river we had crossed yesterday. I couldn't lift one foot by myself, how would I get down this maze – leave alone manage a river crossing?! The porters, one on each side, supported me under my armpits. Another held my waist from behind and yet

another lifted my foot and placed it on a rock in front of me – and I took my first step. Each step of the way to our camp, we managed thus. The pain was sickening but I was moving and I let out a little cheer inside.

Throughout this drama, Harish uncovered an as yet hidden talent – that of a paparazzi. ‘Arre Burjor – Look this way. Smile! What is this stupid face you are making? You call that a smile? Smile! Wah Burjor. Wah! ... Now turn your face the other way so that I can get all the blood...’

‘ I have only 6 pictures of my accident (when he fell into a crevasse and broke his hip) – but don’t worry, I am taking enough pictures for your grand children’. This, just as I was wondering if I would ever see my children again. So much for melodrama.

The night was the worst night of my life. Looking after me like mother hens throughout the day, my two friends retired to their tents. I lay alone with my thoughts. The next day was a make or break day. I needed to get down the rock fall, cross the river and ascend the other side of the valley – after which the route was fairly straightforward to a Shepherd’s hut. Like in life, when confronted with a seemingly insurmountable problem, it helps to tackle it in pieces. I thus resolved to first concentrate on the descent with no thought of the river and to take it literally one painful step at a time. The next step however was getting through the night. I had taken as full a dose as possible of painkillers throughout the day and did not want to take enough to cloud my concentration the next day. I had examined myself in some detail during the day. I had a few broken ribs on the right side for sure. My nose had broken. My left knee was twisted, my left hamstring muscle was torn. My right thigh had a haematoma (blood clot) the size of a small coconut. The muscles between my shoulder blades were torn and I had split my scalp somewhere at the back of my head. I could not close or open my mouth without pain, but that was due to the knocks I took to my temple and muscle bruising. All in all, trivial injuries compared to the nightmare of a spinal injury or a punctured lung. But here’s the thing. It took me two hours to get up from a lying into a sitting position. Another half hour to kneel and another age to open the zip of my tent (yes you can use your teeth to bite into the zip and move it along). A further 15 minutes to unbutton my trousers before I could relieve myself at the door of my tent. I don’t think my friends slept much either, with my constant groans and grunts of pain.

The next morning Harsingh (Jr.) and Chamusingh one on either arm, escorted me down the rock fall. The whole porter team pitched in, to literally rearrange the whole length of the rockfall so that I would have to take only small steps and step on only flat rocks. It was nothing short of amazing and incredibly touching. Of course, with all the fervour of a newfound convert, I was peppered with questions from the man behind the video camera.

‘Burjor, tell me, was your wedding procession as long as this one?... Answer me!!’. And procession it was indeed, with the porters arranging all the rocks just so, lifting my feet and placing them on the flattest most stable of rocks, till I was safely by the river bed.

Odd as it may seem, I don’t really mind river crossings. I like the mental process of ignoring the ice cold water, the concentration needed to negate fear and dare I say it, the tingle of fear itself. Harsingh on one arm and with the support of two ski sticks, we were across in no time. Mind you, I nearly took a tumble as I sunk almost waist deep, but the steady arm of Harsingh pulled me through. A roaring fire on the other side dried us off. Once that was behind us, we slowly climbed up the other side to a path that took us out of this remote valley. Harish remained with me the whole way. Despite his jokes I could read concern in his eyes and I knew he was looking for any sign that telegraphed for help.

Later that night after dinner, Harish and Vijay told me they thought I was dead at the bottom of the gully. Harish was certain I had ‘gone’ when I did not respond to his calls.

‘You just fell face forward like a sack of potatoes’ then holding up his fat fingers in a Churchillian salute ‘actually, like two sacks of potatoes!’

The next day was grueling and hot. I expected it to be, so I loaded a syringe with a strong painkiller and injected myself with it as and when the pain became unbearable. I could feel the broken ribs grating against each other and whilst it wasn’t painful per se, it was an unpleasant experience. To keep my mind engaged, I designed a chest splint. If I could cut up my foam mat into a waistcoat and line it with bamboo readily available in the jungle, it would splint my rib cage and cut down on the flex of my spine. I was sure it would reduce the pain. When we



38. Bambo strips that saved pain.

got to our destination I gathered a team of friendlies and like a *pucca* sahib directed operations seated in a chair. The whole village got into the spirit of things and one of our porters actually improved on my masterpiece by slicing the thin bamboos vertically and intricately weaving them together by string. A bit of duct tape kept the bamboos in place and voila, I was ready to be strapped in. As soon as it was wrapped around me, I felt vastly better. The dozen or so bamboo kept my back straight and my ribs immobile. Problem

was, I looked like a bright yellow canary and a fat one at that.

