

## Two Walks in the Kishtwar

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Harish Kapadia and Amrita Dhar

### The Kablas Lakes

Our man in Bhaderwah assured us that all was currently peaceful in their part of Jammu and Kashmir. The floods in 2014 had been terrible, but Jammu had been spared. So there we were one sunny morning in Patnitop. Vikas Manhas sipped his *kahwa* with relish and addressed the nine plainspeople in front of him. 'We shall let the horses take the main trail up from Nalhy. But with three children in the group, we shall make a shorter day of walking ourselves. We can approach the Kablas lakes from Chhetra Gala, and from that direction it should be no more than 6 km to the lakes.' In this first part of a three-week trip to Jammu, we were planning to trek to a high plateau of snowmelt lakes - the Kablas lakes (3810 m) to the south of the Bhaderwah valley - and it sounded like a good idea to allow a short day to ease ourselves into the high terrain. With three Kumaunis and Vikas, we therefore rattled down by bus from Patnitop to Batote, and up from Batote to Bhaderwah, where we did our groceries. Another hour's drive brought us to the lovely little village of Nalhy (1853 m).



Old fort above Bhaderwah town (Harish Kapadia)

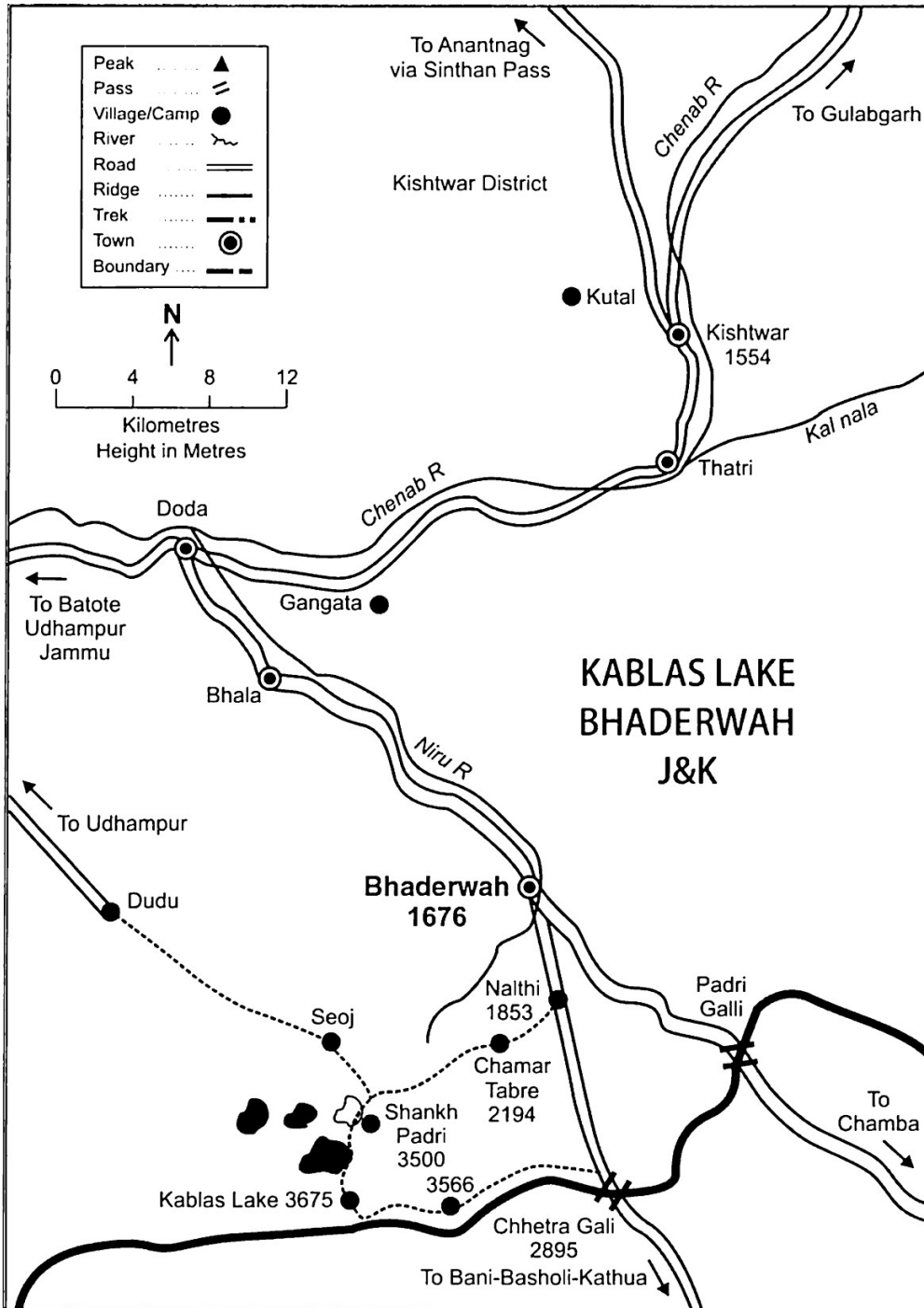
The *Gazetteer of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladak* mentions that Bhaderwah was called ‘Badrawar’, or variably ‘Budar’, by the locals, and ‘Bubrikar’ by the Kashmiris, meaning ‘Stronghold of Badha’ (a local tribe). During Mughal rule, Muslims of Kashmir migrated to Kishtwar and Bhaderwah via the Sinthan Top. After conquering the district, Moghul king Aurangzeb visited the area. His first Begum died en route and she was buried at the Mughal Maidan near the Sinthen top.<sup>1</sup>

