

A Journey through the Girthi and Kio Gad Valleys

Ashutosh Mishra

A few months after we finished the Gupt khal expedition, during the many email conversations with Harish Kapadia, he proposed:

‘Why don’t you try the Girthi valley next?’

As I researched the proposed route, the romance of it grew on me.

The route through the Girthi valley is a logical shortcut between the Malari-Ghamsali region of Garhwal and the Milam area of Kumaun. But it could never ascend to its potential popularity because of its intractable terrains¹. Only four traverses can be found in the records.

1. Major Smyth - early 1800s²
2. Dr. Kurt Boeckh’s expedition - 1895³
3. Murray’s Scottish Kumaon expedition - 1951⁴
4. Harish Kapadia’s expedition - 1986⁵

Apart from the brief descriptions of Murray and Kapadia, little documentation is available. We decided to follow this rarely travelled Girthi Gorge till the Jaintidhura ridge and then retrace our way back to Malari on the ITBP trail via Lapthal and Sumna.

The team was structured soon. Arun, Bharat, Suraj, Ravin, Shahid and Ritesh had all been with me on many previous adventures. Kalyani and Kaveri were the new members with mountaineering achievements to their credit. Pawan was the only greenhorn.

The first obstacle, procurement of the ‘Inner Line Permit’, required us to spend two days in Joshimath; delaying us by a day right at the beginning!

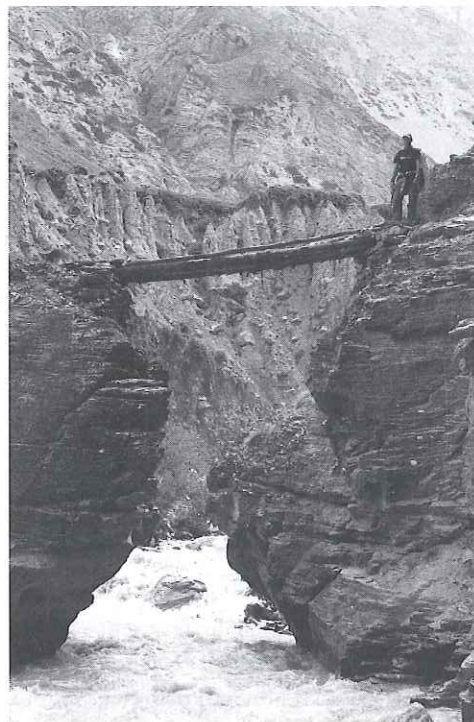
1. (a) Sherring, page 344, (b) Atkinson, page 86.

2. Atkinson, page 324.

3. *HJ* Vol. 45

4. *HJ* Vol. XVI

5. *High Himalaya unknown valleys*, by Harish Kapadia, page 48



Girthi bridge. (Ritesh Mittal)

Stage 1: 12 to 17 June 2011: The Girthi Decathlon - (Malari - Girthi, 31.5 km)

Joshimath - Malari (65 km, 3400 m) - 8 Pt Camp (8 km, 3050 m) - Paani Udiar (5 km, 3500 m) - Dum Paani - (5 km, 3700 m) - Senyurpaani (8 km, 3550 m) - Girthi (5.5 km, 3720 m)

It takes three hours from Joshimath to reach the quaint little village of Malari. We had to spend some time at Malari to get the passes processed at ITBP, arrange for kerosene and to hire the local guide. We ended up

hiring Bhuwan Singh; the oldest shepherd of Malari, fifty years of shepherding under his belt in the vales of Girthi, Kio gad and the plains of Tibet. At his ripe old age of 74, when most others would prefer to mind their worldly chores, Bhuwan was excited to revisit the meadows he used to roam, decades earlier.

It was late afternoon when we set up the camp on the right bank of a roaring Girthi Ganga. The milestone near the bridge said, ‘Malari - 8 km’.

As advised by the shepherds of Malari, we chose a route for the next day that was short but required us to do an unconventional crossing of the Girthi over a natural rock bridge.

