

### **The Great Garwhal Trek of 2003**

This time I had decided to be kind and spare you all a detailed account of our trek. However, when I started writing, there were so many stories to tell and so much beauty to share that the report turned out to be as long as ever. In any case, you don't have to read this but I hope you at least enjoy the pictures! Unlike the last trek which was sort of a luxury trek what with hot pakodas and bed tea, this trek was a lot more of hard work. The trek itself was much more physically challenging. Now that its over and I and all parts of my body are still alive, I can say that I really enjoyed it. I know I've probably said this before but its so true it has to be repeated. When you're out there and you're struggling up a steep part of the mountain, you cant breathe, you're cold and hot at the same time and your rucksack feels incredibly heavy- you really wonder why you're doing this. But when you stop and take a breath, the views, the forests, the village hospitality, the mountains are all so amazing that you know its worth it and you'll hopefully be doing this again some day. This time we were a large group. Nine of us from Madras and three porters, Bahadur, Jagath and Bhupal Singh. Actually eight and a half since one of our team was only 10 years old. The cast were Enakshi, Hema and her daughter Kavery, Namita and Anil, two German students Philipp and Rainer and Subbu and I. Our base camp was a place called Pipalkoti which is about 16km away from Chamoli, the district HQ of the state of Utteranchal. We spent a couple of days there at our friend, Gunu's place, resting from our long journey from Madras, as well as planning our trip and getting used to the altitude. It's only about 1250m but that's a lot compared to Madras! Although we had sort of decided on one route before we left Madras, since the weather was a bit dicey, after discussions with Gunu we decided to trek to another place instead. This was a meadow called Bansinarayan. It wasn't a regular pilgrims route which meant there would be less people but there were villages on the way so if the weather got really bad we could always seek shelter there.

#### **Day One**



**Just before starting.**

The trek started with a 17km jeep ride from Pipalkoti to a place called Helong. We had a glass of tea at the local chai shop and then bravely put on our rucksacks and started off. Our destination was to be Kalpeshwar, an 11km walk over mostly hilly land. Just five



**Crossing the Alakananda river, five minutes into our trek**

minutes after starting we met a group of villagers coming in the opposite direction.

Villagers normally always encourage hikers and as soon as they saw us they cheerfully called out and told us that we weren't far from our destination!

In retrospect that was a clue to the ongoing battle we were going to have with our porters. There was a big gap between their idea of times, distances and the actual time and distance

to a destination! The first days walk was hard but manageable. We walked through pine forests and with a stream or river some distance below for most of the way.



**One of the rivers that kept us company for part of the way.**

We stopped en route and had lunch (aloo and parathas that we had packed from Pipalkoti earlier that morning) and then continue walking till around 3:30pm. Our walk also took us through villages and golden fields of wheat. As we got closer to our destination it started to rain but luckily it was a short shower and the sun came out again. Kalpeshwar has a temple and a dharamsala that we decided to spend the night in. The dharamsala was a set of rooms, some without doors and with obvious signs of previous occupancy, for example bits of cow dung! Obviously, all forms of life were welcome here!



**Views along the way on that first day.**



**The bridge to the temple.**



**Our home away from home.**



From here one could walk down to the river. It was icy cold and felt great washing ones feet there. The dharamsala was located on a plain surrounded by hills. In the distance was a beautiful waterfall. As the evening wore on, we noticed a bright light behind one of the hills which rapidly got brighter and brighter. Without actually planning it our trek was during full moon and what a sight that was! In one direction, distant snow clad peaks lit up by the moon and in the other, the waterfall shone brightly. It got quite chilly and we lit a fire to keep us warm. We sat there for a while enjoying the warmth of the fire as well as the beauty of a moonlit Himalayan night before going to sleep.





## Day Two



This was the day we got the first hints (actually more like slaps in the face!) that our porters' ideas of distances and time were anything but accurate! We were supposed to walk all the way to Bansinarayan in 4-5 hours. After 4 hours of a gruelling climb, we finally reached a wonderful meadow where we all collapsed. It was only the



**After: we had survived the climb.**

**Before: we knew what lay ahead that day!**

beauty of the surroundings that gave me the will to live at that moment!