In 1821, Shah Shuja, then ruler of Afghanistan, took refuge with Maharaja Ranjit Singh, king of Punjab. Shuja presented the famed Kohinoor diamond to Ranjit Singh but later they fell out. To save himself from wrath of Ranjit Singh, Shuja defected to Kishtwar and was given asylum by the ruler Mohamed Tej Singh. This infuriated Ranjit Singh and he marched with his large army to Kishtwar, conquering Bhaderwah, Doda and Kishtwar, bringing them under Punjab rule.<sup>2</sup>

Zorawar Singh (1786-1841), general of the Punjab army, was appointed Raja of Kishtwar in 1821 and he conducted two major expeditions through the valleys of Kishtwar to Ladakh and Baltistan. The first was through the Warwan valley, crossing Bhotkol pass or Lanvilad gully. The second expedition was from the east crossing the Umasi la.

Almost a century later, the British visited the area. Arthur Neve recorded his extensive travels in a book, which was revised later by his brother E. F. Neve.<sup>3</sup> The Kishtwar mountainous region therefore enjoyed relative peace and prosperity for about a century leading up to India’s independence in 1947. In independent India, Bhaderwah became part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and its strategic geographical and political importance. Matters came to head in the late 1980s when militancy and terrorism threw the state into turmoil. For over the better part of a decade, the Indian army proceeded to ‘sanitise’ the area. 2008 saw a degree of normalcy return—although it was a few years yet before trekkers and climbers began to trickle in again.

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1. *Gazetteer of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladak*, Government of India. P. 183. (First published in 1890. Reprint 1974. Vivek Publishing House, Delhi)
  2. *The Jammoo und Kashmir Territories*. By Frederic Drew. P. 121 (First published in 1875. Reprint 1997. Capital Publishing House, Delhi)
  3. *The Tourist’s Guide to Kashmir, Ladakh, Skardoo, &c.*. Edited by The Late Major Arthur Neve, F.R.C.S., Ed., R.A.M.C. Surgeon to The Kashmir Medical Mission. Revised by Dr. E. F. Neve, F.R.C.S. (Lahore, 1933, Price Rs. 10) When published in 1933 it ran into fifteen editions in one year.



Map of Bhaderwah area

It is a short distance to Chhetra Gala from Nalthy (10 km; but the drive over the winding dirt roads took a good hour). At Chhetra Gala, a gracious young army Captain oversaw the inspection of our papers and stood us steaming glasses of chai as we unloaded our bags from the bus and strapped our respective rucksacks. A grassy alpine path from

Chhettra Gala climbs up to meet the ridge to its west, then crosses it in a long and gradually climbing traverse - taking in a good number of small ridges on the way - until it comes up, in some eight hours of good walking, against the rim of the bowl of mountains containing the lakes.