Walking on the main road ahead of 8 Pt camp, it’s difficult to miss the large rock lying right at the centre of the river with a red pennant

fluttering on its top. The whole of Girthi Ganga almost disappears beneath this 40-feet high rock with an angry clamor. Two worn out strands of Fiber Optic cables serve as a support for the local users to climb up and rappel down. Thankfully we were equipped adequately to reinforce this contraption with ropes and pulleys.

Immediately thereafter a steep climb commences on the left bank. Negotiating the route through exposed slopes and sharp climbs we finally reached the Siraunch camping ground. There were some deserted sheds and small fields for step-cultivation. These fields were used to grow potatoes and rajma at some point in history.

Another two hours of a frustrating roller coaster trek across the ravine of the Siraunch gad, brought us to the Paani Udiar campsite. When Bhuwan, pointed at the water source in the little cave shelter, we understood why the place is named such. It was a thin stream of crystal clear water dripping from the rock-walls of the Udiar that proved sufficient for our 26-member team!

Paani Udiar has just enough space for setting up few tents in the recess of a vertical wall with barely a foot of space left for moving around. Thick shrubs hide the near-vertical hundred metres drop into the valley below.



Girthi valley. (Ashutosh Mishra)



Rambhakot. (Ashutosh Mishra)

Next day, by about 09.30 a.m., we were upon a high ridge from where we could see the entire route till the road head - the deep ravines separating Paani Udiar, Siraunch top and the road on the far bank of Girthi. Only then could we appreciate the verticality we had managed in the previous day.

From here, one had to go down 200 m to the bottom of the Gangdeopani valley, climb up 400 m till a high point marked by a lone tree. From this 'Tree-Top', the view ahead opened up to reveal the towering rock pinnacles of the Rambha kot group. There was now a visible trail that led easily through sparse woods and ascended gradually to the Johari Kharakspur. After that it is an easy descending walk to the small meadow of Dum Paani. A new campsite had to be constructed here to accommodate our large team.

Starting off after a rest day, we had to do a steep descent and a traverse along a near-vertical wall. Soon Bhuwan pointed to the meadow of 'Haniagaar Lead Mines'⁶ far below; a little meadow of a few hundred metres with a prominent depression in the middle⁷.

6. Atkinson, page 324.

7. Strachey, page 165.

Next came the Atkaraa nala, covered with a glacier at an impossibly steep angle. After some focused step cutting we passed through. A mile ahead was Hada Gadra; a big hollow with a huge frozen glacier, along a steep hillside! It took more than an hour to negotiate this patch. The valley opened up after this to reveal a relatively easy terrain till Topidunga. A kilometre ahead was another campsite near the Sangla Palyo stream.

An hour later we reached the Khangaar traverse; a highly exposed slope of gravel and hard soil that's extremely hard to hold on to. With bit of effort and lots of anxiety, we crossed over. We finally called it a day at Senyurpani Udiar nestled prettily beside a small waterfall. The Girthi flowed tempestuously not very far away, its waters almost black with all the silt it was carrying.

I could not but help thinking for a moment about the strange nomenclature of the campsites in this valley; Paani Udiar, Dum Paani, Gangdeo Paani and now Senyur Paani. Each had *Paani* attached as prefix or suffix. It seemed water scarcity in the valley was not a recent phenomenon. The Girthi traverse is like a decathlon; a series of a variety of challenges. Onwards from Senyur Paani, the river challenges add on. One has to now negotiate and cross fast flowing streams. In fact, from here on, we had at least one river-crossing per day for the next seven days!

After an hour of easy walk by the raging Girthi, we reached the Dudhagarhi nala. The Dudhagarhi campsite is in a jungle clearing nearby. A kilometre later, the Girthi takes an abrupt 90-degree turn through another gate of narrowly separated rock-walls. Up above, these walls are joined by a log-bridge. The route across the bridge leads over the Girthi Dhura pass⁸ and drops to a point called Ruli Bagad on the banks of the Kio gad.

An hour later we were upon the beautiful Girthi meadow. Resting there among the tall grass we could see the ruins of some century old huts⁹ to our left, upon a ridge overlooking the confluence. The history of these ruins went back more than two hundred years, narrated Bhuwan.

Crossing the Girthi was easy. The camp was set up on a pretty grassy flat on the right bank.

