

THE SAINJ RIVER

A tributary of the Beas, the Sainj is one of the four rivers that flow through the Great Himalayan National Park in Kullu district, the others being the Parabati (Parvati), Tirthan and Jiwanal. Deep inside the Park, the Sainj originates from the Rakti-Sar glacier at 4,000m and following it to its source was an almost spiritual experience for me, as the Rakti-Sar is cloaked with an intense mythological aura for the local peoples. The journey to the source of the Sainj begins at its meeting point with the Beas, the tiny hamlet of Larji on the left bank of the Beas, about twenty-five kilometres below Kullu. Driving upstream from Larji on a single lane blacktop, we quickly passed the villages of Sainj and Siund and reached Neulli thirty kilometres away, where the road ends. The trek from here to Shakti, the first day's camping spot covers twenty-two kilometres, first through the eco-zone area of the Park and then through the Sainj Wild Life Sanctuary. Thick forests come right down to the river bank, dotted with the occasional village: Niharni, Baha, Denga. We reached Shakti by 5.00 in the evening; this is a village of about twenty-five houses on the right bank of the Sainj. Here, the Park Administration has built a Trekker's Camp that is situated in the midst of a thick grove of sea-buck thorn trees which appear to bathe the whole camp in a greenish hue! The camp is comfortable with two rooms, a dormitory, kitchen, toilets and running water tapped from a stream that flows just behind it!

Day Two began at 7.00 in the morning since we had a twenty kilometre trek ahead. We crossed to the left bank of the Sainj over a wooden bridge and continued to follow the river upstream and eastwards. To the south and south-east lay the vast expanse of the GHNP, mile upon mile of pristine and untouched forests all the way to the mighty peaks of the Srikhand range. After eight kilometres we reached Maror, the last village in this valley, but not before we spotted two ghoral on the opposite bank, climbing down to drink. The village has an interesting and ancient temple that is worth looking at. We had an early lunch and pressed on.

The climbing immediately becomes more difficult. This is first on the river bed itself – over rocks, sand and driftwood, but soon the banks become too precipitous and one has to take to the forests on the right bank. The track practically disappears and we just plodded on in a north-easterly

direction. After about ten kilometres, a huge stream joins the Sainj from the north: this is the Chiush Nallah, the boundary between the Sainj wildlife sanctuary and the GHNP. There is a steep ascent of 200 metres after the crossing, and emerging the Nallah one suddenly comes onto a massive, luxuriant, flat meadow, framed by thick stands of fir and spruce on three sides and an untouched mountain range on the fourth. This was Parkatchi Thatch, our second day's camp. The 'thatch', the local word for a high altitude meadow is located at 2,950 m and was knee deep in grasses, ferns, medicinal plants such as Salam Panja and Ratan Jot and a profusion of multi-coloured flowers. There is forest hut at one edge but we preferred to pitch our tents in the middle of this riot of colours. This is prime brown bear and western tragopan habitat but we were not lucky enough to see either of them, though the abundance of bear scat all around indicated that they were thriving here.

The third day's trek is to Rakti-Sar – the source of the Sainj – and back; this is the most strenuous lap and one has to leave even before breakfast at 6.00 in the morning. The



Manu Temple on the Sainj trek route

bushes were still wet with dew and in ten minutes our lower bodies were soaked. We followed the river eastwards, on a track about one hundred metres above it. Dominating the eastern skyline was a massive, ice-covered, domed peak called Munda Tapra beyond which lies the Rampur area of Shimla district: 6,000 metres high, it has never been climbed or crossed as it is covered with a permanent mantle of snow and ice. Two kilometres from the camp site, the Sainj veers sharply to the north-east (left) and at this point, it is also joined by a substantial stream coming from the south-east. This junction is called Rakti-Kol and a small jogni, collection of rocks with prayer flags atop it has been erected by the villagers here to pay obeisance to the local Devi. This is a beautiful spot and it is worth taking a break here. The river, after turning left, practically disappears into thick undergrowth: there is no track left and landslides have eroded the banks and one has to slither up and down, jump over boulders, and cross over half a dozen ice-bridges. We saw the tracks of blue sheep on the sandy edges while a couple of monal pheasants went gliding down the valley with the typical whistling sound of their wings.

After two hours of this difficult trekking we came to a succession of thatches two kilometres long, carpeted with the most amazing diversity of alpine flowers, rare herbs and grasses: the whole meadow was a burst of colour. The climb becomes gentler and the infant Sainj gurgles down the eastern edge of the thatch. Two kilometres later, the valley turns to the left, and straight ahead we could suddenly see the towering snout of a house-shoe shaped glacier: the source of the river! The snout was at least forty feet high and completely covered with grey-black moraine: the glacier itself and its accumulation zone stretched back into massive ice slopes that in turn, merged into 17,000 feet high peaks that closed off the valley completely. Two streams emerged from the snout: the lower one had the greater volume of water but this is not considered to be the source of the Sainj. The smaller, upper stream flows into a large, rectangular shaped depression where it first divides into a number of narrow ribbons which gradually merge and join the main stream about 250 yards below the snout. It is this smaller stream which the locals call the Rakti-Sar and revere as the real Sainj. The circular bowl is

considered holy ground and people do a barefoot parikrama of this. There is the inevitable jogni erected on a mound where we too offered prayers.

"Rakti-Sar" means, literally, "Head Covered with Blood." The mythology of this remote valley has it that in very ancient times, a powerful demon called Raktibeej used to live here. He had received a "vardan" or blessing that every time a drop of his blood fell on the ground a new Raktibeej would be born of that drop. This made him practically immortal and, secure in the confidence of his invincibility, he began to rival the Gods themselves. Finally in desperation the Gods despatched the mighty Goddess Mahakali or Shakti to vanquish Raktibeej. Mahakali caught hold of the demon with two hands, chopped off his head with the third, and in the fourth hand held a vessel into which the blood from the severed head dropped and was collected. Since no blood dropped on the ground, Raktibeej could not resurrect himself and died. As proof, the villagers will point to a small stretch of the stream which emerges from under a rocky outcrop, red in colour! This epic battle was supposed to have taken place in the rectangular depression, and this is how the little stream gets its name, just one of the incredible myths that this land abounds in, connecting man, nature and God.

We had spent barely an hour at this magnificent, forbidding and sacred place when it started snowing heavily. It was already 3.00 in the afternoon and we had at least a four hour gruelling trek back, so with one last look at the glacier and Rakti-Sar we departed this enchanting land. We reached back at Parkatchi thatch after dark, and the next day we were back at Shakti, exhausted but rejuvenated at having seen another face of genesis.

- Avay Shukla



Glacier at Rakti Sar