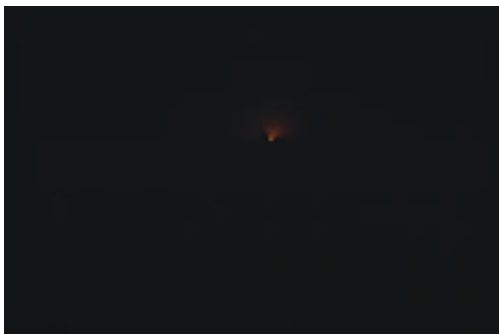
We had run out of water so we took only a short break there and walked on for half an hour (but seemed like much more) till we came to a stream where we stopped for lunch. The porters wanted to go on after this insisting there was just an hour of climb left but we all refused to budge, found some relatively flat ground and put up our tents. We had picked up an extra member to our team at Kalpeshwar, a beautiful sheep dog who had spurned the offerings of temple prasada he was being served (witnessed by Enakshi) and had chosen to join us instead. He was a silent member of our troupe, never asked for food, never barked but always seemed to watch out for us. By the end of the trip we had quite decided that he was God in disguise! That evening a group of us decided to walk back to the meadow to enjoy the full moon.

We set out after a hearty meal of rotis and cheese. Of course the dog accompanied us. The porters were pleased since this area is full of bears and leopards and they hoped the dog would warn us of any impending danger. When we started out we laid trail markers (piles of stones) along the way to help guide us back in the dark. We reached the meadow after just 15 minutes of walking. In the



**Just before the moonrise**

afternoon the meadow had seemed miles away! We all sat down and eagerly awaited the moonrise. We were not disappointed. Initially in the distance we could see a faint set of rays of light and then slowly the tip of the moon peeped up over a snow clad mountain.



**The moonrise.**

**The reddish colour is due to the fact that the photos were over exposed (my inexperience with moonrises!). The sky was actually blue like in the photo above.**

It was an amazing sight to see it slowly rise over the mountain lighting up the meadow and all the snow clad peaks around. After sitting and watching for a while, we reluctantly decided to return to the camp. Although it was quite well lit, the trail markers and Philipp's fancy white LED torch helped a lot. Subbu, who had stayed back at the camp, said he could see us from far off. One really bright star followed by four measly spots of lights! Most people had gone off to sleep, so we crawled into our tents and followed suit.





**The slope we slept on.**



**Looking at things with a different point of view...**



**The view from our (tent) window.**

### Day Three

What had seemed like flat ground the day before, proved not to be that flat after all! The next morning we exchanged stories of how we had slipped while we slept! This was supposed to be an easy walk (remember just one hour of walking...). We started off and were pretty excited because soon we came to a huge piece of frozen snow under which a stream was running. The climb was tough although easier than the day before.



#### On the way to Bansinarayan.

half hour to reach Bansinarayan. We managed to climb under a ledge and hail started to fall! We were tired and hungry and really cold. The world looked bleak and grey. We had crossed the tree line so the terrain was mostly rock and lifeless meadows. The world started to look a bit whiter since it started to snow. After an hour or so the snow let up and we crawled out from under the rocks. It was beautiful. The path we had walked on was dotted with white and the mountains looked majestic.



#### The path dotted with snow.

or make use of the many ledges available. Finally as the sun grew stronger and our spirits rose we decided to set up tents. Rainer and Philipp found themselves a cave into which their tent would fit. After ascertaining that there were no bears or traces of bears there, they proceeded to put up their tent, pleased with the view. The porters decided to sleep in one of

However, we walked and we walked and we walked for more than four hours! In-between a part of the group had gone ahead and we (at the back) weren't even sure if we were on the right track. It was only Dog's footsteps in some snow that reassured us! We reached a certain point where we caught up with the others. By this time it was evident that some heavy rain or worse was on its way so we hurried up the last



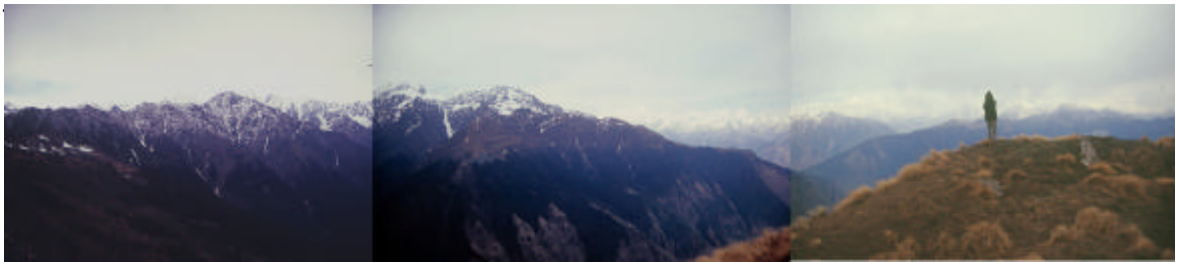
**Just before reaching Bansinrayan. This view made us think of Scotland! This is the only picture of Dog that I managed to take.**