8. *High Himalaya unknown valleys* by Harish Kapadia, page 50.

9. Strachey, page 165.



Girthi confluence. (Bharat Tomar)

Stage 2 : 18 to 24 June 2011 : The Tethyan Highlands (Girthi-Malari, 89.5 km)

Girthi(3720 m) – Lower Matoli camp (6 km, 4400 m) – Topidunga (5.5 km, 4500 m)- Unta dhura base (5 km, 4900 m) – Jainti dhura (4 km, 5620 m) - Topidunga (7 km, 4500 m)-Khingar la (5.5 km, 5280 m)- Chudaang (7 km, 4450 m)- Lapthal (11.5 km, 4450 m)- 21 Pt (20 km, 3400 m)- Malari ITBP camp (18 km, 3450 m)

The next morning, the tall fluted ridge of the Kholi dominated the view south. With tufts of baby clouds variously dotted over, it looked majestic in the golden sun.

Going forth, the trail rose sharply for 250 m to reach the Khanagaar meadow, through which lay a gently rising track. For kilometres, a green carpet was spread out with little dots of monsoon blossoms of yellow, white and orange hues; a pretty place, but without any water. After five long hours of walk we found the first watering point. Not far was a beautiful meadow with myriad streams crisscrossing through. It was the Malla Kanda camping ground, the midpoint between Girthi and Topidunga. We proceeded ahead for another hour and found another pretty meadow higher up beyond a fast flowing stream. We decided to camp there at the lower Matoli camping ground.

Next morning, a short scramble of a hundred metres brought us to a ridge top, from where we could see the wide valley leading all the way to Topidunga and the course of Torgad nala¹⁰ meandering in with a giant curve. The ITBP had warned us to be extremely careful about this nala. Luckily for us, the waters weren't high when we reached there. We could cross without fixing ropes. The ITBP post, half a kilometre away, was locked, without a soul in sight. Ahead of the post one can see a large dome shaped rock in the middle of the vast meadow. It did resemble the shape of a large head cover. Legend has it that, the place is named Topidunga (Topi- head cover and Dung- rock) after this rock!

That night we took refuge in the bunker of the post.

It is an easy mule track to Gangpaani from Topidunga. The 400 m rise in altitude over five km takes about two hours to cover. All along the Lanka stream flows on the left, mostly unseen from the trail. Gangpaani has historical importance as a campsite, a much-used staging point for crossing the Unta dhura. We proceeded over the mud flats beyond Gangpaani to gain a better altitude and a clearer view of the Unta dhura-Jainti dhura junction. Camp was at the approximate place where the route coming from Unta dhura bifurcates; one going down to Topidunga and the other traversing up to Jainti dhura; the pass we wished to explore. In the busy days of the Milam-Chitchun (Tibet) trade, one Madho Singh Rawat used to have a tea-stall here¹¹, servicing the passing traders. All that stopped after the 1962 war. The trade route withered away; Madho Singh's tea stall has vanished long since.

Monsoons can be magical in Himalaya. A clear morning in June is often more beautiful than the blue skies and the snows of December. The dawn of 21 June was one such moment. The magic was woven by the interplay of the blue sky, the golden sun, the fibrous clouds, the gurgling streams and the snowlines around us; such spectacles get you lost behind the viewfinder of the camera.

Route for the day began along the Jaintidhura stream, coursing through a valley side of dark-clay! After about two hours of steady climbing we reached a spot devoid of snow with a smooth surface of hard-baked dark-clay. This was the half way mark. The cairn-mark of the Jaintidhura ridge was visible vertically up, 400 m above. At about 5400 m one can

10. Atkinson, page 97.

11. *High Himalaya unknown valleys* by Harish Kapadia, page 52.

see beyond the ridges of Unta dhura. That's when I discovered that the path we had followed was a long-winded one. If we had managed to climb atop the rocky spur near our campsite, we could have had a level trail from the top till Jainti dhura. A little after noon, the entire team reached the Jainti dhura cairn to witness a spellbinding view¹². The focal point on the kilometre long ridge was an old and tall cairn with a flag pole. During the heydays of trading, the flag here would beckon the caravans coming from passes at both sides of the ridge – Kingri Bingri la to the northeast and Unta dhura to the southwest. To the southeast were P. 6120 m and the long ridge line that led to it.

