

Arundhati cave, Uttarakhand

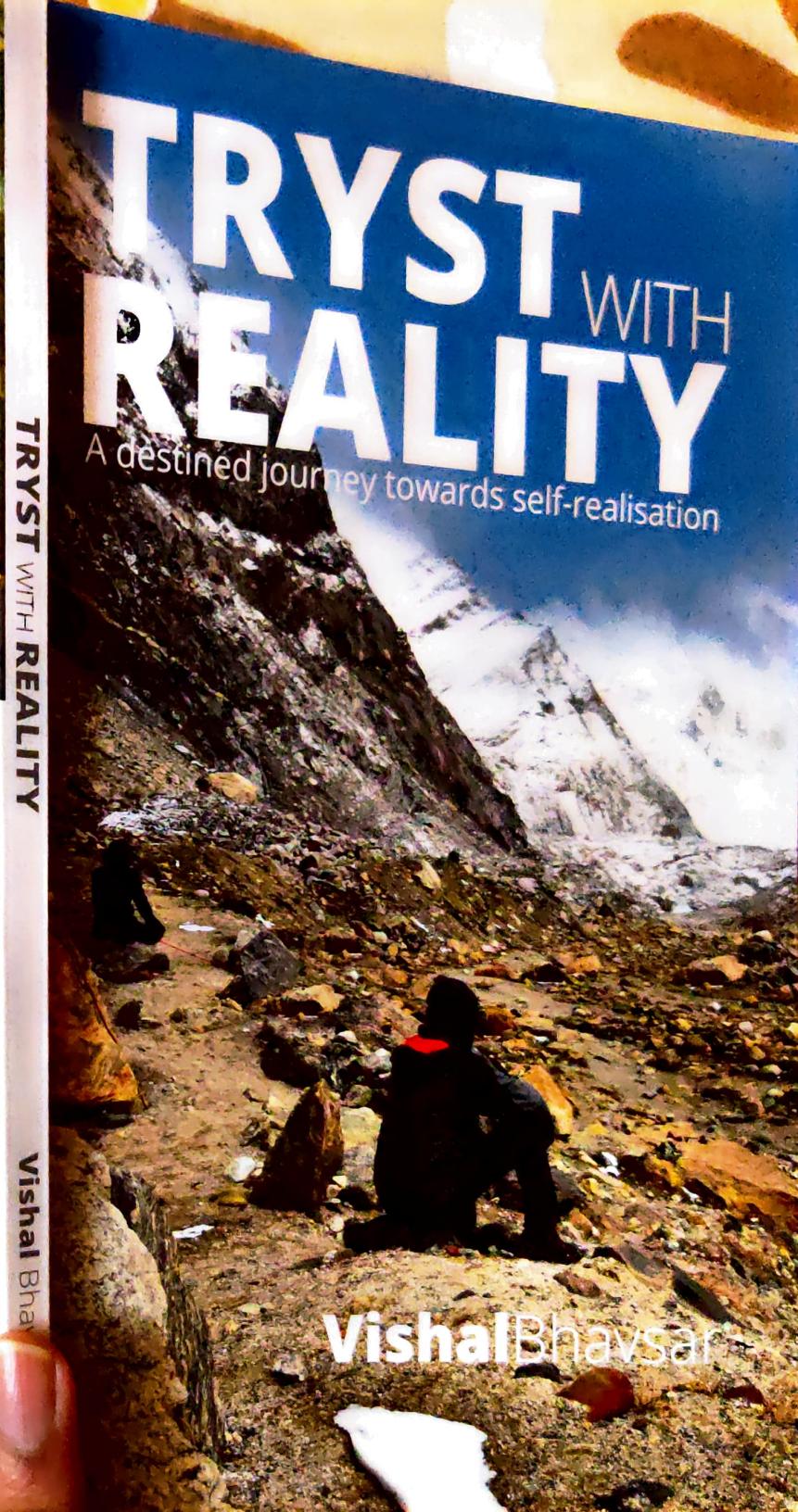
"After reading 'Tryst with Reality' I feel Vishal needs to carry forward this gift he has been bestowed on him. From his writing he has the grit to see this through. His words can move mountains and he has put in words with genuineness not seen nowadays. It compels the reader to migrate from the safe corner in their minds and trust the writer. Vishal has written it with a pure consciousness and that is 99% of the battle won. The impact of the simplicity that the chapters churn out one after another does not need a preface or introduction to entice the reader. I read it as an international reader and this is exceptional writing. Not even a Pulitzer book winner can bring out this grade of innocence."

Susan Phelps-Whitmore, Ortho rehab specialist, New York.



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Tryst with Reality

A destined journey towards self-realisation

Vishal Bhavsar

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Tryst with Reality

A quantum journey towards self-knowledge

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CONTENTS

Foreword.....	xi
Preface	xiii
Maps	xiv
Part 1: Let's go to the Himalayas.....	1
Part 2: The 'Journey'.....	3
Part 3: Going back	96
Part 4: Connecting the dots	97
Part 5: Destiny	104
Part 6: Sumant & I	105
Epilogue	107
Appendix	
Photographs from the Journey.....	108

PREFACE

Dear reader,

At the outset, I would like to thank you for taking some precious time out to get a copy of 'Tryst with Reality' and for your intention to spend even more time reading it. I do not wish to influence your thoughts or opinions in any manner by giving my own views on what I have written. Just a small spoiler though - this is a memoir of an unplanned backpacking trip to Himalayas that I undertook with my college friend Sumant Kachru during the summer of 2017.

In a matter of 15 days, a normal trip to the Himalayas became a 'journey of a lifetime' for both of us. Even though we went on this trip with absolutely no purpose or expectation, we were lucky to experience some of the most beautiful moments of our lives.

During our journey, we cried and we laughed, we enjoyed while we struggled, we surrendered even though we were vulnerable, we believed while we questioned, and we learned as we realised.

However, according to me, the most important thing we did during those 15 days was - we allowed. We allowed things to just happen to us by keeping our hearts and minds open to recognise, understand and appreciate the many ways in which the universe was conspiring for us.

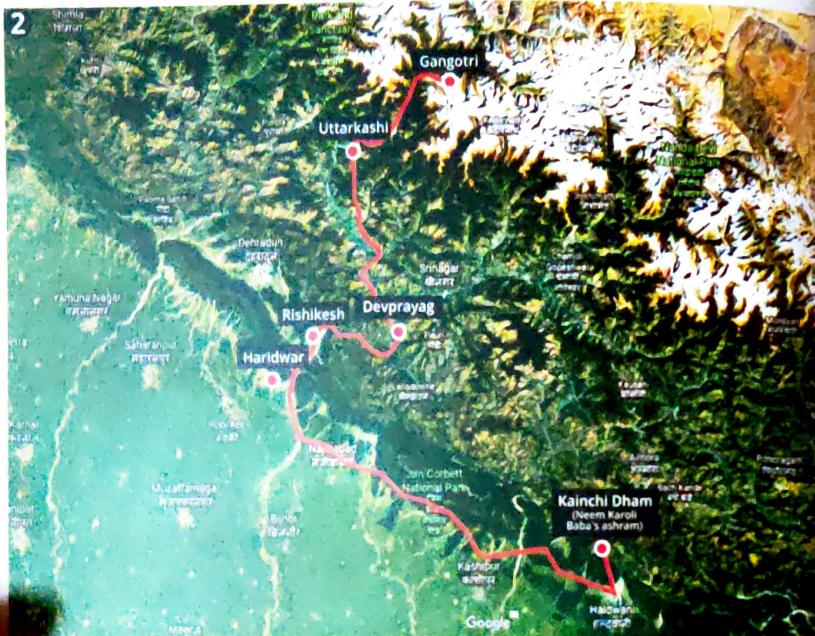
I wish the same experience for you as well, while you travel along with us during the course of the book.

'Tryst with Reality' can be about friendship, adventure, spirituality, travel, pantheism or self-realisation depending upon which aspect establishes a connection with you as you read through. However, if you are unable to establish any connection, I thank you once again for your time and apologise for not being able to provide your time and attention's worth of reading.

Vishal Bhavsar



MAPS



PART 1 LET'S GO TO THE HIMALAYAS

In the summer of 2017 (April end – the beginning of May), my college friend Sumant and I experienced one of the most amazing 'journeys' of our lives. Sometimes not having a plan is the best plan. And that's exactly what we did: a trip without a plan.

Sumant had visited me on April 13, 2017, at Ahmedabad. He had come from Surat to drop his kids (Taran and Saisha) at his parent's house here. He was en route to Delhi for his cousin's wedding. We decided to meet, along with our families, the evening before his trip. We met at the YMCA International Centre. It was a beautiful evening as we sat at the poolside catching up with each other's lives. After sometime the kids moved away to play video games along with Krishna, while Sumant, Ruchi (Sumant's wife) and I got talking. In the middle of our casual conversation, out of the blue, Sumant popped a question, "Would you be interested in going to the Himalayas with me?"

"Yes," I said. I had considered going to the Himalayas before. I suggested we go the following year after proper planning. While he was happy to hear that I was interested, he clarified, "I am thinking of going next week. I would be in Delhi for my cousin's wedding. If you join me in Delhi, we can leave on April 19 as soon as the wedding is over."

To Sumant's surprise, my answer was still the same.

"Yes," I declared, "Let's go to the Himalayas."

I responded instantaneously without thinking about the practicality of it. For some strange reason, the thought of what my family would think about this decision and how my business would be managed during that time didn't cross my mind. Going to the Himalayas would mean a minimum of two weeks' break from my routine. Perhaps I knew my family would support me and was confident that they would not mind me taking such a sudden and long break. They had been generous in the past as well.

When I broke the news to my family later, they were surprised and, as is normal, had a few questions for me:

- Where exactly are you going?
- Why are you going?
- When would you be back?

When I couldn't answer these questions properly, they asked nervously, "Are you coming back or not?"

The only answer I could give with surety was the destination we had in mind, which was 'Tapovan', a place 5 km from Gaumukh. Gaumukh literally means 'mouth of a cow'. It is a revered destination for Hindus, and Tapovan (Tap means 'penance', Van means 'place or forest') is a place where people engage in spiritual activities. It's a barren area at the foot of Shivaling peak at the western Garhwal Himalaya.

Few things I realised when I chose to accompany Suman:

- a) Both of us were seekers with no other commonality.
- b) Apart from having a vague idea of going to the Himalayas, there was no specific itinerary.

I tried to make sense of this impromptu decision and the only way I could do it was by humming a few lines of one of my favourite songs, sung by my idol and legendary singer Kishore Kumar¹: "Liye sapne nigahon mein, chala hun teri rahon mein, zindagi aa raha hun main..." (With dreams in my eyes, I have embarked upon a journey towards a fulfilling life...)

¹ Kishore Kumar (4 August 1929 – 13 October 1987) was an Indian playback singer, actor, lyricist, composer, producer, director, and screenwriter. He is considered to be one of the most successful and versatile playback singers in the Hindi film industry.

PART 2 THE 'JOURNEY'

DAY 1 (April 19, 2017) - 53 m above Sea Level

AHMEDABAD TO DELHI (RAJDHANI EXPRESS @ 5:40 P.M.)

Just when I was about to buy an airplane ticket, Suman suggested I travel to Delhi by train. He felt that it was important for me to take a pause and align myself mentally for the next few weeks. Somehow I agreed with him and although the difference in the cost of both the tickets was negligible, I asked my secretary to book my ticket on a train. She was perplexed, but I was sure Krishna and my daughters (Jiya and Aanya) came to the station to drop me. As always, I was just in time to board the train. Krishna barely managed to park the car and meet me before the train left. If we were late by a few more minutes, I would have missed the train.

DAY 2 (April 20, 2017) - 1400 m above Sea Level

OUR JOURNEY BEGINS @ KAINCHI DHAM

Steve Jobs' spiritual journey started at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram at Kainchi Dham near Nainital a few years before he founded 'Apple' in 1976. Since I consider him one of my idols, I thought it would be best to try the same route to spirituality. We decided to start our 'journey' at Kainchi Dham as well.

Kaichi Dham is around 320 km from Delhi and it takes around 7-8 hours to reach there. I reached Delhi station at 7:30 a.m. and had to take a Metro train to Anand Vihar, from where we would take a bus to Haldwani. Sumant was waiting for me at '#148' number bus-stand. Sumant had many relatives in Delhi who informed him that there were no air-conditioned buses in the daytime, and we should try and take a night bus. As it was a 8-hour journey, travelling during the day in the summer without an AC could be very tedious. However, we were not looking for any kind of luxury and were completely okay with travelling without air conditioning. Fortune favours the undemanding and the ones who are willing to adjust to any circumstance. To our surprise, we got an AC bus. We boarded at 9:30 a.m. and reached Haldwani at 4 p.m., just in time to have a quick tea at 'City Heart Sweets & Restaurant' and catch the last scheduled bus for Kainchi Dham.

In the bus, we tried to inquire with a few locals about the stay at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram. They promptly conveyed to us that there was no possibility of staying in the ashram without prior permission, which was supposed to be taken at least 4-6 weeks before the day of the visit, through a hand-written letter only. There was no landline phone number or email on which one could book a room at the ashram. Plus, one needed to give the reference of a person who had previously stayed in the ashram. I somehow felt very confident that we would be allowed to stay. We reached Kainchi Dham at around 5:30 p.m.

As we got down from the bus, the person who had told us that he would help us with the stay within the ashram a little while earlier suddenly said that he could not help as it was not possible and advised us to stay in the guest house next to the ashram. We however, had different ideas. As we entered the ashram,

met the security guard who, on inquiry, suggested that staying in the ashram was impossible, but that we could be a part of the evening aarti², which would start very soon. We asked him if we could meet someone in the office, to which he replied in the affirmative. As we entered the office, we met a tall person with a powerful voice. His name was Pradeep Sah. He made the same suggestion as others. He showed us the file of request letters, most of which were either rejected or given a date two months from the date of the application.

With folded hands but firmly, I pleaded with Pradeepji that we had come here to stay in the ashram and not in the guest house, as we were looking for divinity and not luxury. Sumant even indicated that we were ready to sleep on the floor of the ashram compound than go to the guest house. I don't think he encountered such assertive 'guests' very often. Our persistence paid off and we were led to a person called Joshi ji (who we later learned, had spent time with Neem Karoli Baba or Maharajji, as he was fondly called). Surprisingly, Joshi ji didn't take too long to allow us a one-night stay at the ashram. Looking back, and after talking to a lot of people who knew about the rules at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram, we realised that this was nothing short of a 'miracle'.

MAHARAJJI, DAD, and RAABTA³

We had reached the ashram just in time for the evening aarti. We put our luggage in the room and immediately went for the aarti. Apart from an elderly couple and us, only few ashram people were there. They gave us the aarti-booklet from which we were to sing the bhajans⁴. It was around 70-80 pages long. I was already feeling elated. I can't express the emotions I felt while I was singing the bhajans with everyone. Just holding the aarti-booklet in my hands and singing bhajans for more than an hour felt surreal. I had never done this before in my life. Nevertheless, I immediately felt very comfortable, as though I had been doing this for ages. Strange!

² Aarti is a Hindu religious ritual of worship, a part of puja (worship), in which light from wicks soaked in ghee (purified butter) or camphor is offered to one or more deities.

³ Raabta is an Urdu word of Arabic origin, which means a connection, relation, contact.

⁴ A bhajan refers to any song with a religious theme or spiritual ideas.

The entire aarti took about an hour and a half. Different prayers/bhajans were sung at different temples within the ashram. It started with bhajans on 'Sya-Ramji' followed by bhajans on 'Hanumanji', 'Shivji', 'Vaishnav Devi mata', 'Durga mata' and 'Maharajji'. Even though we didn't understand most of the bhajans as they were in Sanskrit, we got into the rhythm very quickly. It was a very nice feeling to chant in harmony with other devotees. The last 10-15 minutes of the aarti was in front of Maharajji's temple/murti⁵, right in front of Maharajji's room. By now I was in a trance and the ambience and the chanting thoroughly stirred up my emotions. I was looking at Maharajji while chanting and instantly felt a connection. As I watched, Maharajji turned into my Dad!!! I was not in a state either to apply any logic or to question what had just happened. I was simply overjoyed to see my Dad. I looked straight into Dad's eyes. He gave me his quintessential smile. We met each other after 23 long years. During these years I had missed him so very much. I had longed to be with him very many times. I had spoken to him without knowing whether he listened to me. I am sure Dad must have felt the same way. Maharajji granted us this great blessing. This was our chance to make up for lost time. Both of us had much to catch up on, much to share, and much to express. And it all happened by looking into each other's eyes. At this point in time, everything around us ceased to exist. All that mattered was living each and every second of these priceless moments with each other to the fullest. I wanted this moment to freeze for eternity.

I was overwhelmed by many things: the presence of Dad, Maharajji's grace, the reverberation of bhajans and slokas⁶, the devout environment, the cool evening breeze, the repose and tranquillity of the temple, and the Hanuman chalisa⁷. By the time the aarti was over, I had tears in my eyes and gratitude in my heart.

The 'journey' had begun.

⁵ A Murti literally means any form, embodiment or solid object, and typically refers to an image, statue or idol of a deity or person in Indian culture.

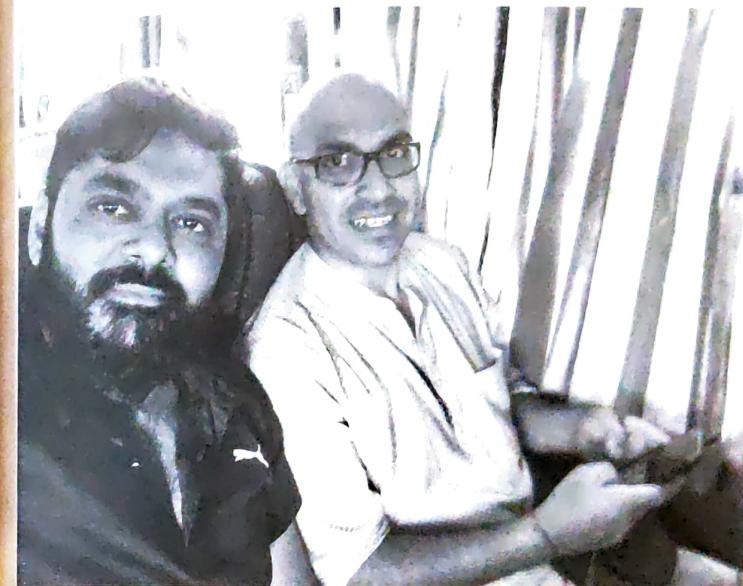
⁶ Sloka is a Couplet of Sanskrit verse, especially one in which each line contains sixteen syllables.

⁷ The Hanuman Chalisa is a Hindu devotional hymn devoted to Lord Hanuman. Maharajji is considered by many to be an avatar of Lord Hanuman.

INFO

Today, a few things happened for the first time in my life:
I did an entire aarti for more than one and a half hours.

I bathed with cold water.
I washed my own clothes (as per the technique demonstrated by Sumant).



On the bus to Haldwani.

DAY 3 (April 21, 2017)

LIFE IN AN ASHRAM

We woke up at 5 a.m. and by 5:30 a.m. we were near the temple, ready and all charged up for the morning aarti. The temple was already open and one could feel the early morning energy all around. The small but beautiful temple compound had some really amazing positive vibrations. Today was the day to learn about 'ashram rules'. At sharp 6 a.m., we were told to go for prasad⁸ (tea) near the dining area. There we got a chance to interact with the local staff and hear some stories about Maharajji and his miracles for the first time. Until yesterday we had no knowledge about Maharajji. The more we spoke with them, the more we knew why Maharajji was also called 'Miracle Baba'.

After having tea, we spent our time near Maharajji's room and his temple. It was nothing less than meditation. We actually spent some time in Maharajji's room where he used to live. It is extremely difficult to put that experience down on paper. The peace, calmness, and serenity of the place allowed me to be with myself. This kind of setting, the 'chanting' happening in the background, along with the divine aroma, created an ecosystem favourable to connect with the Almighty. There were moments during that time where I felt a real connection with the Supreme power.

Gradually our curiosity and faith in Maharajji were increasing. So we decided to read about him and bought a few books on Maharajji at the bookstore. We started reading our books near the temple. In between, we tried to use our charm with Joshi to get an extension for a second-night stay at the ashram. But to our disappointment, we realised very soon that Neem Karol Baba's ashram follows a strict discipline and we would have to leave after lunch. If we wanted to stay longer, we would have to follow the proper procedure/formalities next time. But by now we had realised how lucky we were to be allowed a one-night stay without proper formalities. At sharp 12 noon, we were requested to go for lunch. The food was simple but delicious.