The prospect was magnificent. The Kishtwar ranges looked resplendent to our distant north. But by afternoon, it was clear that the lakes were no 6 km from Chhettra Gala. If pace and time were to be any indication, they had to be at about twice that distance! So, as we approached an airy ridge on which was perched a tiny shepherd's shelter, Harish decided to call a night's halt. Vikas and a couple of others went on to the lakes to fetch tents from the party of horses who must by now have reached by the regular trail. The sounds of concerned consultation in the hut gave way to laughter and song and soon, the congenial conversation that takes over any warm campfire. As dusk fell and Vikas and a couple of horsemen returned with tents and food for the night, a cheer went up from the three youngest members of our party.

By lunch time next day, everyone was assembled at Lake camp (3675 m). Our tents stood like little patches of colour in a crumpled grey landscape. But from slightly higher ground, the two lakes lowest in the bowl came into view. One of the horsemen, Irshad Ahmed, pointed west to say that



Kablas lake above Bhaderwah (Amrita Dhar)

two more lakes lay in that general direction. A spot of lunch later, Amrita and Irshad set out from camp for an afternoon's scramble.

Our ostensible destination for this scramble was a dramatic granite pinnacle directly behind our campsite. But both in order to avoid a gradient of 60-70 degrees, and explore further, we headed left and just a little higher towards what was called Trisul Lake. This nomenclature was by virtue of an iron trident stuck on the ground near the lake, as we would soon find out. The final rise to the pinnacle (4110 m) consisted of about twenty feet of phenomenal exposure involving, however, delightful fourth class climbing. As we stood waving down to the minuscule dots of colour on the valley floor in the hope that someone in camp might spot us, we could see directly across the huge bowl to the rim we had crossed yesterday. A shelter was built on the banks of the higher lake for pilgrims when they visit in thousands in August, for yatra. Carrying blankets and food, most stay for a night and go down the next day.

A few days later, when we walked down by the main trail to Nalthy, evidence of the yatris was everywhere. It is easy to identify with the mystical and emotional pull towards pilgrimage that such an amazing landscape doubtless inspires, but less easy to understand the piles of Styrofoam, plastic bags, and general debris along the trail. It is important to realize that the mountains belong in exceedingly fragile ecologies, and that if travel in these places is to be sustained, the onus is on all of us to keep these areas clean, to meticulously pack out all non-biodegradable waste, to respect trails and thus avoid undue erosion, and to leave behind only the lightest possible footprints.

At dusk, a hailstorm pelted the campsite and turned the world white. But as the barometer held from evening to night, it was not unreasonable to imagine that a bit of good sun in the morning would dry the rock enough to enable a venture to the beautiful three-summited peak we could see from our campsite. For behind the lake stood Chhota Kablas (4270 m) and further behind, invisible from either Trisul or Kablas lake but following the same high ridge, Kablas itself, or Bara Kablas (c. 4400 m), and we wanted to head that way.

The next day dawned cold and sparkling. We walked to the temple and shelter that had looked so tiny from the vantage of the pinnacle the day before. Up close, Kablas lake was even more impressive, and some indication of the age of pilgrimage to this spot was obtained in



Peaks of Kishtwar from Padri. Sickie Moon second from right (Amrita Dhar)

the form of a quarter-anna coin from 1939 we found on the lakeshore. By the time we were back in camp, Irshad had packed a lunch of a few parathas and a couple of apples for himself and Amrita to take to Chhota Kablas.