The photo-shoot with the Tricolor on top of that ridge was an experience worth mentioning. There is a different sensation that runs through your being, waving the flag of your nation upon its snowy northern frontiers. Descending fast to Topidunga, we had a brief glimpse of the Khingar la. The perfect parabola of the saddle looked majestic from that distance, the high point of the next day's trek.

Following the downward trail from Topidunga one has to cross the Lanka stream to enter the Sumnolti camping ground. The Dol coming from Khingar gorge and the Lanka coming from Unta dhura meet next to this ground¹³. Within half a kilometre, the sharp hairpin bends start. The trail goes steadily up a massive rock whose top looks like a gateway. Beyond this gateway there is a snow-bridge that spans across the Dol flowing with icy depths. Both Webber and Sherring describe this snow bridge in their accounts written more than a hundred years ago; a permanent natural feature existing on records for more than a century now.

The switchbacks of the '52 bends' (*Kalamatiya Chadhai*)¹⁴ that start after this point have been rendered much more tractable, compared to earlier¹⁵ descriptions¹⁶; probably due to routine maintenance by PWD. The climb lasts for not more than two hours after which it flattens onto a gradually ascending slope. The terrain, slowly and imperceptibly

12. Strachey, page 409-410.

13. Atkinson, page 33.

14. Atkinson, page 97.

15. Webber, page 160.

16. Sherring, pages 344, 348.

becomes trans-Himalayan; a remarkable combination of easy angles, brown rocks, tall mountains, patches of snow and little cloud clusters against the cerulean skies.

During this long trudge to the top, we found the fossils!¹⁷ Strachey had recorded fossils in this area in 1857 and confirmed them to be of Upper Jurassic age --about six million years old! This was one of the most compelling evidence of the Tethys Sea that existed between the Indian and the Eurasian landmass.

It's easy to loose track of time shooting pictures of the surreal beauty from Khingar la. The Chudaang camping ground could be seen from the saddle; the view of it rivaled an oil painting. The descent is easy, along an ancient but well-maintained trail. The picturesque seven km walk finally ends at the naturally manicured lawns of Chudaang.

Crossing the river ahead of Chudaang, the trail rises steeply to a cairn at 4600 m providing a bird's eye view of the Lapthal valley and then descends steadily to the left bank of Kio gad. A careful scanning of the trailside during this descent can yield shapely ammonites for the interested fossil hunter¹⁸. The fossil hunt becomes even easier as one climbs up the right bank of Kio gad to reach the barren brown mounds of Lapthal.

After some looking around, we located the huts of the ITBP post from a high vantage point. A group of soldiers was already gathering there at the courtyard examining us with binoculars. An hour later we were seated like distinguished guests and treated to rounds of packed fruit juices. Special sleeping quarters were provided for the ladies. In no time each member of our team had found some Jawan from his part of India.

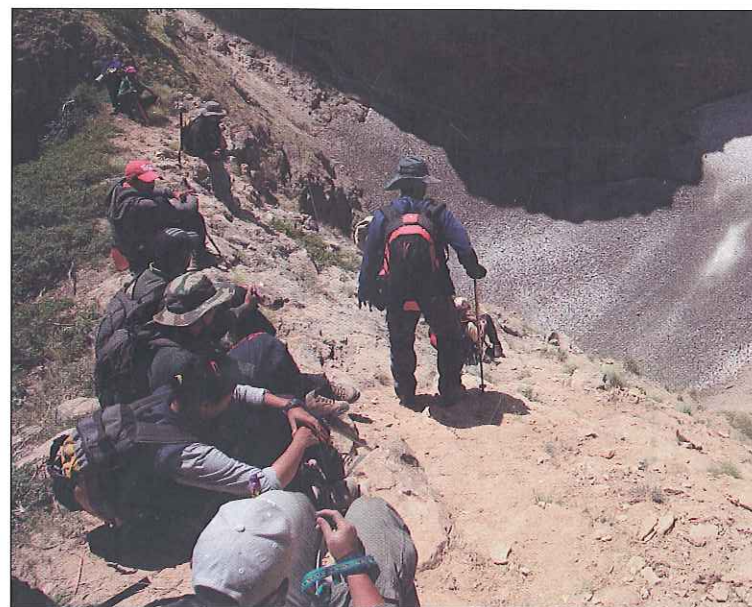
On the last day of the trek and we had to cover the entire 40 km length of the Kio gad valley. The post commander was kind enough to allow us a lift in the ITBP Gypsy car till the end of the motor road; saving us three km of the trek. Soon the route descended rapidly to Ruli Bagadon the banks of Kio gad and followed the river thereon till Sumna. At Sumna, the waiting ITBP Jawans treated us to refreshments of tasty