⁸ Prasad is a devotional offering made to a God, typically consisting of food that is later shared among devotees.

I still fail to understand how a short stay (less than 24 hours) at an ashram can make you a part of the ashram. I felt as if I have been there forever. I didn't feel like going back at all. The effect was magnetic. What I experienced in a short time was more than I could have ever asked for or imagined. So there was no point being greedy. It was time to leave this time, only to come back again very soon.

I don't know what Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and others took back from the ashram. I am certainly going back with a divine experience and memories for a lifetime. The joy of being with Dad after such a long time remains unparalleled.

INFO

- Prasad (tea) has to be served by someone. We cannot help ourselves.
- 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m. was the time for breakfast.

WE HAD MAHARAJJI'S BLESSINGS

For some strange reason, Sumant asked me to go alone and make the donation to the ashram, while he waited near the main gate. As I was making the payment to Pradeep Sah, I shared with him the experience I had the previous evening during the aarti. It broke the ice between us and we started chatting about various things. He emphasized the fact that we were lucky to be staying the night without prior permission. It made me ask him why we were allowed to stay while everyone else is usually rejected. He pointed to a picture of Maharajji on the opposite wall and said, "It is He, who decides. He must have felt good energies about you and that's why He gave you the permission. We don't decide who would stay or who would not." I can't express how good I felt on hearing that.

I don't know what made Pradeep Sah take me to Joshi who was in the other room. This time he introduced me properly to Joshi. Joshi was delighted to know that I was a civil engineer as he was trying to learn AutoCAD. We had a long conversation. I created a good rapport with him at the time of leaving and we chatted for almost an hour while Sumant was waiting outside for me. I told him that we enjoyed our stay in the ashram very much and we

would like to come back again very soon for a longer duration. I was shocked to hear him repeat the same thing (pointing at another picture of Maharajji in his room) that Pradeep Sah told me a few minutes back in the other room, "It is He, who decides. We don't decide who would stay for how long. Maharajji must have felt good about you and that's why you were able to spend one night at the ashram." Hearing this from both of them made me extremely happy. The feeling was probably even more special than getting an appreciation letter from a client after successful completion of any project.

We took a local bus back to Haldwani around 3 p.m. and spent the evening at 'Cafe Coffee Day' reading about Maharajji. As our bus for Haridwar was at 11 p.m., we had ample time on our hands. We countered the temptation of watching a Bollywood⁹ movie at a local theatre and instead read about Maharajji. Later we had dinner at the same place where we had tea while going to Kainchi Dham. We were still under the aura of Maharajji. It was thus not at all surprising that two people who were seated beside us at an adjoining table in the restaurant also started telling us stories about Maharajji when they overheard us talking about him. We also wanted to know, hear and learn as much as we could about Maharajji now.

For the next hour, we performed 'impromptu satsang'¹⁰ that didn't require any social media help to organise. All we needed was Maharajji in our hearts.



Jeem Karoli Baba
(Maharajji)

HMT

Some of the teachings of Maharajji

- Sab Ek (All One).
- Love all, Feed all, Serve all.
- Attachment is the strongest block to realisation.
- When you remember me I come to you.
- You can leave me. I won't leave you. Once I catch hold of you, I won't let go.
- If you do not make it empty, how will you fill it up again?
- Everything is impermanent, except the love of God.
- It's better to see God in everything than to try to figure it out.
- Every line of the Hanuman Chalisa is a Maha mantra (Great mantra).



Shri Kainchi Hanuman mandir & ashram, Nainital district, Uttarakhand.

⁹ Bollywood is the name for the Indian popular film industry, based in Mumbai.

¹⁰ Satsang means a spiritual discourse or sacred gathering.

DAY 4 (April 22, 2017) - 314 m above Sea Level

EARLY MORNING AARTI @ HARI-KI-POURI, HARIDWAR

We reached Haridwar at 4:30 a.m. and came across a cycle rickshawala (the rickshaw man), who claimed to be from Bihar. However, he didn't even know who Shatruघन¹¹ and Sonakshi Sinha¹² were! This caused serious doubts in our mind about him being a Bihari. How can anyone who is from Bihar not know the Sinhas?

We ended up taking an electric auto to Hari-ki-Pouri and reached there by 5 a.m. There is something about this time in the morning that makes you feel so energetic and lively. There was a nice cool breeze and the whole place looked so ecstatic with the mighty Ganga flowing right below the bridge where we stood. The aarti started at 5:30 a.m. and the photographer in me got active. Suman decided to occupy the vantage point on the bridge while I ventured out to find interesting 'subjects' to take some nice shots. I decided to go down to the opposite side of the river where the aarti was to be performed so that I could capture the aarti properly. While I was getting down the stairs I saw some sadhus¹³ sitting on the steps. Their attire was quite colourful and they all looked very interesting. As I crossed them and looked back, I saw a nice formation (ten sadhus sitting one after the other in a line) with one very intense looking sadhu in the front (on the first step). My digital SLR camera was giving away some obvious information. As I got on my knees and bent a little to create the perfect angle from where I could have them all in one frame the sadhu sitting in the front immediately stopped me from taking a picture. For a moment I thought he was offended as I was taking his picture without his permission. But he actually stopped me from taking a picture, as he wanted Rs.10 for allowing me to take the picture. Even though I was surprised with the sadhu's professionalism, I didn't mind it, as it was a nominal fee (Rs 1 per sadhu). I happily took out Rs.10 note and handed it over to him. He was offended again. He gave the money back to me and looked away. When asked him why he returned the money, he replied, "We charge Rs.10 per sadhu. You need to pay Rs.100 for 10 sadhus." I paid the 'fees', completed my task and moved on.

¹¹ Shatruघan Sinha is an Indian film actor turned politician.

¹² Sonakshi Sinha is an Indian film actress and the daughter of Shatruघan Sinha.

¹³ A sadhu is a holy man, sage, or ascetic.

LIGHT AND SOUND SHOW

While the aarti was going on, the weather suddenly changed. As the sun rose, dark clouds rushed to cover it up accompanied by a strong breeze and lightening. In a matter of a few minutes, the colour of the sky changed drastically. The 'orange' of the sun and the 'grey' of the clouds, along with some 'blue' of the sky created a unique 'sepia-like' colour that I had never seen before. The phenomenon that unfolded in front of us was really mind-boggling. I had never witnessed something as special as this. I captured the moments in my camera and realised that every frame (taken within a span of few minutes) had a different colour of the sky. It looked as if the whole event was a computer simulation. I would never be able to forget the 'sepia' coloured sky that appeared during those few minutes. The cool breeze, the lightning, and thunder only added some 'special effects' to the already dramatic scene. Perhaps God was in a mood to display his entire range of magical tricks today. However, what we witnessed was not an illusion, but reality. I was lucky that I could manage to take some pictures as it started pouring heavily immediately after the aarti was over.

SOMETIMES BOOKING A HOTEL BEFORE-HAND IS NOT A BAD IDEA

We had a nice hot breakfast (poori-bhaji)¹⁴ and tea while it was raining. It was already 7:30 a.m. and time to look for a guest house or room for a few hours to freshen up. Suman, as always, was full of energy in the morning and suggested that he would go and look for a room. I still don't know why he gave me his phone along with his wallet and haversack while he went to look for a room. Normally, it does not take more than 10-15 minutes to get a room, especially when there are ample options. We did not have any special criteria for a room. I was waiting at the reception area of one of the hotels with the entire luggage. Immediately after Suman left, I felt a need to use the toilet, which was only getting intense. It was more than half an hour now since Suman had left. I went and inquired from people across the road where

¹⁴ Poori Bhaji is a dish of poori (deep-fried rounds of flour) and bhaji (a spiced potato dish which may be dry or curried). It is a traditional breakfast dish in North India.

I last saw Sumant. They had no idea about his whereabouts. The hotel where I waited had no common toilet or a vacant room where I could use the toilet. When I repeatedly inquired with the hotel manager, he also felt guilty for not being able to help me. As I kept asking in some hope to get a toilet somehow, the poor guy said with a lot of resentment, "Sir, I can understand your situation, but I am so sorry that I can't do anything about it." How I wished that Sumant had carried his phone with him.

I was not able to understand whether my predicament was tragic or comic. Forget about carrying both the haversacks (weighing almost 15 kg each) and going and looking for a room myself, I was not even in a position to walk a few meters. Sumant was taking too long for my 'comfort'. It was more than 45 minutes now and I had to do something before it was 'too late'. Just when I managed to gather enough courage to take all the luggage and start looking for the nearest public toilet, Sumant returned.

Watching me carrying both the haversacks (one in the front and one at the back) and walking towards the ghat, Sumant asked me "Tu kar kya raha hai? Kahan jaa raha hai?" ("What are you doing? Where are you going?")

He looked amused at my antics. He had no idea what I went through while he was away.

While I was relieved to see him, I was extremely baffled to know that he had come back without reserving a room. He gave me a few options to choose from. I only wanted the closest option. I didn't care about the tariff or other facilities they had. All I needed was a toilet. The one that was the closest asked for the original identity proof instead of photocopy and hence Sumant 'rejected' that hotel. He took me half a km away to a place where he 'assumed' they would not ask for the original ID proof. Unfortunately, his assumption was wrong. By now it was beyond my bearable limits and I just asked for room keys and went away while Sumant completed the formalities. I was saved in the nick of time, literally.

"I HAD A DREAM, TODAY IT WAS FULFILLED"

Once in the room, it took us no time to doze off as it was a long overnight journey and we were quite tired. At 10:30 a.m. when Sumant woke me up from my slumber, I had little idea that I was expected to take a dip in the ice-cold water of the holy river Ganga. He seemed extremely excited to take a dip and even came prepared with a swimming costume. I had often wondered why his backpack looked so bulky even though he was not carrying any camera/gadgets. I trembled at the mere idea of getting into the cold waters. I was very apprehensive about taking a dip.

We went to Hari-ki-Pouri again and this time it looked completely different from the early morning scenery. There were many more people around. The entire place looked very festive as if there was a mela¹⁵. Different people from all over the country and even foreigners gathered here. It was here that I realised how many people want to rid themselves of all their sins by taking a dip in the holy river.

As we reached the ghat, I could see Sumant was in a different zone. I could see sudden energy burst in him. Sumant wasted no time in getting into the river. It seemed as if he was just waiting to get into the waters. He looked very glad. I thoroughly enjoyed watching him. He was literally behaving like a child and dutifully taking my approval to do some difficult stunts. He wanted to check whether he could swim against the tide without holding the chain. I allowed him, but only once, as the flow of water was really dangerous there. While I was a little worried as Sumant swam without holding the chain, I was also very happy to see him enjoy so much and have so much fun. To do something as simple as this, with a child-like zeal is uncommon. He had absolutely no qualms about being watched and about what anyone would think. He was in his own world, in his own space, and in his elements.

When he came out, he looked very content and transformed. There was a spark in his eyes and smile on his face that suggested that something special had just happened. As I tried to understand the reason behind his joy, he proclaimed, "I had a

¹⁵ Mela is a cultural fair or a Hindu festival.

dream since a long time to take a dip in the holy Ganga, which got fulfilled today." I never thought that someone could dream about taking a dip in Ganga. Aren't we all supposed to dream about the 'bigger' things in life i.e. the material possessions? It was an eye-opener for me. Maybe today I realised something about Sumant with whom I never had a chance to converse at a philosophical level. And I was absolutely happy with what little knowledge gathered about Sumant's personality today. I felt privileged to witness Sumant's 'living the dream' moment.

INFO

- In Hinduism, the river Ganges is considered sacred and is personified as the goddess Ganga. She is worshipped by Hindus who believe that bathing in the river causes the remission of sins and facilitates Moksha (liberation from the cycle of life and death), as the water of the Ganges is considered very pure.

A FIRST DIP IN THE HOLY GANGA

After some time, it was my turn to take a dip. The water was freezing. I tried to convince Sumant that I did not want to immerse completely in the cold water, but when your friend has successfully completed a task, you don't want to chicken out. I was under tremendous 'peer pressure' after a long time. After a lot of convincing by Sumant and gathering some courage I managed to immerse myself completely into the holy Ganga. While I didn't have any thoughts when I was inside the waters, I felt really different after coming out. I felt very content and fresh. Now, since I managed to take a dip in the holy Ganga, I only hoped that some of my sins would be washed off if not all.

PATANJALI YOGPEETH: SHALL WE OR SHALL WE NOT?

We had planned to travel north from Haridwar to Rishikesh. We also wished to visit Baba Ramdev's¹⁶ Patanjali Yogpeeth, which was close to Haridwar but in the opposite direction to Rishikesh. We planned to witness the evening aarti at Rishikesh and were unsure whether we should go to Rishikesh directly or visit the Patanjali Yogpeeth before heading to Rishikesh. While having our lunch we decided to first visit the Yogpeeth and leave it to the heavenly guide to show us the path from there on. We took a

¹⁶ Baba Ramdev is a yoga guru known for his work in Ayurveda, business politics, and agriculture. He co-founded the Patanjali Group.

local bus and got down in front of Patanjali Yogpeeth. We realised it was not the yoga-ashram that we had anticipated; it was a huge Ayurveda¹⁷ based hospital. I was a little tired and sleepy and desperately wanted some rest. Since we didn't have a prior booking, we had hoped to book on arrival. Unfortunately, there were no rooms available as there was a mega event starting the next day. It was a hot afternoon. While Sumant tried to get in touch with someone in Surat who could help us get a room, I waited on one of the hospital chairs and dozed off on the chair. Sumant woke me up after some time to inform that he had managed to find a room. We had to walk half a kilometre in the scorching heat carrying a 15 kg backpack, to the residential block called Yogpeeth 2. Sumant had second thoughts, but I insisted on staying, as I needed to rest. We walked along the highway. It was a long walk. However, as soon as we reached Yogpeeth 2, where all the residential blocks were located, we got a nice feeling. The campus was huge and smartly planned. It looked like a big township, made by an upscale developer in one of the metro cities. We were given room no. 7110 in 'Vashistha' block.

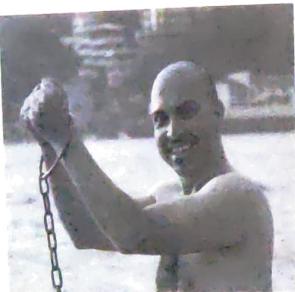
The room was neat and clean and had an AC and hot water. We took some much-needed rest and went back down around 5:30 p.m. to look around the campus. We had a strange feeling. The place looked very different. We realised that even though there were so many people all around, there was no noise. Everyone seemed to be in a rhythm. I have never seen so many people at the same place operating in such harmony. On asking someone we figured out that they were all yoga teachers, who had gathered from all over the country for a seven-day 'yoga shibir'¹⁸ which was to be conducted by Baba Ramdev himself, the very next day. There were thousands of yoga teachers and that was the reason we didn't get a room. Suddenly we realised that we were amongst so many yoga teachers and felt as if we were at the right place at the right time. We ended up going to the huge yoga hall where all the yoga teachers were called for a briefing session for the next

¹⁷ Ayurveda is the traditional Hindu system of medicine (incorporated in Atharva Veda, the last of the four Vedas), which is based on the idea of balance in bodily systems and uses diet, herbal treatment, and yogic breathing.

¹⁸ Shibir is a camp.

day. We were not qualified to be there, but our old college trick did the job for us once again. We also realised that if we wanted to be with Baba Ramdev the next morning, we would require help from Suman's friend. I requested Suman to do some 'jugaad' and he obliged. Later in the evening, we had saatvik¹⁹ food at the canteen. It was delicious. We planned to sleep early so that we could be at the yoga hall at sharp 4 a.m. the next day. I was really impressed by the habits of people who practice discipline and maintain a simple yet healthy lifestyle. They seemed to be living in complete peace and harmony.

- 19 Jugaad is a colloquial Hindi and Punjabi word, which has various meanings depending on the situation. It could refer to an innovative fix or a simple work-around, a solution that bends the rules, or a resource that can be used in such a way. It is also often used to signify creativity—to make existing things work or to create new things with meagre resources.
- 20 Saatvik food refers to vegetarian foods with an emphasis on their freshness and being naturally sourced.



Suman's 'dream come true' moment.



Sadhus at Hari-ki-pouri.



Chaiwala (Tea vendor) near Hari-ki-pouri, Haridwar.

DAY 5 (April 23, 2017) - 372 m above Sea Level

YOGA WITH BABA RAMDEV

Without knowing much about the mega event, we were at the entrance of the massive yoga hall at sharp 4 a.m. There was so much rush at this hour to get inside and procure a vantage seat right in front of the stage where Baba Ramdev was to sit. I have only been in such a situation earlier during live performances by my favourite singers or while entering cricket stadiums. This was a unique situation. Along with everyone else, we tried to get inside the hall and take a front row position. There were many yoga teachers (men and women) in the hall. Once inside, Suman hurried up and managed to get one empty place right in the front. I could only manage a place a few rows behind him. I was little disappointed to see Suman leaving me behind for Baba Ramdev and getting a front row seat.

To my further disappointment, within a few minutes, one of the volunteers came up to me and politely asked me to move further back to make sure that I was not captured by any of the cameras. The reason: Baba didn't like to see people wearing black clothes. But my disappointment was short lived as within a few minutes, I saw Suman also walking towards me. He was also asked to go back. Luckily there was an empty place next to me and I offered him the same. I was happy once again. Both of us realised a couple of things:

- We were the only ones in black attire. All the others followed a dress code, which was obviously 'white'.
- Both of us were probably destined to stay together during this trip.

At 5 a.m., one of Baba's disciples demonstrated yogasanas²¹ and everyone followed him. It was also time for us to realise that we had barged into the wrong party. All we could do was watch in utter awe while he performed some of the most difficult yogasanas. I have never seen anyone with such a flexible body.

- 21 Yogasana (Yoga + Asana): In yoga, an asana is a posture in which a practitioner sits. In the yoga Sutras, Patanjali defines "asana" as "to be seated in a position that is firm, but relaxed." Asanas are also performed as a physical exercise where they are sometimes referred to as 'yoga postures' or 'yoga positions'.

almost like elastic. What we witnessed was phenomenal!

At 6 a.m. it was time for Baba Ramdev to make a grand entry. This was the moment that was eagerly awaited by everyone. As soon as Baba came on the stage, there was sudden anxiety and energy in the hall. The entire audience cheered for Baba Ramdev. What followed in the next two hours was a mix of nationalism and yoga. Baba spoke strongly about building a new India through a strong youth and about how yoga could help in improving an individual's life. Baba talked about a 'master plan', a pan-India movement. His goal is achieved I see the fabric of India's culture, changing drastically in the coming years.

INFO

- We left Patanjali Yogpeeth in the afternoon in a shared auto rickshaw for Haridwar and then took a local bus from Haridwar to Rishikesh.
- Today was Suman's marriage anniversary. That's why he had insisted that we have lunch in a nice restaurant in Rishikesh and not in Yogpeeth. He wanted to give me a surprise party.

EVENING POOJA AT PARMARTH ASHRAM, RISHIKESH

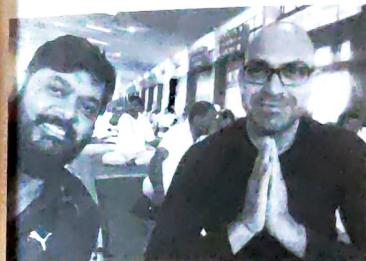
Rishikesh has a nice bus stand surrounded by hills all around. After having lunch near the bus stand, we took an auto-rickshaw towards the ghat. We wanted to stay in one of the ashrams that were located in the old Rishikesh on the other side of the Ganga. However we were not able to get into any of the ashrams (Kamli wale Baba ka Swargashram, Parmarth ashram or Geeta bhavan) as all these ashrams needed prior booking and room were available only for 'families'. So we ended up taking a room at hotel Raj Palace, which was located exactly behind Parmarth ashram.

