

## A Ringing Revolution

Harish Kapadia

A revolution is taking place in the Himalaya. The slow progress of last few decades has gained momentum and lives of villagers and visitors are changing fast. There are roads now often extended up to borders, deep inside the ranges. These have allowed easier access to the plains and therefore, goods available in towns to reach villages. This development has brought prosperity at the price of the environment, with hordes of pilgrims, visitors and security forces. Everyone is using transport instead of going across a pass to meet a relative that too by 'share a taxi' where you pay for a seat in an over crowded taxi. Buses are fewer and private cars rule the road as young people with good earnings from government jobs come home to meet parents who are farmers.

Roads have brought many benefits too, for example, in the fields of education and communications. There are schools even at Milam, in the eastern Kumaun which is a five-day walk away from the roadhead Munsiary. Many children are sent to boarding schools in the foothills to study. Children of my friends from Kumaun stay at Almora, learn computers, English and send e-mails. To arrange a trek I can send an e-mail and the children communicate the message to their parents who will do the needful! Even postal departments accept 'E-mail telegrams' – you send a telegram from Mumbai, which will be e-mailed to the nearest post office and a print out is sent to the village in a day or two.

On an expedition to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary five years ago most of the porters signed for their wages. Hardly anyone used their thumb impression as a signature, like they would in



19. TV antenna on a traditional Kinnauri house. (Harish Kapadia)

the earlier days. There are banks at bigger villages leading to wise savings and investments – many villagers have more money than we can imagine. Shepherds sometime sell off the livestock, put the money in a bank and live comfortably on the interest that they earn.

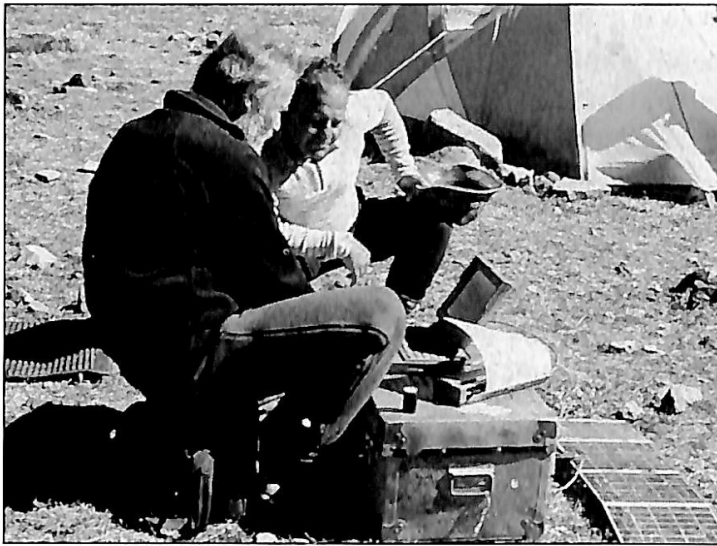
There are hydro electric projects so in remote villages, you will find lights. With it comes television and the ‘Direct to Home Service’ which beams a couple of dozen channels, including foreign ones. Once I watched the Wimbledon finals, with snow peaks just outside my window. Life style changes are evident too. Educated youngsters do not want to follow goats and cows for days on end, or till the land. They would prefer to work in an office, earn a disposable income and buy requirements and luxuries. Nowadays, shepherds and farmers seem to be either from poor families or of a lower caste. The long term impact of this remains to be seen as finally there is no substitute for meat, milk and food grain! Laws are also changing to overcome caste barriers.

