

1. **Daily Diary maintained during Kailash Mansarovar Yatra 2007 (22July–22August)**

2. **22 July 2007 (Sunday)**

3. The date for which I was waiting for such a long time since my selection as LO in April has at last arrived. I shall be meeting yatris today at Hearts and Lungs Hospital on Panchkuian Road. I had been applying for this post for the last several years and I was fifth time lucky this year. I felt that if Lord Shiva wants me to come to His abode in MK, He would make conditions propitious for my selection. I was clear in my mind that if I were ever to go to MK and ML it would be not because of my efforts but because of His inscrutable ways of getting things done in His own inimitable style. He also selects the time. I was certain that it was He who would make conditions favourable for my selection. It was His desire that I would be fulfilling if I were to be selected. Of course I would be doing all that was expected of me. Such as filling up form; getting for myself clearances and sanctions from government departments and appearing for interview in the MEA.
4. The sky was overcast. It had probably rained a little in the morning, as the dried droplets on cars seemed to suggest. I noticed them on my way to the neighbourhood park in the morning for my customary morning walk. Did some yoga and pranayam exercises.
5. I was on the way to the Hospital at about 10. I dressed casually to lend an air of informality to my interactions with yatris. Looked forward to meeting them. They would be my companions for the next one-month. They had agreed to place both their fate and faith in my hands on the advice and directive of Ministry of External Affairs that had selected me as their LO. A slew of questions crossed my mind. In what health would they be? What would be their fears and concerns? What kind of bonding would result as a result of this yatra? What could possibly be their age profile? I was going to be their LO and what did they expect from me? I had no clue to the answers of these questions at this stage. Will I ever have all the answers to the questions? I do not know.
6. These thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of car at the hospital. As I entered the main gate I espied Mr. Joshi PRO of KMVN authoritatively sitting behind a desk arranged thoughtfully by the Hospital at a conspicuous place in the reception area meant for patients and their relatives. He was helping yatris generally and collecting their passports for getting group visa from the Chinese embassy. Mr. Joshi was dark, in early forties and had red teeth that suggested his addiction to that typically south Asian habit of chewing betel leaves. I had met him earlier and found him to be amiable. Mr. Joshi informed me that only 34 yatris have reported for medical examination. I was exultant. Smaller the group, the better the management, I thought in my mind.
7. Then began a series of informal meetings with Yatris who were going about their business of getting themselves medically examined at different places in the hospital. All yatris could be identified by the red ribbon that had been pinned to their shirts or sarees. I was

astonished to see a lean old man in white cotton shirt and dhoti with gray cropped hair walking briskly from one place to another. He appeared to be in either late sixties or early seventies. He was as straight as a ramrod and as lean as a reed. I made a mental note of this yatri as probably the oldest of the lot. A few yatris were sitting at a coffee counter chatting among themselves. When I walked up to them and introduced myself, a few were genuinely pleased while others were relieved. Don't know why? A majority of Yatris appeared to be from Karnataka; from Bangalore and Mysore. It appeared to me that ladies were more than gents. But I was wrong in this assumption. Average age of Yatris? Around 45+. All of them were in the last stages of physical and mental preparation of yatra. I was glad that my batch was small and easy, so it seemed from whatever discussions I had with them. The purpose of my meeting them was to initially break the ice and get to know them better.

8. Mr. Joshi in his typical officious manner asked whether I got my passport with me. Since I had not been advised to bring it with me, I could not give him one. He advised me to deliver it to Mr. Dalpati of MEA direct tomorrow by 11 so that action for obtaining group visa could be taken by him.
9. It was getting close to noon when I left yatris to their devices and went home.

10. 23 July 2007 (Monday)

11. In the morning Mr. Dalpati called on my cell to inform me that he needed my passport urgently. I told him that I would come and give it to him by 11.
12. Dropped in at MEA and handed over my passport to Dalpati. He asked me to collect the Satellite Phone in the afternoon. The man was pleasant.
13. Went to Tigri Camp of ITBP where Yatris were summoned for further medical examination. Those who were declared medically fit were obviously elated, while those who were not fit were disappointed. About 4-5 yatris were referred to Batra Hospital for a second opinion. Here I got further opportunity to mingle with the yatris. After the examination was over, all the yatris were called to the first floor hall, where lunch for them was arranged by an NGO. We were given water, lemon juice and a well-organized lunch that included I think gulab jamuns. We were also given waist strap pouch containing Maggi soup powder, Nescafe pouches, and puja samagri. This was preceded by recitation of prayers to Lord Shiva. After one NGO had gone others came and gave yatris lectures on how to look after oneself during the yatra.
14. I got bored with all this stuff and did a disappearing act. I was later informed that the NGOs had also given rations to the yatris for preparing food in China in four big sacks. Even a medical kit was given that contained, among essential medicines, a stethoscope and a BP instrument.

15. While I was leaving the Base Hospital a young man whom I did not recognize accosted me. He said that he would be leaving his parents in my care during the yatra, and although he did not say it but from the way his eyes spoke, I understood that he wanted some words of assurance from me that they would be looked after well. I made some reassuring noises that seemed to satisfy him. It was then that I realized the enormity of responsibility that I had assumed and felt terribly humbled.

16. 24 July 2007 (Tuesday)

17. The day had been set apart for briefing by the MEA at Hotel Akbar from where a few offices of MEA and Ministry of Overseas India Affairs function. While we all were waiting in the compound of the hotel for someone in authority come and take us inside, I noticed a young girl in about mid thirties, in tight jeans and black t-shirt standing at the entrance. She had a round face. Her hair fell freely over her shoulders. She clutched a file in her hands and was generally waiting for someone or something. I later on found out that she was the one who was invited by KMVN to brief yatris that day. She has it seemed gone to KM a number of times and enchanted by her experience, given up her job in an MNC and was organizing trips to KM via Nepal.

18. We all were shepherded to the conference hall that had the capacity to sit about 70. I, this girl, Mr. Joshi, and Dalpati were on dais and were later on joined by Mr. Anil Kumar Under Secretary (EA) of MEA.

19. The girl made her points forcefully and said that the religious significance of the yatra must never be lost sight of. We must make an attempt to shed our cultural, and regional identities, ego, vanity and prejudices in order to truly benefit from that Yatra. Then she advised all the yatris how to look after themselves and in what spirit must the trekking in the Himalayas be undertaken. She also gave a day-to-day account of the yatra and what to expect on those days.

20. After her briefing was over, I also spoke to the yatris for a few minutes. I told them that I felt honored to be their LO and looked forward to spending the next one month with them. I further advised them that they should not hide any discomforts from me. I said that I looked forward to their cooperation.

21. After the briefing, all the yatris paid Rs.15500/- to KMVN and that took a long time. Meanwhile I slipped out of the AH and went to Ashoka Hotel from where dollars were to be purchased. The man at the Central Bank of India's counter in HA was perhaps looking forward to an early lunch and appeared to be annoyed to see me. There was only one man waiting for his turn. Since he was taking a very long time to fill up the form, the manager allowed me to jump the queue. He quickly gave me a form to fill for drawing foreign exchange. I filled it up. I took 900 US\$ at the exchange rate of Rs.41.20 to a dollar. While leaving him I forewarned him to expect a group of about 30 yatris to descend on his branch for collecting foreign exchange. He said he would have enough dollars for 30 if not more.

22. Then I went to the CP and bought a 2 GB memory card for the camera. It was Nikon A 400 with 3.2 MP. The card cost me Rs.1250. Then I went home and started packing for the trip.

25 July 2007 (Wednesday)

23. The day of departure finally arrived. Had a good night's sleep. Got up early and after taking leave of the family members left for Gujarat Samaj Sadan at 5.45 am from where the bus to Kathgodam was to leave. The weather was cloudy and humid. Temperature in late 20s. Roads were empty, although one could see an odd vehicle or two. Streetlights were glowing in daylight. A TATA 407 vehicle had overturned near the Defence Colony flyover. As we were cruising along on that road, 4-5 bulls and cows came charging down the road giving enormous fright to the driver. Reached the Samaj Building without any further ado.
24. Saw that an NGO (Dharma Sanstha Samiti) was holding an elaborate farewell function to facilitate the yatri. A priest was chanting prayer and the yatri were being garlanded and given some puja samagri. A bright yellow and red polyester scarf was being draped around the shoulders of yatri. A beaded rosary, a pouch containing puja samagri and a bottle of mineral water were given to them. The priest also made a short speech saying that Lord Shiva is different from all gods inasmuch as when other gods were asked to choose their homes to settle, only LS chose to settle on earth among his devotees. He also mentioned that the pouch contains "Bilvapatra" a favourite of LS and among all the offerings made to Him, this particular offering can be brought back and kept in homes.
25. When asked to say a few words, I thanked the NGO for all the trouble they took in bidding us farewell and for their kind and magnanimous words. I said we all need their blessing for completing the yatra successfully.
26. All these formalities were delaying us. I asked KMVN officials to start loading the luggage immediately so that we could leave as soon as possible. We finally left Delhi at 6.45. As soon the 53 seater a/c bus rolled out of Delhi, the yatri started singing Shiva's name, slokas, bhajan and popular Shiva sangeet. A few ladies took out booklets and started reading slokas and hymns from them. At 8 we reached Ghaziabad, where we stopped at a Hotel where another NGO had kept an elaborate function to facilitate us. Speeches were made. I thanked them for their encouraging words. One of the persons there presented me with a whistle the purpose of which I reckoned was to call all yatri should they be playing truant. I liked that. I had to use the whistle immediately to tell yatri that it was time to depart. They had arranged breakfast for all of us. After we had partaken of their hospitality we left the place at 9.
27. The vehicle in which we were traveling appeared to be an old one. Although its a/c was working well, the seats could not be adjusted. If they were in slide back position they remained in that position and could not be brought to upright position. It was painful. The

driver's cabin was occupied by a couple of youngsters who kept him busy with incessant chat. Since the roads in UP are full of potholes and have been made narrower than they are by human encroachments and chaotic traffic, the ride was jerky and, of necessity, slow. The driver was adding to the jitters by talking incessantly on mobile and not caring two hoots about traffic safety.

28. No sooner did we leave towns behind than we were treated to lush green countryside. Peasants and labourers were working on the fields. The roadsides were lined with Mahaneem, sheesham trees. The streams and rivulets were full of flowing water thanks to the bountiful monsoon. Egrets were busy picking up insects from host animals' body.
29. We had to endure the pain of traveling through the UP countryside for close to 5 hours before we crossed over to Uttarakhand. The roads thereafter became smoother. Ms. Prompty sang a few bhajans and filmi songs. She had mellifluous voice and had apparently taken some lessons in classical singing.
30. Amid a few yawns and general ennui, reached Kathgodam at 3 in the afternoon. The management of the KMVN guest house had made elaborate arrangement to welcome us with garlands and a glass of lemonade. The guest house is just by the side of the main narrow road. One actually has to step on to the road to go to the dining hall from the rooms. If you were not aware of the location of the GH then you were likely to miss it.
31. We finally had our lunch consisting of dal, rice, sabzi and chapati. We liked it. But little did we realize that this kind of food was going to be our staple diet for the next one month and would ultimately make yatris pine for home-cooked food.
32. We left Kathgodam after shifting into two smaller buses. One was about 25 seater and the other 10 seater bus. Smaller buses are necessary in the hills to negotiate road curves on them. I noticed that Baggage Committee members who were supposed to supervise the shifting of baggage from the bigger to smaller buses were not performing their jobs properly. On way the driver allowed KMVN staff to load two small gensets in the aisle crowding it further. I was in a smaller bus with about 10 yatris and the remaining yatris were in a bigger bus that was driven ahead of us. The tedium of the journey was being relieved by occasional singing of bhajans and slokas. After about an hour or so we were in a sort of valley where a village called Kaichi Dham nestled. The driver stopped the bus in front of a temple that had been built amid sylvan surroundings. We all got down and went inside the temple to have darshan of deities. It was dusk and the light had begun to fade. Arti was imminent. The only thing that amazed me was the presence of a large number of foreigners in that temple who were dressed in typically Indian clothes. The ladies wearing Salwar-Kameez and gents kurta pyjamas. The temple had all the major deities that Hindus worship – Vaishno Devi being the most prominent there. But the major temple hosted the statue of the founder of the temple whom the foreigners worshipped. He was called Neem Karoli Baba.
33. After spending about 20 minutes at this idyllic place, we started climbing once again and

without any further ado reached Almora at 8 in the night.

34. The KMVN guest house at Almora is situated at a height and is approachable through a narrow road. One had to climb a flight of around 30 steps to reach the reception area. Our luggage remained on the bus as we were forewarned that we would have to do without it at Almora. We retired to our rooms after having our dinner. I informed all the yatris that we plan to leave by 5 in the morning as it would take at least 12 hours to reach Dharchula. I also instructed Raju to wake everybody up by 4.15 and serve them tea. For me, I gave him detailed instructions on how to prepare filter coffee that I had brought along with me for the journey.

26 July 2007 (Thursday)

35. I slept well. My room was the best in the guesthouse. Got up at 4; took a bath and had great filter coffee prepared by Raju. Was ready by 4.45 and as I went down the corridor to go down to the ground floor, blew the whistle to alert yatris. The old couple from Maharashtra was ready and waiting in front of the GH. The younger lot took more time.
36. The weather was sultry and not too comfortable, but outside, cool breeze blew. Left at 5.15 am after reciting Shiva Vandana. Stopped at the Mall by the side of a restaurant where one of the yatris had arranged tea and B/F for us. This yatri was from Almora and wanted to fete yatris. Who could have objection to that? We were served with samosa, a piece of sweetmeat (an Almora speciality) and namkeen. After spending one hour at that place, left for Dharchula.
37. While passing through the town could not help but notice that smaller towns are in a sense uglier than major ones. There were bent electrical poles on which garish posters hung just by a thread of a nut. The beauty of the place was marred by huge and out of shape billboards announcing accommodation at some resort or the other. Narrow and open drains were clogged with plastic that announced graduation to modernity. All this and more made one look with despair at the pace of progress that overlooked simple ways to make towns look pretty and clean.
38. The serpentine road passed through mountainous terrain. A leopard protected area suddenly appeared and just as suddenly disappeared from view. The berm was covered with red dried pine leaves. Mountain streams were cantering along the boulder strewn slope. All around one could see different hues of only green colour. Terraced slopes of mountains sides indicated patchy farming by the villagers. At Beri Nag the guide who accompanied us got down to telephonically inform the KMVN at Chakori that we would be arriving for lunch at about 1 in the afternoon.
39. Arrived at Chakori at about lunchtime. The place is a little known hill station. The KMVN guest house is located inside a large compound and overlooks a very pretty valley. A row of tourist huts has been constructed to accommodate wanderers who may accidentally reach this place. It is a wonderful place for sure. But how many know about this town?

There is a 30 feet high watchtower that allows one to look at a breathtaking view of the valley. All yatris climbed the tower to take photographs and videos.

40. After the lunch, we left the place at about 2.30 and had barely gone about 10 kms when one of the passengers discovered that he had left behind the carry bag of a very expensive camera at Chakori near a tree. He wanted to know whether we could turn back and get the camera bag. It was difficult to turn back as it would have meant delay in reaching Dharchula. Nevertheless, I promised to do something about it. We got in touch with the Manager of KMVN, Chakori who had by then left for home. A few cell phones were working while others were not. While we were debating about what to do, we espied that a motorcyclist was washing his vehicle beside a stream that flowed across the road. This was just 4 kms before Thal. We dropped our KMVN guide there and requested the motorcyclist to take him to Chakori and get the camera bag back. The motorcyclist as well as the guide was tipped generously by the yatri.
41. Reached ITBP camp at Mirthi at 3pm. Were escorted by a ITBP vehicle that came to fetch us about 10 kms before the camp. Here we were to be briefed by the Commandant on how to take care of ourselves during the yatra as well as the do's and don'ts.
42. We spent about an hour at the camp and the lasting impression I have of the briefing was that it was done with clock like precision. We were served with tea and snacks at the end of the briefing. The Commandant informed us that only one batch before us had come back with all yatris in good health. Some of the things he said were as follows.
 1. Each human being is different and reacts and responds differently to the same stimuli.
 2. Be humble.
 3. We would be trekking on the traditional route followed for ages.
 4. The yatra was closed in 1962 and reopened in 1982.
 5. Dhauliganga meets kaliganga at Tawaghat.
 6. The route would be Budhi (2740m) – 3km – Chiyyalekh (3350m) – 6km – Garbanga (3181m) – 11 kms – Gunji (3600m) – 10 kms – Kalapani (3570m) – 9kms – Nabidang – Lipulekh pass (5073m)
 7. ITBP Inmarsat nos would be:-
 - i. Garbayang 00-873761105942
 - ii. Gunji 00- 873761105944
 - iii. Kalapani 00- 873761105940
 8. A trekker gets mentally tired and not physically. Daler Mehndi danced for 2 hours after 40 kms of route march.
 9. Have positive thoughts.
 10. Avoid horse riding from Gala to Budhi.
 11. Check passport and purse physically before starting on the day's trek.
43. After tea and snacks were served we were taken for group photographs. A place had been thoughtfully selected and chairs kept there to take group photographs of yatris. We were

told that on our way back each yatri would be given one copy of the photograph.