After dumping our backpacks in the hotel room, we went to the ghat. I was not surprised at all when Suman decided to take another holy dip. After he completed his dip, we reached the ghat near Parmarth ashram where the aarti was to be performed at 6 p.m. As soon as the gates opened, everyone (Indians as well as foreigners) took their places. It was such a nice sight to see people of different faiths and cultures performing aarti with the same devotion. I could manage to take some pictures of people who were engrossed in the aarti. After the aarti, we had a 'special

tea opposite Geeta bhavan. It was such a nice tea. By now we were getting habituated to eating saatvik food and were looking for the same everywhere. We were told by locals to try dinner at Geeta bhavan. We had an unforgettable dining experience at Geeta bhavan. The system (serving aisle in the centre with men and women sitting in separate rows on the opposite sides of the aisle on an elevated platform), the taste of water, the daal²² and the ambience were as homely as it could get. The price was Rs 60/- (including taxes) per person for an 'unlimited Thali'²³. I believe we had 'unlimited joy' for Rs.60/-.

22 Daal is prepared from pulses and is among the most important staple foods in India. Daal is frequently eaten with flatbreads such as rotis or chapatis or with rice.

23 Thali is a set meal at an Indian restaurant.



Men in black. Suman and I at Patanjali Yogpeeth.



Crossing river Ganga by boat to reach old Rishikesh. The famous Laxman Jhoola is in the background.



Evening aarti at Parmarth ashram, Rishikesh.



Melting pot of different cultures at Rishikesh.



Devotees from various countries engrossed in the aarti near Parmarth ashram, Rishikesh.



Dining hall at Geeta bhavan, Rishikesh.

DAY 6 (April 24, 2017)

SMILE, YOU ARE ON CAMERA

It was Sachin Tendulkar's birthday today and our second day in Rishikesh. We didn't have any specific plan for the day. Hence I decided to sleep in and Sumant decided to explore the town early in the morning. Around 8 a.m. he came back fully charged and announced the 'plan-for-the-day' with a child-like zeal. Sumant had hired a scooter (Honda Activa) on rent for the whole day and had also negotiated an excellent deal for a massage and Shirodhara²⁴ but first, we decided to go to Vashistha gufa (cave) which was around 22 km to the north of Rishikesh. Someone told Sumant about it in the market. We had never heard about such a cave before this day. The scooter made it possible for us to go there.

The road to the cave was very scenic, running parallel to the Ganga. It reminded me of my bike-trip to Leh in 2013. On the way, I called Devangkaka (owner of IPCO) to wish him good luck for his new venture. While talking to him I came to know he had been to Neem Karoli Baba's ashram during Maharajji's time. When I told him we wanted to stay only in ashrams in the following days, he suggested I talk to Maulin, my school friend who is a part of the IPCO family. He arranged for our stay in ashrams at all the places we were planning to visit with the help of Nirgundasji Maharaj of Santram Mandir in Nadiad, my home town.

Shivpuri, the most happening place for white water rafting in India, was on the way to Vashishtha cave. I had been here once before when I was working for Cushman and Wakefield, Bangalore. We decided to stop by for some time. We parked the scooter and went to the riverbank after negotiating a good deal for rafting later in the day. The plan was to enjoy rafting while returning to Rishikesh from Vashishtha cave. Shivpuri has one of the best riverbanks in India with white sand and green water in the backdrop. It has a perfect setting for taking nice pictures. Since I carried my camera, Sumant and I decided to have some

²⁴ Shirodhara is a form of Ayurveda therapy that involves gently pouring liquids over the forehead and can be one of the steps involved in Panchakarma. The name comes from the Sanskrit words shiro (head) and dhara (flow).

fun and do some modelling for each other. Sumant wanted me to capture him in different 'yoga' postures. Even though his postures were not technically perfect, they at least looked good. I personally liked the one where he bent on one knee, stretching his body towards the front, dropping both the hands down and holding his head high towards the sky. Till date, I have failed to figure out the name of that 'asana'.

After his 'photo session', it was my turn to pose. Sumant took charge as a photographer and directed me to stand in different yoga positions. Although they looked more like warm-up exercises that I did as a young cricketer, I obliged. At the end of the day it was done merely for fun and we didn't have any intention of making a CD (Compact Disc) and distributing it amongst yoga enthusiasts worldwide.

While we were engrossed in taking each other's pictures, few of the rafting boats came back ashore. Sumant checked with the people sitting inside one of the boats if he could take the picture. Surprisingly, they behaved a little pricey and declined. Sumant was disappointed, but not disheartened. When one more boat came closer to the bank, Sumant simply raised the DSLR camera in his hand and shouted loudly, "National Geographic". All of them seated inside the boat assumed that we were from 'National Geographic' magazine and they probably thought that they would get featured on the cover page of next month's edition. Hence they obliged. All of them immediately stopped rafting, looked at the camera, raised their paddles above their heads and gave huge broad smiles.

It was time to leave for Vashishta gufa so we headed back towards the scooter. Sumant was to ride the scooter. Just as he was about to start the scooter, I called out to him to smile for the camera. I wanted to capture him along with the scooter and the bridge in the background. He smiled and waited for me to 'okay' the click. However, after a while, I asked him to smile again as I couldn't capture his smile. He smiled again and kept smiling for a few minutes until I clicked again. Even after Sumant smiled for such a long time, I was not able to capture his smile properly.

Finally, I asked him to remove the helmet and smile for me one last time. Needless to say, he was furious.

CAVES, CONNECTIONS, AND PROPHECIES

We started for the cave and reached there around 11:30 a.m. The closing time for Vashishta gufa was 12 noon, so we decided to immediately go inside the cave. This was the place where, thousands of years ago, the great sage Vashistha lived and meditated for many years. After him, Purshottam Maharaj made this cave popular and took Samadhi²⁵ here. People say such places still have their aura and spirit and one can feel the positive vibes all around. We were soon going to find that out for ourselves.

As we entered the gufa, we could hardly see anything, as it was too dark. It was quite cool as well, at least a few degrees lesser than outside. When you enter a very dark place from a sunny place, it takes a while before you can see anything clearly. Few minutes after entering the gufa we saw some people (Indians as well as foreigners) sitting and meditating. As Sumant put on his headlamp, we realised that we could still go further inside. There was a very low entrance opening up to another small area where there were few more people sitting and meditating. Sumant's headlamp helped us navigate through this small dark gufa. There was pin-drop silence. Initially we didn't know what to do, but as we found a few empty places, we sat on the floor along with others. It was so peaceful that even the sound of body movement and breathing were quite audible. I was seated next to Purshottam Maharajji's picture and a small 'diya' (oil lamp). The thought, that Vashistha maharishi also might have spent time meditating at the same place, unnerved me. I was finding it difficult to fathom the gravity of the occasion. I was about to meditate in the same cave where great Indian sages once meditated.

However, I decided to stop getting overwhelmed by the occasion and start meditating. As soon as I closed my eyes and took a deep breath I experienced something unique. I felt as if I was

²⁵ Samadhi is a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation. In yoga, this is regarded as the final stage, at which union with the divine is reached (before or at death).

sitting amongst a lot of stars along with my family members who were not physically with me anymore. I was with them in a galaxy of planets. I don't know whether this was just imagination or a real connection, but whatever it was, I felt as if I was taken away from this earth to some other orbit/place which had no mass. I was in a much better position to understand this event after what I experienced at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram. On opening my eyes after some time, I observed the diya and the picture next to me. The flame had no movement whatsoever and it looked like a static object/picture. For me, at this moment, the time had come to a standstill, just like the flame. Even my thoughts had vanished. I felt like I was in a vacuum.

I came back to my senses only when we were asked to 'leave' as the cave was closing for 3 hours. The only problem was that even after coming out of the cave, I was not able to leave the cave.

WAS IT A MEETING BY CHANCE OR TRUE CALLING?

We then went and met the Swamiji who was now taking care of the cave. He asked us to have lunch at the bhandara.²⁶ We had another opportunity to have saatvik food. After lunch, we went towards the river and saw signage with an arrow pointing towards 'Arundhati cave'. On inquiring with someone we learned that Arundhati was the wife of Maharishi Vashistha. Out of sheer curiosity, we proceeded towards Arundhati cave. That's when Sumant broke his sandals and had to 'borrow' someone's slippers lying near the cave. On reaching the cave, we realised it was a small cave, slightly elevated, where no one seemed to go. It was right on the riverbank. We climbed up to the cave and saw one sadhu-like person sitting outside the cave and one elderly person sitting inside the cave. The person sitting inside the cave, on noticing us, greeted us with an infectious smile and invited us to come inside. It was a very small cave with enough space for 5-6 people to sit. Since he was alone and getting ready to settle down, we asked him if we could sit with him. Although we wondered if we were infringing on his privacy, he immediately nodded in affirmative. We were happy as we had some questions.

²⁶ Bhandara is typically a meal (feast) for Holy men. When devotees prepare food on large scale as a religious offering to God that is also called as Bhandara.

and were seeking some answers, which we felt he might be able to answer. There was an immediate connection with him. Even though he looked more than 70 years old, his eyes were sparkling and he looked very friendly. He had this saint-like aura about him, but he didn't look like a sadhu at all. Even though we had many questions, the first thing we wanted to know was who this person was and what was he doing alone in this cave. We learnt that his name was Ravindra Rawat and he frequented this cave for the last 30 years, once or twice a month depending upon his mood. He was from Dehradun and was retired from work. For a person like him to be living in a cave, sounded a bit strange to us. But it didn't matter much to us, as long as we were able to ask him some questions and he was willing to answer them. In no time, we got talking about spirituality and God. He told us about his Guru (Swami Muktananda Paramahansa of Ganeshpuri, Maharashtra) and how he managed to stay alone without food and light in a gufa. For most of us, it can be really scary to stay alone for the whole night in a cave without any light. He said it required a lot of belief, courage and struggle to live inside a cave at night. He also mentioned that one of his friends would also join him soon.

While we conversed about love and detachment, his friend joined us. He also greeted us by giving a smile. He had an all-knowing manner about him. He acknowledged us as if he already knew that we would come to meet them. His name was Thakur Negi and he had arrived the previous day to meet Rawatji. He was also staying in the cave. We later learnt that he was an ex-SBI (State Bank of India) employee and he too lived in Dehradun. For two normally dressed people, both retired, to be living in a cave sounded highly unusual to us. However, we were not willing to let any doubt make us judgemental about them.

On entering the cave, the first thing that Negiji said to me was that I was a writer and that I love writing. I was stunned to hear this! How did he know about that? Could he actually read my face? Or was it just a wild guess? Was it something else? Until that I had written narratives (mainly travelogues) in the last few years. The conversation that followed with Negiji in the next few

hours not only intrigued me but also raised even more questions than what I had before meeting them. To me, it seemed that was the focus of the discussion and everything that Negiji spoke had direct relevance to me and were subjects that I can relate to personally. I felt as if he was reading my mind and it made me feel very uncomfortable. I was in a state of shock upon realising that a stranger had so much insight about me. During that intense conversation, he made the following prophecies/observations:

- My internal diya had already lit-up and now it's just a matter of someone putting oil in it regularly so that it could continue shining forever.
- I would have some 'unique' experiences during this trip that would change my life forever.
- When I go back home from this trip, I'll be a 'new' Vishal.
- I have been a seeker for many births and I would get all the answers in this birth.
- As we travel onwards, I would be meeting a lot of people who are already waiting for me, and they would answer all my questions.
- Sumant is the correct partner for such a 'journey' and he would help me in my quest for answers/truth.

When I asked him how I would know if I met my Guru, he answered that I need not worry about it as my Guru would find me rather than me finding him. He also answered many questions of my subconscious mind that I was unaware of until that moment. Before this conversation started, I had never mentioned anything about seeking to anyone, even Sumant. I became numb when he reiterated several times about my internal lamp being lit-up and about the need to just nurture the flame. Was he suggesting that I needed a Guru or was he predicting that I would get a Guru? How did he know that lately, I had been thinking about a Guru?

While he spoke about rebirths and suggested that I would find answers in this birth, I was completely blank and felt like I was losing my self-possession. As he spoke, Negiji looked straight into my eyes. I found it quite intimidating. After a while, I had to take

my eyes off him to disengage. He was someone whom I had met just a few hours back. I have never had such a deep and intense conversation about myself with anyone in my life. I also realised that I had never felt so vulnerable before. During most other conversations, I had always been on the other side of the table, which is to say, the person with the answers.

Before we realised, it was already 5 p.m. and time for us to take another dip in the holy Ganga and return to Rishikesh. We exchanged contact details with a promise from Negiji that he would contact us before we would contact him. For some reason, I believed him. He also suggested a few books that could help us find all the 'answers'.

INFO

The above is my experience of what transpired with respect to me. I have not included Sumant's experience of the same.
On the way back we went to Laxman Jhoola and had dinner again in Geeta bhavan. After the dinner, we had 'Honey & Fig' ice cream at 'Honey Hut' Cafe. After a long time, I had two servings of ice cream. It was delicious. White water rafting and massage were probably not meant for this trip.

ISS RAAT KI SUBAH NAHIN... (NO END TO THIS NIGHT...)

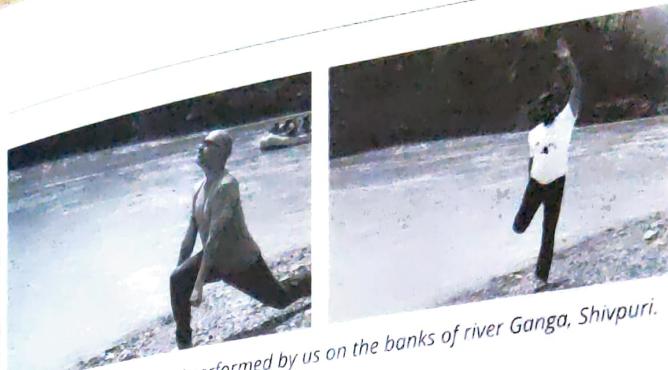
After going back to the room, Sumant went off to sleep early and I sat thinking about what happened earlier today. I tried writing my daily diary as usual but somehow my mind was not able to focus on it at all. I was still trying to make sense of what happened. Sumant and I spoke very little after leaving Arundhati cave. There was a definite undercurrent of strange emotions that both of us experienced. Something unusual, something paranormal seemed to have happened. It was around 10 p.m. and high time that I woke up Sumant to let my emotions out.

He got up immediately as if he was just waiting for me to wake him up and initiate the discussion. I told him about a lot of things that were going on in my mind since afternoon. I shared with him some of the most personal things about myself that Negiji had touched upon in the afternoon. I told Sumant that I was astonished to hear what Negiji said. Sumant too felt that the

conversation we had was too profound not to be discussed. We were highly amused while dissecting each of the topics discussed. We talked till the wee hours of the morning.

Suman and I bonded, and how! The time spent with Suman tonight was special. Not only was he ready to hear me out, but also helped me make sense of a lot of things I felt were beyond my perception. I still don't know how to describe the day, but the turbulence caused during the day demanded some calmness in the night that the conversation provided. I felt today's event had the potential to change my life drastically. I would figure that out sooner than later. Both of us finally went to sleep at around 4 a.m. I still had quite a few questions in my mind that were not going to be answered very soon:

- Who were these two gentlemen?
- What were they doing in the cave?
- How did they know so much?
- Were they already waiting for us to come there?
- What was their interest in encouraging us to 'keep seeking'?
- How did they know we were 'seeking'?
- How could they intuit things that were on our minds without our expressing them?
- Was this all a small part of a larger design?
- How is it possible to connect with strangers at such a deep level?
- However, the biggest question in my mind was: were they both strangers in the first place?

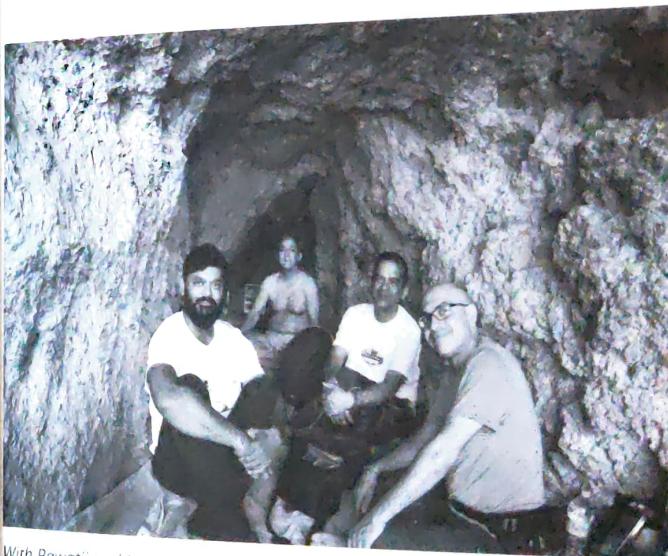


Some unique 'yogasanas' performed by us on the banks of river Ganga, Shivpuri.



The 'National Geographic' moment.

"Smile, you are on camera."



With Rawatji and Negiji (in white T-shirt) at Arundhati gufa.



Taking our customary dips in the Holy Ganga near Arundhati gufa.

DAY 7 (April 25, 2017) - 830 m above Sea Level

SMALL TOWN, BIG IMPACT - DEVPRAYAG

It was now time to leave Rishikesh for Devprayag (where heavenly rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi meet and assume the name Ganga). After having lunch (poori-bhaji) we went to the bus stand. We didn't have any idea how to reach Devprayag. After reaching the bus stand we realised that there were no State Transport buses to Devprayag. The private bus owners were reluctant to take any passengers for Devprayag for this short route that had lower fares. There were a few other passengers for Devprayag and luckily they knew how to deal with these local transporters. We literally barged into one of the buses parked there with an instruction from the locals not to get down at any cost. When the bus got full with passengers the conductor tried his best to get us out of the bus. After a few hours of ordeal in extreme heat, at last, the bus started towards Devprayag.

All the inconvenience and pain was forgotten in minutes, as soon as we got onto the scenic Rishikesh-Devprayag route. It was slightly dangerous, but extremely beautiful, once again reminding me of my Ladakh bike-trip. We were told that Devprayag is a very small town where there are no 'proper' hotels. A fellow passenger suggested that we get down just before the town, where there was a newly built hotel. We accepted the suggestion and got down, but the place looked deserted and didn't give us good vibes. When we went to the back of the hotel, the view from there was not only out of this world, but also quite magical. At first, I couldn't absorb what I saw. It looked unreal. We were on a hill looking down at two rivers meeting each other. The merging of the rivers was unusual due to the stark difference in the colours of the two rivers. Bhagirathi, originating from Gaumukh was wild and green and Alaknanda, descending from Badrinath was calm and brown. The view from the top was breathtaking.

In the hindsight, I now realise why we were fated to get down before the actual town and at a hotel where eventually we didn't stay. After enjoying this view, we descended towards the town. While Sumant went in a hurry to inquire about a place to stay, I took my time enjoying every second of that view while taking

pictures I could not take my eyes off the 'Sangam'.²⁷ Sumant called to guide me towards the guest house where he managed to get a good room. It was a very small place with 8-10 rooms directly overlooking the Sangam. We were the only ones staying there. And what a coincidence! We were given 'room no. 204' out of all the available rooms.

INFO

My Home and Office numbers are 204 and most of the times when I travel with family we get room no. 204 in hotels/resorts. Coincidentally, when my family went to Shimla at the same time, they also got room number 204.

"CAN I SURRENDER TO THE ALMIGHTY AND JUMP INTO THE RIVER?"

As soon as we settled down in the room, Sumant was restless to take a dip in the Ganga. The ghat was on the other side of the river and we had to walk down through the town to reach there. By the time we reached there, it was already 6 in the evening and the water was known to be cooler than Rishikesh as we were much closer to the Himalayas. Sumant confirmed it by putting his feet in the water. There was a very small ghat exactly where the rivers met. As we stood in front of the Sangam, we saw a clear demarcation between the two rivers. Bhagirathi water was flowing at a great velocity. The scene at the ghat looked a little daunting due to the powerful current of the water and the fact that no one else was taking a complete dip in the river. There were a few elders there who advised us to hold the chain at times. There were also lots of big fish (around 2-3 feet long) in the water. The fish were very close to the ghat where we were to take the dip. The steps were also not visible as the water was flowing over them.

This was not an ideal place to take a dip. I was already a little sceptical of taking a dip due to the cold water. In fact, I considered asking Sumant if we really wanted to take a dip here. While I wondered how I would manage this one, Sumant stood in the waters with folded hands, closed eyes and prayers on his lips. He looked as if he was consumed by something. I could see the

emotions he had here were very different from what I saw at Haridwar. While at Haridwar he was having fun and enjoying, I could see that here he was very intense and there was some kind of seriousness on his face. I could feel that he talked to himself and was not even bothered about me, or what was happening around him.

Just when I thought of telling him to skip this one, he asked me casually, "Can I try what Bhagwan Swaminarayan did at the age of 11 by jumping into the river to see where destiny would take him?"

