

MANTALAI - SOURCE OF THE RIVER PARVATI

"Nine,nine,nineteen ninety-nine" is the rhyme that I recite while describing the crossing of the Pin Parvati Pass. The five nines that came together on 9 September 1999 are just so easy to remember. This date remains unforgettable, not only for its numerical significance but also for the profound experience of nature that remains as one of my most memorable treks the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP). On this day, we started in the early morning from Mantalai, the origin of the Parvati river where we had reached the previous evening. It had been a long crossing over a vast expanse of wilderness. The



GHNP is a major source of water for the rural and urban centres of the region with four major rivers (Tirthan, Sainj, Jiwa Nal and Parvati) originating from glaciers in the Park. The Park, free of roads, is one of the most picturesque areas in the Western Himalaya and is well known for its exquisite floral and faunal biodiversity.

The first day's trek started from Barsheni (2,150m), for the easy destination of Khirganga (2,960m) which is only ten kilometres from Barsheni. This is a popular route and many trekkers are drawn to the famous hot sulphur springs at Khirganga. Along the way, we met a number of sadhus – some of whom had come from as far as Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh to spend the summer in the Himalaya. The langar, run at Khirganga where food is provided to devotees at almost all times of day is effectively the last food-place on the trek to Mantalai. Following custom, we bathed in the hot water of the sulphur springs and then ate our meal of lentils and rice at the langar. Our muscles relaxed from the warm waters, our bellies full, we crawled peacefully into our sleeping bags on the wooden floor of the small dormitory building.

On the second day, we had an early start from the Khirganga. It had rained all night, the fir and spruce trees, and the dense undergrowth all sparkled in verdant brilliance. In those days, this part of the trek was less travelled and we only passed two Gujjars who were carrying 'khoya', made of milk to sell in the Kullu market. These Gujjars migrate annually with their families and buffaloes to the forest areas of the Parvati forest division. As we reached the edge of the forest, we also encountered a herd of about fifty sheep. The shepherd from Kullu looked quite worried. He explained to us that a brown bear

had attacked his sheep the night before. A half-eaten carcass was still lying on the spot. We could see the clear footprints of the bear on the muddy ground. Generally, brown bears are considered vegetarians, however, they are known to follow a herd of sheep and feed on them, the moment they get an opportunity.

Along the trail, Punjab Singh, a forest guard, described the beautiful trees of Bhojpatra (or birch, *Betula*) which we came across at heights above 3,100m. He mentioned a broken birch tree in a meadow that the shepherds had named 'Tunda Bhuj', the broken birch. The broad leaf, graceful birch trees grew in small clusters, their delicate, white papery bark peeled off easily from the mature trunks. The birch trees have always added their gracious presence to the summer landscape in the Parvati valley. Growing in a