44. We left Mirthi at 4 after thanking the Commandant for his hospitality. At 5 pm our bus came to a halt by the side of river close to a town called Golgatai. Just before the confluence of Kaliganga and Goriganga, a huge rock had fallen on the road. It was about 5 feet thick. Traffic had come to a standstill. The rock had apparently fallen at 10 in the morning and the workers were using sledge hammers to break it down. It was a huge task. On the other side of the road was the bank of the river on which were built houses. So the broken pieces of rocks could not be pushed down the gorge. Nor could dynamite be used to blast off the rock. The workers finally managed to create a small space for the bus to pass at about 8 pm by which time darkness fell.
45. After meandering through the hilly terrain for another hour we finally reached Dharchula at 8.45 in the night. The town of Dharchula is small and has very narrow roads that allow only a medium-sized bus to pass. Shops on either side of the roads make them dangerous for pedestrians. Stone-slabs covered the drain haphazardly. Pigs were loitering around even in the dark. The guest house is on the bank of a rapidly flowing river whose roaring sound could be heard for at least a mile.
46. I was privileged to be accorded a VIP status and given a double-bed room when 4-5 yattris had to share a room. The luggage was unloaded and after a gap of two days. We would now be able to change our clothes.
47. After ascertaining the requirements of yattris, I informed KMVN officials that we needed 25 ponies and 24 porters. Besides 2 cooks and 2 assistant cooks were also hired for yatra.

27 July 2007 (Friday)

48. It had rained all night. Woke up early. Switched on TV. And then switched it off. Boring. Went to the small semi-circular balcony and saw the mighty river raucously winding its way down the hill warning stragglers on its bank to stay away.
49. Coffee came. Had bath. Called porters and asked them to pack my bags. Went down and found that people had started packing bags. This at 7.30. The packets placed by the yattris in the foyer of the hotel were counted one by one and weighed. Then they were loaded onto the bus. All this took over an hour. Meanwhile a few packets were left unidentified because the yattris had played truant. After this experience I collected yattris and told them:-
 1. To inform me whenever they go anywhere on their own.
 2. To identify their luggage whenever it is loaded on the bus.
 3. Neither increase nor decrease the number of baggages.
50. After that we left for Tawaghat at 8.20 am. The way to Tawaghat winded its way along the sides of hills that surrounded the valley in which flowed the mighty Kaliganga. Numerous

waterfalls sliced through the hillsides making all of us nervous. The bus literally passed at many places under the waterfalls and we all had to close windows to prevent water from drenching us.

51. As we had feared our journey came to an abrupt halt after covering only 20 kms. A huge landslide had blocked the road. As I got down and started taking pictures a huge monster of a terribly noisy bulldozer came hurtling down the road. It went to the landslide and started clearing debris. About 50 uniformed men were already busy removing the rubble. We feared that it might take one full day to clear the amount of rubble that had blocked the road.
52. Meanwhile a jeep from NHPC came and offered us soft drinks and biscuits. When it appeared that there was no way the road could be cleared in an hour or two, Yatra Ahikari of KMVN informed us that we might have to cross the road on foot. So we took off our shoes, collected our personal belongings and slowly crossed the landslides on which an enormous amount of water was flowing. A few ladies found it difficult to cross the landslide but ultimately managed to cross with the help of guides and porters.
53. Thereafter KMVN managed to hire three jeeps on the other side of the landslide and we started moving at 10. We had to cover about 20 kms before our trek to Gala could begin. After about 8 km the jeep in which I was traveling developed mechanical fault. Its clutch wire snapped. Our driver then stopped a vehicle that was coming from opposite direction and literally forced the lone lady occupant of that vehicle to alight and make way for us. The name of the lady was Anju Devi and she was looking pretty in her pink salwar kameez as hill women normally do. The vehicle was terribly crowded. The driver was sitting in a space not more than 8 inches wide. He was driving with only his left hand. The floor gear was nearer to me than to him and I was sitting near the window on the opposite side. It is amazing how people devise ways and means of making money without regard for passenger safety. Under normal circumstances I would have declined to travel in such conditions but really had no choice in the matter. He drove skillfully though and negotiated twists and turns of the hilly road with utmost dexterity.
54. When we thought our ordeal for the day was over came another blow. There was one more landslide before Mangti. This appeared more dangerous and risky to cross than the previous one. The rain had meanwhile intensified. The Yatra Adhikari who was with us made inquiries from the people and after all round consultation with villagers and drivers of jeeps told me that we have no choice but to climb the steep face of the mountain in order to skirt the landslide. This was a difficult decision to take. We had ladies in our group and a few were not feeling well. But taking his advice for what it was worth, we started to climb the mountain by walking on a small and insignificant footpath that appeared to be used more by horses and ponies than by people. We had not eaten anything since breakfast and all of us were ravenously hungry.
55. After we had climbed for over an hour, I realized the folly of what we had done. The guides did not know the route. A few villagers who were coming from opposite direction

told us that the path was risky and ladies would find it difficult to carry on. There were ten ladies in the group and not all of them were young. They were my biggest worry. No less worrisome were some old men in the group. It was around 4 pm and the sun was beginning to go down and I did not want to get stranded on the slope of the mountain. So I decided to retrace our steps after the guide also suggested that it would be unwise to carry further like this. I contacted MEA on my Satellite phone and told them that I was stranded and could neither move forward nor backward.

56. It was 4 pm when we all got down to the road once again. Tempers were running high because there was no assistance in sight and nobody had anything worthwhile to eat since morning. There was no point in consulting yatris as everybody had some opinion or the other that others did not approve of. I was waiting for a word from Yatra Adhikuari who had disappeared from the scene after making us climb the mountain. In this situation I sent a few yatris to go forward and find out what kind of landslide had halted our progress. Meanwhile I went on a reconnaissance mission to find out whether the ladies in our group could find some shelter for the night. There were only two huts in the neighbourhood. One was on the face of the mountain that we had just climbed and the other was just below the road towards the valley. Both were utterly insufficient to accommodate the yatris. In the midst of discussion with the yatris about our next course of action came the news from the drivers of the jeeps that were also stranded that the road to Pangla (a village 4 kms behind us that had good possibility of lodging and boarding) was clear. The drivers suggested to us that we all should move to Pangla and spend the night there. I talked to the drivers and packed yatris in jeeps. As we neared the village, the jeeps came to a halt. A fresh landslide had made even that village inaccessible. Now we were truly caught between the devil and the deep sea. This landslide was enormous and was the result of continuous rainfall. A huge rock had fallen and a 8-10 feet high mound of rock and other debris had collected at the place where once a road existed.

57. We all got down and surveyed the scene. Crossing it when the landslide was fresh was full of risk. Everybody was looking up to me to deliver the judgment on what was to be done next. I never felt so helpless as I did then. Nor more responsible. I had to take care of 30 yatris and see that they perform safe yatra. After long rumination I decided to get back to the place from where we came. So we again went back to the place where we had climbed the mountain. The logic of this decision was that it was preferable to have a yatri who is sick than to have someone who is a cripple. Crossing the landslide carried the risk of a serious injury while sleeping in open could only make one sick at worst.

58. As we were mulling our options in the fast fading light, Yatra Ahikari arrived. He appeared to have been informed by Delhi that we were stuck and that he should immediately go and rescue us. He had done his homework well. He informed me that there is no option at that stage but to go to Pangla where he had arranged two large halls for the night's stay. He would also arrange a good dinner for us there. He had carried blankets with him in case we decide to take his advice.

59. I saw his point. He had also come to this place after crossing the landslide. So there was

the possibility of crossing it without hurting oneself. And frankly there was also the TINA factor. Then one had also to think about how could one survive the night in open and attend the morning constitutionals. Keeping all this in mind I decided to take his advice and head back to the landslide from where we had just come.

60. We arrived at the landslide at 7 in the evening. We took out our torches and one by one crossed the landslide without any prime or collateral damage. All of us heaved a big sigh of relief and shouted in unison “Om Namah Shivay”. The village was about a couple of kilometers from the landslide. In the end we made it to the village and the newly constructed halls rented out for us at about 8 in the night. All of us collapsed on the floor as soon as durries were spread. Tea was served and biscuit packets opened. Candles lit and jokes cracked. There could not have been a more apt example of how quickly tempers become pleasant in a group bound together with a common objective and with its members dependent on one another for support, the moment the danger facing the group disappears. An hour ago there was heated debate on what should be done. I had to remind yatri that I was in charge and my decision would have to be respected. A few yatri had glared at me and some were visibly upset at how things had turned out. I could not blame them. They were tired and hungry. There was no place where they could lie down and rest. They were anxious about how they would spend the night and from where would the next meal come. All these apprehensions were not bothering them anymore. They were lying down no matter that it was some nondescript village in a nondescript setting. All that mattered to them was the prospect of spending peaceful night with their bellies full. And that was what lay in store for them. And that prospect dissolved all rancour that characterized group dynamics earlier.
61. Dinner was arranged in a small dhaba and served to us at 10.30. A person came and kept a crate of 24 empty Pepsi bottles telling us that these bottles may be used in the morning for attending to the call of nature. By 11 all of us retired for the night in a much more comfortable physical and mental state of mind than had seemed possible a few hours ago.

28 July 2007 (Saturday)

62. All of us slept well. Mostly because we were tired with the exertions of the previous day. My eyes opened at 4 am. I immediately got up and started making a lot of noise on the pretext of taking out my toiletries bag out of the rucksack in the hope that it would wake up yatri who were still sleeping. I brushed my teeth and made my way to the cornfield. The YA was by now shouting to make everybody get up quickly. Everyone was given a cup of tea and we assembled at 5.35 am in the space opposite the halls. The old lady from Ahmedabad said that before we proceed we recite prayer together. So I recited “Ganapati Atharvashirsha”. After loud chanting of ONS/HHM we started our trek, in the faint pre-dawn daylight. It started drizzling. Everyone was wearing a raincoat. My poncho that I had specifically got made was serving me well.
63. We eventually came to the place of landslide. All of us were now mentally better prepared to deal with it. As I was crossing it I saw one of the yatri climbing on the rock that had

fallen in the middle of that dangerous slide and filming the crossing of the yatris on his handycam. I shouted at him and asked him to immediately get down and cross over to the safety of the other side. I also warned him that should I find him doing such stupid things in future I would not hesitate to leave him behind. The man did not realize that he was putting his and others' lives at risk by doing so. The best way to cross a landslide is to cross it quickly and be done with it.

64. The head section of the group had by then reached the second landslide that had delayed us the previous day. When we left Dharchula we were joined by a doctor from Uttarakhand Health Service, Dr. HS Yanki, who had been deployed by the government to look after the health of the yatris till Gunji. Two policemen with wireless sets also joined us. They were assigned roles as head and tail of the group during our trek.
65. When the head policeman of the group sent the message that he needed my permission to allow yatris to cross the landslide, I gave my tail policeman the permission to wire my approval. For one thing we were mentally prepared to carry on regardless. And for another, I did not look at the possibility of spending another day and night in the middle of nowhere with any pleasant anticipation. It was only when I reached the landslide later that I realized what I had done. The landslide that had detained us so far had formed as a result of a section of hill falling down the valley and taking down the road with it. The rubble did not comprise rocks but loose soil. The road had as usual disappeared and the three little mounds of loose soil, of about 8-10 feet height, had formed at a place where there once was a motorable road with steep sloping surface. These mounds were separated from each other by 5-10 feet of walkable road. Below these mounds was a steep valley about 100 feet deep at the bottom of which flowed the Kali. It was making a terrific sound flowing hard as it was on huge rocky boulders throwing up sprays of fine and misty water droplets several feet high.
66. It became clear to me that if the group were to cross the landslide on foot it would need the helping hand of providence and a huge slice of luck. For if any yatri were to slip while crossing those mounds of loose and wet soil, he would just freely roll down the slope to eventually fall 100 feet in the river that would swallow him in no time without leaving any trace behind.
67. A few yatris were, and I must admit I too was, scared while crossing the landslide. A false step and the fast flowing river would willingly have embraced one. Eventually we crossed without any mishap. It is at times like this that one begins to believe in someone up there directing the affairs of those who inhabit this planet. Call him by any name you wish: Ram, Rahim, Jesus... but his all-powerful presence cannot be described in words. It has to be felt. Otherwise why should it be that some people fall or slip and some others do not slip at all while crossing the same river or a mountain pass?
68. Before I started to climb the mound I enquired from the yatra adhikari whether it is safer to allow the yatris to cross the dangerous and potentially risky landslide. He laid my fears to rest by saying that many villagers have crossed the landslide in the night and early

morning making the path harder and firmer than what it was the previous day.

69. Suitably reassured I started to climb. Before me was a lady of 60 from Bangalore who was a little on the plumb side. She was finding it difficult to get a firm foothold on the loose soil and pebbles that comprised the landslide. She would bend, sit and then place her foot on the ground before moving her body forward. That naturally took time. Behind me were two ladies who were younger and fitter. One of them was a native of Uttarakhand and was perhaps aware and knowledgeable about how to cross the landslide. Both these ladies wanted the group to cross the landslide as quickly as possible. But the plumb lady was slowing the entire group. Eventually the group managed to cross with any further ado and everybody heaved a big sigh of relief. Lord Shiva certainly seemed to be with us. The woman yatri from the UK told me that the best way to cross any landslide is to cross as quickly as possible to prevent injuries from falling debris that might still be waiting for the slightest nudge or a movement to fall.
70. This was our first acid test of our ability to hold together as a group in face of adversity. And I must admit that my handling of the crisis left a lot to be desired. It was probably just as well that the difficulties were encountered in the beginning of the yatra. They made us a lot more realistic about what to expect in the days to come.
71. By now the rains had grown in intensity. We quickly crossed a small bridge that lay a little ahead of us beyond which was an ITBP camp. The ITBP men welcomed us with tea and some biscuits. The horses and ponies for the yatriis were a little further ahead from where those who wanted to ride the ponies could mount them.
72. Those who had not asked either for pony or porter started their trek without further loss of time. I had my porter-cum-cook with me. He carried one rucksack while I carried another with me. We were all suitably dressed to protect ourselves from the rain that showed no sign of abating. The landscape seemed full of water. Huge mountains on either side of the valley supported scores of waterfalls both big and small. On several occasions during this part of the trek we had to pass under waterfalls that drained huge amount of water over overhanging rocks. The path at many places had been badly wounded by the sheer force of water that fell on it. The sky looked gray and dull. It did not seem as it was going to open up in a hurry. The river seemed to grow bigger and bigger as it collected an enormous amount of water from these streams and waterfalls. On the black faces of rocks were painted messages that exhorted the trekkers to be wary and careful. The weather though not exactly cold was not pleasant either. And those who were walking briskly were sweating.
73. After walking for about a couple of hours we came to a place called Lakhanpur where we had our breakfast. The place consisted of no more than a couple of dhabas. The dhaba in which we sat had low ceiling and stone slabs were kept on three sides that were covered with blankets for yatriis to sit. This was a pattern that we saw at most of these eating-joints. They had made comfortable but basic arrangements for yatriis to sit and rest. Upon arrival they were served with aloo ki sabzi, green chutney and puris. Puris looked soaked in oil

and made our fingers sticky. But it tasted fine. After resting for about 20 minutes we all moved ahead. Actually we were not moving as a group. Those who could manage to walk fast were ahead of others. I was alone with my porter and kept changing my position in the group to ensure that everybody was fine. The doctor was with the tail section of our group so that in case any help was needed he could easily be contacted.

74. The next stop was a place called Malpa where a terrible tragedy took place in the year 1998. Malpa is about 5 kms from Lakhanpur. Walking at a normal pace the distance could be covered in 2-3 hours. Those of us who enjoyed walking in mountains were now beginning to forget the inconveniences of the last few days and keenly soaking in the atmosphere. The rainy season had painted the landscape in various hues of green and wherever the green colour appeared to be interrupted, it occurred mainly because of landslides that brought down a portion of the hill along with it. There was that grayish mistiness to the air with rain lashing down with great force. The path though held firm. The railings that had been constructed at tricky bends had been twisted. It appeared that ponies that carried pilgrims' luggage for the last so many years had savagely assaulted these metallic railings. The path was narrow and fully loaded ponies were bound to collide with railing while negotiating the twists and turns of the mountain trail. The rocks under which we passed had become wet and oozed water. Moss had formed on them. The pebbles and rocks that we had to step on had become slippery. So walking was of necessity slow and arduous. Even those pilgrims who rode on ponies had to get down and walk through certain portions of the path, as the overhanging rocks under which one had to pass did not provide sufficient space for the pony with the pilgrim riding on it to pass unhindered. Even though I had not hired a pony I had to bend to avoid bumping my head against the rocks. Once or twice my vigil slackened and my head hit the rock. Luckily I wasn't walking fast.
75. Malpa has become synonymous with tragedy in mountain. In the year 1998, the pilgrims of 12th batch met with their watery grave when a cloudburst suddenly brought about the collapse of a portion of a mountain. The pilgrims who were sleeping in tents close to the river did not get any chance to flee to safety. Only a few survived this terrible tragedy. A large number of porters, ponies and pilgrims perished in that summer. So it was with some amount of trepidation that the yatris of my batch were walking towards the site of that tragedy.
76. We reached Mangti at about lunchtime. The approach to Mangti is through a flat open space on both sides of the path. The place where tragedy struck the pilgrims does not have any tell-tale signs of that incident. Huge undergrowth of dense vegetation had hidden any scars of that terrible tragedy that might have survived. The portion of the mountain that collapsed does bear some resemblance to the wounded giant. But it too appeared to be healing well with bits of vegetation appearing on its slope. As they say time is a great healer.
77. We entered the dhaba in which a small boy of about 12 welcomed me with a huge home grown geranium red flower. A small garden behind the eatery tended well by the owner

provided these flowers. I was touched. In the middle of nowhere one can still find people who can genuinely make their guests happy. The lunch consisted of puris and potato vegetable with curry. We ate our lunch, rested for a few minutes and thanked the owner and his waiter-boy profusely for their wonderful hospitality. The place was bare and those who lived in that village would be living a life of privation, as we city-dwellers would call it. But all we could see on their faces were smiles of contentment.