There is awareness which democracy, now in India for almost 60 years, has brought. People know their rights, can talk to local officials and magistrates and elect their local Pradhan in village (Panchayat) elections. In my friends’ village, a lady was elected boss during the last elections! In 1952, election of the first President of India was challenged as ballot boxes from the remote Spiti area were not counted. Courts ordered an election which was held no sooner snow on the passes melted. The ballot boxes were carried for 10 days on mules to some of the most difficult areas, before the highest office in India could be legitimised.<sup>1</sup>

We do not live in Pluto’s Republic hence all these developments have their side effects too. Villagers now resort to costly court cases for disputes instead of looking for amicable solutions at home. Education and desire for prosperity are accompanied by frustrations due to a shortage of jobs and relative poverty in comparison with people in the plains. This is the basis for the ‘Maoist movement’ in these areas. On a trek in Kinnaur I could see so-called development happening around Chhitkul. Hotels and guest houses were coming up. That afternoon there were a few buses and at least thirty cars which brought tourists. Little dhabas were springing up. Sangla was also witnessing hectic development to cater for tourists. Same was the case in other small or remote villages which had any tourist potential.

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1. *Men and mules on mission of democracy* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1960), by Parmananda Sharma.

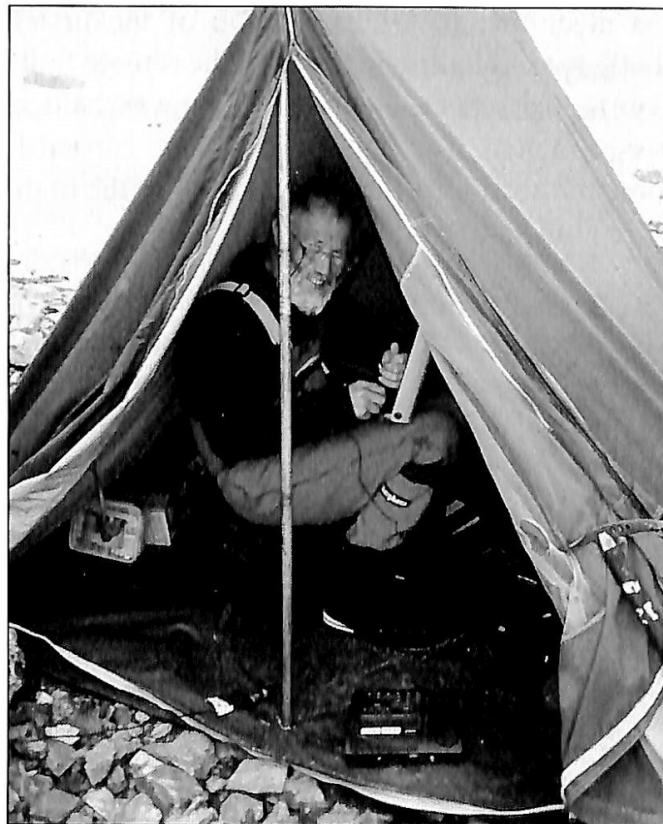


20. Bonnington teaching technology to Kapadia. (M.H. Contractor)

Technology was always part of the Himalayan expeditions. In various forms it was used by many climbers. Satellite phones, wireless walkie-talkies and internet at the Everest base camp has long replaced mail-

runners. I remember a senior bank executive talking on a conference call with New York from the Tibetan plateau while Yaks were grazing around him. Sir Chris Bonington now for many years has carried several gadgets on our lovely expeditions. At the base camp Chris would set up e mail accounts for all of us, imploring us to rush to his shaded

tent to check what scolding one receives from one's wife! One of the earliest computer lessons that I received were at the base camp of an expedition to Kinnaur as Chris enthusiastically started teaching me how to print an address on an envelope. After ten failed attempts, ultimately I wrote it by hand. Almost two decades ago he was working on a computer at a