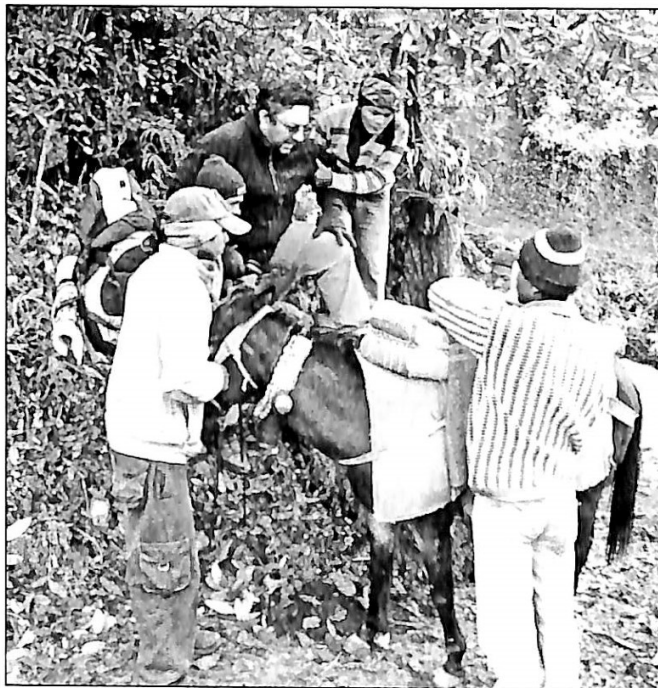
Somewhere along the walk, Harish asked Harsingh if he could get us a mule to carry me out ‘ Make it a large one. Dr Sahib is heavy.’

‘Oh don’t worry Sir our mules can carry upto one quintal (100 Kg.) in weight.’

‘Wah! Dr Sahib weighs one quintal fifteen!’

‘Ah, then maybe two mules?’ And so it was to be. Two days later, as if by magic, two mules made their way to our camp .. to begin the ordeal of their lives!!

Riding a mule, is an art form in itself.



39. Poor mule !



40. End of rescue at Bageshwar.

Without a saddle and with ropes as stirrups, it was a steep and somewhat terrifying learning curve. Going downhill was particularly nauseating. For reasons best known to themselves the mules would negotiate bends on the outside of the curve only. Sometimes this had me leaning back precariously with the valley hundreds of feet below, framed like a gun sight between two long hairy ears. After a few of these high pulse rate manoeuvres, I resolved to keep my eyes tightly shut

and trust in the lord whenever we approached a precipice. Three days of this, and we were finally at the road head.

A hugely bumpy ride by jeep brought us to Bageshwar where I phoned a friend in Delhi informing him about my condition. He owns the largest chain of hospitals in north India and arranged for an aerial evacuation to Delhi the next morning. Harsingh was to accompany me to Delhi by road but now that the plane had been arranged, I thought it was the least I could do to treat him to his first plane journey. As we approached Pantnagar, my



41. The last laugh! Burjor with Vijay Crishna (centre) and Harish Kapadia.

mobile phone rang. It was the pilot, informing me that they would be landing in fifteen minutes. We pulled into the airport just as the plane kissed the tarmac. Ten minutes later we were airborne. Sweet!!

There was an ambulance and a car waiting for me on the tarmac as we landed at Delhi. I did not feel like an ambulance case, so I hopped into the car and Harsingh and my luggage entered the ambulance. Mistake. With sirens blaring, the ambulance sliced through the Delhi traffic and I was stuck in an automotive molasses.

Meanwhile drama was unfolding at the hospital.. The emergency medicine and Orthopaedic departments had been informed of a serious mountaineering injury to a close friend of the Chairman's. They turned up in full force to attend to the victim. As the ambulance pulled into the bay, the doors were slammed open. The attendants rushed in. The stretcher was rolled out and emerged with my large North Face bag and ski sticks. 'Where's Dr Banaji ??!!' Things got a bit frantic.

And then on cue, out stepped Harsingh; eyes wide as saucers, as he was pounced on by the medical crew, deaf to his protestations, until one of the staff who knew me, set things straight for the poor man.

The next few hours went by in a haze. I actually slept soundly for an hour and a half in the noisy MRI machine. By the evening I got to know the full extent of my injuries. I had sustained sixteen fractures. Eight ribs, seven vertebrae – and my nose. But for providence, my two friends and the empathetic caring team of porters, this adventure in the hills might well have had quite a different ending.

Summary :

Dr Burjor Banaji survived a serious fall in the Kafni glacier (off the Pindari trail), Kumaun, in November 2008.

(All photographs by Harish Kapadia)