78. The rain had subsided a bit by now. We were now slowed down by exhaustion. The path appeared to be endless. The village of Lamiri was the next stop 4 kms later. The jawans of Seema Suraksha Bal received us at Lamiri. I was escorted to an FRB hut where I was given tea and snacks. These jawans of SSB guard our frontier with Nepal that lies on the other side of the river Kali. They also live a life of isolation with no connectivity to their hometowns and villages. They spend a couple of years in these difficult, yet beautiful parts of the country, before they become eligible to be posted to better areas. The SSB camp consisted of a few FRB huts and was close to the Kali river.
79. However before we reached Lamiri we had to negotiate a mountain stream that had washed away a temporary bridge. A huge stream about 20 feet wide bumped over huge rocks before falling over a gradually sloping hills to meet Kali. Since it was not possible to cross the river without assistance, jawans of SSB had been busy placing heavy rocks on the shallow bed of the stream to make it passable. Later, on our way back we saw that a temporary bridge had been constructed to enable the yatris to cross the river without assistance.
80. From Lamari Budhi is 5 kms. The physical exertion of having walked 22 kms since leaving Pangla, was now slowly beginning to tell on everyone. I kept a steady and slow pace of 2 km an hour and eventually got near the Budhi camp. A kilometer before the camp, 2 ITBP constables were waiting for me with a cup of tea and a plate of cashew nuts near a bend in the hill. Liaison Officer in this yatra is a privileged person and gets preferential treatment. After a rest of 5 minutes, we continued on our trek. By 5 pm we were in Budhi camp.
81. This trek is by far the most enjoyable as also the most difficult. It passes through rugged and most difficult mountain terrain full of ups and downs. One minute you are ascending and the next, descending. This kind of trek saps one's energy. Drinking water and eating high calorie nuts and chocolates is extremely essential. The rains also made this trek difficult as well as enjoyable. Difficult because one has to walk through slush, mud, slippery rocks and waterfalls that drop tons of water on one's body. Enjoyable because it is rare that one gets an opportunity to trek in monsoon in these beautiful hills with all the resources of the state ready to lend a helping hand whenever required.
82. Budhi camp consisted of 4-5 semicircular FRB huts each of which could accommodate around 8-10 yatris. The LO is lodged in a PWD guest house. The accommodation is basic but comfortable. One Govind Singh who was a Group IV employee of PWD looked after me. As soon as I collapsed on the chair in the verandah of the GH, he gave me a cup of tea

and biscuits. Then he enquired whether I would need a bucket of hot water to immerse my legs in it. I was unaware of this treatment. I was told that if after a particularly strenuous trek, a trekker were to dip his legs up to knee level in a bucket full of warm water mixed with salt, he would feel enormously good and the pain, if any, in the legs would disappear. I was grateful for the suggestion. I asked him to get me warm water in a bucket. He said that it would be advisable to do it before going to bed at night. Shortly thereafter it was dark and GS came with a solar lamp and a few candles to light the room. The solar lamp malfunctioned. I asked GS why did he bring the solar lamp if he knew that the lamp malfunctioned. He had no answer. I gave him proper instructions on how to make filter coffee in the morning. After sometime he brought soup made from ready-made soup powder and asked whether I would come to dinner in the dining hall. Since I was too tired to go out, I requested him to bring dinner in my room. He did so dutifully.

83. The sun had by now set and it was beginning to get a little chilly. Our luggage that was being carried by the ponies had not arrived. All our woolens were in them. The local KMVN official informed me that the luggage has so far reached Malpa and it would be delivered the next day. I told one of the yatris in charge of luggage to inform all the yatris about the position and also to inform that we shall all depart the next day at 6 in the morning. Later on I was informed that the luggage had arrived at 9 by which time the yatris were too tired to bother. After sometime, I called it a day.

29 July 2007 (Sunday)

84. We all got up at 4 in the morning. We were given tea and after sometime milk with bournvita. I took bath with hot water supplied by GS.
85. After reciting our customary morning prayer in the courtyard in front of my room we all began our trek to Gunji. My porter who carried my rucksack containing water and other small eats accompanied me. It was dark when we began. After walking for a kilometer, the steep climb to the mountain pass of Chialekh began. It was indeed a steep climb. In a space of 3 kms one climbs about 600 meters.
86. I kept on walking at a steady pace of 1.5 kms an hour. Also took frequent breaks to catch breath. The climb was steep and during some portion even those yatris who had ridden on ponies had to get down and walk. By the time we reached the top of the mountain at 8.15 all of us were exhausted. The entrance to the valley of Chialekh is through a small opening in a huge rock and once you pass through that opening – which incidentally is decorated with prayer flags and bunting – you are almost at level and thereafter one almost walks for about 10 km on plain level. The next 10 kms or so is through the most beautiful valley of the entire yatra. The valley is about 2 kms wide and 10 kms long and is surrounded by mountains that have streams flowing through their sides. The depth of the valley is about 300 meters. The vegetation also changes and now one sees pine and deodar trees. Wild flowers abound in all colours. It is the most enjoyable to trek in such heavenly surroundings. The weather was sunny and there was pleasant nip in the air. Flowers were

in bloom. Himalayan Griffons soared over the valley and its back was visible to us. We were reminded of the famous song “suhana safar aur ye mausam hansi” from the film “Madhumati”. The hills around us were green and turquoise in colour and tufts of cloud floated over their summit tops.

87. At Chialekh we had breakfast of puri and chole in a dhaba next to the SSB chowki. The SSB men had made a makeshift Mandir where I prayed and then carried on with my trek. This place is also restricted and no one is allowed to go beyond without any permit. Our passports were checked and we were made to sign a register kept by the SSB men. A couple of ITBP policemen accompanied me right through the trek from this place onwards.
88. After walking for about 6 kms through this heavenly valley I reached Garbayang village at 11. Entered a tea stall where porters and villagers were enjoying their time and food. I ordered noodles. It was okay. Meanwhile I saw yatris coming from Gunji and going towards Budhi. Was informed that they were from 8th batch returning after completing the yatra. I wanted to speak to the LO of the batch and get his first hand account of the yatra and any important tips that he may have to give me.
89. After about 20 minutes came the LO, one Mr. Dilip Sinha from MEA. He looked haggard and sported several days’ of stubble on his chin. He told me that LO must hire a pony even if he is fit enough to walk, just in case he might feel the need for it. He said that LO has to be in good health, not because he has to lead the yatris till the end, but also because he owes it to himself to be in good health. He was found to be having high BP in Gunji and wanted to play safe by engaging a pony for himself. And since the government foots the bill of LO, it is incumbent upon LO to hire a pony.
90. His advice was faultless. I decided that I shall engage a pony from Gunji till Lipulekh and told my porter to find a good pony at Gunji.
91. Took 2 hours from Garbayang to reach Siti village. My porter was from Garbayang and he informed me that a row of houses at a slightly higher elevation have been sinking for the last several years. Their owners have abandoned them for fear of some tragedy striking them.
92. Had lunch in the dhaba by the roadside. It consisted of potatoes, green vegetables, dal and roti. Left after a brief rest and reached Gunji at 5 pm by covering a distance of 6 kms. On way Gunji saw a water-powered flour-mill. It was maintained by a villager and was continuously grinding coarse grain. The water gushed from a man-made channel that struck the wooden fins/blades fixed on a vertical spindle. The spindle was attached to two grinding stones that rotated by the force of water striking the blades. It was environment-friendly way of meeting the needs of villagers. Those who get the grains ground in the flourmill left a portion of the flour for the use of individual who maintained it. There were two flour mills in series. The water that flowed from one mill entered the other mill that was at a slightly lower height and rotated the grinding stones. I took a video of this mill to show to children back home.

93. Thereafter one had to cross a bridge to enter the village of Gunji. We were welcomed by ITBP men who gave us tea and biscuits as usual. As soon as these formalities were over we started walking again. The KMVN camp was about 2 km from the village. The setting of the village was wonderful and attractive. The village was bounded on one side by mountains and on the other side by fields that precipitously sloped down to the bank of the river about 50 feet below. Both the men and women worked hard to make ends meet. The wooden doors of the houses were decorated in traditional motifs and were carved in simple yet elegant design. We passed through these houses on our way to the camp.
94. We soon reached the camp where again I was put up in a room away from the huts that were assembled for the yatris. I had a largish room with three cots. Attached to it was a bathroom and toilet. There was huge vacant space in front of my room and one had to cross a low wall to get to the camp that was about 100 feet away. A little shelter had been erected for the horses and ponies to rest and eat. The vacant space was used by the pony wallahs to unload the cargo they carried.
95. After we had refreshed ourselves, I checked my luggage that had meanwhile arrived. The condition of the bags that had been kept in the so-called waterproof fertilizer bags suggested that the bags had been badly handled. The incessant rains had made their condition even worse.
96. I found that one tetra pack of orange juice had burst and the juice had leaked out. Clothes were not only wet and stained but also now smelt of juice. One packet containing laddus had also broken and the material had stained a few woolens. I had to immediately spread out these clothes to get them to dry. Strings were hastily drawn between two available points and clothes hung. Fortunately the weather was sunny and we had a breather the next day. That allowed us to reorganize ourselves. By the time I finished drying my clothes on strings outside the weather had become chilly. I took out my woolens and wore the windcheater that I had bought on the eve of this yatra.
97. The next day was going to be devoted to medical examination of yatris and rest. All the yatris went to a temple for evening bhajans. The ITBP men had at all camps constructed temples where they congregated in the evenings and sang bhajans. A few men seemed to have developed admirable proficiency in playing dholaks and other musical instruments that are used in singing bhajans. I attended that evening's session and enjoyed it immensely. In these areas these men had little to do in the evenings and they pass their time by either playing outdoor games or singing bhajans in temples. This session lasted for one hour after which went to our camp.
98. There was a room next to mine in which a contractor was staying. I heard a radio cackling in his room. He was listening to the commentary of India-England test match that was going on and in which India seemed to be having an upper hand. We listened to the commentary together after which we had a most forgettable dinner and went off to sleep.

30 July 2007 (Monday)

99. Got up in the morning a little early. It appeared to have rained a little but after sometime sun peeked through the clouds. That prompted me to tie up another string to dry up all clothes. Even those that were dry. The man serving me offered to wash dirty clothes. I paid him Rs. 50/- for the service.
100. Had breakfast and went to the medical briefing by Captain Ratra of ITBP. The captain was from Assam and had specifically been deputed to Gunji for this purpose. I saw him scolding a few yatres for being late for the briefing. When I entered the briefing hall at 8.30 only 10-12 yatris were present. More started trooping in during the next few minutes. The good young doctor explained what lack of oxygen can do to body at high altitudes and what precautions should be taken.
101. When the medical check up was to begin, I went to Dr. Ratra and confessed that I forgot my medical report. He agreed to check me up on the condition that I give in writing that I am okay and if anything happens to me I shall be solely responsible. I did not understand the logic of this condition as the MEA has already taken an indemnity bonds from all of us to that effect. Surprisingly my BP showed 170/100 and my oxygen content in blood 84%. That was a tad low. He asked me to come again for a check up in the afternoon.
102. While I was arranging my luggage for the next day's journey, an ITBP man came and handed over an invitation from the commanding officer for lunch in ITBP officers' mess. There Dr. Ratra and his colleagues were present. The lunch, though simple, was served in officers' dining hall with all pomp and show that is normally associated with uniformed service. It consisted of dal, chawal, subzi and salad. It might appear very simple food but in those areas where everything is to be brought up the hills on ponies and by porters it is a luxury and one comes to appreciate such gestures.
103. In the afternoon I went for my check up. My BP was 160/100. The doctor gave me Alprazolam 0.25 mg and asked me to take it at bedtime. The doctor also gave me a list of 5 yatris who needed to be particularly looked after, as they too were hypertensive. One patient of high BP was a young man of 32. In the evening Ramesh, my porter, came and helped me to pack my bags for next day's journey.
104. In the evening went to the Mandir for Bhajan along with other yatris. Came back by 8 pm. Had light dinner and slept. The weather on both days was clear and sunny.

31 July 2007 (Tuesday)

105. Got up in the morning, had coffee, shaved for the first time since I left Delhi, and took hot water bath. Went to the doctor for further check up. My BP was 142/82. The tablet

appeared to have done the trick. The doctor announced my BP with visible relief and happiness. I too was happy that my BP had come back to normal. The other yatris who also went for check up had high BP.

106. Breakfast consisted of porridge and milk with Bournvita. It was good and everybody enjoyed it.
107. We all assembled at the courtyard in front of Mandir after praying to Lord Shiva. I said Ganapati stotra. Everybody was happy to walk again after a day's break. The next stop was going to be Kalapani, about 9 kms from Gunji.
108. This trek was most beautiful. The weather was sunny and balmy. The path is almost at level with the river Kali. Pine and deodar trees lined both sides of the footpath. Thorny shrubs with berry-like fruits were in abundance. Porter plucked them and ate them. I also tasted these berries and found them to be astringent and lemony.
109. After 3 hours of trek reached Kalapani. The entry to the camp is through a Kali Mandir. The entrance to the precincts of Mandir was festooned with hundreds of small brass bells attached to strings on either side of the path. It is believed that River Kali originates from the spot where the idol of Goddess Kali has been consecrated. The KMVN camp is in a narrow valley. LO's room was a pucca structure while the yatris were accommodated in FRB huts.
110. Went around for a little birding in the evening. Saw horned lark, white naped water redstart, large-billed crows and yellow-billed chough. In Gunji I had hired a horse just in case I needed it. The owner of the horse was a young man who had a lovely black dog. The dog was enjoying the ride and gamboling around us. It occasionally would go very far from us and one whistle from its owner was enough to bring it back. From time to time it searched the bushes for any morsel of food. It was a fine dog and I fell in love with it.
111. On the western side of the camp stood Sheshnag parvat. The peaks of the mountains looked exactly like the raised hood of multi-headed snake. I took its pictures. A little ahead of the camp was Sage Vyasa's cave where he is believed to have performed penance. The cave becomes visible on route to Nabidang and it is an opening of about 10-15 feet about 700 feet above the ground. The face of the rock in which the opening is seen is vertical and only an experienced mountaineer can get inside the cave. We were informed that a few ITBP men had gone there and hoisted Indian Tricolour at its entrance. We could see the Tricolour on our way to Nabhidang.
112. As the evening fell, chilly winds began to blow across the valley. We covered ourselves in woolens and went to the temple for singing bhajans. At this point I must record my observations about the yatris from South. They seem to be reluctant to wear woolens clothes. Only when it becomes really cold do they take out woolens and wear them. I saw them roaming about in dhoti half-turned up in a typical Tamil style. One gentleman whom I got to know well later, wore only half-sleeved shirt throughout the

yatra – even in China. I do not know whether they did not feel cold or they did not want to wear woolens. As a matter of fact I tried many a time to tell them not to take any chances with their health. But my pleas fell on deaf ears.

113. The Bhajan session in the evening was joyous and enjoyable. I began to like the way bhajans are sung and all these bhajans have the theme of yatra and how one undergoes many sufferings and privations to reach Lord Shiva's abode in Kailash Parvat.

114. By the time we came back from the temple, it was pretty dark and quite cold. We then had our dinner and retired to our rooms. At all these places the rooms have only one 40 W bulb that lights up the room at night. Even this is because of a genset run on diesel. So everybody has to pack up by 10 at night because the genset is switched off at that time. Candles are there of course but one cannot totally depend on candles. And then mobiles batteries need to be recharged.

1 August 2007 (Wednesday)

115. It had rained at night. Got up as usual at 5. Slept well probably because of the tablet given by the doctor. Went to the doctor at 7 for check up. The rain had slowed down to a drizzle. BP was 160/100. Requested the doctor who was in MI room to come and check up other BP patients. All of them had high BP. The young man had 159/110. I forced him to hire a pony and told him not to get down from it till we reached Nabadang.

116. We started after we had our breakfast at 9 am. I walked for about an hour till all the yatris had overtaken me. I was last and was walking one-step-one-breath at a time. As the climb became steeper, the exertion began to tell. I then decided to sit on pony for the first time. I remembered the words of Dr. Ratra who had said while briefing the yatris, "why to exert when your horse can do that for you". The track was not bad but the effect of less oxygen was beginning to tell on those who were still walking. There were a few yatris who walked very well and did not in the least feel discomfited.

117. I may have ridden for barely half an hour when I saw a group of ITBP men and a few yatris huddled together and comforting Nitya or Ms. Prompty. It so happened that one of the Army personnel carrying a huge trunk coming from opposite directions had struck the pony in the rib accidentally. The pony got scared and the yatri fell down. She appeared to be more in shock than in pain. There were no visible marks of external injury. While she was crying on the shoulders of ITBP men some yatris gave her analgesic tablets. After a while she began to walk though a little slowly.

118. The vegetation along the route had now thinned considerably. But flowers in myriad colours were still wonderfully holding out. There were patches of these small lovely flowers here and there that made trekking and riding a horse a pleasant experience. The tiny flowers that seemed to grow out of the ground appeared to have no stem. Even the plant and leaves were too tiny to be visible. My horse and dog that followed us, kept company. The dog's name was "Khomcho". It was a good mountain dog and I took its

photo.