I reminded him jokingly that he had a family back home and lots of responsibilities, and he should not be even thinking of doing something like that.

He said, "Okay, I will not."

It seemed to me that he would have gone ahead and done it, had I given him my permission! He had mentioned to me a couple of times earlier about how he was extremely influenced by Bhagwan Swaminarayan's complete faith in God. Bhagwan Swaminarayan didn't think twice before jumping into the river Sarayu.

Sumant held the chain, completed his three dips quickly and joined me at the ghat. He immediately thanked me from stopping him from jumping into the river. When I asked him if he seriously considered jumping, he replied, "Yes." Even though it might sound weird, I believed he was telling the truth and would have actually jumped into the river.

Now it was my turn. The water was ice cold, but something happened to me and suddenly I immersed myself completely into the Ganga. This time the experience was really different. As soon as I came out after my first dip, I felt so good that I wished to take two more dips now.

My third dip was special. This time I wanted to stay in the water for as long as possible. I was completely submerged in the water

²⁷ Sangam is a confluence of rivers.

for around half a minute. I felt as if suddenly there was bonding with Ganga mata.²⁸ This was perhaps my longest dip of our entire trip. The moment I got out, I felt completely different. I felt light. I felt like I didn't have any body weight. I had a sense of pride and achievement. I felt as if Ganga mata had accepted me this time. There was a strong connection this time. My apprehension was converted into trust. Perhaps now I understood why Suman wanted to surrender to the Almighty at this place.

At dusk, the small town became even quieter. We got back to the room after having dinner at the only restaurant (Hotel Roxy) on the highway. As usual, Suman went to sleep early and I wrote my diary. It was a beautiful night. The sound of river Bhagirathi flowing just below the terrace of our room was magical. I went out onto the terrace. I called Krishna and told her about this beautiful place. There was an amazing rhythm in the flow and sound of the water. The cool breeze made the whole environment even more tranquil. On closing my eyes, I felt each and every microsecond that moment. Meditation just happened.

I couldn't have been in a better place to be with myself. The breeze, the sound of flowing water, the aura, the connection, the setting, and my emotions engulfed me in a different zone. I was alone, happy and content.

INFO

- As promised, Negiji called just after we took the dip and once again suggested that we 'receive' as much as we could. On inquiring, I came to know that both of them to go back to Dehradun the very next day. It seemed that they were there for a day just to meet us or vice versa.

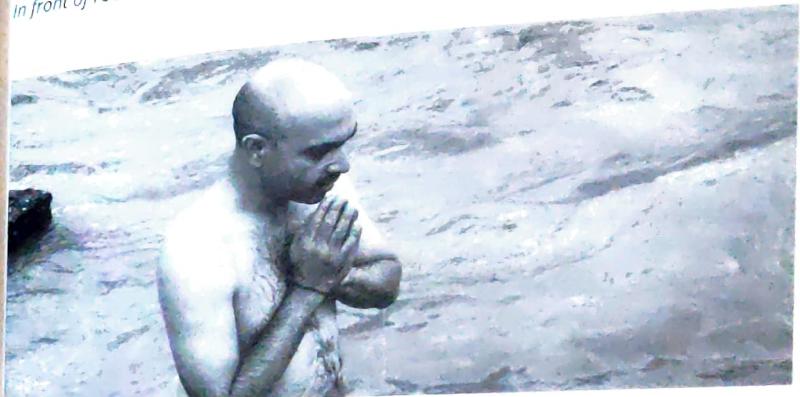
²⁸ The river Ganga is worshipped by Hindus as Ganga Mata (Mata = mother), one accepting all and forgiving all.



In front of room no. 204 at Devprayag.



At Devprayag.



To jump or not to jump'. The thought of jumping into river Ganga going through Suman's mind at Devprayag.



Deep-diving into divinity. My moment of connection with Ganga mata at Devprayag. It was also the longest dip of the trip.

DAY 8 (April 26, 2017) - 1158 m above Sea Level

TAKING THE LAST BUS TO UTTARKASHI

It was time to leave Devprayag for Uttarkashi. Nirgundasji Mah Sevashram at Uttarkashi. I spoke to Sarvanand Giri Swamiji of Bhagirathi morning and informed him about our plan. Connectivity to and from Devprayag is not very good. The distance between Uttarkashi and Devprayag is 160 km. In hilly terrain, it is quite a distance. We had no idea how to get there. There were no direct buses or taxis to Uttarkashi.

Before we left, Sumant wanted to take another dip, this time towards the Bhagirathi side (green waters). Due to huge rocks and rapid flow, he could not manage a dip but satisfied himself by splashing his face and head with the cold water. He also filled our bottles with the water. We went for tea after that. The town was so small that there were no proper tea stalls/restaurants. We asked one tailor about teashops and he said that his wife makes tea. So we sat with him in his small shop while his wife prepared tea next door. They looked so happy and content. There was not a iota of stress on their faces. Their smiles were genuine. Their tailer was honest. He shared with us a few pictures of the devastating floods of 2013 when the water almost touched the small cable bridge over Bhagirathi River. Just when he informed us that most people in the small town were 'pandits'²⁹ at Badrinath temple, one senior pandit Sri Ashok Kumar joined us. He also shared his experience of 2013 floods. And how can any discussion in a place like Devprayag be devoid of religion and spirituality? It was very interesting to listen to his perspective on the subjects. The laid-back and peaceful nature of the town was not letting us leave in a hurry. While we enjoyed every bit of this unusual company, we had to move on.

After having breakfast (aloo-paratha - choley - dahi)³⁰ at 'Ran Hotel' on the highway, we started inquiring about the bus to Uttarkashi. We realised soon that there was no direct bus and we would have to change 2-3 buses/shared taxis to reach Uttarkashi.

²⁹ Pandits are Hindu scholars learned in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy and religion, typically also practising priests.

³⁰ Aloo paratha consists of unleavened wheat dough stuffed with a mixture of mashed potato and spices, which is rolled out and cooked on a hot plate with butter or ghee; Choley is spicy chickpeas; Dahi is the Indian term for yogurt.

Someone told us to catch a bus to Maletha first and then find some other means of transport from there. Just as we finished inquiring, there came a bus right in front of us that would take us to Maletha. We got two seats in the last row. While the seats were not that comfortable, the scenery outside was outstanding. We began the ascent and travelled along the river Alaknanda. We reached Maletha in 45 minutes (around 12 noon) and got dropped at a small junction on the by-pass road from where we needed to take whatever vehicle we would get for Chamba. For a brief moment, we were alone at the crossroads and enjoyed the thrills of backpacking, as there was no certainty when the next vehicle would show up and whether it would take us towards Chamba.

Surprisingly, we got a 'lift' in a taxi that carried young army recruits in less than 10 minutes of waiting. All the recruits were around 19-20 years old. There was just enough space for the two of us. They all looked very tired after their army drill and most of them were sleeping. While Sumant too tried to catch a nap, I decided to spend some time with Kishore da³¹ with my headphones on.

After a while, we stopped at Paukhal (a very small town on the way to Chamba) to have lunch. It was a beautiful place. There were a couple of beautiful trees with Purple and Yellow flowers side by side. They looked very beautiful together. Just as I walked around to take some pictures, Sumant asked me to take one picture of the tree with Purple flowers for Saisha, his daughter. Purple is her favourite colour.

As we continued our journey, the view outside was getting more and more beautiful. We still drove parallel to the river but now it was the Bhagirathi. The aqua green colour of the water with mountains and trees all around looked very scenic. On the way, we also crossed the controversial Tehri Dam, which is also the highest dam in India. Some people believed it is too close to the central Himalayan Seismic Gap. Taking pictures was strictly prohibited on the dam. However, I was not going to let this opportunity go waste. To everyone's surprise, I clicked a few pictures. People in the taxi, including Sumant, looked at me as if I was a criminal. There were a lot of security cameras all around and anyone caught taking a picture was immediately handed

³¹ In Bengali 'da' is used as a suffix for males to show respect.

over to the army. Somehow, I was not scared of my own army.

We reached Chamba at 4:05 p.m. We were just in time to catch the last bus for Uttarkashi, which was to leave at 4:15 p.m. I guess we were destined to reach Uttarkashi today itself. It was roughly a 3-hour journey from Chamba to Uttarkashi. This time, however, we were not lucky enough to get a seat. We had to stand for most part of the journey but I was not complaining at all as the view outside continued to mesmerise me. I thought this was one of the most scenic and unexplored routes of India. It reminded me again of my Ladakh bike-trip. I would definitely want to return again either on a bike or by car. While Sumant interacted with others on the bus, I again decided to be with Kishore da.

We got seats about 30-40 minutes before reaching Uttarkashi when most of the passengers got down. Both of us took window seats in the same row. I decided to take a power nap. On waking up I couldn't find Sumant. Instead, I saw someone who looked more like a blue Spider-Man on the same seat where Sumant had been sitting. After careful observation, I realised it was none other than Sumant. While I was sleeping, he decided to pull out his winter clothing along with the blue 'balaclava' (a form of cloth headgear designed to expose only part of the face. Depending on the style and how it is worn, only the eyes, mouth and nose, or just the front of the face, remains unprotected). Like a seasoned salesman, he demonstrated 13 ways/styles of wearing the Balaclava. I was impressed. I added one more style to his 13, which, for the sake of maintaining public decency, I cannot describe here.

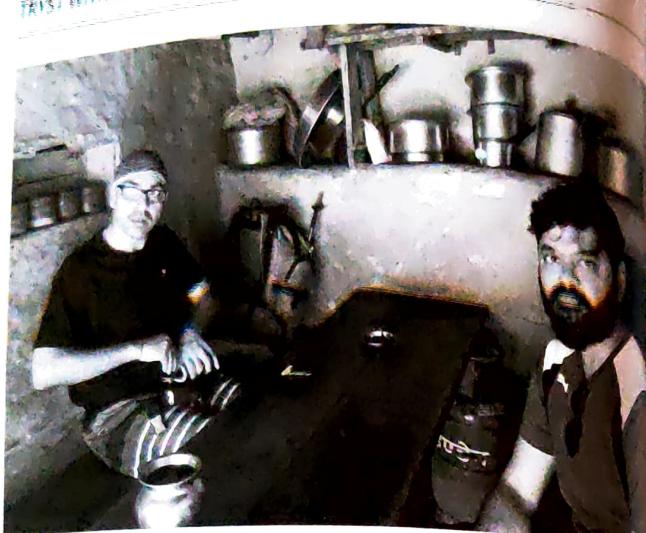
Around 8 p.m. we reached Uttarkashi. I called Sarvanand G Swamiji. He didn't pick up the call, so we walked towards Bharat Sevashram, which was about 2-3 km from the bus stand. It was already dark and quite cold as well. I asked Sumant to open his 'third eye' (headlamp). He was always equipped with the right gadgets at the right time. By now I could blindly trust him on all these. We reached the Pashupati ashram and called him again following his earlier instruction. This time he picked up the call. He told us to wait there and he himself came down to the street

to pick us up. He looked exactly as I had imagined based on the few telephonic conversations with him. He had an amazing aura about him. His face was glowing. His voice had compassion. His eyes were sparkling. His expressions only reflected love. He had a long white beard and looked around 75 years old.

We were given a room and asked to come to dinner in 10 minutes. There were few other swamis at the dinner table. They served us some amazing saatvik food with so much love and affection. Washing clothes, after a sumptuous full-meal, is always tiresome. However, now I was getting used to this ritual. Even though the water was very cold, I washed my clothes as well as Sumant's clothes. Surprisingly, I got some real satisfaction from washing clothes. Now I was also getting better at the rinsing techniques. It reminded me of my UK days during my MBA when I used to wash dishes after dinner in the hostel as I couldn't cook. By the time I was done with the washing, Sumant was in a deep slumber and snoring loudly. I decided to capture this on my phone so that later if he dismissed this, I could show him the proof.

INFO

- The route that we took to reach Uttarkashi from Devprayag was probably the shortest, as well as the fastest, in spite of having no idea until that morning about how to reach Uttarkashi.



At 'Roxy Hotel', near Devprayag bus stop.



The taxi in which we got a lift till Chamba.



In the taxi to Chamba.



Young army recruits (exhausted due to rigorous drill), who gave us a lift till Chamba.



Sumant, the Blue Spider-Man!

DAY 9 (April 27, 2017) - 3415 m above Sea Level

GETTING READY FOR THE CLIMB

By now it was a routine to take a dip in the holy Ganga at every place we went. Today we decided to first go to the famous 'Kashi Vishwanath' temple of Uttarkashi and then to the river to take a dip. When we reached the temple early in the morning, even the pujari (priest) had not arrived. We took our seats next to the Swayambhu Shivaling³² and started meditating. As soon as I closed my eyes, I almost dozed off. It was very quiet there. After some time the pujari came and subsequently people started coming too. We decided to leave soon as it got very crowded. While leaving the temple, Sumant asked me to make a wish in Nandi's³³ ears. I obliged.

It was now time to take a dip. As we climbed in altitude, the water got colder. This was a beautiful ghat with no one around except the two of us. The water was not very deep, so we had to find an innovative way to immerse ourselves. We did the push-up style dip. After the dip, we sat on one big boulder and meditated turn-by-turn. Each time I meditated now, the 'connection' got stronger. Something beautiful was happening, without me really knowing exactly what it was, but I was neither complaining nor too curious to know what was happening. I was going with the flow. I had decided to resign to the unknown.

After completing our meditation we decided to make some plans. Vehicular access is restricted beyond Gangotri. A permit from the local District Forest Officer (DFO) is required for hiking to Tapovan (our destination) and beyond. We resolved to apply for the permit in Uttarkashi, along with making arrangements for a guide, a porter and hiking supplies.

I needed a new SD card for my camera too. So we first went to the bazaar. Then we went to the DFO's office, only to be told that we

³² Swayambhu Shivalings are the lingams that manifest on its own i.e. not made by man. They appear suddenly or mysteriously without any human efforts. A lingam is an abstract representation of the Hindu deity Shiva, used for worship in temples and smaller shrines.

³³ Nandi is the gate-guardian deity of Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva. He is usually depicted as a bull which also serves as the mount to the Lord Shiva.

would have to hire a 'registered' guide and complete all the formalities through him only. In the meantime, Sarvanand Swamiji called to inquire about our whereabouts. He suggested that we go back to the ashram. When we reached the ashram, asked Swami Adhyatmanandaji to help us with the guide and permit. He immediately called Mr. Jayendra Rana of 'Mountain Support' and put us in touch with him. We decided to meet him for lunch and he promised to set up everything for us.

At lunch, we met a man called Bhaskar at the dining table. ~~us, he had come to meet Sarvanand Giri Swamiji. He was going to Gangotri the next day. He was a Bengali living in the United States~~. Sumant got talking to him about the US as he had also lived there for six years. Sumant was curious to know why he was going to Gangotri and whom he was meeting. Bhaskar didn't reveal much. He just said that he was going to meet one very famous saint Swamiji. Sumant got interested as he was still looking for a divine meeting/event to happen. Bhaskar disappointed him by not giving away much. After he left, Sumant asked Sarvanand Giri Swamiji to help us meet the famous saint. Even Swamiji's response was the same. He said he is such a big Swamiji that he does not meet anyone just like that. He consoled us by saying that we would have our own experiences and we should not worry about all that too much. We couldn't find out even the name of that Swamiji.

After lunch, we 'checked out' from the ashram. Swamiji told us that we would get taxis for Gangotri from the main taxi stand near the market. We walked to the office of Mr. Jayendra Rana which was very close to the local taxi stand. He completed all the formalities in 30 minutes and we paid him the advance as well. We asked for a nice guide who would know the terrain well and someone who would also allow us our space and time. He called out to Kapil.

Kapil was a young chap who had been a part of quite a few expeditions on much higher Himalayan peaks. Kapil gave us good vibes and we immediately felt that he was the right guide for us. Kapil would guide us on our most adventurous journey so far, a trek of about 25 km from Gangotri to Tapovan. Until Bhojasa-

le ki from Gangotri, there was no requirement for a guide. But beyond that, we would need someone, as it was not a simple trek. Gaumukh was about 5 km from Bhojasa and Tapovan a further 4 km from Gaumukh after crossing the Gangotri glacier. At Tapovan there was only one option to stay and that was Mauni Baba's ashram. We had heard from one of our college friends, Rishi, who went to Tapovan a few years back that Mauni Baba stays at Tapovan all year round and he has made a few rooms for visitors. We got the same information when we searched on the internet. Nevertheless, we carried the tent with us in case we didn't get a place to stay at Mauni Baba's ashram. It was decided that we would acclimatise for one day in Gangotri before starting the trek to Tapovan. Kapil and the porter would meet us the next day at Gangotri. We were to leave immediately and reach Gangotri by evening.

UTTARKASHI TO GANGOTRI - ERRORS, ANGER, COMEDY!

We reached the taxi stand around 2.30 p.m. Uttarkashi to Gangotri was roughly a 4-hour journey. It was going to be a steep ascent. It was also going to be much colder than any other place we had been until now. We inquired with a person standing nearby about the taxi to Gangotri. He pointed at the two taxis parked next to us and said that either of them would take us there. There were a few people already waiting there to go to Gangotri, including a middle-aged woman (we addressed her as 'aunty'), and a young weird looking chap. Since these people were standing near one of the taxis, we assumed that that's the one going to Gangotri. The taxi driver was nowhere in sight. In the meantime, we decided to be 'smart'. We occupied vantage seats in the front row and put our entire luggage on the roof, firmly establishing our claim for the front row seats. Sumant, like always, had amazing energy and an even bigger heart. Not only did he manage to put our luggage on the rooftop and tie it properly with a rope, but also helped the aunty secure her luggage on the roof. The aunty must have been so impressed with our vision and smart thinking that she had asked Sumant to help her as well. So now we were all set to go. The only problem was that the driver was still nowhere to be seen.

There were a few more passengers for Gangotri now. We were restless. We asked around at the bus stand about the driver. No one had any clue. We also got to know that there was no transport bus after 3 p.m. It was already 3:30 p.m. So now our only hope of reaching Gangotri was by taxi.

Suddenly everyone started cheering as the driver of the taxi appeared, only to inform us that he didn't have any plans to go to Gangotri and we should all remove the luggage from the front as he had to go to the bazaar. This was very embarrassing and irritating. However, Sumant's energy levels didn't diminish at all. He immediately got to the roof again, this time to pull the same luggage down that he had put on top about an hour back. We were back to square one. There was only one taxi and one possibility left now.

After a while, it started drizzling. By now there were around 15 people waiting to go to Gangotri. This was enough for Sumant to put on his PMC (Project Management Consultancy) hat. He decided to take the matter into his own hands. With some help from the locals he caught hold of the driver, who said that since one of the tyres had a puncture, he couldn't go to Gangotri. Sumant took him to the market, got his tyre repaired and brought him back. We literally forced him to take us to Gangotri. He agreed, but with a few conditions: 1) He would charge Rs.200 each for a minimum 15 passengers even though there were only 12 people. 2) Sumant and I would be paying an additional premium of Rs.100 each to sit in the front seat as instead of three passengers he would only have two of us along with him (even though there was no space for a fourth person). However, we agreed, as we didn't want to annoy him. At last, we started around 4 p.m. for Gangotri, taking the last possible commuting option for the day, once again.

Hordes of people endeavoured to reach Gangotri by the next day, April 28, as it was the day when the Gangotri temple, one of the 'Chota Char Dhams'³⁴ would open after 6 months. It is a big

³⁴ 'Chota Char Dham' is an important Hindu pilgrimage circuit located in the Garhwal region of the state of Uttarakhand comprising of four most holy sites - Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath.

event and many saints, devotees, politicians, and people from all over the world would gather that day for Ganga mata's darshan.³⁵ We were destined to witness this special event.

We had an interesting ensemble of co-travellers viz. a politician (the 'luggage wali' aunty), a spiritual traveller, a documentary filmmaker, a senior 'uncle', couple of young US-returned software engineers and 'the weird looking guy', not to forget the eccentric driver who was only interested in money. He was driving rather slowly but safely for the hilly conditions.