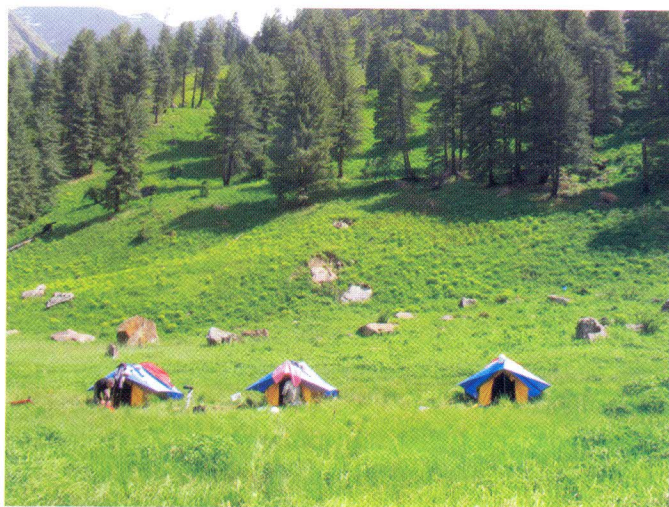


Parvati River

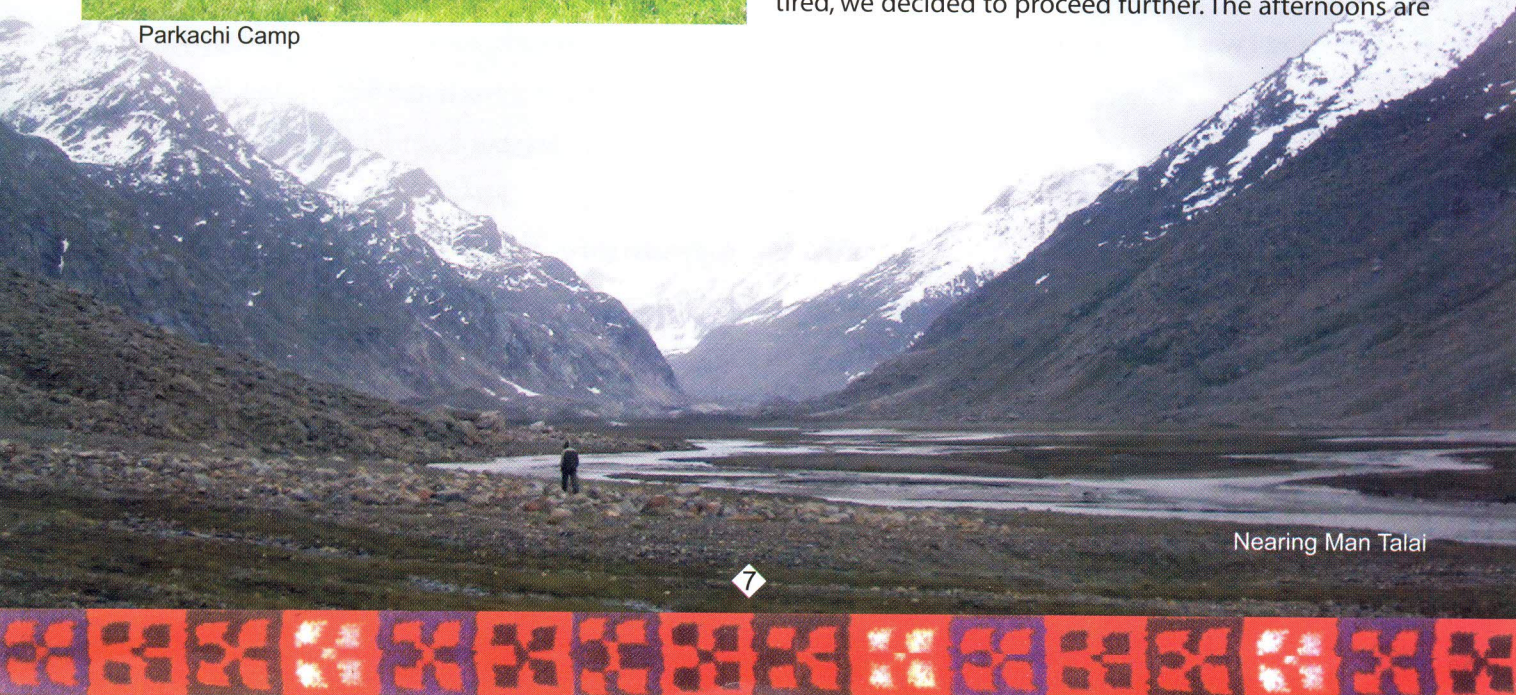
cool and moist locality, they love sun and are a delight for the trekker, the photographer or artist.

The meadow of Tunda Bhuj is at an attitude of about 3,285m and is only ten kilometres from Khirganga. For the aesthetic value of its landscape, and the proximity of drinking water, the place is a perfect camping site. I recalled a previous trek in June when the streams along the mountain slopes were still full of snow! We had to return from Tunda Bhuj as it was getting increasingly difficult to walk on the fresh and deep snow. By September, the snow melts and the walk through the luxuriant growth is a joy.