17. Sherring, page 346.

18. Webber, page 159.



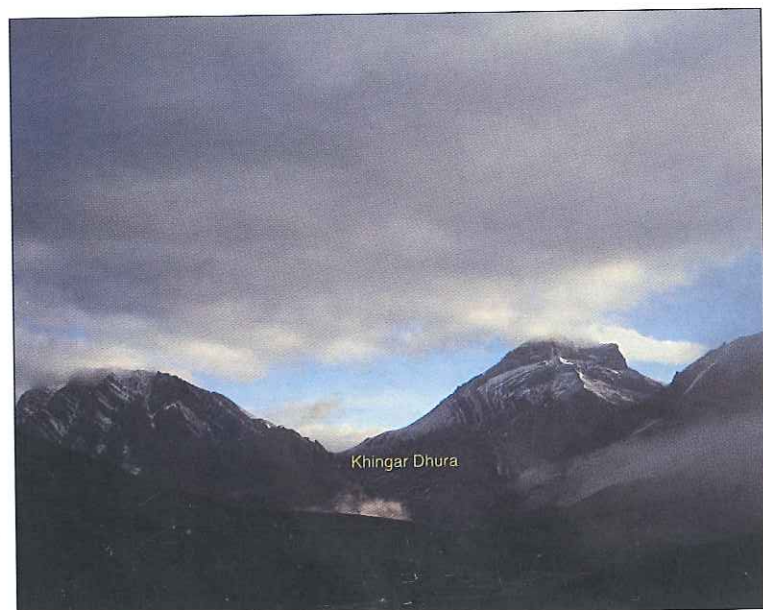
Chudang meadow. (Ashutosh Mishra)



Crossing the snow bridge at Hada Gadra. (Ritesh Mittal)



Fossil. (Ashutosh Mishra)



Khangar la from Gangpaani. (Ashutosh Mishra)

*pakor*as and *nimbu-paani*. The surprise was complete two hours later, when we found a waiting ITBP truck at 21Pt, to take us to Malari.

Our hearts went out to the hospitality we received from that band of 70 men living and doing their duties in most treacherous terrains. The joy one saw in their eyes, of seeing people from their homelands can never be described in words. Bhuwan Singh was the gracious host at Malari village, late that evening, treating us to homemade *Chhang* in his ancient home. He offered me a bottle of special brew as a memento. I shall remember that evening in the smoky hut and that gesture from the old man forever.

Thus ended the expedition to a land steeped with unsung years of human toil and adventure; of tales of discovery, experimentation, survival and evolution. Living with and getting to know people like Bhuwan, a human embodiment of the spirit of that land, completed the experience.

Bibliography:

- Atkinson, E. T. (1882). *The Himalayan Gazetteer* (Vol. 3). Allahbad, UP, India: Cosmo Publications.
- Strachey, S. R. (1900). An account of the 'Journey to Rakastal and Manasarowar in Western Tibet' in 1848. *The Geographical Journal*, XV, 165, 409-410.
- Sherring, C. A. (1905). *Western Tibet and The British Borderlands*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Webber, T. W. (1902). *The Forests of Upper India*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Kapadia, H. (1988). In Famous Foot Steps. *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 45.
- Murray, W. H. (1950). The Scottish Kumaon Expedition. *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol. XVI
- Kapadia, H. (1993). *High Himalaya Unknown Valleys*. New Delhi, India: Indus Publishing.

Summary :

An exploratory trek through Girthi Ganga and Kio gad valleys.