Shades of green, aqua blue, brown and black once again created the perfect backdrop. Halfway through the journey, we got a glimpse of 'white' for the first time. We had goose bumps when we saw a snow-clad mountain peak behind a range of 'normal' mountains. The route was a little dangerous but amazingly beautiful. Again the river Bhagirathi flowed next to us. It was getting very cold and we were told that the temperature in Gangotri goes below zero degrees Celsius during the night. We stopped at a nice 'dhaba'³⁶ for some hot tea. Hot Momos and 'Maska-Bun' (Round bread with butter) were just the perfect snacks to go with the tea. It was a beautiful evening. Suddenly we witnessed a mesmerising scene, an orange mountain peak, white snow, and dark blue sky. The sunrays were falling on the top of the mountain peak, which made the peak look as if it was burning. As the dusk was approaching rapidly, these were the last rays of the sun for the day. After a 30 minutes break, we started the journey again. It was dark by now. We started playing bhajans on our phones. We could also see processions carrying 'Ganga mata' idols to Gangotri temple for the opening ceremony the next day. So far so good!

After a while, we saw a pandal (marquee) where prasad was being served for all the yatris (travellers) going to Gangotri. We stopped there for food. It was already around 8:30 p.m. While we were leaving after having had the prasad, the driver asked us to check

³⁵ Darshan is an opportunity to see or an occasion of seeing a holy person or the image of a deity.

³⁶ Dhaba is a roadside food stall.

If everyone had returned. Someone said that one person was missing. No one knew that person. He was travelling alone. No one was interested in waiting for him as we were getting quite late. The driver also didn't wait for him. Suddenly the aunty recollected who he was and said, "That guy anyway looked mental." Aunty could not control her conjecture and said that he probably didn't want to pay Rs.200 for the trip, as Gangotri was not that far now. He could walk the remaining distance along with other yatris. The moment aunty said all this, something happened to the driver. She unknowingly made him feel cheated. This possibility of being cheated annoyed the driver so much that he immediately stopped the car in the middle of the road. We had already travelled about a kilometre or so from the pandal. It was pitch-dark and silent. The driver refused to go forward till the missing 'mental' guy came back. Realising that this episode could further delay our journey, I suggested (without taking the others' consent) that all of us would equally share Rs.200 and he wouldn't have to incur any loss. To my surprise, most of the passengers refused to bear the additional cost of Rs.16. However, he was more furious about being fooled than losing Rs.200. We all tried to pacify him but in vain. He wanted us to go and find him amongst thousands of other yatris at the pandal. That was almost impossible. And we were quite far from the pandal. All the passengers got out of the taxi trying to convince the driver to move on.

Suddenly one 'enthusiastic' senior uncle decided to solve the impasse. He went to the edge of the road, turned towards the pandal and began shouting 'SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU' very loudly. We all were delighted to know that at least there was someone who knew him. We decided to help him and joined him in shouting "SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU" loudly. Suddenly 10-12 people were shouting "SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU" in the middle of the road. The extremely quiet atmosphere was filled with loud chants of "SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU".

After shouting for about 15 minutes, I asked the uncle, "How do you know Sonu?"

He said, "I don't know him."

I inquired further, "Then how do you know that his name is Sonu?" He replied, "I don't know his name."

"Then why are you shouting SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU?" I asked, astonished.

"Just like that," he revealed.

There was no point in shouting "SONUUUUU-SONUUUUU" anymore. Everyone stopped shouting and again tried convincing the driver to move on.

However, the driver wouldn't budge. Once again we gave him the assurance of Rs.200 but even then he wouldn't move. He wanted his revenge. After a while, even the driver went missing. Just then one of the passengers informed us that he had left to find Sonu at the pandal without telling anyone. He obviously took the car keys along. Now suddenly we were looking for two people. It was already 9:15 p.m. and very cold outside. There was no hope now to go ahead till the driver found the 'cheater' Sonu. 'Enthu' uncle (we named him that after the shouting-episode) again came up with an idea. He wanted to go and look for both of them. I had to politely stop him from leaving. We didn't want to be in a situation where we were looking for three people. After some time, we saw the driver coming back. He was extremely furious, as he couldn't find Sonu. He abused furiously. We forced him to move on with an assurance to make-up for his loss of Rs.200. Inside the car he continuously abused Sonu and did not focus on his driving. I got a little worried as he shouted constantly and the route was dangerous. It was really very dark with a valley on one side. Suddenly I got an idea. I played a bhajan on my phone and urged everyone to sing along. It worked. Everyone started singing bhajans loudly. God had to intervene, and the Almighty's intervention helped. He was forced to cool down, as he could not outshout all of us.

When we were about to reach Gangotri, I don't know why but suddenly I remembered an experience I had had in Dandeli a few

years ago, perhaps because we were driving in the dark in ~~sin~~ terrain. Dandeli is a huge jungle in North Karnataka. While on our way to Karwar (a port city in the South Indian state of Karnataka), my family (Mummy, Krishna, Jiya and Aanya), we entered Dandeli jungle in the night by mistake. I was not aware that it was a jungle with a Tiger reserve and lots of other wildlife. Krishna and I had a supernatural experience. It was the scariest experience of my life. Fortunately, the kids and mummy were sleeping in the car throughout the journey. Later we realised how lucky we were to reach Karwar safely.

Presently, I made an offhand remark to Sumant, "If one can experience an evil spirit, there is every possibility to experience the other extreme too."

We reached Gangotri around 10:30 p.m. It was a strange sight. All the shops were just getting ready to open after many months. In the hilly regions of Northern India, most towns and bazaars shut down completely for 3-6 months during winters due to the extreme cold. There was no reception on our mobile phones. From here on, only BSNL (government network) would work. Neither of us had a BSNL connection. We found one shop from where we called home. From here onwards we thought that we might get completely disconnected from our families for an uncertain period of time. We were unsure if we would get a room at 'Ishavashyam' ashram, as it was quite late. Gangotri was extremely cold. We walked towards the ashram. As we crossed the bridge over river Bhagirathi, Sumant made a surprising statement. He told me to give him moral support the next morning while taking a dip in the Ganga. He sounded a little jittery. I promised him that I would take the dips before him the next day. He gave me a very sarcastic smile. He knew how petrified I was of cold water.

As we reached Ishavashyam, we realised that we were very late as the main gate was closed. We opened the gate and went inside. It looked deserted, as if everyone had retired for the night. Just when we thought that we would have to go back and find a hotel for ourselves, a sadhu-like man came and greeted

us with a mesmerising smile. He communicated to us through sign language and facial expressions. He did not speak. He had a very radiant personality and was extremely friendly. He went and called a few ashram volunteers and 'told' them to take us to the dining area and give us food. He also woke up the manager and informed him that he had two guests. He arranged the room for us as well. This kind gesture of the sadhu was heart touching. Even though he did not utter a single word, his actions conveyed a lot. We felt at home!

SPIDER-MAN, SPIDER-MAN...HERE COMES THE SPIDER-MAN
Sumant, I guess, was not at all tired after such an eventful and long journey. As soon as we got into the room, he decided to take up his superhero avatar once again, the only difference being that this time he was in a black and grey costume. I didn't know that he had carried two balaclavas, one blue and another grey. His black thermal wear and black knee-length socks were well matched by the grey balaclava. He decided to be a bit more entertaining this time and performed a longer skit. He shot his web, ran around, climbed buildings, swung through the air with his web, jumped off the building and landed safely on his feet, while I sat and enjoyed myself. I wished our kids could have witnessed this epic performance.



Meditating near the Kashi Vishwanath temple, Uttarkashi.



Sumant, always happy to help. Tying our luggage on the roof of the taxi that never went to Gangotri.



Having lunch with Sarvanand Giri Swamiji and others before leaving Uttarkashi.



All of us waiting anxiously at the Uttarkashi taxi stand for the driver.



Sumant, the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man.

DAY 10 (April 28, 2017)

COSMIC, DIVINE, CELESTIAL!

Ishavashyam was right opposite to the Gangotri temple on the other side of the river. It was very cold that morning when we woke up around 7 a.m. We went to the terrace for tea and watched the procession and the people at the temple and realised that the event was very special. The opening of the Gangotri temple marks the beginning of the 'Chota Char Dham' yatra (pilgrimage) for the year. Someone at the ashram told us that there would be a rare convergence of saints and sages expected from all over the country to grace the occasion. They would come to witness the opening of the temple and the bringing in of 'Ganga mata' idol after 6 months. This was an extremely auspicious time. Around 11 a.m. once the Ganga mata idol would reach the temple, the temple would be opened to everyone who had come for the darshan. Since we had time, we decided to first take our routine dips in the river and then go for the darshan once the temple was open.

It was such a beautiful setting: snow-clad mountains all around us, Gangotri temple flooded with people waiting for Ganga mata's darshan, Bhagirathi³⁷ river flowing beside the temple, and many devotees taking dips in the extremely cold water. We decided to find a nice spot to take dips where there were fewer people around. We walked further ahead from the temple till we reached a place where an elderly couple (a Pujari and his wife) were almost finished with their ritual of taking a dip in the river. We walked towards the river and waited for them to finish. As they left, they asked us where we had come from. Once they knew we were from Gujarat (a hot place), they had a piece of advice for us. Both of them strongly suggested that we should not take a full dip in the waters as it was extremely cold and can be dangerous. They also informed us that many people fall sick due to the cold after taking a dip. Even though their advice was for our well-being, we were going to do what we had to do. I had promised Sumant yesterday that I would be the first one to go today.

³⁷ Bhagirathi river is considered the source stream of the Ganga.

As soon as the couple left, I immediately removed my T-shirt and went in. The water was ice cold. That did not deter me. It took me just a couple of minutes to take three quick dips and come out. Sumant was astonished. I was even more astonished. The first thing I told Sumant as soon as I came back was, "I feel as if I have taken a new birth." My ears, nose, eyes and the whole face went numb initially. After a few minutes, once the sensation was back, it started to pain like hell. I just took a towel, covered my face and sat on a big boulder beside the river for a while. I shivered a lot. I had goosebumps all over my body. It was only after a while that I realised what had happened. This was a very special moment. I still don't know how I did it. From the first dip taken reluctantly at Haridwar, I had come a long way.

Now it was Sumant's turn. And for some strange reason, Sumant was hesitant to take the dips. He stood in the water with folded hands for quite some time. Somehow, he was not able to take a dip. I realised he needed a push so I urged him to go ahead and just do it. He took the first dip and came out and asked for the towel suggesting that he didn't want to take the other two dips. However, taking three dips was a rule that he himself had set. So I was not going to let him get away. I told him to go back and complete the remaining two dips. He obliged.

A JOURNEY WITHIN A JOURNEY

It was time to meditate after the dip. This was a ritual that we diligently followed. There was a big boulder in the middle of the shallow river on which we could go and sit. The water flowed just a couple of inches below the boulder. First Sumant went. I waited while he meditated. He came back after 15-20 minutes.

Now it was my turn. I faced the snow-clad mountains. It must have been around 11 a.m. and the sun was almost above me. I closed my eyes. I could hear the sound of puja (worship) rituals and bhajans in the backdrop. Within a minute or so of my closing the eyes, a Shankh (Conch) was blown at the temple and the sound of bhajans got louder, suggesting that the temple had opened. The timing couldn't have been more fortuitous! I was blessed with the most transcendental experience.

- As I meditated, I was transported to an otherworldly place. I couldn't figure out this place. My curiosity to know where I was immediately ceased when I saw my Dad!!! Other family members - Raju uncle, Dada, Dadi, Nana, and Nani - all of whom had passed away long back and were not with me in the physical world anymore, were actually here! And more - the Gods were here!!! I saw Ganesh, Shiva, Rama, Krishna, and many others. My family was with the Gods. They were all together and very happy. They smiled at me, suggesting that they were delighted to see me. It was a beautiful place that was very peaceful and serene. There was amazing energy here and lots of positivity. I could not sense any mass, see any shape nor feel any gravity. I felt as if I was in the sky. Everyone was floating, including me. I connected with all of them without speaking. I felt that they were 'living' a very fulfilling, joyful and content 'life'. There was only Love around. I was ecstatic to see them all living together in such a magical place. They were one big happy family. I also became a part of their family for a while.
- The next thing that I saw was that Sumant and I were not the only ones going to Tapovan. All my kin, along with the Gods, accompanied us. I could see all of us walking together to Tapovan. The terrain around us was beautiful and the weather was very pleasant. It was a lot of fun to trek along with all of them.
- Then I saw a large office floor with a lot of people walking around and some of them working on desks. It was one of the floors of a high-rise building. There was no facade. It was open from all sides. It took me a while to figure out what this place was, but after careful observation, I realised it was my own office. It had grown very big with lots of people. There was an amazing amount of energy here. Everyone was very active and busy with his or her work. It was the kind of office, I had always dreamt of having.

After about 20 minutes of meditation, I got concerned about my whereabouts. My consciousness was returning to my physical self. I was sitting very close to the water and suddenly I got a weird thought that I might have slipped underneath. I immediately opened my eyes out of the fear that I might have drowned. I was physically still very much there, on the boulder, in the middle of the river. While I was relieved to know that, I was baffled with what had happened. I had tears in my eyes. I walked over to Sumant and shared my experience with him. I also told him that the Gods would be with us when we go to Tapovan and that we would not have any problem. Immediately after sharing that, for reasons unknown to me, I started crying profusely like a small baby.

I was not able to understand what was happening with me, but maybe Sumant understood. He asked me to sit down, keep quiet and allow the emotional outburst to continue. I wept and wept. I was not able to control the flow of tears. I wept for almost half an hour while Sumant watched over me. I didn't speak. He didn't ask. He allowed me space and time I required at that point. As soon as I was able to gather some composure, Sumant suggested that we go and immediately talk to a big Swamiji for guidance. Perhaps Sumant knew what had happened and wanted to cross-check with someone else. However, I was not very keen to talk to anyone. Sumant insisted but I was not sure about it. I was still not in my normal senses.

I suggested to Sumant that we go towards the temple. As we started walking towards the temple, we saw Bhaskar (the Bengali guy whom we had met at Sarvanand Giri Swamiji's ashram in Uttarkashi) along with an aged Swamiji coming towards us. There was a slight awkwardness when we faced each other. He had no choice now but to introduce us to the Swamiji. His name was Vishwabandhu Swamiji. He was the same Swamiji whom Bhaskar had come to meet. He was one of the biggest sages of Gangotri who rarely met anyone or spoke to anyone. Destiny would have us meet him. Bhaskar told him about our meeting at Uttarkashi. Sumant didn't waste any time in informing Swamiji that I had some unusual experience some time back. Sumant asked me to tell Swamiji what I experienced. He was humble enough to lend

me an ear. I narrated what I saw when I was meditating. As soon as I finished, he immediately declared, "Tum devlok jaa ke wapas aaye ho." ("You went to heaven and came back.") He further added, "Hum log aate jaate rehtein hain." ("We people keep going and coming back.") He continued, "It's quite normal for us, but it's good that it has happened to you." I was dumbfounded. While he was talking to me, Bhaskar was telling Sumant he was surprised that Swamiji was talking so much to us. Swamiji further asked me my 'rashi' (zodiac sign), of which I was not aware. He then asked Sumant for his rashis and advised him to be careful on August 17, 2017.³⁸ Even though I got my answer then and there, I don't know if I realised the gravity of what he said and the significance of what had happened sometime back. While Swamiji was leaving, he patted me on my shoulders. The pat suggested a lot, something that he didn't communicate verbally. I felt as if he was saying "Well done, son."

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

I had probably experienced the biggest moment of my life. I still had tears in my eyes, emotionally I was drained and my body felt very light. We reached the temple, which had just opened. As our phones didn't work in Gangotri, we thought of going to the phone booth to call Jayendra Rana and inquire about Kapil's whereabouts. Miraculously, the next moment, Mr. Rana himself appeared right in front of us. The place was so crowded that it would have been extremely difficult for us to spot each other. We had not even expected to see him at Gangotri. He informed us that Kapil had also reached Gangotri. Kapil was to take us to 'Pandav gufa'³⁹ for a small trek later that day. We told Mr. Rana to look for Kapil and send him to us, as we wanted to plan the trek. Since there was a lot of rush to get into the temple, we decided to have lunch first at the Army langar.⁴⁰ Once again the food was simple and saatvik, but delicious. It was very touching to see

³⁸ Sumant was scheduled to travel to Bucharest, Romania for his friend's wedding during that period, which later got cancelled and he was safe at his hometown of Surat on that day.

³⁹ Pandav gufa is a cave named after Pandavas, the five sons of king Pandu in the Sanskrit epic poem of ancient India, Mahabharata. It is believed that the Pandavas meditated in this gufa before going to Mount Kailash.

⁴⁰ Langar means a communal free kitchen.

Army men cooking and serving everyone with so much love. After having lunch, as we were wondering how to find Kapil (as there was no mobile network) he also appeared right in front of us. It's really not easy to locate people this easily in such a massive crowd. Both of them could not have 'appeared' at better times than they actually did. Sumant and I were still spellbound by the sequence of events since morning. We realised that some rest and a pause for some time would really help. We went back to the ashram after telling Kapil to meet us there at 3 p.m. I was still under the influence of what happened some time ago. I did not speak much. I did not think much. In fact, I was in no position to speak or think. On the way to our ashram, we had tea at a small teashop. While we sat there, Sumant made a card and a bookmark from a sweet box, with a 'circle-of-life' and today's date (i.e. 28.04.17) inscribed on it. Today was a special day.

THE MIRACLES CONTINUE...

We reached our room and took a nap. We were really tired and very sleepy. Kapil reached our room at 3 p.m. sharp. Wish he had come a little later. I wanted to sleep some more. However, both of us got ready for our first mountain trek, a small one though. All our trekking gear was now out. This was going to be a quick 'net practice' before the 'big match' tomorrow i.e. the trek to Tapovan. As we got down from our room on the first floor and walked towards the gate, we met the same sadhu who had helped us the previous night. We were very happy to see him and his mesmerising smile again. He was also happy to see us. He was friendlier today. We informed him that we were going to Pandav gufa with Kapil, who was standing apart from us. When he saw Kapil, he got excited and started 'talking' to Kapil. The way they communicated with each other, we realised that both of them knew each other quite well. When we were just about to leave, we casually asked Kapil who that sadhu was. He said, "Mauni Baba."

Initially, we didn't react to this piece of information, but after a few seconds, it struck us that he might be THE Mauni Baba' of Tapovan. We checked with Kapil and hoped for an affirmative answer. When he said he was the same Mauni Baba, we couldn't control our excitement and rushed back towards him. We had

expected to meet him in Tapovan, but we were very lucky to meet him here. We were ecstatic, to say the least. We had already felt that there was something special about him the previous night itself. By now he was almost like a friend. We told him that we hoped to meet him in Tapovan. He said that he was here at Gangotri for the temple opening and was going to be here for a few days. I then asked him for his blessings for the next days trek. He jokingly refused to give his blessings and conveyed something through sign language. We couldn't understand what he was trying to convey but we knew he was teasing us. He then asked for a piece of paper and a pen and wrote "height dekhkar aashirwad manga karo." ("Check the height of the person before asking for his blessings.") He was barely 5 feet tall and both of us towered over him. All of us burst out laughing when we read that. Then all of a sudden he pulled at my beard that was almost the same length as his own, in a moment of beard bonding. Beardless Sumant was the odd one out. This was such a wonderful meeting. We would never forget that moment. We knew we had got his blessings before we left for Tapovan the next day.

PANDAV GUFA AND GANGA MATA'S BLESSINGS

'Surya Kund' is a pool where, according to Hindu mythology, the first rays of sun arrive on earth. It is fed by a waterfall, under which there is a Swayambhu Shivaling. When we left Gangotri town for Pandav gufa, this was the first important place we came across. The rock formation around the waterfall was very unique and different from what I have ever seen before. As we walked towards Pandav gufa, we saw some huge boulders, maybe the results of a massive earthquake. The route was really beautiful with tall pine trees on one side and a deep valley on the other side. One can very easily believe this to be the route through which Pandavas would have actually gone to Mount Kailash (as is the belief). The orange soil, green trees of various shades and huge black/grey boulders looked celestial. Now I could see why Uttarakhand is called the 'dev bhoomi' (the land of Gods).

We reached Pandav gufa in about an hour's time. There was a large oval boulder with a small opening in the front. As expected it was very dark inside the gufa and we could hardly see anything.

anybody. I asked Sumant to switch on his 'third eye'. We could now see one old sadhu cooking something on a gas stove. Kapil tried to tell us that we should leave soon. The sadhu didn't even acknowledge us, suggesting that he was least interested in talking to us and he wanted us to leave as early as possible. With Sumant around, that looked improbable, as he was not going to let any sadhu of Uttarakhand go unquestioned. As usual, he started talking to the sadhu. The sadhu was not at all impressed and refused to engage. After a while, he must have realised the 'innocence' in Sumant's inquiries and hence started chatting with us. He told us about the benefits of righteousness. He advised us that one should always do the right things and should never support evil. "Dusht ka saath kabhi nahi dena," he said. ("Never support an evil person.") He finished with whatever he wanted to share with us and asked us to leave as his 'companion' was getting disturbed. We couldn't understand whom he was referring to, as we didn't see anyone else in the cave apart from the four of us. Only when he pointed to his right, we realised that there was one more sadhu who was meditating in a corner and had covered himself with a blanket. Because of the darkness, black blanket and no body movement/noise at all, we perceived the sadhu to be a rock. We didn't want to annoy a sadhu who was meditating and hence left the cave immediately.