119. Meanwhile the batteries of the camera gave way. I did not have spare batteries. I therefore could not take any photographs of this part of the route. The rest of the journey was uneventful and we reached a huge valley in which were KMVN and ITBP camps. As soon as we arrived we were given a glass of orange juice. The weather was sunny.
120. The camp itself consisted of 5-6 FRB huts (semicircular) each of which was large enough to accommodate 10 yatris. I was given a separate green coloured tent that had two mattresses. The tent was of 8'X10' size and cozy. A chair could be placed inside comfortably.
121. The camp at Nabhidang was situated in a huge broad valley. Om Parvat was to the east and was at that time covered with clouds. The place was decidedly chilly even in the afternoon. All the yatris took out their cameras and handycams and started photographing the beautiful valley. You could see snow covered mountain peaks. During the brief moment when the clouds cleared and Om as written in Devnagari script was clearly visible, I took its photograph.
122. We took lunch at 12.30 which consisted of Dal, subzi, roti and rice. The quality of rice was good. I slept in the afternoon after lunch with 2 thick quilts and dreamt of some journey the details of which I could not recall after I woke up. But I had a sound sleep. I felt that I had developed fever. But fortunately that was not true. I was woken up by assistant cook with a cup of tea and plate full of biscuits (Good Day and Monaco). By that time my porter Ramesh had come and assisted me in packing for the next day. I decided to leave behind some clothes in Nabhidang that I felt would not be required in China.
123. Thereafter soup was served while I was writing this diary at 6 pm. I rang up home from the satellite phone available with KMVN. The cost was Rs. 68/- for 2 minutes.
124. Then I told the yatris that those who wished to walk the next day to Lipulekh pass would have to start early at 3.45 am and those who wished to ride pony could start a little later at 4.30. That was because walking at that height takes a lot more time and one needs to rest more frequently. They were also informed that KMVN would serve tea at 3.30 am and breakfast consisting of cornflakes/milk would be served at 4 am.
125. The weather had become quite cold at 6 in the evening. But surprisingly a few South Indian yatris were sporting only one layer of clothes as opposed to 5 layers of woollens that I wore. I cautioned them to be careful.
126. There are four huts in this camp for yatris. One hut is for KMVN office and one more is used as a storeroom. Every year 4 primitive types of toilets (much more modern than those we found in China) are constructed as the ones that are constructed are destroyed under tons of snow that envelops the valley in winters. The generator is cranked to life at 7 in the evening to supply electricity to huts. One bulb only. It also charges batteries for

satellite phone kept in KMVN office. The valley looks like a big two terraced structure with KMVN camp at higher level and the ITBP camp at a lower level. By 7 the entire valley was covered in clouds. The temperature began to drop appreciably and might have reached sub-zero level during the night. Several layers of clothing were required to keep one warm.

127. Visited the Mandir that was about 200 meters north of the camp on route to Lipulekh and at a slightly higher level. It had been constructed by one of the survivors of a chopper crash in 93. The wreckage of the crash can still be seen near the Mandir as a testimony of the power of nature over man and machine.

128. While I was writing this diary, a paramedic came and checked my BP. It was 136/90. That only shows that the body takes time to acclimatize. The BP was taken for the first time in supine position.

129. The generator set was switched on at 7 pm. There was a bulb in each tent. Dinner was served at 7.30 and consisted of Dal, aloo sabzi, rice and roti. It must be said to the credit of KMVN that they had managed to give a sweet dish at every meal. As I write this it is 8 in the night and I must go to bed to be able to get up in the morning at 3.30.

2 August 2007 (Thursday)

130. It appeared to have rained at night. It is quite common in the hills to have a completely cloudless sky throughout the night and then to have a cloudy morning. The caretaker had switched on the generator set at 3 in the morning to wake us up. I had slept soundly. I was woken up by the waiter who brought a cup of tea to my tent.

131. After sometime we all ate our breakfast of porridge and bournvita milk (much diluted). After saying our customary prayers in the morning, I started to walk at 4. It was cold and I was fully prepared with multi-layered clothing to cross Lipulekh pass at 7.45. For that was the time the Chinese had decided to come to the pass for exchange of yatris. The 8th batch was coming back to India and my batch would be entering China.

132. Although it was cold the absence of chilly winds made the cold bearable. After walking for sometime I decided to ride the pony. It is difficult to walk at that altitude(16000 feet). Pronounced lack of oxygen makes breathing difficult. All yatris

reached Lipulekh at about 7.45 am by which time the light had improved considerably. We were accompanied by about 15-20 jawans of ITBP who were making sure that we were well and not showing any signs of altitude sickness and fatigue.

133. Once we reached the Lipulekh pass we had nothing to do but to wait for the word from Chinese side. While we waited for the news to come, ITBP men constantly reminded us to keep our hands and feet moving to keep blood circulation going. Toes and fingers were to be exercised by constant movement. Facial muscles were to be kept taut by blowing air in the mouth while keeping it shut.
134. Lipulekh pass is a tiny little pass at about 16500 feet that is normally covered in snow. There is little vegetation on the hills that surround it. Little tufts of grass are occasionally seen here and there. Even flowers. But the area is desolate and made even more so by its inaccessibility. Mountains though are wonderful and host a number of streams that flow from them. Stones and huge boulders litter the path through which we passed. By the time we reached the pass I could notice that yatri were exhausted not so much by exertion but from lack of oxygen. Surprisingly ITBP men seemed not to be affected either by the climate or by the lack of oxygen. Yatri had tied bands containing camphor on their wrists or had tied them round their necks. The smell of camphor is believed to assist in breathing.
135. Finally after waiting for half an hour the message arrived from the Chinese side that yatri of 8th batch had arrived at the pass from Chinese side. We were now advised to move forward.
136. I suddenly saw horses coming to the pass from Chinese side on which were riding yatri. There were greeting followed by “OM NAMAH SHIVAY”. We all moved forward. Yatri were advised to tell porters and pony wallahs whether they were supposed to report on 14 August when we would be crossing the pass on our way back. If the porters were not told in advance they would not take the trouble of coming all the way to Lipulekh.
137. The next 2 hours after crossing were horrible. When I crossed the pass I was introduced to our guide one Mr. Guru. He was a Tibetan-young and energetic. He was in early thirties and had studied in Hubli where there is a Tibetan settlement. He knew Kannadiga language well besides Hindi and English. He was short, fair and sported the loosely hanging short and sparsely grown beard that is the hallmark of traditional Chinese men. He appeared to be as canny and cunning as a fox. The incoming LO was one Dr. Singh from ITBP who appeared to have been shaken by the death of a yatri from his batch after Dolma pass. Since he was ably assisted by Mr.Guru during those trying times, he told me that Guru was a great guide and we must follow his advice. Guru apparently had advised Singh to suggest to me that all yatri must hire pony and porters for Kailash Parikrama, even though many thought of doing the parikrama on foot. The reason why Guru advised Singh to tell me this became clear later.
138. Guru then asked me to take all yatri to a huge black boulder that stood down the path about 2 kms down the pass. The sun had come out now and it was sunny as well as chilly.

The chill and the lack of oxygen had made me very uncomfortable. I do not recall much of that time except that I kept on walking painfully, tiredly down the road in search of that elusive black rock. It was not 2 kms down but almost 5 kms and all yatris were completely exhausted by the time they reached that boulder. A few fitter yatris walked further down to the place from where the bus was to depart.

139. By the time I reached the black boulder, I was completely exhausted. How much was it due to tiredness; how much it was due to lack of oxygen, I cannot tell. But no sooner had I reached the rock than I showed typical signs of mountain sickness or lack of oxygen. I had a headache and had a feeling that I wanted to throw up. Nausea appeared to be building up. But no sooner had that feeling come than I recovered. How I cannot tell. I only remember that I was not able to answer even the casual and routine queries of yatris. One couple that walked down much after I reached the rock wanted to know how far is the bus. I just did not feel like answering them and waved them to move on suggesting that it was close by.
140. Irritability is another sign of this sickness and I was becoming irritable when other yatris tried to talk to me. I just wanted to be left alone to sort out my health problems. I think this was the worst crisis I faced in my entire yatra. But the good part of it was that it did not last long and I recovered pretty quickly. But so long as it lasted it was difficult.
141. We might have perhaps stayed at the rock for close to one hour. Then we saw horses coming down from the pass. It appears that the owners of the Chinese horses settle down to eat breakfast after dropping yatris at the pass. This delays their departure to pick up yatris because of which the yatris have to perforce wait.
142. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs and I made a mental note of mentioning this in my report. Presently I was helped to get on a horse by the owner who handed me the rein and asked me handle the horse. This is not the way the Indian horse owner handle the yatris. They walk alongside the horse and help the yatris in whichever way they can.
143. Chinese authorities' treatment of yatris is so rude and indifferent in comparison to the kind of treatment that they get in India from Indian authorities that yatris find it difficult to adjust to the way Chinese do things in their own country. The first shock of this treatment came in the form of how the horse owners left the yatris to deal with horses. Language barrier though is a major irritation and comes in the way of meaningful communication.
144. Since we had 4 cooks with us – of which one was also acting as my porter – I did not have to carry my rucksack that other yatris had to carry on their own backs. When all the yatris reached the bus parked about 6kms from the pass, I just plonked myself down on the front seat and instantly dozed off.
145. I got up after about half an hour or so. The bus was being driven through vast plain countryside surrounded by snow-capped mountains. There was little evidence of vegetation or trees. Whatever green patches could be seen were fields sown with wheat, mustard and peas in perfect rectangular patches. Otherwise the entire countryside was

barren and brownish gray in colour. Even the fields that relieved the monotony were irrigated by mountain stream water. The grayish huts were made of some kind of stones stuck together with some kind of whitish mortar. The boundary walls of huts were also made up of round stones. In this part there appears to be no concept of red bricks.

146. What amazed me was the cleanliness of the countryside. The men and women were attired in dirty clothes and gave the impression of belonging to peasant class. The houses were all rectangular and grayish in colour even in Taklakot. There was some kind of frightening symmetry about the place. As if other colours and design had no place in Tibetan society except in the colour of their dresses. The size of the main road leading to the Guest House in Taklakot gave false impression about the size of the town hosting it. Somewhat like a man with short torso and long legs. The place where we stayed was called “Purang Guest House” with a huge main entrance leading to a courtyard in the middle of which was an administrative building.
147. We alighted from the bus and were asked to assemble in the hall of this admin building in which we completed the usual irksome customs and immigration formalities. We were asked to fill a couple of forms. Then we were called one by one before a Chinese official who compared our photos in the passport with our faces. Since most had grown beards and were wearing caps we were asked to take off our headgear. They were painfully slow in completing this formality. What normally should not take more than half an hour took almost two hours. By this time the yatri were ravishingly hungry. It was almost 2 in the afternoon.
148. The room in which we sat was a huge rectangular room in which were kept old sofas. We were served with tea while this formality was taking place. The tea was undrinkable by Indian standards. More water less tea and milk. We were asked to collect \$ 701 from each yatri and give it to the Chinese authorities. They gave me one receipt for thirty yatri and another for myself – because I would need it for settling the advance that I had taken from my office.
149. After this we were shown to our rooms. My room was an old dingy little room with a huge window without curtains. It had two beds, a wash stand and one locked wooden cupboard. There was a wire drawn temporarily to provide only one bulb-connection. There was no switch-board. One very long string connected to a rotary switch was required to be pulled for switching the bulb on or off. A huge thermos flask containing very hot water was kept to provide round-the-clock hot water.
150. We then went to the dining hall behind the admin building. It was neat and clean and appeared modern in huge contrast to the very despairing surroundings in which it stood. Between the admin building and the dining hall some feverish and pacy construction activity was going on. This we were later told was the new deluxe guesthouse for the yatri to be made operational from 14th batch. By the time we left Taklakot this building was ready. The pace at which this building was made ready made an impression on all of us. However the quality of workmanship and fittings left a lot to be desired. I personally did

not think that the building would survive for a long time. It would need frequent repairs and maintenance.

151. The dining hall was huge and consisted of 6 round dining tables each of which was large enough to serve 8-10 yatris. Attached to it was a huge kitchen. Much of it was vacant. We were served with a bowl of tasteless red liquid with noodles floating in it. When we expressed our horror, the guide assured that dinner would suit our taste. Some yatris took out whatever eatables they had brought with them to fill up their belly.
152. Then we collected money to be paid to the Chinese authorities and to the guide for arranging ponies and porter. One quiet yatri from south was made the cashier. On the advice of the LO of the 8th batch I made it compulsory for all yatris to hire a pony and porter. Yatris from South India did not make an issue of this decision but a few others were a little dissatisfied. They were the most difficult to handle and very vocal about what must be done and not be done.
153. I took US \$ 21731 (701X31) to the office in Admin building. A middle-aged man with a young girl sat behind a desk. He was short and appeared to be sort of assistant manager of the guesthouse. He asked me to keep one \$1 bill. I was perplexed. He could not tally the amount without that 1\$ bill. The girl counted the money while the man pored over a huge register. It obviously was the guest register. When the counting was over the man again asked me to give him back the 1 \$ bill and laughed loudly. He must be thinking what a stupid person he was!!
154. After this formality was over, we exchanged \$4292 for yuan to be paid to Chinese for ponies and porters during Kailash Parikrama @ Y 250/day for pony and Y 100/day for porter. All these transactions took more than a couple of hours. Other yatris by this time had taken bath.
155. Although the bathrooms were not too bad, the toilets were most primitive. These were located at the farthest northeastern end of the guesthouse near servants' quarter. One had to walk for about 50-100 meters to get there. They consisted of 6 rectangular blocks of concrete. An opening wide enough (two and a half feet) was provided to allow a yatri to get in. There was no door. Nor a roof. The rectangular block was 2 feet high. These blocks were housed in a large building one side of which had men's toilet block, and on the other, the ladies'. In the middle of these row of blocks ran a slit 8" wide and 2 ½ ' deep. One had to squat on the floor of this block with one leg on either side of the slit for shitting. There was no running water and one had to fetch a pan of water from the black plastic drum kept outside the building. These were dry latrines that have been banned in India. This is the biggest shock the yatris get in the yatra. Even the ladies' block had no doors.
156. The human excreta was flushed not more than twice a day. No wonder it was a stinking hole. The Chinese did not mind living in this kind of hellhole.
157. The bathrooms appeared to be better and more modern. We were allowed the luxury of

taking hot water bath at certain fixed times of the day – usually late afternoons. That was because the water had to be heated and stored.

158. After the administrative issues were sorted out I took a bath and washed some clothes. Thereafter went out shopping and bought a knife and an orange fizz bottle for Y 5 each from a shop just next door. Paid in Indian currency Rs. 60.
159. The town of T'kot is small. There is only one main road whose width is terribly out of proportion to the size of the town. This road is about 60' wide and all commercial activity of the town takes place from the shops located on either side of this road. The town as also the road gave the impression of a ghost town. There was no noise. Cars were not seen. Only pick-up van and large trucks occasionally plied on the road. There were no stalls or cabins on footpaths unlike in India. There were Nepali, Chinese and Indian markets at the far end of the road. There were very few trees. Could not identify them. The Agricultural Bank of China located on the street was a huge building. The banking transactions were done with the help of computers and modern gadgetry. The bank appeared to be networked. The cashier of our group, who was a banker, was impressed by the efficiency of the staff of the bank.
160. Also brought a broad-rimmed hat to protect myself from the harmful effects of sun's UV rays at this altitude. It was a good hat made out of plastic wide enough to protect me from both sun and rain for Y 5.
161. The standard local time is ahead of IST by 2 ½ hours. That keeps out darkness till about 9 o'clock.

3 August 2007 (Friday)

162. Slept well. Dreamt about some kind of journey. Got up at 5.30 am. It was pitch dark outside. Not a soul stirred. Started writing diary for want of anything better to do. Slept again after an hour.
163. Once again got up at 7.45. The breakfast at 8.30 consisted of groundnuts, fried bread, a kind of friums and something resembling idli. Yatris were fed up with the kind of food given to them. So we decided to ask our cooks to do the cooking for us. They prepared a typical Indian lunch for us and made all of us happy.
164. Took shower at 11 and headed for Googar Gompha. This Gompha is about 3 km west of the town. To go to Gompha one has to cross a bridge on the western extremity of the town and then turn left. The Gompha has been carved out from the face of a rock that is almost vertical. Walking up to the Gompha in this rarefied atmosphere is a strenuous exercise and I had to walk slowly.
165. I walked up to the main courtyard of the Gompha which is situated on a hill. I then took a flight of steps leading up to the first floor of the gompha. I entered a huge dark

room at the end of which was a narrow, metallic and steep staircase that led one to the first floor of the gompha. A lama or a caretaker was sitting inside. It was difficult to strike any meaningful conversation with him. Yet when I showed him my camera and asked by sign language whether I could take any pictures, he moved his forefinger over his thumb to indicate that money would be needed to do that. I showed him my wallet to indicate that I had only Indian currency. After a bit of haggling I gave him Rs. 120 and took back Y 10. So for Rs.70, I could freely film the gompha. I asked him to speak so that I could get it translated later. After spending about 45 minutes at the gompha, I headed back to the Guest house.

166. Thereafter had lunch and exchanged \$20 for Yuan. Went around the market. The market is unusually silent and traffic practically non-existent. The young women like to dress fashionably and the men, in general, except those in government service are casually dressed.
167. It is 10 o'clock at night. I still see some daylight. The Chinese have wrongly put the clock ahead by two and a half hours even though its longitude is the same as Allahabad. They have adjusted the time to synchronise match it with Beijing time. After completing my diary I fell off to sleep.