21. Bonnington on E-mails. (Harish Kapadia)

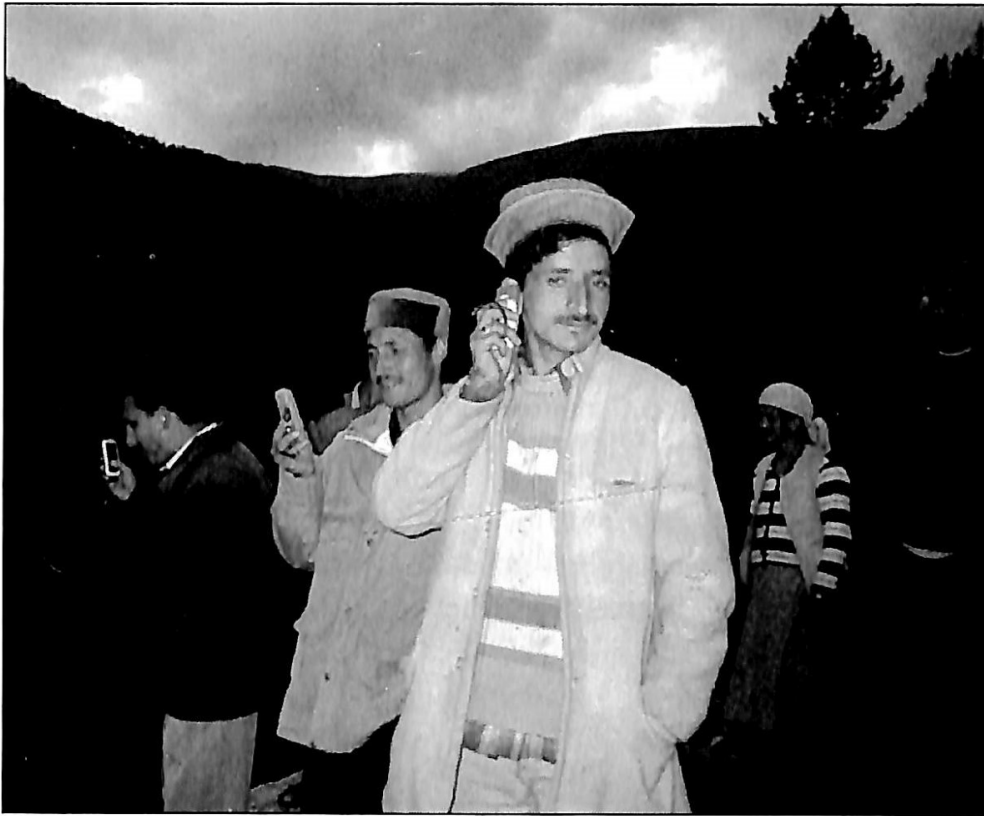
roadside dhaba while women were carrying fodder and water home. Perhaps a difference of a generation. But it took little less than a decade before the villages caught up. Now the 'reverse swing' is taking place as the villagers are into these technologies in a major way and are technology literate.

### **Mobile with Mobile**

Of all the revolutions, a not so silent one is the increased telephony deep inside the valleys. In fact this year a climber talked from the summit of Everest on a cell phone (popularly known in this part of the world as a 'mobile')!

Instead of laying wires for landline connections in these remote Himalayan villages, the Indian government created a policy which allowed any company to erect mobile towers in different valleys. These towers would provide telephone facilities in these remote areas without the hassle of laying wires. Suddenly villagers, who had never seen or used a telephone, saw a paradigm shift in their lives and went straight into the mobile age. With such connectivity they learnt to use internet and other facilities such as short messaging services (SMS) and thus remain in contact with their loved ones down the valley. Villagers, school teachers, temple priests, shepherds for that matter anyone living in the valleys has a mobile phone which is rather cheap in India and has good connectivity. We are witnessing a mini revolution, surrounded by mobile towers, television dishes, electricity and other modern amenities, high in the Himalaya (ugly mobile towers breaking pristine Himalayan views, notwithstanding). Himachal Pradesh is particularly well served by telephone networks as they had a Minister from this State in the Central government few years ago who looked after communication portfolio!

Imagine how things have changed. A decade ago I had to write a letter to my porters at least a month ahead, asking them to meet me at a fixed place to start the expedition. Now I call the leader on his mobile a week before I leave. His wife tells me that Harsinh has gone to the field but she will call him. She dials another mobile number, using a neighbour's mobile and he comes running! Everything is arranged and we decide to meet at a remote village in the northeast. Instead of deciding on a fixed address we agree that once there, we will connect on our mobiles for coordination!