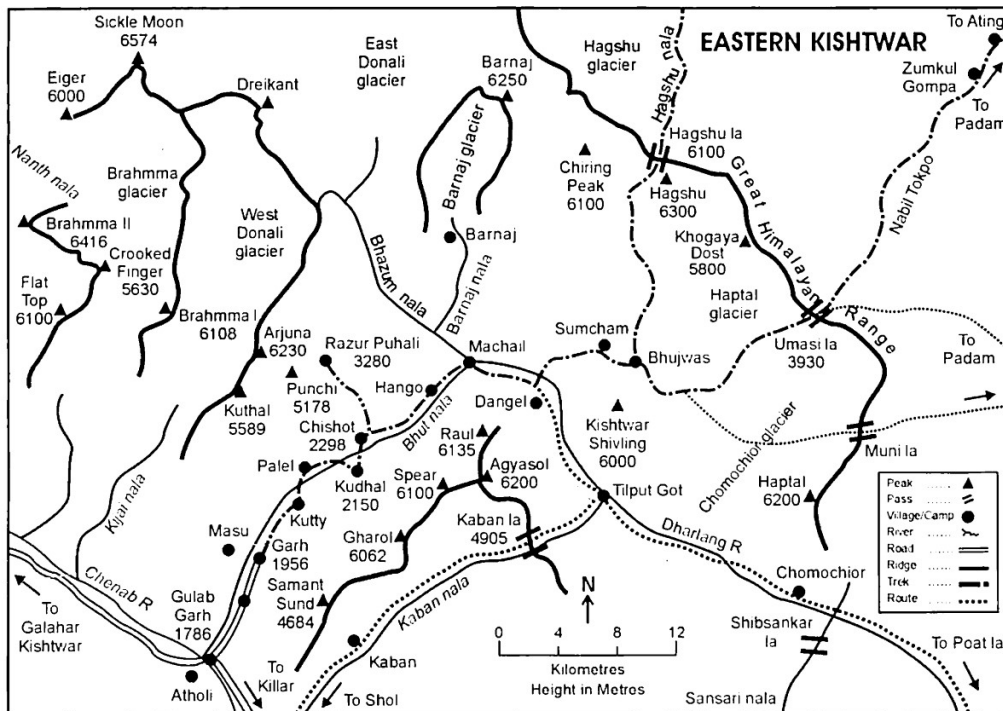
This time, instead of going right from Trisul lake, as we had done yesterday, we branched off left to a near-circumnavigation of the lake as we gained a tiny corridor of tumbled granite between the permanent snow and ice patches lining some of the higher but relatively more gradual slopes of the mountain. Since we were ill-equipped in shoes and waterproof wear to walk in snow, we stayed on the rocks. Last night's hail had left pockets of snow in tiny ledges all over Chhota Kablas, but we were glad that the rock, at any rate, was already bone dry. The sun beat down on us whenever the flying clouds allowed. As one, then two, then three hours fell away into silence and the start of a glorious afternoon, we found ourselves at the upper reaches of this scrambler's paradise. Irshad went one way, Amrita another. Before long, the two of us were smiling at each other from two of the three summits of the mountain.

We completed, a circumnavigation of Trisul lake by virtue of the route we took on our way down. From the summit of Chhota Kablas, it is possible to look down almost directly at Kablas lake. But descending that way is not a safe option without having the means to set up a couple of full-length abseils. So we went down again in the general direction of Trisul lake. As the afternoon grew chillier with wind, we started an

intricate series of advancements and retreats as slowly, over consistent fourth class climbing that sometimes verged on fifth class, we lost height. It was a relief, finally, to be standing on the banks of Trisul lake again.

We were late for lunch, but we knew that we had earned it. But not yet - for Mallik had been scouting, that morning, for climbing possibilities. Even as the rest of camp had moved to Shankh Padri (3500 m) today, he was waiting for us, with ropes and harnesses, at the foot of a magnificent bit of slab a little way down. So we raced on, hastily bolting lunch as we debated anchors for setting up a top rope. We didn't do much more than finish a single short climb. Tired and happy, we walked down to meet the rest of the team at Shankh Padri as the setting sun leached the final light from the sky, and our three summits of Chhota Kablas receded again into distance and mystery.

The following morning brought us a clear sunrise over a stupendous panorama of Kishtwar peaks. The centerpiece was Sickle Moon (6574 m), flanked by Chomiochor (6322 m), Agyasol (6200 m), Arjuna (6230 m), Brahmma II (6416 m), Barnaj (6250 m) and others. We were already looking forward to the next leg of our trip, which would take us closer to some of these mountains.