4 August 2007 (Saturday)

168. Woke up at 5 am. The absence of an attached toilet makes it very difficult to answer the call of nature at night, as it is very cold outside. We were informed that the breakfast was to be served at 8.30. All the yatris were ready by that time.
169. One thing that impressed all yatris were the thermos flasks kept for each yatri. They were very efficient and could keep the water really hot for close to 2 days. A few yatris took the trouble of buying these fragile flasks and carried them all over to India – they were cheap also. They used cork as lids and were housed in thin tin bodies.
170. Ramesh as usual came and packed my belongings. We all had the same kind of B/F as the one given yesterday. Collected some peanuts and put them in packet for munching later.
171. We started off for Darchen at 9.30 am after our customary prayers. About 8-10 local Tibetans also hopped on to the bus for a free ride to Darchen. The route after a few kilometers was dusty and pebbled. For the first 20 kms we could see wheat and mustard fields, but little sign of human activity that is so characteristic of Indian village. In India peasants work quite early in the morning to avoid working in the afternoon. These Tibetans must be working in the afternoons to avoid early morning chill.
172. At a few places the pebbled road was used to channelise the water flowing from the mountains to irrigate fields. It was surprising to see water flowing on the road and get suddenly diverted to fields. At one such place Guru got down to fill up 2 cans of water to

cool down the engine. He would pour water by sitting on the bonnet. The mountain ranges on all sides were desolate and were in various shades of brown, blue and gray. Some of them were clad in snow. One could see that the most common bird was the size of a lark. It was brownish gray in colour; had white distinctive patch at the base of the tail and a prominent black band at its tip.

173. One could not be expected to see trees at this height. But here and there green patches of grass and bushy undergrowth indicated presence of underground moisture.
174. At 11.45 am we had the first glimpse of Rakshas Tal. It is called “Zhukso” in Tibet. It is a huge blue lake with an island at the center that looked black. Ravana is believed to have meditated here after he was denied permission to meditate in Mansarovar Lake by the gods. It is indescribably beautiful. Guru explained what it signifies. Everybody got down and took pictures of the lake. My batteries had packed off so I borrowed one set from Sh. R Somasundara. At the point where we got down, we could see that people had constructed little mounds of pebbles or stones. These had been made by yatris for their wishes to be fulfilled. Mount Kailash is visible from this place but today it is hidden by clouds.
175. Looking at this desolate place I wondered why Lord Shiva chose to live in such inhospitable surroundings? Hundreds of miles away and thousands of feet above his devotees. After about an hour or so, we boarded our bus. Thereafter we negotiated a narrow stretch of land from where we could see ML. It appeared to be much smaller lake than RT but its religious importance cannot be gainsaid.
176. After we had driven through the rugged Tibetan plateau for half an hour we reached Darchen Camp at about 3 in the afternoon. We were taken to a row of rooms whose verandah was covered by glass. These rooms were enclosed by a boundary wall. Attached to the boundary wall were two rows of toilets that were similar to the ones we had seen in T’kot.
177. Darchen is a small town and happens to be the gateway to MK. Yatris stay here for the night before starting its parikrama. It has a very small population and it serves the pilgrims that arrive here for darshan of MK.
178. We quickly had our afternoon tea prepared by our cooks. Then Guru arranged 6 Land Cruisers @ Y30 a yatri for us to be taken to Ashtapad. Ashtapad is 8-10 kms from Darchen and the road passes through mountain on NE side of the town. From there the southern face of MK is visible. The LC wended its way towards a small hill and after crossing a few streams we had our first darshan of MK. All the yatris were ecstatic. After all they had come to see this. They had undergone so much of hardship only to be able to see this abode of LS. They started chanting ONS in unison.
179. We had very good views of MK, Nandi Parbat, first Jain tirthankar “Rishabh’s” samadhi sthal and Ashtapad mountain. As one approaches MK, the samadhi is towards the

right on top of a small hillock. The Ashtapad is on our left towards Mount Kailash and Nandi Parbat on our right ahead of samadhi. The snow that melts from MK forms a stream that we crossed to climb the hillock to see the samadhi. We prayed there and laid prostrate before MK. Yatris collected water from the stream believed to be Ganga as it flows from MK. I could see elation on the face of yatris on getting this life-long ambition fulfilled.

180. As for me I was mesmerized by the sheer beauty of MK, prayed for peace and prosperity of mankind and laid prostrate before it. I also like other yatris did Parikrama of samadhi and collected a handful of soil and stone from the samadhi to be taken home.

181. After we had spent over an hour we came back to our camp. By this time our cooks had kept dinner ready. It consisted of rice, subzi, and dal. It tasted delicious. Never had I eaten so much of rice in one meal in my lifetime.

182. Thereafter I bought 2 spare sets of batteries for Y20; made call to my home; and wrote diary. Then saw black-headed gull in breeding plumage foraging among rubbish during a walk in and around the camp of Darchen.

5 August 2007 (Sunday)

183. My roommates were thorough gentlemen. One of them was from Kerala and the other from Bangalore. They were quiet, solicitous of my welfare and kept to themselves most of the time.

184. I woke up as usual at 5 am but seeing daylight still some time away, fell back to sleep. Woke up at 7. Did morning constitutionals and took tea. The cooks were doing a terrific job. By 10.30 all yatris were ready.

185. We all had been given one room in the admin block to keep our excess luggage. We were advised to carry only backpack that would serve us for three days of Kailash parikrama. After saying our morning prayers that had become ritual before starting on a new journey, yatris boarded the bus. Some of the yatris, notably Mr and Mrs. D took front seats which they had not occupied before. That led to some heated arguments among yatris who cried foul arguing that good seats have been occupied, dispossessing them. After 5-10 minutes of animated discussion I had to intervene and to request all the yatris to occupy seats that had been occupied by them before. No sooner had this unseemly and unnecessary controversy died down, than another argument broke out between Guru and some other yatris. Yatris were miffed that they were not given hot water and were upset about the arrangements. So they objected to the inclusion of 5-6 Tibetans in the bus when the bus was solely and entirely hired for the yatris. In this I sided with the yatris as I felt that Tibetans who were trying to wangle lift had no business getting in the bus and occupying aisle. However amid recrimination and counter-recrimination, it was finally decided to allow the Tibetans to hitch a ride in the bus. The journey to Deraphuk finally commenced after this inauspicious start.

186. The bus headed first in westerly direction and thereafter in northerly direction. It passed through huge open and flat countryside that looked completely barren save for a bush here and a bush there.
187. At 12 noon we reached a place called Yamdwar. At this place the western face of MK becomes clearly visible on a sunny day. There was a small canopy constructed on a raised platform under which yatris pass three times in the belief that they would attain moksha. After spending one good hour photographing the place we headed for a place from where horses and porters would become available. The weather was warm and sunny that afternoon and the yatris enjoyed their stop at Yamdwar. We reached the camp of the Tibetans who owned horses at about 1 in the afternoon. And it took good 1½ hours before allotment of horses and porters could be made by draw of lots. Most of the porters were young teenagers to whom yatris were reluctant to give their backpacks. While Guru was talking to local horsemen, I gathered around me a few obstreperous yatris and told them that what happened in the morning was not good and we should not let small inconveniences come in way of achieving the larger objective of successfully completing KM yatra. I also explained to them that tougher tests lie ahead when the group crosses Dolma pass the next day. The members of the group are expected to show utmost accommodation and cooperation so that final goal is achieved. I also warned them that if Chinese and Tibetans dig in their heels and refuse to accede to our demands and requests, only we would suffer. So it is necessary to keep our heads cool and not get into unnecessary arguments either with other yatris or with Guru. To their credit they readily agreed to cooperate.
188. After the allotments of horses and porters were made, we headed for Deraphuk: some on ponies, others on foot. The literal meaning of Deraphuk is the cave of Female Yak's horns. This place gives the closest and the clearest view of Mount Kailash. It also gives spectacular view of MK in morning and evening golden light. I walked for three-fourths of the distance and rode on pony for the rest of the journey, as I did not want to take chances with my health.
189. We covered a distance of about 8-10 kms in 3 hours and reached Deraphuk at 5 pm. The route went around MK which gave a glimpse of its NW face. MK is a black monolithic mountain while others around it are brownish in colour. We arrived at Deraphuk camp after crossing a wide shallow stream. The horseman asked us to disembark about ½ a km before the camp where temporary rooms had been constructed for the yatris.
190. Six rooms were allotted to us. Each had 4-5 beds with springing action. I felt fine but the other yatris in my room; the old couple, Machwala and Dilsukhbhai immediately lay down to rest. After half an hour or so Rajesh kulkarni came as fresh as a daisy and suggested that we go the Charan Sparsh – the base of MK that is only about 1-2 kms from the camp. One had to climb about 100 meters to get there. He offered a little Tibetan girl lure of some money and inspired some other yatris to come with him. I told him that I would go with him only till such length, as my stamina would permit.

191. So about 7-8 of us started to climb the little hill at the back of the camp for going to the base of MK at 6 in the evening. Even climbing one meter proved difficult. So we decided that we should climb only up to a small plateau where a mound of stone had been constructed and had been festooned with prayer flags. So we all climbed on to the plateau, took pictures, murmured a few prayers and came down. By that time the weather had begun to deteriorate and the threat of rain appeared imminent. So we quickly made our way back to the huts and awaited the return of the yatris who had gone there.
(Chandrashekhar, Prushottam, Dube and Kulkarni)

192. These yatris finally returned at 8 o'clock and all appeared well. With usual dinner of rice, dal and sabzi we called it a day.

6 August 2007 (Monday)

193. Could not sleep well at all. It was very cold. In spite of having worn all the woollens and a couple of rugs to cover me I could not keep the cold out. Besides lack of oxygen made breathing difficult. Towards 4 in the morning I might have slept a bit and dreamt that my son's mark sheet had been reevaluated and he had been given 7-8 marks more than what had been indicated in the mark sheet. I do not remember either the subject or the class. It is still a mystery why should a man dream a dream that has no connection with what he is doing or engaged in. Dreams are weird and unreal. They have fascinated mankind and psychoanalysts have tried to extract meaning from them.

194. At 6 I heard some movement in the room in which 6 other yatris were also sleeping. A few minutes later Ramesh also knocked. I went out in that bitter cold, tired and lazy to brush teeth in open. A few minutes later I went out towards the back to answer a call of nature. There were no toilets in the camp and yatris went to the open area around the camp to relieve themselves. It was very difficult for the female yatris. Somehow they managed to get ready.

195. By 7 all yatris were given tea/coffee by our cooks who were doing a fantastic job. By 7.45 we had been given our B/F of "Upama". I ate a little. I did not want to eat anything, as I had not slept well. By 8.10 we all had assembled. I thanked LS for looking after us so well till today and prayed that He would look after us in the days to come. After that I recited GS and shloka about 12 jyotirlingas as it was a Monday.

196. We had to walk for half an hour before we could ride horses. A stream had to be crossed on the NW side of the camp before we could mount our horses. This day was going to be crucial because we were going to cross Dolma pass the highest point in the entire KM yatra (19000 feet). Then began what I would consider to be a very steep climb over boulders and rocks. This trek took us to Dolma pass which all the LOs and yatris dread. The weather at best of times is unpredictable. At that height it can be tricky. But the weather gods had smiled on us. The sky was azure and there was no hint of wind or rain.

197. Half an hour before we reached Dolma I saw a yatri, who was riding a pony and was

just ahead of me, throw down his umbrella at a spot where a lot of discarded clothing had collected. Then I realized that the place is Shiv Sthal, where Yam, the God of Death, judges people or so it is believed. People leave behind their clothes in the hope of ascending heaven.

198. Crossing Dolma pass was very easy because of the weather. It was sunny and the absence of any wind made crossing and lighting of lamp at the rock believed to be the abode of Tara Devi easier than expected. We all said our prayers, burned incense sticks and diyas and took photographs of this place to our heart's content. We must have spent about 30 minutes at this pass where one is not expected to spend more than 10 minutes because of the height and lack of oxygen.
199. Dolma pass is a small opening at a height of 18000 feet from one valley to another. The climb leading up to it is steep and full of rocks and boulders. As one approaches the pass one sees numerous prayers flags tied to rocks. The pass is literally covered with flags of all colours. It is also the place that collects a lot of rubbish as pilgrims leave behind plastic bags, empty cartons, match-boxes and a host of other items. The rock on which people light candles and place glass bangles is believed to be the abode of Goddess Tara Devi. It is covered in black soot because of smoke of camphor. I also distributed a packet of glass bangles, that Aditi had given me, to the Tibetan girls.
200. On one side of the pass is MK and beneath it is the beautiful Gauri Kund whose water is emerald in colour. It is not very big but its religious significance is immense. It was in this Kund that Parvati was said to be bathing when Shiva came and was stopped by Ganesh at the gate. Incensed by the refusal of the boy to let him in, Shiva beheaded the boy Ganesh. When Parvati found out what had happened she insisted that Ganesh be brought back to life. Shiva beheaded the first living creature that he found and placed the head on Ganesh's torso. And so did the Ganesha become the elephant God.
201. The Kund shone brilliantly in the rays of the sun. Goddess Parvati is believed to have bathed here before her marriage to LS. I fought an urge to climb down to the Kund and bathe there. I did not do so for two reasons. One was it would have taken at least an hour and a half for me to finish that business and come back to the path that we were following. And for another, seeing me taking bath, other yatris would also have gone down and then it would have been free for all and all of us would have been delayed. So I satisfied myself with its darshan and started trekking down the Dolma pass.
202. The trek down the pass is very steep and one has to tread carefully. On one stretch we had to walk over snow in August. The path had been temporarily created among boulders and rocks. So the use of stick is very important. In fact all of us always used sticks during our treks. It is very useful and serves to transfer weight easily.
203. It took us about an hour and a half to reach the bottom of the valley on the other side where we rested for tea and snacks. By 1 in the afternoon we reached the tea-shop. None of us had anything for lunch. So we ate whatever was with us or was made available to us

in the small tea-shops that were pitched temporarily. Bought a can of pepsi and ate small eats from Dilsukhbhai's bag. The owner of the teashop sat in a kind of a covered tent 10 X 12 feet. While he sat in the center of the tent, the yatris sat all around him on low benches. Behind and in front of him he kept his wares. Noodles, soft drinks, chocolates, batteries, stove for making tea and hundred other items were displayed. It is amazing that for these three months the KM yatra provides employment to so many Tibetans. A little further away from these teashops sat the horse-owners and porters for their lunch. They would be available only after 2 o'clock. Behind them flowed the calm Indus River that after collecting water from many tributaries would enter Ladakh.

204. Thereafter had to walk for a couple of kilometers on plain land to reach a rock towards south from where we could mount our horses. The yatris cannot use horses for getting down from Dolma pass. It had been sunny throughout the afternoon and the absence of trees of any kind in this landscape made sitting under the afternoon sun a none too pleasant experience. But after a while the horses came and we started walking towards Zongerbu – our next destination on way to Darchen.

205. The Tibetans who were walking with my horse appeared to be family. A young man in early thirties, a young woman and a little child of about 12 were walking alongside. The headman's name was "Sona". He wore fashionable sunglasses, had reddish black face and sported a traditional Tibetan dress. A young woman whose face was permanently covered by a white cloth mask accompanied him. All women in Taklakot and in Tibet wear this mask to protect their noses from chilly winds. Why men do not wear them is a mystery to me. The small boy with rosy cheeks wore a hat and red and blue sweater. He appeared to be getting lessons on how to handle horses from the young Tibetan. He would keep a keen eye on the horse and the boy and bark instructions whenever the boy appeared to be doing something wrong. The boy could not keep pace with the woman as a result of which my horse would lag behind others. I admired physical stamina of the local people. They would smoke incessantly and yet walk for hours in that inhospitable terrain without slightest fatigue. The boy climbed the mountain to reach Dolma pass and continued to walk for 8 hours. Sona would now and then stop the horse to adjust the saddle. The horse not only carried a yatri but all kinds of clothes and rugs of the owner. So the saddle had become thick and had to be adjusted every fifteen minutes. I did not know why Sona could not get it right the first time. He would ask me to dismount, adjust the saddle, tighten up a belt here, adjust a seat there and would repeat the procedure every half an hour.

206. The trek/journey from the rock to Zongerboo took three hours. Most of it was plain land between two mountain ranges. Reached Zongerboo at 5.45 in the evening. The place is again a row of rooms each of which could accommodate about 6-7 yatris. It was facing a flat strip of land at the end of which flowed Indus river. It was by far the most scenic setting for a camp. All the yatris who walked from Deraphuk to Zongerboo must have been terribly tired. I was thankful to God that weather held out for us at Dolma Pass.

207. I put my bags in the room in which yatris from Karnataka had put their bags. The room was of the size of 10' X 14' and had space enough to accommodate 6 people with one yatri

sleeping on the floor. There was practically no space for keeping one's luggage. Tents had been pitched outside that served as kitchen, and place for poniwallahs and porters to sleep at night. People for want of a better place defecated and urinated out in the open or near the bank of the river. On a walk to the bank of the river in the evening I found that a lot of rubbish had been thrown around the site. Even rural India has a better waste disposal mechanism than this place in Tibet. There seems to be no sense of shame here. Ameya (my son) would have found it difficult to survive in this environment. I sat by the bank of the river Indus that was flowing serenely. It was in fact a mountain stream flowing over boulders about 100 feet wide. I was reminded of the song "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down".

208. I reminded myself that all these points must be included in the report that I have to submit to the MEA. It had become cold in the evening, although the sky was clear.