While we were heading back to Gangotri, it started drizzling a bit. We first went to the bazaar to get the essentials for Tapovan. It was an unusual situation as the whole town had just opened after 6 months. People were still opening their stores and getting ready for the season. The store we went to didn't have any electricity and the owner was still opening the boxes of supplies he had just received. Sumant's headlamp was handy once again. We barged into the store and started hunting for the items ourselves, as suggested by the shop owner. We picked up the snacks (biscuits, soup, and 'Maggi' noodles), coffee, sugar, ponchos, and medicines. We had to make sure that we had enough supplies for the four of us to last for 4-5 days. Beyond Bhojbara, we wouldn't get any supplies. It was a very unique shopping experience. Sensing a bit of trouble with regards to my knee, I decided to buy additional kneecaps for myself. Kapil also

helped me buy a 'bamboo stick' (trekking pole), which would be my companion and critical support system for the next few days. The stick is a very important tool in trekking. I was happy with Kapil's selection. Due to its shape, it had the elasticity that is very essential for trekking, and it also had the correct height. It was just perfect for me.

Deepak, our porter, also joined us now. He looked quite fragile and had a very tiny frame. We were a little worried about how he would carry so much weight. He didn't even have proper shoes. He was wearing only sandals without any socks. I decided to lend him my 'special' socks that were bought for extreme conditions. Deepak was a Nepali refugee and needless to say, was looking to make some money. We felt bad for him but didn't want to deny him his opportunity to make money.

We finally went to the Gangotri temple for darshan. It was late, around 6:30 p.m. There were very few people, probably because it was raining and most people would have had their darshan during the daytime. First Sumant went and I waited outside with the stuff we bought. Once he came out, I went in. I realised that I was the last person to go for the darshan. There was absolutely no one in the temple apart from the priest. It was a fabulous time to go for the darshan. I was lucky to get such a peaceful and long darshan of Ganga Mata at Gangotri on the very first day of the opening of the temple. Ganga mata's blessings were required to go further. I was the last person to leave the temple before it closed for the day. No amount of planning could assure you such a divine one-to-one with the Almighty.

APRIL 28, 2017

Today was an 'eventful' day. Travelling to the 'other world', witnessing life-after-death and returning back to 'this world' is not an ordinary event. I feel blessed coming into 'this world' twice. From now onwards, December 21 and April 28 would mean the same for me.



Near Gangotri temple.

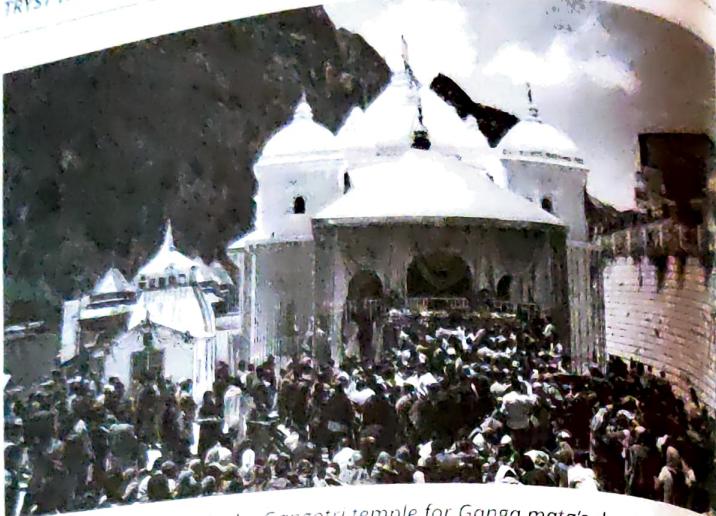


Sumant prepares to take a dip at Gangotri.



A 'journey' within a journey.





Devotees waiting outside the Gangotri temple for Ganga mata's darshan on April 28, 2017. The opening of the temple marked the beginning of the 'chota char dham yatra'.



All set for the trek to Gaumukh.



At Ishavashyam, Gangotri.



With Kapil, our guide, at Ishavashyam.



With the ever-smiling and charismatic 'Mauni Baba' at Ishavashyam.

TRYST WITH REALITY
21/04/2017 - 21/04/2017

Mauni Baba's suggestion (in his handwriting) when I asked for his blessings before starting the trek to Gaumukh.

DAY 11 (April 29, 2017) - 3775 m above Sea Level

MISSION BHOJBASA

Gangotri to Bhojbasa is a 6-7 hours trek if the weather is good. This would be the first major trek of my life. Kapil was supposed to come at 7 a.m. to our room. Like always, he was on time but we were not ready yet. It had been extremely cold at night. Even after wearing thermals, hand gloves and woollen caps we were not able to get peaceful and uninterrupted sleep. As is normal at ashrams, there was no water heater. This made the morning rituals extremely difficult. Even though we had Deepak with us, the idea was to carry minimum luggage. At the same time, we also had to make sure that all the necessary items viz. medicines, thermal wear, snacks, clothes, cameras etc. were packed and nothing was missed out.

Beyond Gangotri, there would not be any phone network. One is totally disconnected. The time taken for the journey to Tapovan and back would depend a lot on the weather, which was extremely unpredictable. We realised that we would be incommunicado after Gangotri until we return. We would be untraceable. We were excited and anxious at the same time.

At 7:40 a.m. we started from Ishavashyam. Kapil suggested that we should have a hearty breakfast before leaving. Even though we felt it was a bit too early to have breakfast, we trusted him and did as he said. We had 'aloo paratha' in the market. The routes to Tapovan had just opened a few days back and we were amongst the first few travellers to go towards Bhojbasa. Hence, there was a real possibility that we may not get anything to eat on the way. At last, we started our trek. It was a very steep climb to get out of the town. After a kilometre or so, there was a check post at the entrance of 'Gangotri National Park'. They checked our bags thoroughly and made a detailed list of all the items we were carrying including the food packets. They also took a deposit of Rs.500 and counted the number of food packets. If we brought back the same number of plastic wrappers on our return, the money would be refunded or else it would be forfeited. This anti-litter policy was made to encourage travellers to maintain the

pristine nature/sanctity of the mountains. It was so good to see such a protocol in India.

It was a bright and sunny day. We headed towards Chirbasa, our first stop. After walking for a while, I had to open the zip of my jacket as I started perspiring. The route was amazingly beautiful with a very narrow pathway through the mountains and the river Bhagirathi flowing through the valley to our right. As the water level was very low, one could see a lot of boulders and we also saw Bharals (Himalayan blue sheep) wandering around in the river belt. After an hour or so, I realised that the trek would not be easy as my breath became strained. On top of this, I had a backache (maybe a result of carrying so much weight for such a long time), that was getting worse, and I always had the broken left knee at the back of my mind. I had kept Sumant unaware about my ligament tear problem.⁴¹ Chirbasa was the only place where we could expect to find a restaurant and a resting place. The place was named Chirbasa as it had a lot of Chir (Pine) trees. I was desperate to reach Chirbasa as soon as possible.

At last, we could see a lot of thick foliage (Chir trees) from a distance and Kapil confirmed it was Chirbasa. We reached Chirbasa at 12:30 p.m. only to realise that the restaurant had not yet opened. By now I was hungry and exhausted. I needed to lie down and have a proper break. Kapil managed to get one roti and some pickle from another guide, who was his friend. Four of us shared that roti. Sumant made some Glucon D (drink) and passed around some dates and raisins. After having that, I went and lay down on a flat surface as my back was in a bad shape by now. Within minutes Kapil suggested we leave as the weather could change anytime and we should aim to reach Bhojbasa before dark. It was so bright and sunny that it looked highly improbable that the weather could get worse. However, Kapil was an experienced guide and we followed his instructions. Even though I was reluctant, we started walking.

⁴¹ I have been living with a severe ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) tear for more than 10 years now.

About 3 km after Chirbasa, comes the dangerous Gila parbat (wet mountain), a place well known for its landslides. Much of the trail that existed before the massive deluge and landslides of 2013 lay damaged. Kapil was extremely smart and sensitive to this situation. Normally he followed us all the time. However, as we neared the Gila parbat, he went out in the front to scout for landslides or stones falling from the top. There was one section that was very dangerous. It was just a foot-wide trail with a deep valley below. A few workers repaired the gap in the trail even as we prepared to traverse it. We were advised to not look below. A person stood on the other side to assist us. All we had to do was give our hands to him, close our eyes, trust him and cross over.

ARE THESE 'SNOWFLAKES'?

I was still in a lot of pain. Around 2:30 p.m. the weather changed. Suddenly it got cloudy. There was a cool breeze. The blue sky turned grey. It became very chilly, which did not help my pain. Sumant walked a little ahead of me. A thought crossed my mind that in the eventuality of a sudden downpour my condition could worsen. Though the thought was momentary, I never considered stopping, as I wanted to be in a positive frame of mind. I hoped that it would not rain before we reached Bhojbsa. Around 3 p.m., I felt some white particles falling on me. When I looked around the mountains, I saw them falling everywhere. It took me a few seconds to realise that these were snowflakes. It astonished me that it was snowing in the peak summer time. Just a few hours back I had removed my jacket, as it was too hot. It took some time for me to come to terms with the fact that I was actually witnessing a snowfall. It started snowing heavily after a while. Kapil's prediction that the weather could change very quickly came true. That is why experience matters. I wouldn't have thought in my wildest of dreams that a bright and sunny day with a clear sky can change to heavy snowfall in the matter of half an hour. I called out for Sumant who was far away from me. I was still in a state of disbelief. I was witnessing snowfall for the first time since my stay in the UK (in 2003). I thought of Jiya and Aanya, as they had wanted to see snowfall for a long time. I missed them. I captured the snowfall on my mobile phone for them. I was not extremely excited and delighted but concerned as well. I was not

sure how far Bhojbsa was and how long it would take to reach there. It reminded me again of a similar situation during my Leh bike trip, where we barely avoided getting stranded for the night in extreme conditions in the middle of nowhere.

Luckily we were close to Bhojbsa. After some time we could see the valley with a few small structures (government guest house and few ashrams) from a distance. We had seen the same images in Google maps before we left. It was a superb feeling. I was relieved. We had to descend now to the big valley. Kapil and Deepak hurried up and disappeared in a jiffy. As we got closer to the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN) guest house and ashrams, we realised that both of them went ahead to get the tents up. It was smart thinking by Kapil. He probably knew that the snowfall could get worse and we should not remain out in the open for too long.

SAVED BY THE BABA

By the time we reached, Kapil had put up the two tents with the help of Deepak. Each tent had a capacity of two people. The snowfall got heavier. Kapil told us to remove our shoes and immediately get inside our tent. He had also unpacked the sleeping bags that worked as pillows. The tent was about 6 feet long. I was too exhausted to take it all in. I had never before stayed in a tent and suddenly I found myself inside a tent in sub-zero degree Celsius temperature. I had a lot of back pain and the tent was too small and claustrophobic for my comfort. I craved to be in a 'normal' environment as soon as possible. I suggested to Sumant that we stay in the GMVN guest house and not in the tent, but Sumant was too excited to carefully assess my suggestion. He was in a different zone. He looked happier than a small kid who's just got a surprise gift. I told Sumant that I would not like to sleep in the tent for the night. Sumant was adamant about staying in the tent. He even went to the extent of saying that this was like a dream come true for him. He spoke to me about how, as a small kid while on a school camp in Kashmir, he had stayed in a tent in similar conditions. He sounded like a pro. However, I knew my limitations. At that point, I really thought of Sumant, as a brave man with an iron will. It gave me comfort to

be with a man like him in such trying conditions. For the first time in many days, we were not on the same page.

I headed for the guest house hoping to get some hot tea and Sumant went towards Kapil's tent. Kapil was to make tea and 'Maggi' noodles for all of us. As I walked towards the guest house, which was just a few hundred meters away from our tent, I could see the entire landscape covered by snow. The snowfall got heavier by every passing minute. Very quickly, the brown and green of the valley got covered with white. The trees, the mountains, the buildings and everything else looked as if they had a white blanket over them. It was a beautiful scene.

The guest house was a small building made of stone and wood with a dormitory, a kitchen, and a canteen area. It was a very cosy place. I went to the canteen and ordered some tea and Maggi noodles. There were a few foreigners sitting around a big table. It felt good to see people indulging in activities like eating and chatting. This is what I wanted, some normalcy. I felt good in the guest house and decided to make a booking for myself in the dormitory for the night. There were around 10-12 beds in the dormitory. I got my hot Maggi and tea. After a while, I got talking to a French guy who was sitting next to me. His name was David. He was around 60 years old. In no time we got talking about Spirituality. It is such a wonderful feeling to know that you can connect so well and so quickly with complete strangers. After some time, Rishikesh (the South Indian IT guy from the US who was with us in the taxi to Gangotri) joined us. All three of us from three different generations (Rishi was in the early 20s) and different cultures discussed a common subject, Spirituality. While we were engrossed in deep discussions, we got more company. Sumant came in, as I had expected. I was happy to see him. The snowfall got more severe while we talked. This created some doubts in Sumant's mind. He was humble enough to convey that he also wanted to stay in the guest house now. Once again it was proved that we were destined to be together throughout this journey.

The four of us talked for hours. We were surprised to hear a Frenchman talk about miracles and divine interventions. He shared with us that some divine powers helped him write 12 poems in one night at Surya Kund (the same place that we visited near Gangotri). David also spoke about Ganga-Mira, a European woman who gives satsang on the banks of Ganga in Rishikesh. It was a wonderful evening. We went out in the snow and took some pictures, including some 'selfies'. By now it was dark and though, was that like Sumant many others, who had planned to stay in their tents, had dropped the idea. So when we went to book 'another' bed for Sumant, we found out that there was no bed left, even for me. People had come and occupied all the beds, as it was freezing cold outside. So suddenly both of us had nowhere to go except for our tent. It was then that Rishi suggested we try Lal Baba's ashram where he was staying. It was a small ashram a few hundred meters from the guest house. We went there along with him, only to find out that there was no place for us there as well. Lal Baba assured us that he would do something about our stay. He told us to go and sleep in the small temple building in front of the rooms. Lal Baba's ashram had a kitchen, a small open space for dining, a small temple and a few rooms. As we entered the temple, we realised that there was no space inside. It was already full of all the sadhus who were sleeping on the floor. We went back to Lal Baba and he sent us to another room with one of his volunteers. We went through a small, narrow and dark corridor with very low ceiling height. There were a few rooms on the right side of the corridor. He told us to get into one of the rooms. It was so dark inside the room that we couldn't see anything. Sumant put on the headlamp. We saw a lot of people already sleeping on the floor of this very small room. There was hardly any space for us. We asked the volunteer where we should sleep. His answer was, "Wherever you can manage." We could only manage to find enough space in a corner for us to sleep in our sleeping bags. There was no room to even move our hands by an inch. I had never slept in a sleeping bag before. Sumant helped me with the sleeping bag. I felt awkward and claustrophobic. I had severe back pain too. I was also worried about my left knee, as it had started to pain. The severe condition

of my back and the pain in my left knee made me sceptical of going to Gaumukh the next day. I informed Suman about my intention of staying back at the ashram and I also told him about the condition of my injured left knee. He was shocked to know how bad my knee was. He lambasted me for not telling him about my knee injury before we came here.

"THANK GOD I CAN SEE AGAIN"

It was around 8:30 p.m. and we were off to sleep. After some time, there was a thud that woke me up. Suman had hit the low ceiling while getting up. I saw him standing beside me and I asked him what he was trying to do. He wanted to go pee.

I decided to give him company. He asked me, "Do you have the urge to pee?"

I said, "No."

He asked me, "Then why are you coming with me?"

I said, "I want to make sure that I don't have to wake up for that later."

With the kind of arrangements we made before sleeping, it was going to be a very painstaking task to get out of the sleeping bag, take the torch, remove the gloves, wear the shoes and walk out of the ashram in such extreme cold. I realised doing all this alone would be a tough task.

I thought I was smart. Suman may have a different view though. Accompanying someone for a pee when you don't even have the urge to pee is crazy. I guess that was the need of the hour. Surprisingly, I was not the only one who was being smart. One more person, who must have overheard us, asked if he could join us as if this was a 'professional service' that we provided. We 'allowed' him to join us. All three of us went out with the help of Suman's headlamp. It was still snowing heavily. As soon as we put our foot outside the ashram premises, we realised how much it had snowed since evening. My foot went at least 5-6 inches deep into the snow. The view outside was breathtaking. There was a lot of snow around us. It might sound weird but urinating in the snow-covered open field was an amazing experience.

We went back to sleep. After a few hours, I lost my sleep again and woke up. I was shocked when I realised that I couldn't see anything. I thought I had gone blind. I was petrified. I immediately woke Suman up and told him I couldn't see anything. "Even I can't see anything," Suman replied without any fuss. He immediately switched on his headlamp to prove that my eyes were okay. The reason why both of us couldn't see anything was that it was pitch dark in the room.

I was extremely happy to 'see' once again. However, it was a frightening experience for a few minutes. I slept well after knowing that I could see again.



En route to Bhojbsa from Gangotri.



Near Chirbasa. Bhagirathi peaks can be seen in the background.



The tent that was never used. GMVN (Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam) guest house at Bhojbsa can be seen behind the tent.



Narrow corridor inside the Lal Baba ashram, Bhojbsa.



Vishal, Rishikesh, David, Suman (from L-R) enjoying the snow fall outside the GMVN guest house, Bhojbsa.



Dining area at Lal Baba ashram, Bhojbsa.

DAY 12 (April 30, 2017) - 4023 m above Sea Level

DUM MARO DUM (Take a puff)

We woke up in the morning to more snowfall and one more miracle. My back pain was completely gone in the morning. Until last night it was so bad that I was apprehensive about going to Gaumukh. This was really a pleasant surprise. I still don't know how that happened. Was it because of sleeping on the floor or was there some 'other' reason? It was quite miraculous. There had been continuous snowfall since 3 p.m. the previous day. So going to Tapovan looked impossible, as the route would be blocked due to heavy snowfall. One also needs to cross the Gangotri glacier to reach Tapovan. The forest department had issued an advisory for everyone to go back to Gangotri as soon as it stopped snowing. The entry from Gangotri to Bhojbsa was also stopped for the time being. Going to Gaumukh was still possible as it was about 5 km before the glacier. Kapil suggested we leave for Gaumukh in the afternoon once it stopped snowing. Now we completely trusted Kapil's judgement. While Sumant remained in the room, I interacted with the sadhus and some foreigners near the kitchen area. There was a small bonfire to keep us warm. It was very cold outside. Many of them, who had a schedule to follow, left early morning for Gaumukh even though it was snowing. I utilised that time to take some pictures. I had a chance to interact with Lal Baba in the kitchen where he was making the breakfast (porridge). There was hot tea being served as well. It was very nice to see everyone, including the Japanese, the Westerners, and Indians helping Lal Baba in preparing the food. There was real ashram spirit on display.

While I was taking pictures just outside the ashram, I got talking to a few sadhus and a tour operator (Indian) who was travelling along with a few foreigners. They were smoking bidi.⁴² I had heard that these sadhus take charas (cannabis resin) instead of tobacco in their bidis and it was very commonly available in this part of the world. Just out of curiosity, I asked them what they were smoking. "Charas," was the reply. They figured out my hesitance in asking for it and hence offered me one bidi. I was reluctant, as I had

⁴² Bidi is a type of cheap cigarette made of unprocessed tobacco wrapped in leaves.

never smoked charas in my life before. The tour operator knew that we were planning to go to Gaumukh. He insisted I try one, as it would 'help' me trek to Gaumukh. I was not sure how it would help. He asked me to just take one and see for myself. I had one bidi that had no effect at all on me. I got greedy and asked for one more. This time they were hesitant in giving as they thought one was enough to get the desired 'result'. They also told me that it would take effect after an hour or so. If the charas worked, I would 'automatically' reach Gaumukh without much effort, I would feel as if I was flying. This was music to my ears. I became more adamant about having another one considering my left knee condition. They gave me one more. While both of them had witty smiles on their face, I was simply hoping that the second one would 'work' and I would actually 'fly' to Gaumukh.