Map of eastern Kishtwar

### Up The Bhut Nala

A busful of waving hands pulled away in Nalhy. Our paths bifurcated here. For most of us, the road led home. But for Vikas, Harish, and Amrita, it led to Kishtwar town (1554 m) on the way to Gulabgarh village (1786 m) on the way to a walk up by the stream of the Bhut nala in a beautiful little gorge of Eastern Kishtwar. We arrived in Kishtwar town - via Thatri, which possibly has the world's best pears - on the last day of Dussehra, and found the town's central *maidan* full of crowds and annual festivities.

The next morning, a drive through Karthai (1800 m) and Atholi (1800 m) - both on the banks of the Chandrabhaga - brought us to Padar district, and in it, the village of Gulabgarh. Vikas asked around to locate a house that had a reputation for accommodating pilgrims on the Machail Yatra.

Machail (2740 m) is the village at the head of the Bhut nala. To all appearances standing guard over this village, the craggy peak of Raul (6135 m), locally called Shiv Parvat, oversees the meeting of the Bhujas and Dharlang valleys. The temple at Machail has been seeing increasing traffic for *yatra* in recent times. Signs telling of the 5-day *yatra* are visible in the market square of Gulabgarh in both Hindi and Urdu. Unfortunately, so is the trash that this peculiar kind of tourism seems to engender in great bulk. In an idyllically beautiful valley such as carved by the Bhut nala, here a flutter of plastic bag and there a glint of white Styrofoam rudely catch the eye. As chance would have it, we had an opportunity to ask about the state of things with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate currently posted at Gulabgarh, for Vikas had just discovered that the man in question was indeed his old friend from university.

We met Sanjeev Rana, the Sub-divisional magistrate, who proved to be a man of great hospitality and generous conversation. He enlightened us about the history of the area. The valleys are called the Padar, bounded by the Buddhist kingdom of Zanskar in the north, Muslim valleys of Kishtwar to the west; while the south and further east are part of the Hindu kingdom of Chamba. Due to Rajput invasions from Chamba, Atholi was the only Muslim village left in the eastern section. Gulabgarh is on the right bank of Chenab. It changed hands and its name on several occasions after the name of local kings, (Shital Garh and Chhatra Garh for example). The Dogra General Zorawar Singh



conquered the valley and annexed it to the Jammu state extending the boundaries till Sansari nala, the present demarcation. He named the place Gulabgarh, after the king of Jammu, Gulab Singh.

Over dinner we talked of efforts to minimize and eliminate trash on the trails, the role played by the Indian army in these remote areas of the country, the weird and wonderful history of migrations and settlements that had created the currently inhabited regions of the Kishtwar, and the terrifying militancy years of Jammu and Kashmir. For the hundred-thousandth time, the thought crossed our minds about the pity of such beautiful country being under political unrest. Thankfully, eastern Kishtwar is now a peaceful land. Long may it remain so.

Our journey started the following day with a dramatic jeep ride over stone and dirt road of about 6 km, and once we reached Garh village (1956 m) we made ourselves comfortable in the local schoolhouse balcony. Harish walked into the village to ask around for the right *puhali*, or grazing ground, to take photographs of the mountains on both sides of the gorge from. Our maps told us that although we could not see them, we were standing in the shadows of the mighty Arjuna (6230 m) and the Brahmmas I (6108 m) and II (6416 m) to our northwest, and the uprearing Agyasol (6200 m), Spear (6100 m), and Gharol (6062 m) on the true left of the Bhut nala. An hour of exchange and laughter later, it looked as though our destination would be a high grazing ground called Razur Puhali (3280 m). Nothing grazed there anymore this late in the year, and all the people we might meet there, if we met any at all, might be a couple of hunters after small game - strangely, no regulations seemed to exist to protect the fauna of the land, or if they did, the villagers seemed to be unaware of them - but Razur appeared to promise an unobstructed view to the southeast. From Chishot village (2298 m), our route would take us up and away from the Bhut nala to one of its constitutive streams, the Chachal nala, for encounter with one of those charmed places where water is born.

The next two days were a blur of sunshine. The Bhut nala grew younger and more boisterous as we walked. Every few kilometres, there would be the curious sight of someone whacking at stone with a smaller stone, and it was only when we found out that our paths were frequently lined with walnut trees that we realised that this was an effort to first crack the hard nut shell out of the soft green fallen fruit, and then crack open the nut itself in order to get at the fruit. We took to doing this ourselves.