7 August 2007 (Tuesday)

209. Could not sleep again at night. Must have slept for only a couple of hours. Do not know whether my roommates slept well or not. But during the time I slept I dreamt that I got admission in MBA course and I am warned that my absence of 15 days from classes for KM Yatra would lead to loss of studies.
210. Dr. Bapat from Mysore and incidentally the oldest yatri in the group, announced that it was 7.30 in the morning. Since we had planned to leave by 9 I quickly got up. B/F was served at 8.30 (cornflakes and milk). It was a refreshing change.
211. We finally left for Darchen at 9.30. I rode a horse for about a couple of kilometers and then got down and walked for the rest of 9-10 kms of plain footpath. The path wended its way by the side of Indus river. Rakshash Tal was visible at a distance. We then reached the place where the bus was waiting for us. In half an hour all yatriis arrived at the scene. In the meantime Tibetans porter were holding cans and bottles of water collected from Gauri Kund and searching for yatriis who had asked them to do so. There was a lot of confusion as porters could not identify the yatriis who had given water bottles to them. In this confusion I collected a bottle of water that nobody came forward to collect and paid Y 5 for it. After the confusion was cleared to the satisfaction of all concerned, we headed back for Darchen on the last leg of Kailash Parikrama. It took us a little over half an hour to reach Darchen.
212. On reaching Darchen, Guru announced that water is being made available in the tap that had been fixed in the passage. Everyone started washing clothes that they did not have the opportunity to change much less wash. I too washed my handkerchiefs, socks, and hand towels. The jacket that I had been wearing for the last week or so had become dirty and needed to be washed. Two ladies from the group seeing me wash my clothes, very kindly volunteered to wash my clothes for me. I vehemently protested, but their offer was so genuine and full of affection that I gave in. I was touched by their gesture and could only reflect upon the offer as an approval of my way of leading them. In fact when both

these ladies were not well, I enquired after them and gave them medicines. This might have prompted them to do a good turn in return.

213. The lunch was served at 3.30 in the afternoon. It consisted of dal, rice, and sabzi with pickle. I then sat down and rearranged my bag. I was thankful that the more difficult part of our yatra had taken place without any mishap. In the evening I visited the China Post Office that is just five minutes walk from the camp more out of curiosity than any work. There were three young men waiting for the customers. There was no work there. Language barrier prevented me from asking them to give me a few Chinese stamps as souvenirs. When I made some kind of sign language to suggest that I needed stamp they gave me a packet containing some horrible looking picture postcards of Mount Kailash without any stamp. These young Tibetans/Chinese men sat behind a small counter doing no work. I wondered what kind of postal work could be engaging them in such a small town.
214. Behind our rooms was a huge building that housed some comfortable rooms for accommodating tourists brought by private Nepali tourist operators. I really wondered why these rooms were not made available to us. In fact our cooking was done in the hall of that building and we went for lunch and dinner to that hall. We were housed in a building that looked like tenements.
215. There was a tent in front of that building in which sat a portly Tibetan. He did roaring business by keeping a satellite phone. Each day tourist would flock to him for making calls to India for Y3 a minute. He also peddled small items of daily use as well as batteries and films.
216. Had an early dinner. Took one tablet prescribed by the doctor for inducing a little sleep and went to bed.

8 August 2007 (Wednesday)

217. Slept extremely well. Got up at 7.30. Had tea and coffee. Skipped B/F.
218. We left for Quhu at 11 am. There was no hurry and the yatis were mentally relaxed and getting ready at leisure. There was no deadline to meet.
219. The next stop would be at Quhu which is where we would spend the next three nights. The road to Mansarovar parikrama first took us to Barkha plains. Tibet is an unusually large tract of plain flat land normally running for hundreds of kilometers. One could see mountains that are literally 60-70 kms away. Streams from snow-covered mountains often ran through and across pebbled roads. Habitation and traffic that one normally associates with rural India is completely absent. The bus driver who was attached with the bus drove carefully. In fact I felt that if drivers like him drive blue line buses in Delhi, road fatalities would vastly reduce. There were many streams that needed to be crossed and the driver negotiated them very skillfully.

220. After covering a distance of 60-80 kms we came to a small town of Hore at about 12.30. There were no more than 10-12 hutments. I went to a small shop and brought a black hat, knife and goggles for Y30. Guru managed to haggle with the shop-owner and brought down the price from Y40. A few yatris went to a restaurant and ordered Chinese noodles/vegetables plate. I ate a portion but could not say that I liked the taste.
221. Another interesting thing about Tibet is that even the smallest villages have snooker table that are kept outside the hutments. A group of young men deport themselves by playing snooker and smoking cigarettes. It is indeed a strange and peculiar sight in a settlement that does not boast of a decent home or electricity. I must also try and identify birds that flew as soon as the bus approached them. I am sure they would be some kind of lark.
222. The kitchen Committee purchased some vegetables and fruits from one of the mobile vans that was parked in the center of that settlement. Most common vegetables were cucumber, cabbage and simla mirch.
223. As we were nearing Quhu, I felt sleepy and was suddenly awakened by a violent and jerky motion of the bus. It had a flat tyre. Yatris got down and sauntered down to the bank of Mansarovar lake which was nearby. Despite my clear instructions to all the yatris not to take a dip, I saw Ms. Usha Jha walk away from the group and suddenly take a dip. I certainly was not amused. Because another yatri had got down from the bus with a bag full of clothes and towel. She had threatened that if she saw anyone taking a dip she too would follow suit. Fortunately she did not see that someone had already taken a dip. The day was sunny and warm and I did not want yatris to waste time in the middle of nowhere getting themselves purified at the expense of our planned travel arrangements.
224. After about an hour or so the bus's flat tyre was replaced. During that one hour we had a very good view of ML. It is a huge lake and is surrounded by mountain ranges. MK is also visible from Quhu on a clear day. Yatris busied themselves by walking along its shore and picking up stones and pebbles that resembled any deity of Hindu pantheon. After we left this place we arrived at Quhu at about 3.30 in the afternoon.
225. Quhu is situated on the bank of ML and is a small camp with accommodation available in two rows of hutments facing each other and separated by a large courtyard. I was put up in a room in the hutment that was closer to the bank of ML and from whose window one could see the lake in all its magnificent splendour. The rooms were basic but large. Next to the hutments was a monastery where a lama stayed. Behind the row of hutment on the other side were mountains that showed their white snow-capped peaks. They were a little green at the base suggestive of the fact that mountain grass could only grow in these inhospitable climes.
226. Two streams from these mountains flowed into ML. The one closer to the monastery was used for washing clothes and for other such uses. The one closer to the entry to the

camp was supposed to be kept clean and not to be used for morning ablutions or for toilet purposes.

227. Since the day was warm and sunny all of us decided to take a dip in the lake. I packed a pair of fresh clothes in a carry bag and headed to the part of the bank that was about half a kilometer from the rooms towards east. In fact the shore of the lake closer to the hutments was rocky and not suitable for bathing.
228. We had a good time and the group from Gujarat performed a little havan. The group from Karnataka chanted slokas. Ms Prompty dipped photos of her late parents in the lake in the belief that the act would bring her and them mental peace and happiness. It was at times such as these that one begins to feel humble by the belief held by common folks about religion and the way it informs all their actions. It was the second time that I experienced the manner in which Indians are emotionally, spiritually and religiously attached to sacred rivers and lakes. The first time was when I visited Kumbh Mela at Allahabad when lakhs of devotees took dip in Sangam on a particularly auspicious day. I went slowly into the lake. The water was cold. The slope was gradual and one could walk into the lake for about 40 feet without getting fully submerged. There was no one except us. The shore of the lake was long and disappeared around a bend that was two kilometer further to the east. Towards the North were the mountains of which one was MK. Clouds had covered it. The lake was huge and one could see water as far as the horizon. It was blue in colour but the colour changed with the weather and the time of the day
229. I came back in an hour to my room and had dinner at 6.30 – a little too early by Indian standards, but had no choice as the yatris did not have proper lunch. The weather had meanwhile deteriorated and heavenly thunder could be heard. After about an hour or so the sky opened up and the sun was bright and bathed the lake and Quhu in its twilight sunshine. It was wonderful to experience such changing weather all in a space of a few hours.
230. In the evening, after the sun had come out, went for a stroll on the shore of the lake at 8 pm. It was still daylight and the sun shone brightly. The part of the lake where we bathed in the afternoon had a large patch of green grass. Small rat-like animals – which I later found out to be black-lipped pica – had burrowed underground tunnels with hundreds of openings. They would scurry from one hole to another at the hint of the slightest alarm. Birds flitted from one place to another. The raptors of any kind were conspicuous by their absence. Had they existed these picas could not have thrived. Gulls and dabchicks floated on the surface of the lake though they were only about a dozen or so.
231. Quhu camp is in the center of a very large semi-circular bank. The length of this part of the bank must be about 8-10 kms. I looked out of the window of my room and saw that the sun was setting at 9.30 at night. The colour of the lake turned from blue to gray. There was total silence in and around the camp. I made up my mind to walk the entire length of the bank of the lake tomorrow in the morning and then take a bath in the afternoon.

9 August 2007 (Thursday)

232. Slept soundly. Got up at 7.30 am only to find that it rained heavily in the night and the mountains behind the camp were clothed in snow. It was drizzling when I went out to brush my teeth. Went to the kitchen and asked cooks to prepare tea. They did. Came back to my room and again had tea with roommates. Jaygopalan predicted that rains would stop in 2 hours. We joked that although it rained copiously, we are glad to know that the lines of communication between him and Lord Varuna are still intact. Since there was nothing much to do in the room, I donned my poncho and went out for a walk on the bank of the lake. Went till the other end. It was tiring. Must have walked for about 5-6 kms. Could identify 6 crested grebes in water. Went about picking up stones and examining them to see whether they resembled shapes of various deities of Hindu pantheon.
233. By the time I returned to my room a couple of hours later the drizzle had stopped and the sun shone brightly.
234. Decided to wash a few clothes after taking some rest. The camp had made good arrangements for washing clothes behind the Gompha. They had dug a hole of about 4 feet in the ground in which they let water from a mountain stream fall. A few metallic tubs were also kept to enable yatris to soak their clothes in water and wash them. I must have washed about a dozen clothes. It is very tiring at this altitude to do any kind of work for long periods. After the clothes had been hung for drying, lunch was taken. It consisted of cucumber slices, rice, khicheri, and urad dal as salad.
235. I then came and slept in my room. Was planning to go out for bathing in the lake. Even after my roommates woke me up could not summon enough energy to go to the lake as one had to walk for at least a kilometer to reach the place designated for bathing.
236. However after about one hour or so, I felt better and decided to go for a dip. When I reached the site the group from Gujarat was packing up after performing "havan". When I started to take dip Tinchubhai and Suresh Mehta decided to give me company. After spending half an hour in water came back to my room. In Tibet the sun is bright even as late as 9 o'clock at night.
237. I read up to four chapters of the book Gnome at night and was fascinated by the story of how scientific discoveries are made by being perseverant and also by serendipity. Also learnt that chimps are our closest relatives.

10 August 2007 (Friday)

238. Had decided to sleep last night without taking the pill. Slept soundly. Had given one tablet to Soma and he could not sleep well last night. He too slept well after taking the tablet.

239. As usual woke up at 7ish. It was raining hard. After about 2 hours the rain stopped and the sun came out. Went for a walk along the shores of the lake. Came back and had “Aloo ka Paratha” for brunch. Then decided to walk up to the mountain behind the camp and try to climb as much as possible. The summit of the mountain does not appear to be far. But it actually is. Mr. D and Mr. K decided to go along with me. While I was walking, I knew that the group from Karnataka had decided to perform “Rudrabhishek” today in the afternoon. The K Group appeared pious and its members were followers of RK Mission in Bangalore. They had fixed 12.30 for puja. So after walking for about half an hour came back to the camp leaving both my companions to carry on. Climbing that mountain was not easy. Main problem was breathlessness caused by low oxygen content.
240. Packed puja samagri and a few clothes and headed for the shore. The K group was preparing the site for puja. They had come fully prepared for this. Ghee, bel leaves, dry fruits, family deities, panchamruta, books, white clothes for puja; everything had been brought from Bangalore. I also sat in their midst and added my own bit by way of samagri. It was indeed an elaborate puja performed by the K Group and I was lucky to be one of the participants in their puja. It lasted for two hours. The weather remained sunny throughout. By 2.30 pm the puja was over and we headed back to our camp. Our cooks then served all of us a cup of hot milk chocolate. This was going to be our last day in the camp.
241. Yes one more important thing!! Last night a group of devout yattris sat almost throughout the night in the open in freezing conditions to witness what they considered to be descent of gods from heavens for a dip in ML before performing puja in the wee hours of the morning at MK. They were told by yattris from previous batches that gods in the form of heavenly bodies take a dip in the lake at “Brahma Muhurta”. It appears that last night at around 4.15 am they saw a celestial light descend from the sky and slowly immerse in the lake for about 5 minutes after which it came out and went up heavenwards.
242. It was then decided that all yattris would sit tonight to witness this magical celestial event. Whether I can keep awake till 4.30 am only time can tell. But I am curious about this event. Whether what they said happened, really happens or is it a figment of their very fertile imagination, I wanted to see for myself.
243. In all probability, the stars set in the west and that probably gives the impression of a dip in the lake as the farther shore of the lake extends to the horizon. I will certainly write about this in my diary tomorrow.
244. I also spoke to the LO of 11 batch, Mr. PD Sharma and advised him to use his authority to make it compulsory for the yattris to hire ponies and porters for Kailash Parikrama. He was at that time in Taklakot and Guru advised me to speak to him on his mobile.

11 August 2007 (Saturday)

245. While I was sleeping in my bed, Mr. Jayagopalan sat next to me from 3 to 5 in the night

to witness the celestial phenomenon. At one point he shouted "Look here". I go up from my half wakefulness, blinked once or twice, but saw nothing. The sky was overcast and it was terribly cold. I had put on all my woollens. It also rained at night. Since I was feeling sleepy and had no intention of trading my sleep with the chance of watching the event I slept back after waiting for 10 minutes for something to happen.

246. That was the end of my rendezvous with celestial gods who are supposed to take a dip in the ML.

247. It appeared to me that my other roommate, Mr. Somasundaram had not slept well. He kept on talking and took deep and loud breaths now and then. In the morning along with a cup of tea and coffee, the cooks had brought a plateful of rusk. This was the first time since we left India that we had anything with morning tea. And immediately after that came the announcement that brunch was ready. I was in no mood to take anything at that time.

248. We finally loaded the bus with our belongings and left for Taklakot at 11. The journey was notable for the way our driver negotiated a few dangerous fast flowing streams that crossed the roads. He would get down, survey the area, mentally formulate a plan of fording the stream and carry it out with commendable skill.

249. At a place near Rakshas Tal our ML parikrama was over. On road to RT we saw a very large hare and a group of deer. Hoopoes were common. At RT yatris got down and despite my instructions filled up its water in cans.

250. By 1.30 we reached Zorawar Singh's tomb. He was a general of the Dogra King and had gone on a military expedition in Tibet. He died there after he was wounded in a battle with Tibetan army from Lhasa. A little history needs to be recounted.

251. I found most of my 30 odd companions had no idea about the gallant hero who had integrated Ladakh, also known as "Little Tibet", with India through his military expedition in 1841.

252. The "samadhi" of Zorawar Singh, "Sing-ba Ka Chorten" to the locals, is located between Taklakot and Zaidi outside a sleepy village, Toye. It is marked by mountainous topography of Gurla Mandhata range. Oblong Rakshak Tal spans its western side whereas vast Mansarovar spreads on to its East. Mount Kailash is a distance glimmer on further north.

253. The monument is merely a pyramid of small stones collated together in multiple layers without the use of cement or clay - with the top layer white-washed. Prayer flags are perched atop it and around. It is surrounded by green shrubs and girdle of loose boulders. The monument is maintained by the local villagers all by themselves. At prohibitive heights above 16,000 feet, Sing-ba Ka Chorten sounds like a wispy mythic figure. The man whose memory rests here is actually Zorawar Singh Dogra, the general in the army of

Maharaja Gulab Singh. His singular - and truly remarkable - contribution to history was bringing Ladakh within the political domain of India.

254. In 40 years of his monarchy, the phenomenal Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, had galvanised the region from a hub of vying Sikh chieftains into a strong unified Hindu nation. (All contemporary records and correspondence refer to the Maharaja as a "Hindoo" king). In 1834, five years before Ranjit Singh passed away (on June 27, 1839, at Lahore), his favourite satrap Gulab Singh's general, Zorawar Singh in Kishtwar, took advantage of internal disorders in Leh, and demanded the restoration of an estate supposedly held by a Kishtwar chief in former times.
255. To quote from History of the Sikhs by General JD Cunningham, contemporary annalist: "He crossed into the southern districts, but did not reach the capital until early in 1835. He sided with one of the contending parties, deposed the reigning Raja and set up his rebellious minister in his stead. He fixed a tribute of 30,000 rupees, placed a garrison in the fort, retained some districts along with northern slopes of the Himalayas, and reached Jammu with his spoils towards the close of 1835. The dispossessed Raja complained to the Chinese authorities in Lhasa; but, as the tribute continued to be regularly paid by his successor, no notice was taken of the usurpation" (p.182, LP Publications, Delhi 1992).
256. In April 1841, Zorawar Singh demanded Garo's adhesion to Punjab since Garo was a dependency of Iskardu which in turn had become a dependency of Punjab. He desired that Lhasa should pay tribute to Lahore rather than Peking. Zorawar Singh marched to Garo while another column proceeded eastwards along Kumaon hills to sever Lhasa's contact with the British. In June 1841, the Dogras captured Garo. Their victory march continued towards Taklakot. A large Tibetan force that resisted their advance was pummeled. This was the first time the Dogras that penetrated into the heartland of Ladakh - and the flag of Punjab fluttered over Taklakot. However, before they could consolidate their victory, the short-lived campaigning season in the hostile hills came to an end.
257. The British were alarmed at the astonishing feat of Dogra warfare. As the residency at Ludhiana was busy persuading the Durbar at Lahore to pressurise Dogras out of Ladakh, the Chinese mobilised their armies. With the first arrival of snow they encircled the Dogra advance posts, cut off their supply lines, and locked them in a war of attrition in bleak climatic conditions.
258. To be stranded at those prohibitive heights was like buying time from death. Soon the Dogras ran out of provisions and many of the brave soldiers succumbed to frostbite. Devitalised and ill-equipped before a hard and hostile Tibetan winter, the Dogras were compelled to fight with a mammoth Chinese force. On December 12, 1841, gallant Zorawar Singh fell to a bullet in the war - his army was massacred with the usual Mongoloid ruthlessness. Taklakot was abandoned. The flag of Lahore Durbar, however, continued to flutter in Leh.
259. The Sikh-Dogra army, during its brief stay in the region (totalling just a few months),

left indelible footprints on the rugged mountains. The last Chinese post, adjoining Nepalese border at Hilsa, is called Sher. The prominent town in the area is Taklakot. Occasionally, one comes across shops playing Hindi film songs and the locals refer to Zorawar Singh as the "Indian king".