Slowly the sun came out and the green meadows seem to come alive. We debated on whether to put up our tents



the ledges with a fire going and the rest of us set up two tents in the meadow, on the only real flat ground we could find. The area was slightly protected by rocks so we hoped we would be protected from the wind. All of us were pleased with our respective locations at least for the time being! The Germans tent was a quite a distance above ours and the first problem of that location became obvious when one of us needed to "go"! No matter where one went, no matter how big the rock one found, the Germans had an excellent view! One would always see Philipp waving out cheerfully as one searched for a well-hidden spot! That night we again climbed up to watch the moon rise. It was cold. I brought the brandy that I had been saving for medical reasons :) and although there wasn't much of it, it did warm us up.

### **Views from Bansinarayan**



**Namita and the mountains**



**Sprawling meadows**



**Sprawling meadows and a bright coloured Subbu!**



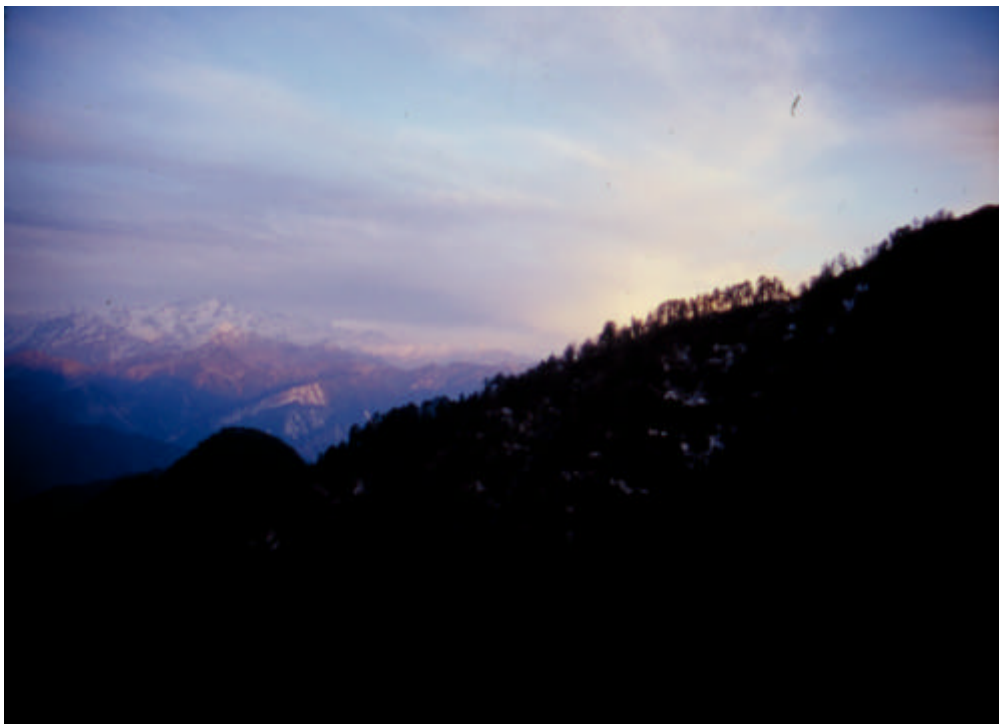
**The temple at Bansinarayan.**



**Our kitchen.**



**Somewhere in this area there was flat ground where we tented.**



**Sunset**



#### **Day Four**

The next day was our rest day and we spent the whole day at Bansinarayan. Some of us climbed up the ridge from where we had a view of Pipalkoti. It was warm and sunny during the morning and we enjoyed every moment of it. In the afternoon most of us took a short nap. Subbu , Kavery and I were in one tent and were woken up by the sounds of a storm building up. Luckily we were in our tent then since the wind was so strong that the fly sheet almost flew away and needed to be re-fixed! The hail, snow and clouds lasted for about two hours. Having underestimated the appetite of our porters we were slightly short on rations and decided to skip dinner that night to the horror of the Germans who had voracious appetites! Actually I'm surprised that I haven't mentioned their appetites before this! They ate a dinner of Maggi noodles that night and couldn't quite believe that we didn't want any. (Don't think that we starved. We had enough snacks to feed a small army!). I won't go into a report of Philipp and Rainer eating through this trek since that is a story all by itself but let me just say that they enjoyed their food! It was refreshing to see people who could tuck into food like that and still be fit and healthy!

#### **Day Five**



**The view that greeted us when we emerged from our tents: beautiful sunlight and the moon!**



**The whole troupe before starting on our way back.**

Finally we started our journey back. It began as a delightful walk. Always downhill



**Our companion for the first part of the walk.**

alongside a stream which we often had to cross. The path was not always clear due to fallen trees so some amount of clambering of the rocks in the stream made this more fun. We finally reached the village of Kalghot/pokhri around 12:30 and stopped to replenish some of our rations and to have a cup of tea. The villagers who served us tea, didn't want to be paid! We rested awhile and then continued our walk for what we thought would be a couple of hours. Ha!

By the way, Dog was still with us. At this village, he stopped to play with some other dogs and when we started off, he was nowhere to be seen so we thought that we had lost him and were glad since we worried about what would happen if he came all the way to Pipalkoti with us. However, about 10 minutes after starting he suddenly jumped out of the bushes near the path and continued to walk along with us. We walked and we walked and we walked.