One golden afternoon, we arrived in beautiful Chishot village, which would effectively be our base for a couple of nights.

Har Sinh and Amrita left for a day's walk up the Chachal nala the next day. The path leading to the grazing ground of Razur faded in and out of forest as a few hundred metres fell away beneath us. We were effectively creeping up the grassy and wooded hillside clinging to a tremendous granite monolith, and by the time we reached Razur Puhali, the woods ended and we had an unobstructed view of the appallingly beautiful rocky Zagal (5210 m). While approaching Chishot, we had marvelled at the east face of Zagal, which had towered some 600 m above the valley floor. Now, it loomed to our right with as much forbidding as invitation. A couple of traditional rock-climbers with a weakness for clean, high, sunned-upon granite could spend an entire season playing here, and Zagal alone would justify the long walk-in.

Across the Chachal nala and to our left, another magnificent vertical solicitation of rock currently lay dusted with snow along its many mini ledges. This rocky ridge, called Punchi (5178 m) stood as a massive barrier between us and the mountains that we knew lay beyond: Arjuna, the Brahmms, Crooked Finger (5630 m). But we drew our breaths most sharply in at what lay directly behind us and to which we now had a ringside view: the slanted sharpness of Gharol (6062 m), and the unmistakable upward thrust of Spear (6100 m). Stretched out against



Agyasol (left) and Spear peaks-Bhut nala (Amrita Dhar)



Gharol peak in Bhutan (Harish Kapadia)

a deep blue sky and newly whitened with snow, they looked close enough to touch.

Although we never did see beyond Punci - that ridge remained solidly between us and any glimpse of Arjuna or its neighbours in the northwest - we soon came into view of Agyasol (6200 m) to our southeast. As the Zagal ridge we were on flattened out and dropped off in front of us and to our right rose sheer flanks of rock, the north lay spread out in a series of dense ridges and passes that opened in the unseen distance on the Barnaj and Donali glaciers. A few hours later, it started to snow again, but by now we were nearing Chishot and it came down on us as rain.

The mountaineering history of Kishtwar goes back to 1946 with visits of Fritz Kolb and L Krenk. They explored eastern Kishtwar, corrected available maps and attempted several peaks near Muni la. This started sporadic visits of mountaineers which continued till about 1989 when due to militancy and terrorism the area was closed. Details of early climbs are well documented in two articles by Simon Richardson.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Richardson, Simon. 'A peak baggers guide to the eastern Kishtwar'. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 45, p. 90 and Vol. 50, p. 202

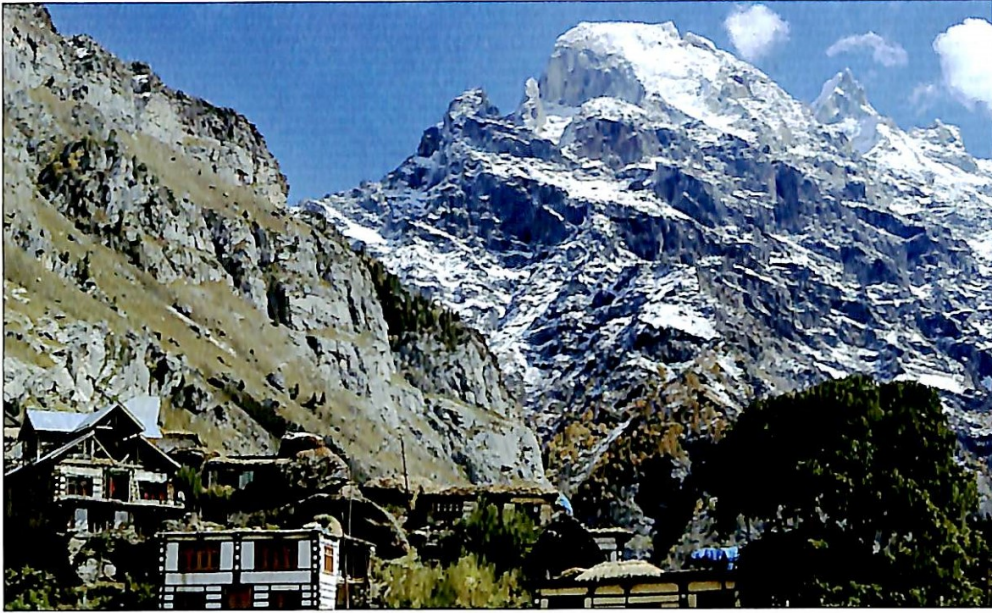


Famous temple at Machail (Amrita Dhar)