TREKKING WITH THE GODS

Many people, who had left early in the morning for Gaumukh, had started returning by 11 a.m. They couldn't see the Gaumukh glacier properly due to the snowfall and the cloudy weather. They spoke of a Sardarji who took a dip in the waters at Gaumukh. This sounded unreal, as I thought it is beyond human capacity. Around 12 noon, it stopped snowing and we immediately decided to leave for Gaumukh. It was a 5 km trek, but the road was very rocky, according to the early birds. They also informed us that there were boulders through and through on the trail. It was going to be a test for my left knee once again. I guess we were the only four people going to Gaumukh at this hour.

As we trekked a little further the terrain became very different from the one we saw before Bhojbsa. It is just so fascinating to see how the landscape can change in a matter of a few kilometres. Nature never ceases to surprise us with its infinite variations. This was turning out to be a beautiful trek. I felt as if I was in heaven. It was a bit cloudy. The big boulders, Bhagirathi river, snow-clad mountains, and fresh air, made the whole environment very serene. One can easily get lost in the tranquillity of such natural surroundings. It was so captivating that one wouldn't want to be found if one was lost here. Surprisingly, there was no pain and stress today. I walked with a lot of ease. Was it the 'charas' or

some 'other power'? Whatever it was, I felt very light. I could tell this was a very different trek. Sumant and others were walking far ahead of me. After a while when I reached a flatland, I just felt something was different about that place. I slowed down a bit but eventually continued walking.

After an hour or so, we got the first glimpse of Gaumukh glacier from a distance. What an amazing moment that was! I got goosebumps. The only issue was that the Bhagirathi peaks (1, 2 & 3) were still not fully visible as the clouds were obstructing the view. As we moved closer to the peaks and Gangotri glacier from where the Bhagirathi (eventually the mighty Ganga) river originates, the clouds were slowly but surely getting cleared.

We reached a place where there were a small shrine and a signboard which said that we should not go beyond that point, which was 500 meters from Gaumukh (the terminus of the Gangotri glacier, which is one of the largest in the Himalayas and about 30 km long and 2 to 4 km wide). However, we decided to go as close as possible to Gaumukh. As soon as we reached the point from where we could not have gone further, the clouds dispersed completely and we were given a very clear view of the Bhagirathi peaks. God gave us enough time to take some pictures. This was a moment of a lifetime. We were right there, at the exact point where the 'holy and mighty Ganga' originates. We undertook a very long and difficult journey to reach here. But every bit of pain/difficulty to be here was worth it. Although we didn't want to go back, we had to leave, as we knew by now that the weather could be really tricky.

As we started going back, the Bhagirathi peaks again got covered by clouds. It seemed as if God had decided to give us a window of 10-15 minutes to enjoy the clear view of Gaumukh. This was nothing short of a miracle. Events like these would certainly make you believe that the Gods were really trekking with us.

As we headed back, Sumant went to take 'Gangajal' (water) from the river. It would be the purest form of Gangajal, taken at the source. Deepak went with Sumant, while Kapil and I continued. I

followed Kapil. After a while, I reached the same flatland where I had paused earlier. This time I stopped walking. Something was holding me there. I felt as if I have been to this place before. I had a sense of *déjà vu*. I felt as if someone was talking to me. I looked around. I took a 360-degree view of the plain. This was the place I saw on 28th April in my meditation where Gods and my family were walking along with us. I stood there for some time, closed my eyes, took a deep breath and then continued walking.

While coming back, I was in a state of trance. I was not worried about the weather anymore. The satisfaction and joy of being able to have a clear view of Gaumukh along with the Bhagirathi peaks were overpowering all other thoughts and emotions at this point in time. By now we had clearly understood who was planning our 'itinerary'. Now we just had to wait for the next 'move' by the Almighty. He was not yet done with snow. It started snowing again when we were halfway down to Bhojbsa. This time I enjoyed the snowfall much more than before. There was no anxiety anymore. On top of it, we knew that we had been extremely lucky with the weather. We reached Lal Baba ashram around 4 p.m. and Kapil treated us with 'soup-Maggi'. It felt so good to have hot soupy noodles in such chilly weather. We then decided to rest for some time. While we were resting, the snow kept on adding more layers of 'white'. By the time we woke up for dinner, once again the valley was covered completely by a white blanket.

INFO

- As most people had left Bhojbsa for Gangotri in the afternoon, we were 'upgraded' to another room, which had beds for all of us. Deepak chose to stay with us, while Kapil decided to stay with his buddies in the tent outside.



Sardar Balkar Singh Maan posing for me at Lal Baba ashram, Bhojbsa.



Bonfire in the dining area at Lal Baba ashram, Bhojbsa.



Kitchen at Lal Baba ashram, where seekers from different countries and faiths helped in meal preparation.



Lal Baba ashram, Bhojbsa.



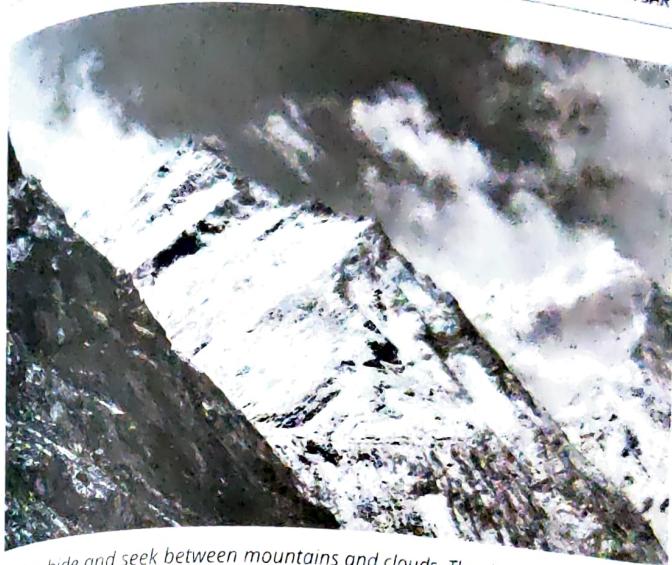
Snow on the roof. At Lal Baba ashram.



The *déjà vu* spot near Gaumukh.



Shrine before Gaumukh. This is the end of the trail. It is considered too dangerous to venture beyond this point.



Divine hide and seek between mountains and clouds. The clouds clearing out just as we reached Gaumukh giving us a good view of Bhagirathi peaks.



Seeker team at Gaumukh.



Having Kapil's special soup-Maggi after returning to Bhojbase from Gaumukh.

DAY 13 (May 01, 2017)

AN OFFER TO STAY IN THE HIMALAYAS AND A 'BIG-BANG' REMEDY

We woke up around 6:30 a.m. to even more snow than the day before right outside our room. It had stopped snowing when we woke up but looked as if it had snowed the whole night. I was not feeling well. I was feeling dizzy perhaps due to the extreme cold, it could have been due to the low oxygen level as well. There was such strong reflection due to the sunrays on the snow that we could not even open our eyes without the special 'Grade 4, UV goggles'. We witnessed some unfamiliar phenomenon; the water falling from the roof had frozen into icicles, the water in the big tub had frozen to form a layer of thick ice and the floor had become slippery as the moisture had frozen to become a thin layer of ice. This could be really dangerous for my injured knee. There was snow all around. This was not helping me. I was not feeling like getting up from my bed. I was losing my balance. I became a bit worried and told Sumant about it. Today we were supposed to head back to Gangotri. My being unwell for the long trek was not a good omen. Sumant gave me some dates and raisin for energy along with some hot water. But it didn't help.

I was not feeling well enough to travel. As I was standing near the kitchen area drinking some tea, a short gentleman came and patted me on my shoulder. I couldn't recognise him initially but soon realised that it was Mauni Baba. I was so happy to see him again. He looked different as he was wearing goggles and a jacket. He gave me a big smile. He looked happy to meet us again. He once again pulled my beard in jest. When I told him that we were going back to Gangotri, he told me to stay back and go to Tapovan with him while Sumant could go back to Gangotri. I was taken aback by his 'offer' to accompany him. I didn't know how to react to his suggestion. I don't know why I was taking time to respond. Did I get a thought of joining him even for a second? After a long pause, I told him that this time I would have to go back but I would come back again to meet him.

I was still not feeling well. Mauni Baba had suggested that we leave Bhojbasa around 9 a.m., which I conveyed to Kapil. That

would also give me some more time to recover. Sumant gave me some 'electral' powder dissolved in water for hydration but even that didn't seem to help. After some time as I went to the toilet, I banged my head with great force against the very low door frame of the toilet. There was a big thud. I was shaken for a moment. While I got a big bump on my head, miraculously the dizziness had gone. This was beyond my comprehension, but I was not willing to doubt anything anymore. I was good to go now.

BLUE SKY, WHITE EARTH AND THE 'GILA PARBAT'

Surprisingly, the weather had changed for the better very quickly. It was bright and sunny with a clear blue sky. It was similar to the weather at Gangotri a few days back. But this time the ground was completely white due to snow. Blue and white colours occupied the entire landscape around us, while there was no trace of any brown or black. The entire pathway was covered with snow, making us feel like we were walking on a soft white carpet. The softness of the snow and the cushion it provided made the walk much more comfortable. While the snow made walking easy, it created a small problem. As the snow started melting, the loose rocks/stones fell off the mountains. We were about to reach 'Gila parbat' in some time. This could be very dangerous after the snowfall when the snow melts. Kapil realised that and went ahead of everyone so that he could keep an eye on anything falling from the top. His judgement was spot-on again. Within a few minutes, there was a big sound and some stones started falling from the top. He told us to take shelter below a big boulder to protect ourselves. We could literally see the stones rolling down the mountain. It was a bit scary. We passed through that stretch very quickly. We were relieved once we crossed that dangerous stretch.

By now the snow had started melting quickly due to the sun. We also took the opportunity of eating some snow before it melted completely. It was fun to eat fresh snow. Not even in my wildest dreams, could I have imagined eating fresh snow while trekking. As we reached closer to Chirbasa, we could see all the green leaves covered by white snow. It was looking beautiful. As we walked under the trees at Chirbasa, we could hear the sound

of snow falling from the green leaves above on the dry leaves below. As we walked passed Chirbasa, the snow started falling on us. When we looked up we could see the soft snow particles falling on us. It was such an amazing view. This was nothing else but the Almighty's blessings being showered upon us in the form of snow. Thank you, God!

INFO

While we walked back in the morning, we witnessed a strange phenomenon. We noticed that some of the snow particles (that initially looked like they were blown by the wind) on top of the mountains were actually static. Maybe the snow particles were frozen in the air and due to lack of wind they didn't move at all. This was quite incredible!

WHERE DID SARDAR BALKAR SINGH MAAN GO?

Since the time we started our trek in the morning, we saw bare footprint marks on the snow. We wondered all the while, who could be crazy enough to walk barefoot on the snow. The marks were there throughout the trail, suggesting that whoever it was, he didn't wear any shoes throughout the journey. Soon we learned that it was the same Sardarji who had taken a dip at Gaumukh. He was staying at the Lal Baba's ashram. We met him just about a km before reaching Gangotri. He was barefoot. Last morning I had taken his picture accidentally. While I was taking the picture of Lal Baba's ashram, he suddenly came out of one of the rooms and when he realised that I was taking a picture, he posed for me like a supermodel. He looked and behaved differently from everyone else. He must have been around 75 years old but was extremely confident, self-assured and strongly built.

While Sumant got talking to him, I continued towards the Gangotri National Park check post. I reached there and waited for Sumant. After some time, Sumant came along with him and introduced him to me. His name was Sardar Balkar Singh Maan. He told us that he was the son of Late Lance Naik (L/Nk) Sardar Jigir Singh Maan who was martyred during the 1962 Indo-China war. He had a plan to travel barefoot for 10 months, to places of worship of all religions in 8 different states. He even had a plan to go to Pakistan by foot and had asked for the Prime Minister's intervention to get the Pakistani Visa. While we sat at the check

post and Kapil was completing the formalities, we got a chance to interact with him and know about his philosophy. Suddenly, something happened to Sumant and he sat on the floor by the Sardarji's feet and started rubbing them. I was taken aback by Sumant's spontaneous and uncharacteristic gesture.

For the next 20 minutes, we were spellbound listening to him. Below are the excerpts of his counsel/claims.

- A guide (religious leader) cannot be God.
- A guide can only be an instrument in helping us find religious literature.
- God has made all the saints do certain things on earth, which has led people into believing that these saints are God.
- One should do such things in life that people start considering one the messenger of God.
- Even though I have never been to school, I know our Indian Constitution thoroughly. I have attended a press conference of 40 minutes as a participant along with Dr. Abdul Kalam, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Chief Justice Satya Pal Jain.
- I consider all the saints/babas as guides.
- Bhagwan ek hai. Na woh upar hai, na woh niche hai. Woh aapke andar bhi hai, woh mere andar bhi hai. (God is one. He is omnipresent. He resides in all of us)
- A guide only helps in understanding God, but God is only one. There cannot be two Gods.
- Humans have better opportunities to eat and live, but other lesser living beings (viz. insects, animals) do not have any surety of food and shelter.
- Even for these lesser beings, there is God to look after them. He takes care of all his creations.
- Before any living being takes birth, God makes provision for its food.
- Head office = God.

- The Government has banned my speech.
- The government does not know me. I can leave the country without a passport.
- Nobody can stop me from fulfilling the orders that I have received from the Head Office i.e. God.
- If I cannot go, my head will go. I am that kind of a person.
- I don't have such powers, but God has. He will help me achieve my goal.
- *Iss duniya mein koi saathi nahi hai. Akele aaye hai, akele jaana hai.* (There is no companion in this world. One has come alone and one goes alone).
- I got the opportunity to serve these people. I am helping them get back to Gangotri, as they were scared. I believe serving them is serving God.

After our chat, we descended towards the temple/town. As we got closer to the town, Sumant asked him if he would like to have lunch with us. He said first he would have to go for Ganga mata's darshan at the temple and then he might join us. We followed him to the Gangotri temple. He was right in front of Sumant and I was following Sumant. Sumant was around 5 feet behind him and I was another 10 feet behind Sumant. He went towards the temple and then came back towards the 'chowk' (an open market area at the junction of two roads). Suddenly Sumant asked me if I had seen him. He had lost him completely. Even I had lost him. I told Sumant he was walking right in front of me. Sumant was even closer to him. It was strange. He was right there a moment ago and now we could not see him. He had a huge frame, was more than 6 feet tall with a well-built body. He was also carrying a yellow flag on an iron rod, in his right hand, which he kept above his head level. We decided to look for him. From the place in the chowk where we lost him, there were only two possibilities where he could have gone. One was a narrow road that went towards the bazaar street and the other went down towards the ghat. Sumant went towards the ghat, which was very small and only a few people were there at that time. Sumant inquired with others about a big 'Sardarji'. No one had seen him. I hurried

towards the end of the street and beyond but I could not find him. He was an old man. He could not have given us a slip. Also, there were not too many Sardarjis around. It was very intriguing and disappointing for us to lose him like this. At that point, we thought that maybe he didn't want to be distracted and perhaps he wanted to be left alone.

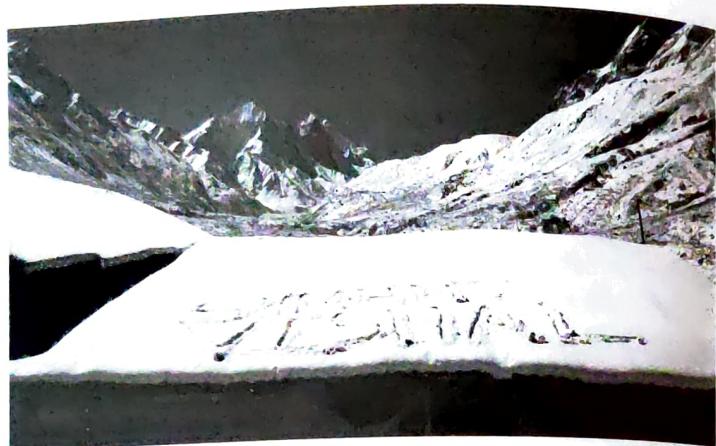
We decided to go ahead and have our lunch as it was 4 p.m. already and we were very hungry. We told Kapil to come to our room later in the evening to settle his account. While we sat in the restaurant, we wondered about the Sardarji. How could we lose him in a moment? I remembered then that I had taken a picture of the temple and the chowk on my phone. I asked Sumant to show me the exact place where he saw him the last time. He showed me the same place where I had last seen him. The question now in our minds was; did he 'power walk/run' quick enough to give both of us a slip, or did he simply vanish right in front of us? After all the experiences of the last couple of weeks, both of us believed in the latter.

INFO

- I recorded our conversation with Sardar Balkar Singh on my phone.
- Sumant told me while having lunch that he felt as if it was Maharajji whose feet he was rubbing and not Sardar Balkar Singh Maan.
- On our return to the Gangotri National Park, our empty packets were counted and our deposit was refunded.
- We thanked Kapil for being a good guide when he came in the evening to meet us for the last time and assured him that we would refer him to friends travelling to the region. We were grateful for Deepak's support as well.



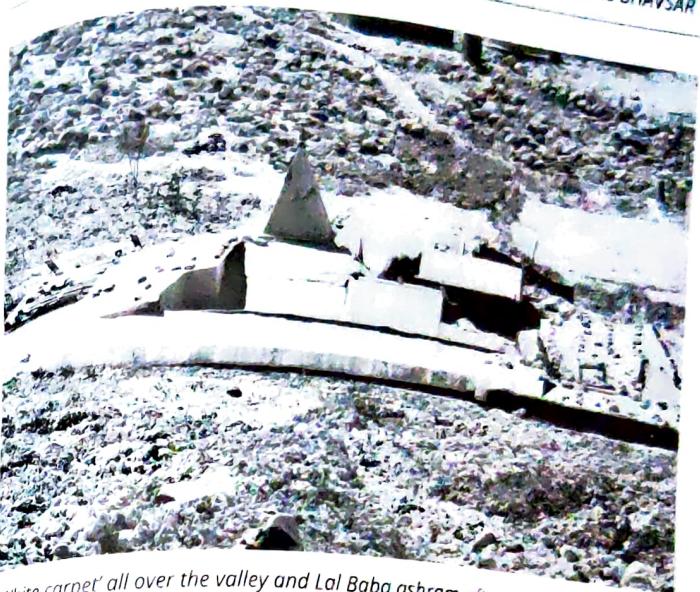
Frozen scenes at Lal Baba's ashram.



Our attempt to 'leave a mark' in the Himalayas. By now the Himalayas had already left a permanent mark in our hearts.



Snow calligraphy by Suman.



'White carpet' all over the valley and Lal Baba ashram after continuous snowfall all night.



Leaving Bhojbas (physically).



Pre-season condition of the restaurant at Chirbasa.



Having our staple Himalayan diet of raisins, dates and fresh glacier water.



Having fun in the snow.



With Sardar Balkar Singh Mann at the Gangotri National Park check post.



DAY 14 (May 02, 2017)

TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE STARS, HOW I WONDER WHAT YOU ARE!

We took a 5 a.m. bus from Gangotri to Haridwar. As we didn't have return tickets to Ahmedabad, Suman booked our tickets in Sleeper class for the 'Yoga Express' train the next day i.e. May 03. Better seats were not available but the thought of being uncomfortable in Sleeper class never crossed our minds. We decided to stay overnight at Rishikesh. Because of Devangkaka, we got an opportunity to stay at Parmarth ashram this time, one of the biggest ashrams in Rishikesh with more than 1000 rooms. Maulin connected us to Bhagatji, who lived in Parmarth ashram with his old mother in a small house on the terrace of one of the blocks. Bhagatji gave us the choice of staying in a normal room or sleep on the terrace outside his home. We chose to sleep on the terrace.

Later in the evening we went for dinner in the ashram canteen and spent some quiet time on the riverbanks before returning around 10 p.m. We were given chatais (mats), pillows and blankets. Mountains surrounded the ashram. There was a nice cool breeze. We slept on our mats facing the sky. We could see many stars above us, as the sky was absolutely clear. The silver sparkling dots in the black background looked beautiful. Within minutes, we were asleep. I had the best sleep of our trip.