**Taking a break.**

The view was wonderful and even though it started to rain at a point and we all put our ponchos and raincoats on and it got cold, it was still beautiful but we were so tired! Finally after starting off at 8:30 in the morning we reached at 5:30 in the evening. A little earlier, Enakshi had slipped and fallen and couldn't get up just because her legs refused to move! It was a wonderful feeling to know that we had reached and didn't need to walk more that day. We stayed in a Channi which is a shelter the farmers and shepherds use on a seasonal basis. With typical village hospitality, the current occupants moved out so that we could use it. It felt like a five star hotel after all that walking.

## **Day Six**

We were woken up by some members of the group who decided that everyone was awake at some unearthly hour of the morning (could it have been 6am?!). Anyway there was Enakshi knocking something over and apologising loudly and someone else asking if everyone was up and someone else answering that everyone was! Subbu, Philipp, Rainer and I woke up grumpily to inform them that some of us were still trying to sleep- of course there was no going back to sleep after that! The final frontier. This was the first day that everything ached when getting up! The thought of walking another 8km seemed rather



over ambitious so we decided to at least walk back to the road (5km) and try to get a jeep or something there. As we left the village, Dog followed as normal but then some village dogs ran up to him, snarling and barking ferociously. Dog just stood there unaffected or unafraid by their aggression. He didn't bark or growl back but he didn't move either. The other dogs suddenly stopped growling and started whinnying in a very supplicatory manner



**The zigzag path downhill.**

and then they actually started wagging their tails at Dog. He almost looked like a king with his humble subjects. I looked back to the scene where Dog was surrounded by the other dogs, and then continued to walk on glad that there had been no fight, not realising that that was the last we would see of Dog. He had joined us on the first day of our trek and walked along with us the whole way and then on the last leg of our trek, a couple of hours before the end, he stayed behind! Of course, at that point of time we did not realise that he would not follow us so we didn't even stop to say good bye. We walked along a very zigzag path down to the river and then up a very barren path to the road.

The last stretch of the path was along an area where a landslide had occurred so it was dusty and depressing and the soil was dangerously loose as well. It was with real pleasure that we took the last steps that led to the road. The

rest of the team who had reached the road earlier had managed to stop an almost empty jeep that was on its way to Pipalkoti so we all happily climbed in and made our way back. Dusty, dirty, tired but very very satisfied. :)

## Pipalkoti



The peak in the distance is Bansinarayan. This is the view from Gunu's house.



Gunu's house and garden (and if you look closely, there's Gunu, Enakshi and Subbu there as well!)



Gunu's dogs.





**The whole group just before leaving Kalpeshwar. This photo was taken by Hema with her digital camera.**