Our walk back to the roadhead of Garh village began with a partial walk further into the Bhut nala gorge. While Harish scouted out and oversaw the pitching of camp at Kudhal (2150 m) on a ravishingly beautiful sandy bank of the Bhut nala, Vikas and Amrita walked to Machail (9 km from Chishot). On the way, deodar forests relented to make space for the Buddhist villages of Hamori (2580 m) and Halot (2850 m) before a bridge across the river led the path into Machail. Machail is

located at the junction of the Dharlang, Bhut and Bhajun nalas with a temple of Goddess Kali. In 1985 Kuldip Singh, a policeman was posted here to guard the ornaments. After retirement he visited the temple every year and this was start of the Yatra which attracts many pilgrims now. This area is known as 'asurbhumi', land of devil. The goddess killed one of the chief Asur named 'Agyasur' and he stands as peak Agyasol opposite the temple. Most other devils also escaped and settled on top of different steep peaks and spires.

Despite its brilliant setting, the village of Machail itself is somewhat unprepossessing, All paths led to the temple, and were often liberally strewn with rubbish. But looking up, you could see Raul in full state. As also the last glimpses, still, of Bion (4985 m), a rocky peak that stood across the Bhut nala from Zagal. Sometime, another day, Machail will be the point of departure for forays into the Dharlang and/or Bhujas



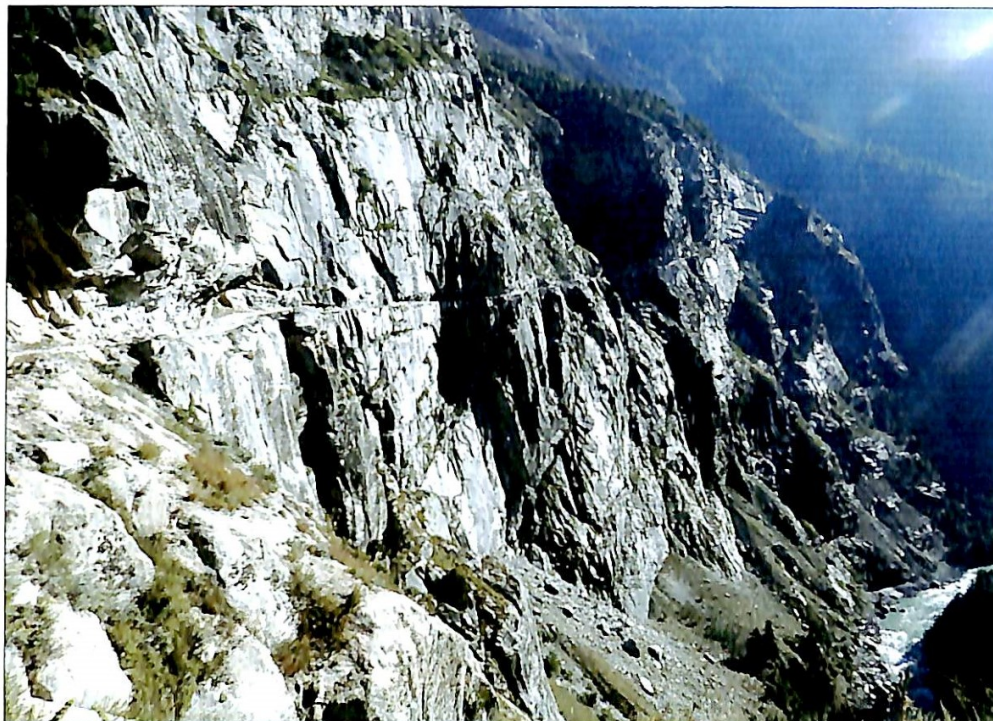
Madhav Rigo peak above Machail (Amrita Dhar)



Raul on left and Agyasol from Machail temple (Vikas Manhans)

valleys. At the moment, it was the point of return on the lovely walk back, over the next two days, to Garh, and eventually Gulabgarh.