260. The martyrdom of Zorawar Singh did not go in vain. With spring in 1842 arrived reinforcements from Jammu to Leh. Gulab Singh's forces trounced the Chinese opposition convincingly. October 17, 1842, was a red-letter day when an agent of Lahore Durbar and Gulab Singh's personal representative signed a treaty with a representative of the Chinese Emperor at Lhasa. According to this treaty, the boundaries between Lhasa and Ladakh were inviolable.
261. The spot where Samadhi of Zorawar Singh is built is 3 kms from Taklakot. The tomb is a huge pyramidical heap of red stones with a flag mast on top and is surrounded by a grove of trees. I do not know which trees were they.
262. It was 2 in the afternoon when we reached T'kot. Our yatra was successfully completed – thanks to Lord Shiva - and we now had to spend two days in Takalkot before returning to India.
263. Guru had arranged hot water for yattris. I bathed and washed a few clothes. By 3 I was feeling really hungry. I opened up ready to eat mashed potato bag given by ITBP and added hot water, sprinkled salt and ate. Also made tomato soup from ready to make packet.
264. Thereafter went around the market just to while away time. Compared to Quhu, T'kot is warmer and drier. But we would have to wait aimlessly till 14 February before we could finally cross into India.
265. Cooks had managed to make a decent dinner at 8.30 pm. In the meantime called home from the same booth from where a lady runs a successful business venture.

12 August 2007 (Sunday)

266. Could not sleep well. I have some difficulty in sleeping in Taklakot even though it is at lower altitude than ML. I need to take deep breaths. Lack of adequate oxygen it appears.
267. Adding to my problems were loudspeakers blaring loud music in an adjacent building. That building appeared to be a nightclub. Even dogs could not help barking at night for no apparent reason. The nightclubs were all over the place and young Chinese men and women frequented them. I do not know whether there were any restrictions on such activity in the area. Perhaps they were licensed.

268. In the morning Guru took all of us to the temple of Ram-Sita at Khojarnath – a place about 30 kms of Taklakot. Legend has it that seven wise men came to visit MK and ML about 100 years ago. They all carried a leather bag. When they were in the village where the temple is built they requested the villagers to look after the bags till they come back from their pilgrimage. They also permitted the villagers to dispose of the contents of the bag as they pleased should they fail to return in seven days.
269. The villagers kept the bag not for seven but fifteen days hoping that the wise men would come back and claim their property. But when they failed to return even after a month the villagers decided to open the bags. They found to their utter surprise that the bags were heavy and full of gold coins. They then approached the local chieftain seeking his advice about the best course of action. The king thought about this and decided to build a temple dedicated to Ram, Sita and Laxman at that place.
270. Initially the temple had deities made of pure gold. But during the time of the Cultural Revolution in China, the deities were partially destroyed and now the deities are made of gold/silver. To a Hindu there did not appear to be any difference between the deities of Ram and Laxman and one of the yatris asked the Tibetan priest who was Ram and who was Laxman.
271. I paid Y 2 and lit a lamp. Only the LO is authorized to take a photo of the deities. So I took two photos of the deities with the camera of one of the yatris in the hope that he would send the photo to all the yatris.
272. I was also honored by the Priest who gave me a white polyester shawl in which the deities are normally draped. Guru's village was close by. It was on the other side of the river that flowed in the valley below. He served us with tea in the hall near the temple.
273. There was a souvenir shop near the temple where the yatris made a lot of purchases. It has some good bric-a-brac. I did not buy anything from the shop though I did spend some time inside that small cramped shop.
274. After spending an hour or so in the premises we returned to Taklakot. The lunch was served at 1.30. It was the best lunch served in China since we arrived here. It had the usual D/R/S and in addition Halwa. The ingredients for this dish were brought by one yatri from Mysore. He brought 5 kgs of ready to make raw material and carried it all the way from India. They also served apple slices along with the lunch.
275. In the afternoon, a few yatris came to my room and wanted my permission to hold a small cultural programme in the administrative building before leaving China the next morning. I saw no reason to withhold the permission. In the evening I went to the market and purchased three silver ear-rings. (I hope the ear rings are made up of silver as promised.)
276. The cultural programme held in the hall of the Admin block was a grand success.

Nirmala had set up a small skit in which she played the role of legendary Shabari of Ramayana with élan. Others who acted in the small skit were two young yatris as Ram and Laxman. It was a wonderful performance from the old lady that stole the show. A few Chinese came and saw what we were doing. They initially appeared apprehensive and suspicious. But when they realized that we meant no harm and did not threaten to lead a revolt in Tibet, they joined in the fun.

277. Another small presentation by Vanitha showed how we mess up our communication when we relate an incident from one person to the next. The original idea was to show through playacting the process of washing an elephant. Three yatris were kept out of the hall. Then one person who was present in the hall had to show through playacting the process of washing an elephant to the first person who was not in the hall. Unless you acted well, the person who did not know what it was all about had no clue to what was being communicated. He in turn had to play act the process to the second person and so on. The end result is that the whole thing turns out much more hilarious and funny.

278. One of the actors thought that what was being depicted was puja, the second one thought that a cow was being washed and the third one thought the cow dung cakes were being made and baked.

279. I also sang a few songs. Singing at that altitude is difficult. Breathing becomes problematic. A few yatris cracked good jokes at the expense of Lalu, Giani Zail Singh. All in all a great fun.

280. One yatri – Usha Jha – was not feeling well during the function. I sent her to her room. After the programme I went to her room to enquire about what happened. She had fever and refused to take any medicine. I asked her roommate to keep an eye on her and report any deterioration in her health to me.

281. Read Gnome till 11.30 and slept.

13 August 2007 (Monday)

282. The morning rituals were over by 8. Then began the most disagreeable part of the yatra that required collecting money from the yatris for the common pool. A few yatris objected to paying for 4 cooks (they said two would have sufficed). To object to the number of cooks after getting service from them and at this stage appears to me to be mean.

283. Their other objection was that the service was bad and the Chinese-Tibetan servers do not deserve any tips. I at first told them that let us not bear any grudge against anyone as we are on a pilgrimage. But later on I realized that they had a point and said that if they did not wish to contribute for tips they are welcome not to do so.

284. They then insisted that I also pay \$43 for the porter. I told them that I had a porter who

is an Indian and I had the option of paying him in Indian currency. That is why I did not pay in dollars for the porter. They then objected to the charges collected by Guru for bus travel from Darchen to Yamdwar and Ashtapad.

285. All these objections were laughable had they not been serious. I told them firmly that they would have to pay no matter what. I asked one yatri from their group, who appeared to be the only reasonable member of the group, to persuade them to pay. They finally paid in the evening after custom clearance. But all this left a bad taste in mouth and was entirely avoidable.

286. The custom clearance for which Guru summoned all of us to the hall in the Admin block at 5 in the evening was a farcical affair. We were suddenly informed that we were needed in the hall. The Chinese would pick up 5 yatri at random and check their luggage for any contraband items. However after having been made to wait for over half-an-hour 4-5 uniformed officious looking Chinese men entered the room and looked around and went out.

287. Later on we were informed that the custom clearance was over. Guru clarified that the men had forgotten that papers were earlier seen to be in order and having been reminded of that they felt that no more formalities were necessary.

288. Later on I went around the town for a leisurely stroll with Mr. Somasundara. I was now itching to get back to India as it is difficult to spend time in a foreign country whose language is all Greek and Latin to you. How much can one read? And then there is the added problem of food!

289. I have never ever been so out of touch with political, economic, and sports activity of my own country for such a long period of time. As if I was shut out of my own country. Finally tomorrow I would walk into freedom and liberty from this country. It is indeed a pity that MK and ML are in a country whose people are not so deeply attached to them as Hindus of India.

290. After having dinner at 8.30 went again for a walk and brought a good measuring metallic tape (5 meters for Y 10). Then went to sleep at 10.30 after chatting with K-group.

14 August 2007 (Tuesday)

291. Could not sleep at all the whole night. At 11.30 pm my cell phone which was packed in luggage started beeping indicating low battery. Had to get up and unpack nicely packed luggage and put the cell phone on charge.

292. It was indeed a very disturbing night. Must have had a wink only in the early morning.

293. Guru woke us up at 7 and we went for the same kind of breakfast (peanuts, friums, fried/steamed bread kind of thing). Could not eat much. However kept a handful of

peanuts in pocket. Would be useful during trek. In the Dining hall called Machwala and requested him to tip Y155 to kitchen staff (4 nos.)

294. Then we assembled in the courtyard and prayed as usual. Thereafter I requested Meera to give Y100 tip to Dorjee who is an excellent driver. Dr. Bapat gave Y 100 to Guru.
295. Then immigration officers came into the bus and checked everything. A young policeman came in the bus and sat next to the driver to ensure that nobody got off the bus en route.
296. We started from T'Kot at 8.40 and after one hour climb reached a place where horses were waiting for us. Guru informed me that a jeep for LO and 6 other yatris had been arranged that would take them directly to the Lipulek pass. I forewent my entitlement and gave it to one more lady.
297. The horse ride began at 9.40 and by 10.40 we were at Lipulekh. All this Beijing Time. Meanwhile it began to rain hard.
298. When batches cross Lipulek, utter confusion prevails. Yatris look for their personal baggage, locate their porters and pony wallahs who come to receive them. Some report missing bags. Others report breakages in handling. The incoming batch is in a hurry to get down to Chinese side of the border and the outgoing batch wants to start trekking immediately to Kalapani. Meanwhile I briefed the LO of the 12th batch properly in confidence. Guru was lurking around to overhear what I was telling the LO. I told LO that Guru is indispensable but LO will have to be wary of him.
299. Then I started walking towards Nabhidang. Rain had not abated and it was cold. We reached Nabhidang at 12.30 (Indian time). We were courteously received by ITBP and KMVN officials and jawans. I lost my walking stick at Nabhidang while having food. The food was a welcome change.
300. That left me wondering how is it that separation of two geographical areas by a mere pass can lead to growth of two completely different cultures, food habits, and language. What prevented Tibetans from colonizing this part of India and the other way around too. Lipulek pass is not merely a border between Tibet and India but separates two cultures that are so distinct that it is difficult to pass even 15 days for an Indian in the former without feeling extremely homesick. I truly felt the meaning of homesick only after I spent 12 days in China. And when I entered India everything looked so familiar. Even the stones, trees and animals. Not for nothing do people kiss the soil of their country when they return to it after spending a long time in a foreign country or from exile. I can truly appreciate their feelings. I felt elated. I could talk to anybody and in a language I spoke and he understood. The sights and smells of your own motherland are indeed uplifting. We do not value it much because we take it for granted. But ask those who spend long time in foreign lands without any window to the outside world.

301. After lunch we rest for an hour. Then we continued to descend and trekked all the way up to Kalapani. We reached that place at 1.30. I was put in LO's room and served with tea. I lied down for an hour. It was windy and chilly. I had worn all my woolen clothes.
302. Meanwhile an ITBP man came and invited me and the yatris to Badakhana on the eve of Independence Day. There was going to be a Bhajan session at the Kalimata Temple in the evening after which the dinner was going to be served. An ITBP constable came to my room and requested me to give them medicines that we might not conceivably require during the rest of the journey back home. So after consulting Dr. Bapat I gave all the medicines, excepting a few that we could need, to the ITBP. I am informed that ITBP men normally manage to get their quota of medicines from yatris on their way back from KM. These sentinels of the Himalayas perform such a great job during KM yatra that no yatri or LO can ever turn down their request for medicines. And in any case these medicines were given by an NGO in Delhi and it is just as well that ITBP men finally get to use them.
303. Meanwhile immigration formalities were completed by ITBP men. They stamped all passports and delivered them to me. In the evening we went to the Kali Temple and sang bhajans. Tinchubhai started singing bhajans and later ITBP men joined him. I am now beginning to enjoy bhajans if they are accompanied by musical instruments played by skilled musicians. A few ITBP men excelled at dholak and other instruments and that gave these bhajan sessions a marvelous and enjoyable tint. I realized that bhajans calm the mind and give it peace.
304. Thereafter we went to the tent where the dinner was organized. We were treated to D/S/puri and kheer. It was the most delectable food we have had for a long time. I thanked that Asst. Commandant Sh. Bhatia and then came to the room to sleep. By this time the weather had turned cold and it was pitch dark by the time we returned to our room with the aid of our torches.

15 August 2007 (Wednesday)

305. ID dawned. It was chilly. For sometime it rained in the morning. At 7 the K-Group called me to their room for reciting slokas in praise of the motherland. The slokas that we sang in unison were about India where diverse beliefs and cultures had flourished without any let or hindrance for centuries. It is a beautiful sloka which was read by Vanitha from Kannadiga script and recited by 7-8 yatris. The sloka makes one aware of Indianness as a concept. It was an apt beginning to the ID.
306. Then breakfast followed. The halwa prepared by the KMVN was smelly and I could not have it. The Choles were good. In these mountains at this height a "dhoop" shrub grows. People dry its leaves, mix them with a little bit of ghee and then put it on burning charcoal. It gives fragrant smoke. The leaves were pine-like.
307. Then at 8.30 am we went to the little ground near the mandir where flag-hoisting was to take place. ITBP men had turned out in smart uniforms and a contingent of 10 ITBP

personnel had been lined up to give the tricolour a ceremonial salute. After all the yatris had the darshan of the goddess Kali and Lord Shiva we were asked to assemble in the ground adjoining the temple. Then to my surprise, the Assistant Commandant called me to the dais where 7-8 chairs had been placed. For god knows whom. Then he made a short introductory speech after which I was asked to unfurl the flag. I was slightly taken aback but was deeply honored by the request. I proudly stepped forward and with a little pull and nudge from the ITBP man unfurled the national flag. All this was done with proper ceremony and honour due to the flag and the occasion. I was reminded of the moment 25 years ago when as an SDM I had unfurled the national flag in Mayabunder, Andamans and taken salute of a small police contingent.

308. I was asked to deliver a speech. I made a speech telling all those present there, not more than 100, the importance of ID, of the sacrifices made by thousands of men and women who underwent untold hardships for the cause of the motherland. I said that freedom that had been won after a bitter and hard-fought struggle had to be preserved at all costs for which the role of military and paramilitary forces cannot be gainsaid. There was a need to make India a strong nation and the concept of Indianness had to be preserved at all costs. For India can only be strong if there is unity of purpose among Indians. Jai Hind.

309. During the speech the cordless mike gave the usual trouble. I do not know why mikes give trouble on such occasions. This was no different. I then gave my speech without the mike. I thanked the Asst. Commandant for the honour and wished everybody present there a very happy Independence Day.

310. I then reflected on how lucky I had been. Who gets an opportunity to unfurl the national flag in Kalapani – the birthplace of the mighty river? I consider myself doubly blessed in as much as I did get this opportunity twice. Once in Mayabunder. A coastal town in Andamans where I had been an SDM. I thank the Almighty for this honour. How many people get this honour even once in their lifetime?

311. After the ceremony was over we all assembled and recited “ganpati stotra” and Atharwashirsh. Then we departed for Gunji. The weather had meanwhile cleared and the sun was shining brightly.

312. I started to walk in a leisurely manner, as the distance to be covered was no more than 9 kms. We started at 9.30 and were in Gunji at noon. The walk was very enjoyable with the river flowing by the side of the path. On the other side of the river is Nepal. The vegetation started to grow thicker as we slowly descended to the lower altitude of Gunji. Pine trees and thorny bushes were becoming more common. The mountains were also much greener.

313. At Gunji I took hot water bath and rinsed my clothes that I was wearing in plain water so that they could be dry for tomorrow's journey. The day was warmer than it was at Kalapani. Evening was however cold. We had a normal lunch at 1.30 after which I went to sleep. I was woken up by the cook who said that the LO of batch 12 had rung up twice to speak to me. I told him to ask LO to ring up again after half an hour. At 5 in the

evening, I asked the cook to prepare the decoction coffee and went to answer the call of the LO. The LO was alright but wanted to know whether he should split the batch in two or take all of them in one batch. I told him that it would be better if the batch is split into two, as the facilities on the way do not permit comfortable stay at Darchen for 38 people.

314. There was a delay in arrival of luggage from Kalapani. It appears that the pony handler had not fed ponies for 3 days as a result of which they had disappeared in the jungle. So the luggage of 5-6 yatris could not be transported that day. The yatris whose luggage had not arrived were not amused. Finally the luggage came at 11.45 pm at night in mild rain and was distributed to the yatris. While sleep eluded me I heard the tingling of bells of ponies and inferred that luggage must have come. So I went to the huts and informed all yatris that they must come and collect it.