Trekking guides recommend that the second day's trek should end at the Tunda Bhuj campsite. Considering that we started very early in the morning and did not feel very tired, we decided to proceed further. The afternoons are



Parkachi Camp



Nearing Man Talai



generally predictable in these mountains. The clouds start gathering by mid-noon and after four in the evening, it can rain at any time. The rain started as we came out of the birch forest. For the next stretch of the trek, we had to cross the Parvati river to her right bank by a jhulla, a ropeway across the river. 'One person at a time in the 'jhulla' and do not look down while crossing,' were the practical instructions. For first timers crossing the river by the 'jhulla' was a lifetime experience.

The trek on this side of river is through beautiful meadows with numerous flowers like geraniums, potentillas, anemones, primulas and many more. The villagers of the Parvati valley come to collect medicinal herbs from these open expanses which they sell to dealers in Kullu. The walk through the meadows is enjoyable and I was told that we were reaching Thakur

Kuan (3,400m) where the first stage of the now abandoned Parvati Hydel Project, had been planned. At Thakur Kuan, the camping site is on the left bank, where we reached by a 'jhulla'. Before dark, we pitched our tents on the grassy turf. The nine kilometre walk in the afternoon was not so tiring, and this gave us the chance of singing around the camp fire – perhaps the last place on this trek to do so, as we were entering the alpine zone with very little biomass to burn.

The third day's trek is from Thakur Kuan to Pandupul (3,700m) to Mantalai (4,200m), which should normally be done in two days. The twenty-seven kilometre distance, with a climb about 500m in a rarefied atmosphere, is a bit of a feat for a single day. The whole stretch is above the tree line in high altitude meadows full of medicinal herbs, alpine grasses, bees and butterflies. The trek in this stretch is quite demanding but rewarding.

As we started our morning walk, I noticed a Lammergeyer in the open skies of the upper Parvati valley. The bird can be recognised on account of its very distinct wedge-shaped tail. The bearded vulture as it is commonly known, the Lammergeyer has the largest wingspread and is well adapted to local conditions. The bird will even use a rock to break a bone for its marrow – which it will drop on it from a



Shepherds



A normal stream crossing

height. My birding list has been growing with additions such as white wagtail, Plumbeous restart, River Chat, Black Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Himalayan snow cocks, Chukor, and chipping warblers. Starting early in the morning we made up to Pandupul by mid-noon. The Pandopul is in fact a huge boulder in the middle of the Parvati river over which one can cross over to the right bank.

The scenery got very dramatic as we trekked ahead of Pandupul. The drama of nature unfolded on the mountains and they changed continuously with the wandering clouds. The evening sun altered the hues at every moment. The whole atmosphere was so spectacular and serene that one had to be there to believe it. The fifteen kilometres from Pandupul to Mantalai was through very scenic and panoramic views. We noticed a number of sheep and goats in the encampments of shepherds feeding on the high altitude grasses, which are very nutritious and palatable. In the pastures, we had been observing the droppings of domestic sheep and goats along with those of wild Blue Sheep indicating a competition for both space and food in nature. We stopped by one of the encampments. The Gaddi shepherd offered us goat milk, which we had as dessert. As we progressed towards the source of the river, we could see the valley widening – as well as the marshy areas and a

rugged and difficult terrain.

We reached Mantalai (4,200m) at about five in the evening. Sunlight was reflecting off the lake water. We could see that devotees had set up a number of cairns to provide exact directions to the lake. At Mantalai, the pilgrims had offered tridents to worship the origin of the river. I have seen Tirath, the origin of the river Tirthan; Satroo, the origin of Jiwa Nal; and the Rakti Sar, origin of the Sainj river – and all of them are revered and worshipped by the inhabitants of the area. As a friend put succinctly, "A visit to the origin of a river is like a visit to the origin of our own roots or self." The source of a river is virtually a source of mankind – water is life, as we often read on roadside signboards. However we can experience this when we come to such a place as Mantalai that on its upper reaches is surrounded glaciers, which are a continuous source of water.

The fresh mountain air, vast natural vistas, and the effort to reach Mantalai are a perfect combination to rejuvenate oneself mentally and physically – and being a part of nature and all its purity and serenity. For the villagers, coming to Mantalai is to be on a pilgrimage. Brushed by the grandeur of the mountains, those of us who have visited a place like Mantalai are changed forever.

- Sanjeeva Pandey



Mantalai