DAY 15 (May 03, 2017)

DOLPHIN DIVE, JOHN LENNON, THE BEATLES ASHRAM

The early morning sunrays woke us up. We were ready by 7 a.m. We had our tea at our favourite 'joint' opposite Geeta bhavan and then went to Bhagatji's cottage near Ram Jhoola. It was a very quiet and beautiful place right on the riverbank. Suman was not going to let go of this opportunity and once again wanted to take some dips. He might have realised that this would be his last chance on this trip.

As the riverbank was quite deserted, he decided to swim in the shallow waters and do some 'dolphin diving' as well. He was even more playful than he was at Haridwar (while going to Gaumukh). I was happy to take his pictures as he dived and swam and played in the water. I showed him a picture where I was able to capture him airborne during the dive. He was overjoyed. He wanted me to take a perfect shot of him soaring over the water. This time he didn't mind giving innumerable poses (dives) while I tried to capture him mid-air during his aeronautical dives.

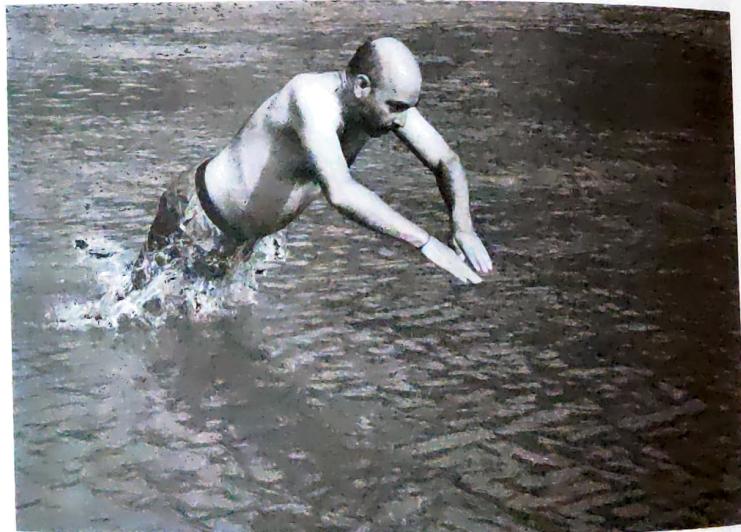
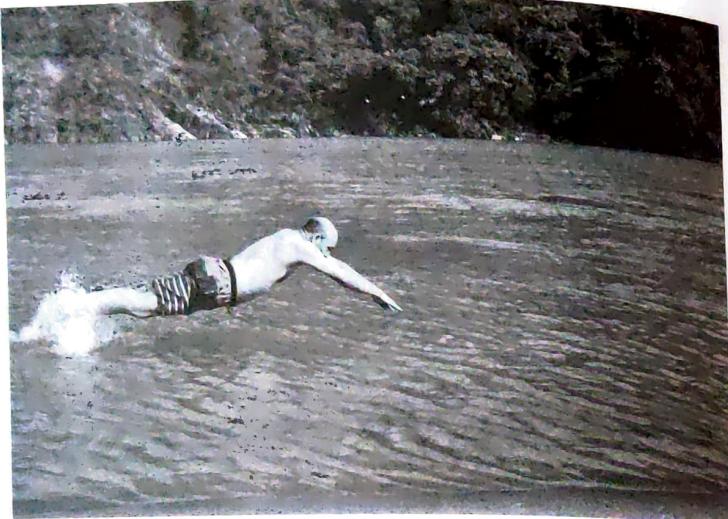
After he finished his diving, we went to look for Ganga-Mira. David, the Frenchman from Lal Baba ashram, had told us about her at Bhojbsa. Her satsang location was close to 'the Beatles ashram'. We decided to go there as we had some time before leaving for Haridwar to board the train back to Ahmedabad. We soon found out that Ganga-Mira had already left Rishikesh for Europe.

However, we decided to visit The Beatles ashram. Mahesh Yogi earlier ran the ashram and The Beatles had come and stayed here in 1968. He also built special caves for meditation (with one toilet and room on ground floor and a meditation room on the first floor) for The Beatles' visit. Now the ashram is run by the government and looks deserted. We spent some time in the meditation room of cave number 9 where John Lennon had stayed. It was a beautiful experience.

Just then we got a call from Bhagatji to get back to Parmarth ashram as Swami Hansanand Saraswati, who was over 90 years

old, had come for a satsang. We reached there on time and were blessed to hear him speak.

After the satsang, it was time to leave for Haridwar. We shared an auto-rickshaw, which had the usual drama associated with it, and reached Haridwar.



Sumant's Dolphin dives.



At John Lennon's cave number 9 at The Beatles ashram, Rishikesh.



The usual wait for other passengers to fill up the shared Rickshaw at Rishikesh.



Trying the local favourite 'Rabdi' and having lunch at Abu Road railway station.



Sumant's 'innovative' photography.



Going back...

PART 3 GOING BACK

At last, it was time to go back home, time to leave the Himalayas, time to leave Ganga mata, and time to leave the sages and their auras.

Although our 15 days 'trip' had concluded, I felt as if the 'journey had just begun.

As we boarded the train to Ahmedabad, I couldn't help, but ask myself, "Am I going back to reality?" or "Am I going back from reality?"

PART 4 CONNECTING THE DOTS

How does one define a 'trip' as unique as this and a 'journey as divine as this?

When I returned back, I had no idea how much I was impacted (psychologically as well as in my physical behaviour) due to the events that happened during those 15 days. My closest buddies from college, Vishal Shah and Ilyas Momin came to meet me the night I returned. Both of them called me the next day to check if everything was okay with me. They both definitely felt that there was something different about me. The three of us meet too often for them not to notice the 'change' in me.

It took a few months after coming back from the Himalayas for me to understand the gravity of what had happened. Once I did, I had a few questions in my mind which needed some answers:

- Why did 'I' have such divine experiences, as I have never been that religious/spiritual in my life?
- How did it happen without any special efforts/intense desire from my side?
- Why did it happen now, at this juncture in my life?

These were questions, for which I didn't have straightforward answers. And I knew it was going to be difficult to figure those out easily. Everything just happened so suddenly. Susan⁴³ described it aptly, "You were travelling by a bullock cart in a village when suddenly you were put in a rocket, sent to another planet and were not even given a chance to put on the seat belt." I completely endorse that analogy.

In such a situation, the only thing I thought would help was to 'connect the dots' and see what they show me. To do so, it was important to understand some of the events that occurred just a few months before we went to the Himalayas, as well as in

⁴³ Susan is my school friend Gaurang's colleague. She accidentally got hold of the draft copy of this book on Gaurang's iPad.

the recent and distant past. I started connecting the dots and recollect some significant events about my life. They gave me a better understanding of myself that I think are worth sharing with you.

BOLO 'Om' (CHANT 'Om')

On February 17, 2017, Virat Kohli posted on his official Instagram account an image of himself holding a book called "Autobiography of a Yogi" written by Paramahansa Yogananda and wrote, "I love this book. A must read for all those who are brave enough to let their thoughts and ideologies be challenged. The understanding and implementation of the knowledge in this book will change your whole perspective and life. Believe in the divine and keep marching on doing good deeds."

I was quite surprised by this piece of information. How could a young man of 28 years (leave alone being one of the most successful and popular sportsmen in the world), be inspired by a book on a yogi. This 'suggestion' from Virat came at a time when he was growing in leaps and bounds, both as a batsman and as the Captain of the Indian Cricket team. It made me curious. As a former State level Cricketer, I have always had a keen interest in Cricket even after I stopped playing professional Cricket. I have followed Virat's journey and growth in the past few years. Even though he is one of the most aggressive cricketers in the world, mentally he seemed to be in total control of himself and his team. It is not easy to be the Captain of the Indian cricket team and still perform like a champion. I somehow felt that I might personally benefit from the book and ended up buying it.

A few days into reading the book, I had got the idea of learning yoga myself. All my life I have been into sports, swimming, gyming etc. but had never ever thought of practicing yoga. I had called Vishal Shah and asked him if he would be interested in accompanying me to yoga classes. He agreed. The beginner's batch at 'Shivanand ashram' would start every day at 5 a.m. With my extensive business travel, this would be a big challenge. Those days I used to travel 2-3 days in a week to Karjan (a three-hour drive from Ahmedabad) for one of my construction projects and

sometimes came home very late in the night.

After a week or so into yoga, I suddenly decided to stop eating meat (including eggs) and drinking alcohol. A lot of people started asking me the reason behind this sudden and surprising decision and all I could say was, "I don't know."

Equally surprising was the fact that I had been able to attend the classes quite regularly. With every passing day, we got more and more comfortable with the yogasanas and were also enjoying the routine of getting up early in the morning and being amidst the naturally therapeutic environment of the ashram. The cool early morning breeze, flocks of birds flying above us at the dawn Yoagasanas, we had also learned how to meditate. The sound of 'Om', as I closed my eyes and took the Padmasana position, had started having a profound influence on me.

Little did I know then, that I was going to close my eyes and say the same 'Om' on a big boulder in the middle of the holy river Ganga at Gangotri, on April 28, 2017, and that it would take me on the journey of a lifetime.

I bought a book on a yogi in February 2017 and ended up meditating at Gangotri in April 2017. This sounds bizarre, doesn't it?

INFO

- If it were not for Virat Kohli, I would have never thought of buying a book on a yogi.
- If it were not for 'Autobiography of a Yogi', I would have never thought of learning yoga and meditation.
- My Nana (maternal grandfather), Champakbhai Bhavsar, used to teach yoga in Rajpipla, Gujarat as well as in the USA and UK. He had also written books on yoga.

'I PLEDGE'

In June 2013, I went on a bike-trip, on my Royal Enfield-Bullet, to 'Ladakh' in Jammu and Kashmir and 'Lahaul-Spiti' in Himachal Pradesh. That was probably one of the craziest decisions of my life. I had decided to go on the most adventurous (sometimes dangerous) bike ride in India with absolutely no preparation. I had not ridden a bike for almost 10 years before going for the trip. I didn't even have my own bike 15 days before leaving. I didn't know any one of the 22 riders with whom I was going to ride. I didn't do any research beforehand about the terrain or the weather conditions, which are unpredictable in hilly regions.

I think something that I wrote on June 14, 2013, about a week before leaving, is worth revisiting now:

I Pledge

I pledge to live every moment
 I pledge to dream big
 I pledge to laugh like before
 I pledge to explore the unknown
 I pledge to accept the truth
 I pledge to face the unexpected
 I pledge to know myself
 I pledge to challenge norms
 I pledge to preserve the child within
 I pledge to reciprocate trust
 I pledge to ridicule wisdom
 I pledge to ignore hypocrisy
 I pledge to simplify relations
 I pledge to love life, no matter what!

At the time of writing this, I would have never imagined that few of my pledges viz. exploring the unknown, facing the unexpected and knowing myself, would get fulfilled within a few years in a journey of 15 days.

I am not sure whether all the events leading up to April 28, 2017, were a result of the Universe conspiring to fulfil those pledges or was it simply my 'calling'.

TAKING THE 'I' OUT OF VISHAL

Maharajji (Neem Karoli Baba) used to say, "Suffering brings us closer to God."

I wish I knew this earlier in my life, as my sufferings had started as early as May 1994 when I lost my Dad. I was 18 years old then and in the first year of my college.

Along with my Dad, I also lost a few other things: my guiding force, my support system, my family business, my ancestral home, my trust in relationships, my comfort zone, my safety net and most importantly, my freedom, to live life on my own terms and as per my wishes.

If that wasn't enough, another setback was in the offing. I suddenly realised that henceforth I would have to choose between 'financial security' and 'following my passion'. Back then, Cricket was my life. I had a dream to play Cricket for India and I genuinely believed that I had a chance to do so, based on my past performances.

However, in the changed circumstances, if I pursued Cricket it would mean that I would end up compromising my studies. I was studying Civil Engineering in CEPT-Ahmedabad, one of the best universities in India. On the other hand, playing professional Cricket didn't offer any financial security in those days. It didn't take me long to decide that I would have to focus on my studies and stop doing something that I loved. While losing my Dad was not in my hands, I regretted not being able to play Cricket anymore. I had lost the purpose of my life.

What followed after 1994 was a very long journey of survival and struggle. Perhaps some of the negative incidents in my life made me sceptical about a few things. At one point in my life, I also believed that everything that I loved would be taken away from me. As a result, I created a 'shell' around me to protect myself, which meant that I would not know if there was any help available for me outside that shell and no one could see what I was going through inside the shell.

I started a long journey, all alone.

I had to now look after my family and myself. I had to find my own way. I had to take important decisions. I had to motivate myself and make sure that I kept going and didn't break. I had to believe in myself and hope that someday things would improve for the better. I had to discover a new purpose for my life.

I had taken it upon myself to put my life back on the right track. I had to rebuild my life brick by brick. From facing severe financial problems while studying Bachelors of Civil Engineering (B.E.) to completing Master of Engineering (M.E.) in Construction Management and eventually going on to study Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from the UK, from struggling to get my first job to having my own business, from being alone to having my own family, I think I have come a long way.

While managing things on my own made me strong, it also meant I didn't have anyone in my life to fall back upon. Although a few people did support me enormously at different stages in my life, I didn't have any Guru/Godfather. Surprisingly, while I was struggling, I didn't feel the need to have a Guru, nor did I miss my Dad as much as I do now.

I think I got used to living with a lot of chaos and anxiety within me all the time.

My 'journey' to the Himalayas has changed everything. Virat Kohli stands completely vindicated. My thoughts and ideologies have changed. My whole perspective of life has changed.

The events that occurred during those 15 days tell me that there is someone out there who guides me all the time, who takes care of me all the time, who loves me unconditionally and who is with me all the time. I didn't plan a single thing for this trip. Even then, there was not a single second, which was wasted or not enjoyable. In fact, I had experiences that were beyond my imagination. It was like a fantasy trip planned by the Almighty. He had set up the entire itinerary for me. Even though there were a few challenging moments, overall it was an amazing journey of

learning, growing and realising. I think that's exactly how my life has been until now.

Now I strongly feel that I should stop interfering/messing with my own life since it is already designed by the Almighty.

Until now I have always believed only in myself and never depended on anyone else. I always thought luck didn't favour me and that destiny is nothing but what I create myself. I always believed in controlling the situation, rather than allowing the situation to control me.

However, I realise now that it was not 'I' who achieved things until now in my life. It is the Almighty who made me achieve these things. For the first time in my life, I have started believing much more in 'destiny' and surrendered myself totally to 'someone else'. I see no reason to worry or to feel vulnerable at all. In fact, I feel much more assured and content than ever before. I guess I am finally at peace with myself.

Now I totally believe what Maharajji used to say, "I do nothing. God does everything."

PART 5 DESTINY

As I connected the dots, I realised that I could neither have experienced what I did on April 28, 2017, in Gangotri due to my wishes or efforts, nor could I have stopped it from happening. I was destined to experience Divinity.

Only time would tell the reason behind 'why' I was destined to experience what I experienced. For now, I choose to believe that if the dots have connected looking backwards, they would somehow connect in my future as well.⁴⁴

PART 6 SUMANT & I

Since our first trip together in 1994 to Morbi (as a part of a study tour in college), I must say we have come a long way. From fighting over hot water on a cold winter morning in our hotel room to taking a dip in extremely cold Ganga water together at Gangotri after 23 years, sounds surreal to me. A lot of people would believe that Sumant and I have very different personalities with nothing in common, but according to Negiji, we were the perfect partners for each other. I personally think both of these are true.

From the time he asked me if I was interested in going to the Himalayas till we came back, we were in complete harmony. Nothing was planned for the trip beforehand. Even then, we didn't have a difference of opinion or an argument over anything. Both of us were in the same zone. We had similar frames of mind throughout the trip. We were tuned to the same frequency.

Most people have strong reasons to go to the Himalayas. It's very strange that neither of us was interested in knowing the other's reason. Not once did we ask each other, "Why are we going?" We had never discussed spirituality before. I didn't know why Sumant asked me to join him on a trip to the Himalayas and I was least interested in knowing the reason. Maybe both of us had a feeling that we were both 'seeking' something that was common to us even though we never discussed it. Probably that's why we had such an amazing time together. We both gave each other the space needed while supporting each other at the same time. I am personally very thankful to Sumant for being with me and understanding me during some of the most personal and defining moments of my life.

Sumant was the more organised and experienced companion. Being completely different from each other was a blessing in disguise. His preparation compensated for my lack of experience/knowledge. Unlike me, he was technically very sound, as far as preparation and trekking knowledge was concerned. He was carrying all the essentials. He knew when to rest during a trek,

⁴⁴ Inspired by Steve Jobs' commencement address delivered at Stanford University, on June 12, 2005.

when to hydrate, when to have dry fruits and in what quantity, what to wear, how to take the support of the mountain at dangerous spots, where the centre of gravity of the body should be while trekking, etc. He loved to help out and it felt good that for a change there was someone to look after me and take care of me. I loved each and every second of travelling with Sumant.

Prior to this trip, I had never heard about the concept of a 'Soul family'. After spending a few weeks with Sumant, I now know what it means.

EPILOGUE

I had never imagined in my wildest of dreams that our 'trip to the Himalayas' would become 'Tryst with Reality' one day. I am now compelled to reflect upon the reason why Vishal was the person who came to my mind for accompanying me to the Himalayas. I am also compelled to now look at Vishal from the prism of Tryst with Reality.

Some really interesting facts/episodes come to my mind now, which may be worth sharing with you.

Vishal had taken some yoga classes for a month or so just before I threw this idea of going to the Himalayas at him. Also in one of our conversations he had told me how he had given up all non-vegetarian food including eggs, junk food, and liquor. It was apparent that there were some common traits between us. We both were leaning towards spirituality and maybe that nudged me on a subconscious level to ask him casually about going to the Himalayas.

Normally one would take some time to consider such a proposal, as one would have to check one's calendar, seek spousal approval and such things. But to my surprise, Vishal agreed instantaneously. I was actually doubtful about his commitment until a day before he was to travel to Delhi (from where we were to go further). It was only when he bought trekking gear and winter clothing a day before leaving that I realised his seriousness.

Now, after reading the book, I realise the depth of his observation and ability to express his deepest emotions through simple words. Every time I read this book, I go back in time and enjoy the innumerable beautiful moments we shared together all over again. While both of us have resumed our personal and professional duties after coming back, I sincerely wish that this be the first of our several 'journeys' together and that for Vishal this is the beginning of several future edifications that he puts on paper.

Before this trip, I had known Vishal as an adventurer, a romantic, an entrepreneur, a writer, a photographer, and a sportsman. Now the description has been expanded to include the word 'Seeker'.

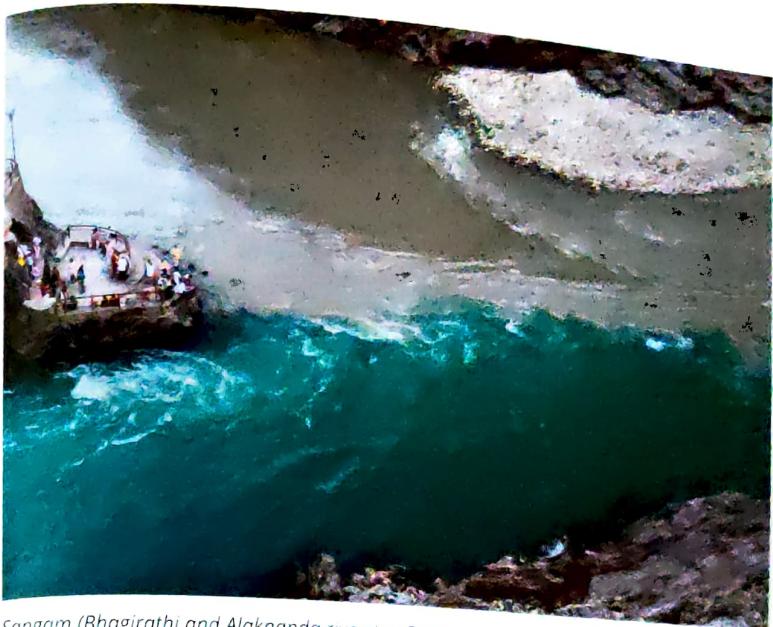
Sumant Kachru

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE JOURNEY

(© Vishal Bhavsar)



Morning aarti at Hari-ki-pouri, Haridwar.



Sangam (Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers) at Devprayag.



Holy river Ganga near Shivpuri.



Surya kund, near Gangotri.



Near Pandav gufa (few kilometres from Gangotri town).



Bhagirathi peaks, Gaumukh.



Near Pandav gufa (few kilometres from Gangotri town).



At Lal baba ashram, Bhojposha.