16 August 2007 (Thursday)

315. I could not sleep well because of last night's problem. Got up early. The weather looked gloomy. Rain and dark clouds threatened to spoil our return journey. Weather has so far remained extremely friendly and yatris were happy.
316. By 7.30 all were ready, save the G-group. So we said our prayers and I requested the K-Group to proceed. The G-group was getting ready and some of them were having breakfast, which consisted of upama and porridge. I asked them to get ready quickly.
317. As soon as we left Gunji the weather turned sunny. The Gods were really with us. I reached Garbayang which is 10 km from Gunji at 11. Met yatris of 13th batch as well as its LO, Sh Garg. Wished all of them well. The trek from Gunji to Garbayang was excellent. The meadows and the mountains were beautiful. The Sun was mildly bright and all appeared well with the world.
318. From Garbayang, one constable from ITBP by the name of Singh accompanied me. Right through 10 kms that he walked with me, he kept on telling me what a hard life he leads in ITBP. It appeared that he got married recently and could not even ring up his wife as frequently as he wished because of the high cost of satellite call. He was Gujarati from Banaskantha district. It is rare to find a Gujarati in service – even rarer in uniformed service. He said that his family owns land in Banaskantha which his brother looks after. His wife stays in a joint family. He informed me that by the time he retires he would have enough savings to lead a happy retired life. But at the moment he looks distinctly unhappy with his life.
319. We reached Chhialekh at 1. I had maggi noodles in a small restaurant there. I then started the steep descent to Budhi (3kms) at 1.15 pm and was surprised by my own speed and stamina in coming down fast. By the time we reached Budhi it was 2.30 pm. It had also begun to rain. We were glad that the rain Gods had held out for us long enough to allow us to get into our rooms without getting soaked.

320. Had lunch in my room. I made it known to all yatris that we would leave Budhi at 5 in the morning the next day so that we could reach Mangtinala by 3 in the afternoon.
321. In the evening it rained hard once again. I felt that rains at this time indicated that morning would be clear. But rains also cause landslides that might be ominous. So far the Lord has favoured us with good weather whenever we had embarked on our trek.
322. On our way from Gunji, a wandering sadhu had also traveled to Budhi. He came with us to the KMVN Government Guest house and put his meager worldly belonging comprising a bag (small duffel) in the veranda of my room. When I was offered a plate of apple slices, I offered him some pieces. After sometime when it started raining, he spread out a thick cotton sheet on the floor of the veranda indicating that he planned to sleep there. The doctor from Uttarakhand government who had accompanied us from Gunji, was in the next room. He asked the sadhu to shift to his room as there was space for both. That is how we got talking.
323. The sadhu belonged to New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. With only Rs. 500 in his pocket he traveled all the way to Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu and came back via Mahendragarh, Tanakpur, Pithoragarh, Dharchula and went up to Kalapani for darshan of “Om” parvat. Then he went to Chota Kailash and now was on his way back to New Jalpaiguri.
324. When I asked him how he managed to see so much he said that he leaves everything in the hands of Bholenath and He finds a way for him. The sadhu is in his late twenties or early thirties and lightly built. The doctor told me later that the sadhu coughed throughout the night. He apparently takes chillum with ganja in it. Throughout his wanderings he had been provided shelter and food by people and he carries on with his life in this manner. And yes he smokes 10-12 bidis a day.
325. There was another character in guest house who had such a huge grievance against his department for having posted him in Budhi that he thought nothing else. He was a sweeper attached to the dispensary there. He kept on harping on his imagined hardship of staying alone in the guest house. The doctor humoured him and patiently listened to him but offered no solution. They spoke on this topic for two hours without any end in sight. Whenever the sweeper saw the doctor he would just raise the topic and request him to post him to Dharchula. What he did not realize that the doctor could do nothing to help him.
326. Had food at 8.30 pm and asked the waiter to wake everyone up at 4 in the morning. Since I had decided not to dine with yatris, in the evening a group of 4 from K-group came to see me (ostensibly to find out about the next day’s programme although I had announced it earlier) but I suspect they came to find out whether I was eating anything at all or not. That was a good sign and confirmation of my belief that this group was more refined and cultured than the other group.

17 August 2007 (Friday)

327. It was the first time in a long time that I slept well. I had told everybody that we shall leave at 5 am and that everybody must assemble for prayers at 4.45. Despite this notice only 7-8 yatris were present at the forecourt of my room at 5. I quickly said my prayers and asked those who were ready to leave. It was still dark. There was no threat of rain.
328. The sky was clear and the stars were twinkling. That promised no rain and plenty of sunshine. I started at 5 at a brisk pace, and before daylight broke out, had covered 3 kms. The footpath was interrupted at a few places by recent landslides that were trodden upon by yatris of 13th batch. Had it rained it would have made walking a lot tougher and riskier. By the time I reached Malpa at 8 am, 9 yatris had overtaken me. The path was undulating and full of rocks and pebbles. A few patches of wet earth were easy to walk upon. The ascent and descent were steeper on this stretch than at any other. One time we were at level with Kali river and at other far above it in a span of a kilometer. The sun had risen in the sky but the sunshine did not reach us because we were walking in a valley. As we neared Garbadhan at 1, walking had become tiresome. I slipped a few times while crossing waterfalls. My porter Ramesh was giving excellent support and carried both rucksacks. I had taken off my jacket, as it was getting hot. My feet were wet as one had to walk under fast flowing waterfalls.
329. Since the sun had come out after 3-4 days, I noticed that lizards that were sunning themselves at the edge of the path on rocks would suddenly dart back to the safety of undergrowth as soon as they heard footfalls. The wandering sadhu, Satyendra Bharti, was his name, also joined the party and kept pace with the group.
330. By noon we were at the roadhead. We had covered 21 kms in 7 hours. That was not bad at all. The scene at the landslide that had delayed us by a day during outbound journey to MK made me anxious. Suddenly Ramesh showed me that a few stones and rocks were still falling at that place. It was scary. I did not want to get stranded once again at that place.
331. Just before we reached our destination, I saw Dr. YS Yanki coming towards us with his family in tow. When we met, we exchanged pleasantries. I thanked him for his company till Gunji on way to MK. Then suddenly out of the blue he asked me whether he could have my walking stick. The request was so sudden that I took a couple of seconds to react. Normally all yatris are very possessive about their sticks. I had lost mine in Nabhidang and was sad about it. I managed a second stick that I had with me and which no one had claimed. I had become fond of the stick that I had. But I soon recovered and without a moment's hesitation gave him my stick, though I was left with no stick at all. The doctor had requested for the stick in such innocence, as is the hallmark of rural folks that I did not have the heart to refuse. It appeared to me that he was going to his village in the hills and needed a stick more than I needed it, to walk all the way. When he saw that I had no stick his wife who was coming behind him gave me her stick, which was a branch of a tree meant to be used as a walking stick. I gladly accepted her offer. In Dharchula though I managed to get another stick once again because no one claimed it. So I was once again

the possessor of a proper walking stick.

332. As soon as we reached Mangti Nala NHPC staff welcomed us with tea, biscuits and small eats. They had set up a counter for the benefit of yatris. All yatris were happy that the yatra so far had turned out to be safe and enjoyable. Relief was writ large on their faces. They would no longer be required to walk. It would be back to business as usual. Then we were served lunch by KMVN in the bus that had been parked there. It consisted of curd, pickled rice. The K-group was very happy. The group had tasted curd after a long time. I wanted to leave as soon as we reached the place. But KMVN yatra adhikari said that unless all the yatris report at that place he couldn't ask the bus to leave. In retrospect I think he was right. The last yatri came at 1.30 and thereafter 15 of us left in the bus at 1.45 pm.
333. The journey from Mangtinala to Dharchula was over in 2 hours. Once again the minibus had to pass under huge waterfalls. I thought that these waterfalls could serve as efficient car wash system if only automatic brushes could roll over the body as the bus passes under the fall. The memories of our stay at Pangla came alive as we passed the village in much better frame of mind. Wow! That night was special. It seemed yesterday once more.
334. We checked into the guest house on arrival at 3.45 pm. The bags had arrived by then. They were wet. They had to endure journey under the waterfalls on the back of mules. The clothes though were thankfully dry because they were wrapped in plastic bags. I put all the bags in the balcony for drying and took a bath with cold water. A most refreshing bath after three days.
335. My shoulders had developed some kind of roughness, which the doctor said was because of continuous sweating and absence of hygiene. There was no opportunity of taking bath!!
336. In the evening my porter, Ramesh, came to claim his baggage and money. I paid him Rs 4400/- for being my porter on both the Indian and Chinese sides. These porters get the opportunity of earning some hard-earned money only during these months and one should not grudge them this. I had seen some my yatris haggling with porters and were averse to giving them tips. It is not easy to carry load in the hills and in China where oxygen is less. I wished him well when he took my leave. He will now go with 14th batch.
337. In the evening Yatra Adhikari informed me that rains had caused landslides on the road leading to Pithoragarh and has led to some delay in our departure tomorrow. He spoke to DM and was hopeful that we should be able to leave by lunchtime tomorrow. Both GREF and PWD bulldozers were busy clearing the landslides. In any case KMVN would like to push us out as soon as possible because they would have to receive the 14th batch on 19 August and unless we vacate, the incoming batch cannot be accommodated. I informed all yatris of this development.

338. Then we all had dinner and I slept at 10 pm.

18 August 2007 (Saturday)

339. Slept well. Got up at 5.30 in the morning. There was no news of landslides being cleared till 11.30 in the morning. When YA announced that situation was grim and the 100 kms road between Dharchula and Pithoragarh was closed because of 3-4 major landslides, yatris began to get worried. They had booked their onwards tickets from Delhi to their hometown and it appeared that they might miss their flight or train because of delay in reaching Delhi.

340. Since Dharchula is a small town and closure of a major road connecting it leads to shortage of essential commodities – notably milk and vegetables. Prices of onions rose to Rs. 80 a kg. There was nothing to be done but to wait and watch. In fact the pressure was more on KMVN staff to see our backs as the new batch was expected to arrive tomorrow. At least we were being looked after well.

341. The road between Ascot and Thala was giving headache to the authorities. I entertained myself in the morning by watching “You only live twice”- a James Bond movie on TV and “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”. Both movies were my favourites once upon a time.

342. Cell phones do not work in this town. Border area and security clearance are cited as reason for not setting up towers. So the yatris have to depend upon STD booths to make calls.

343. A message came in the evening that there was no possibility of the group leaving today. So we decided to wait for another day. If we leave tomorrow then it will have to be non-stop journey from Dharchula to Delhi. In 18 hours. It is going to be very tiring. But yatris were ready to do that for fear of losing their connecting flight and trains.

344. Nepal is just across the river Kali. I just walked across the bridge which connects the two countries. Not much difference between the two countries in the way people lead their lives. The town across the river is called “Darchula” in Nepal. The buildings, the lanes, the shops, the tea-stalls could be from any town in India.

345. There was nothing the yatris could do but to bide their time. Nitya kept herself busy by coaching some young students in group and individual singing. In the evening met YA and tried to find out the progress in clearing the road. It appeared that the bulldozers of GREF and NHPC would work till 9 at night. So in all likelihood roadblocks should be cleared by tomorrow morning. At this time this is all conjecture. All yatris have been fed up of waiting and doing nothing. The only silver lining to the dark cloud is that we were looked after well by the KMVN staff.

346. I saw Natwest series final which India won by 2 wickets. Had dinner at 9 and went to

sleep at 10.

19 August 2007 (Sunday)

347. Slept soundly. In the morning one of the yatri informed that ITBP at Mirthi rang up to inform that the road has been cleared. Went to YA and asked him to confirm. He contacted a few officials who informed him that the work is in progress and by 11 the road should be clear.
348. So informed everyone to be in readiness. Everyone brought down the luggage from the rooms to the reception's holding area. Had an early breakfast of Paratha. Still no word about the road being cleared till 11. Spoke to DM who also did not have the latest news. Had lunch at noon. Then the call came from YA that a doctor had come from Pithoragarh who said that the road would be cleared by 2 and asked whether luggage should be loaded. I told him that unless official word is received by me I shall not be moving at all.
349. All yatris were worried about onward journey from Delhi. They were likely to miss it. Nothing much could be done. I could feel their tension. I was lucky that I had to only reach Delhi. I did not want to leave the comforts of this guesthouse and land up in a place with 30 yatris on my back. At least we were being looked after well here.
350. So kept myself busy by watching TV. Only my room had TV. Meera had finalized the accounts. Thirty copies of these accounts were made for distribution to the yatris. Saw Hollywood movie "Random hearts". Watched also 1983 world cup final.
351. No news of road being cleared reached us till 2 pm. It was clear that even the incoming batch would have considerable difficulty in reaching Dharchula. If we could not leave because of landslides, they could not reach here for the same reason. The YA (Bachiram Arya) told me that he would have to make arrangements for lodging and boarding of 44 yatris of 14th batch. He asked for my help in getting rooms vacated for the incoming yatris. He said that he would have to make alternative arrangements for our yatris in some private hotels and guest houses. I asked him to brief my yatris where I would support him.
352. Accordingly we called a meeting of all yatris in the holding area of the reception. Mr. Arya briefed them. He said that a few yatris would have to vacate and shift to private guest house. All yatris agreed to cooperate with KMVN.
353. In the end shifting was not required. The batch could not come, as it too could not cross the landslide. The rains that came in the evening made things worse. With two day of compulsory wait the yatris were getting restless. I was full of anxiety and foreboding. In this circumstances we all ate our dinner and slept.

20 August 2007 (Monday)

354. In the morning LO of the 14th batch called up and said that the landslide was not very

big (15 mts.) and that they would have certainly crossed it in the evening had it not been for fresh landslide and gathering darkness. So they decided to go to Didighat. I asked him when is he planning to cross the landslide. He said that he is planning to cross the landslide in Hastia in an hour's time. I told him to give me a call as soon as he crosses it so that I could decide to leave this place.

355. Back in guest house Mr. Arya was preparing to leave to receive the yatris at Gala. I told him that as soon as he reaches Gala he should ring me up and tell me about the ground situation. I then decided to call a meeting of yatris to tell them of my discussion with Bhandari. I asked them whether they were prepared to cross over the landslide with their luggage. Mr. Arya had said that he would be able to hire porters to carry their luggage on both sides of the landslide. All of them said that they were prepared to cross the landslide more out of frustration than confidence. At 10.30 I got the information that LO had crossed the landslide and was waiting for the vehicle. From this side YA could only proceed with the vehicles after crossing a small landslide at Balwakot.

356. At 11.15 am I got the information from the police that the roadblocks had been removed both from Hastia and Balwakot. I took this message at the reception desk. Since the message was from District Authorities I decided to leave pronto. The yatris were overjoyed at the prospect of leaving Dharchula at last. Within 20 minutes we had loaded our luggage in the bus. A jeep with Mr. Bist as our guide was also commissioned. We left for Pithoragarh at 11. I was in a TATA 407 pick up van that had the luggage of all the yatris.

357. All along the way till Ogla we saw the devastation wrought by nature. Hill sides had fallen down and blocked the road or the roads had sunk leaving behind a huge crater. The authorities had great difficulty in making these roadblocks passable for small lorries. But a few landslides were still dangerous. By this time, medium and heavy vehicles had started moving to and from Pithoragarh. At Ogla we were met by ITBP in charge who gave us our group photos. The Commandant gave me a Hindi translation of the autobiography of a yogi as a gift. I was touched.

358. We reached Pithoragarh at 3.30 pm and had our lunch at KMVN guest house. We were mobbed by a few local journalists who interviewed us about our yatra. They were particularly interested in knowing what kind of facilities exist in China. I told them that we hugely enjoyed our yatra and China is slowly but surely improving services it provides to yatris.

359. After lunch we started for Kathgodam. I shifted in another vehicle (Tata Qualis) and after a very hectic and tiresome journey through the mountainous road reached Kathgodam at 2 am on 21 August 2007.

360. The dinner at 3 am was ready!! I was given yatra completion certificates by the guesthouse in charge. I distributed them to the yatris before commencement of journey for Delhi. Mr. N Jaygopalan was vomiting badly throughout the journey and so was the driver

who drove Qualis. I was surprised at the way in which the driver drove the vehicle despite being clearly unwell.

361. The ride from Kathgodam to Delhi was one of the most tiresome and difficult I have experienced so far. There was a huge traffic jam just before Ramnagar because of Kawarias. It took 4 hours for the bus to cover 20 kms. The journey through UP was frustrating and disappointing. The traffic is most haphazard and all kinds of vehicles vie for space that does not exist. Our bus had no chance against these smaller vehicles because of which the speed was low.
362. We finally reached Delhi at 1.50 pm. Before that I requested the yatris to thank Lord Shiva for enabling us to complete the yatra successfully. I made a short speech thanking all the yatris for being patient with me and said that I enjoyed their company. It had been a most memorable personal experience for me, which I intend to write down so that whenever I happen to read the diary the scenes of yatra would come alive before my eyes. I wished them well in their onward journey to their native places.
363. We got down at Gujarati Samaj building at Raj Niwas Marg. As soon as we got down yatris dispersed quickly. All of us were tired after 26 hours of non-stop bus journey from Dharchula.
364. Thus ended my KM Yatra 2007. I was happy to be back with all the yatris in good health. I shall remember this yatra for as long as I live. For how many people get the chance to go on this yatra much less escort yatris. I am really blessed. I thank the Almighty for these favours.