22. 'Pabar Telecom'! (Stephen Venables)

Here is a charming example of what I mean :

We were camping in centre of Janglikh village at 2650 m. This was the end of civilisation in the Pabar valley for there were no villages beyond. We had travelled from Shimla to Rohru and had driven on a narrow track 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 in traditional Kinnauri dress climbing above the village with a purpose.

'Where are you all going?' we asked.

'To the STD booth' they said with a smile. In India the STD (Subscriber's Trunk Dialling) booth is a telephone centre from where you can call nationally and an ISD (International Subscriber's Dialling) is a facility to make international calls.

'Do you have an STD booth so high in a remote place like this?'

'Come with us, we have the mobile' they laughed.

Above the village overlooking the approaching valley was a small ledge. The villagers by experience had discovered that by keeping their cell phones at an angle they could make calls anywhere in India or abroad. We saw them merrily chatting with family and friends lower down in the valley and for that matter anywhere in the world. We too made telephone calls learning the technique of standing at a particular angle and talking.

Next afternoon I met a chirpy girl, Minu in Tagnu village. In an hour we became friends and she began to ask several questions about life in a city, facilities and what she could expect. I told her about television, telephones, education, transport, water supply and lots of people. She thought for a while and said laughing, 'we have all these things here, only instead of people, we have trees'. My British friends teased me calling me 'Casanova Kapadia' at this interactions. In India, an elder is called 'Uncle'. To give the term more respect, a 'ji' is added as in 'uncle ji'. To the great amusement of my friends I was addressed as 'Kapadia ji'. I had arrived at threshold of a mature age!

We trekked towards Buran Ghati, the pass leading into Kinnaur. After making a camp near foot of the pass by noon we were standing at Buran Ghati (4724 m). Immediately, mobiles were brought out, for at this height, we could get mobile signals from Sangla. Many of us could talk and send SMS to the amazement of our friends in India and abroad. We descended over ice and after a camp reached Sangla in the centre of Kinnaur.

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 made. As we visited the Mahakali temple at Sarahan, several processions of devtas filled the streets to the main temple. People were dancing, priests leading the way and, followers talking on mobiles ! By late evening it was dark and the taxi with our luggage had still not arrived. But no cause to worry, for the driver had a mobile and informed us of his whereabouts every half an hour.

Being mobile with a mobile has its advantages and may I add that despite mobiles and other development, these 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 it because

it was a landline number in Mumbai, and she was familiar only with mobile numbers!

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

More such experiences were to follow on my trek with British friends in Garhwal. Visiting the holy Hindu shrine of Badrinath, we could see mobiles being used everywhere. Inside the temple priest was performing a special puja - for some old gentleman in Delhi who was listening to the proceedings live through a mobile held in the inner sanctum. We had a private audience with the traditional high priest. He ran a school next door, there was a temple where a pre recorded discourse was being played on a Bose sound system, and there was a community screen to show religious DVDs to aspiring students. We discussed history and the year that his predecessor Adi Shankracharya centuries ago would have crossed Mana pass into Tibet, if at all. As we had different points of view, out came his laptop on which he checked ancient Hindu texts which had been scanned and recorded there. Not finding the answers, he picked up his mobile and referred to his library in Delhi ! That's the synthesis between traditional thoughts and modern facilities in the remote Himalaya -the best of east and west!

We were at Auli, a ski resort above Joshimath. Mobiles worked only at a point about a kilometre away. Mark Higton, immediately left for the spot with his mobile registered in England but operational here, in front of Nanda Devi. He called the London Police department. The call was diverted to an operator in Scotland. Giving his credit card number, Mark paid the fine for a traffic violation in London, to avoid penalties - it was the last day to do so. The Scottish operator murmured in amazement at the end of it all, 'No one has paid us traffic fines from high Himalaya, Sir!'

### **Summary:**

A revolution sweeping the Himalaya.