Our travels were rounded out by two unreal car rides: journeys that just barely accommodate wheels. Harish and his radio were by now aware of the massive cyclone Hudhud flying in from the Andaman Sea onto the southeastern coast of India. Hudhud would go on to ravage Andhra Pradesh and - since nothing really lay in its way until the high Himalaya - hit the mountains. We were nearing mid-October, and combined



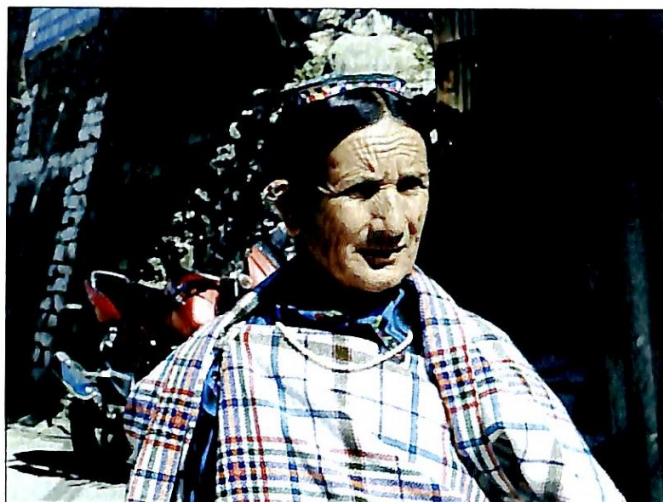
Road carved out from rocks from Gulabgarh to Killer (Harish Kapadia)



Dangerous motor road leading to Killar (Harish Kapadia)

with the effects of a storm, our passes for crossing from Jammu and Kashmir into Himachal Pradesh might close for good for the year if we didn't get a move on. So we loaded a battered-looking Sumo driven by one Shashi in Gulabgarh, and set out for Killar (2591 m) a couple of days ahead of our original proposed schedule.

The 'road' from Gulabgarh to Killar



Lady at Killar in traditional dress (Harish Kapadia)

(55 km) is an absurd dirt track carved out of sheer rock faces, and there were several heart-stopping instances when the total width of the track exceeding the width of our car by mere inches. Shashi laughed at our appalled faces, and hearing of

Harish's plans to go over Sach Pass (4385 m) into Himachal, said that we must try and locate his friend, Bipin, for there indeed was a road that made this one look tame by comparison, and of the few who plied it by car, Bipin was one of the best. As we sat there gulping silently, our track passed through villages that betrayed no real reason for their existence, so tenuously did they cling to the hillsides containing them: Shol (1835 m), Tayari, Ishtayari (2200 m), Sansari nala (2014 m).



Unnamed peak in Pangti, seen from Sach Pass (Harish Kapadia)

We found and loaded Bipin's Sumo in Killar. Soon we were on the road that cut ever deeper into the mountains through a warren of connecting ridges and troughs. The unpaved 'road' was both a marvel of engineering, and a terror. Harish had climbed up to Sach pass in 1971 from the Chamba side, and even the thought of a motorable pathway in this labyrinth had been inconceivable. Yet here we were in 2014. Before long, we had traversed the 43 kilometres from Killar to Sach Pass, we were straddling the high ground looking into Himachal. Tiers upon tiers of mountains stretched away in every direction. As always, our trip was ending with a sense of many more beginnings to come.

About an hour from the pass, we drove into and had our IDs checked at the army post of Satrundi (3800 m), where in 1998 fifteen labourers had been killed by militants. But our passage to Chamba was peaceful, hemmed around as we were by smiles and nods of welcome, and a gathering dusk.

### **Summary**

Two treks in Kishtwar, summer 2014

1. Kablas lake above Bhaderwah
2. Up the Bhut nala, to Razur Puhali and Machail

Members : Amrita Dhar, Vikas Manhas and Harish Kapadia (both treks) Mallik Singh, Swati Apte, Antara (9) Arjun (7) Sneha Mehta and Sana (9)