

After an initial short introspective moment, we regained our composure and celebrated our success and communicated with the team back at the base camp on the walkie-talkie. Towards our west we could see the high and expansive summits of Everest, Lhotse and Makalu. Towards the south we beheld the majestic Kangchenjunga and Jannu, in one of their most rarely photographed perspectives. Looking down towards the col, the summits of Dome Kang, Langpo, Kirat Chuli and the Fluted peak now appeared dwarfed by the height of Jongsong. Towards the north and the northeast we viewed the peaks of Kellas and Chorten Niyma, which too appeared as small mountains. Towards the far east the mountain ranges of Chomo Yummo, Dongkhyia Ri, Pauhunri and Shundu Tsenpa showed their lofty summits above the clouds. In the foreground we saw the vast plain of the Janak valley and the Goma chu meandering its way down the valley. Towards the north lay the brown plains of the Tibetan Plateau.

We spent about 40 odd minutes on the summit, before making our way down to the col. By 12.00 noon we had already wound up our summit camp and were ready to descend the east ridge. By the time we hit the glacier bed it was 5.30 in the evening. We dragged ourselves on medial moraine ridges that lead to our Camp 1 location that we reached in partial darkness. I slipped into my sleeping bag in my tent, dead tired but satisfied and contemplated the events that took place over the last five days after we had left Camp 1. All the objective hazards were behind us now. We had climbed two peaks above 7000 m, making two ascents on new routes, all within twenty days of leaving Kolkata and within twelve days of climbing above our base camp. We wound up Camp 1 on 01 October and descended to BC. We finally returned to Kolkata on 12 October, thereby completing a most memorable expedition.

Summary:

Ascents by new routes of Dome Kang (7260 m) and Jongsong East summit (7462 m) in northwest Sikkim by a team from Kolkata Section of the Himalayan Club in September 2012. The main summit of Jongsong (7483 m) was not attempted.

Auden's Trail Through Shiva's Matted Locks

*An Exploration of the Jahnavi - Saraswati Watershed -
June 2012*

Ashutosh Mishra

'Forbidden' and 'Impossible' are the two words that have perhaps been the cause of most adventure, exploration and discovery.

Loving the drive on the winding road ahead of Bhaironghati, on my maiden venture to Gangotri, in the summer of 2000, one of those words had caught my attention. Just when we were half an hour away from reaching Gangotri, a blue and red board on our left announced, 'Nelang-21 km, Restricted Area, Entry Forbidden.' We neither had the time nor the inclination to dwell upon it further on that occasion. However, the words kept coming back much after we were home.

'The place has history!' I realised when I researched the Nelang area later. It is that forbidding valley through which Harrer escaped to Tibet from the British prison at Dehradun. J B Auden in his famous exploration of the tributaries of Bhagirathi landed up in this valley in 1939. He wished to cross over from the Nelang area to the Alakananda watershed through Arwa col but did not succeed. Harish Kapadia and Romesh Bhattacharjee of the Himalayan Club repeated Auden's explorations in the late eighties and documented their experiences with great detail.¹

The Nelang watershed was famous for many centuries for the massive trade traffic between Tibet, Garhwal and Rampur-Bushahair. With Tibet to its north, Rampur to its west and Garhwal to its southwest, it was the 'Himalayan Singapore' in those days. The trans-Himalayan watershed had few villages - Nelang and Jadhag; and one market - 'The Pidiya Mandi', which used to attract traders from far and wide.

Ridges that have an average altitude of about 6000 m bind the Nelang valley. To the north is the Thag la ridge, to the west are the high ridges of Garhwal Himalaya, to the east is the Muling ridge and to the south is the Mana dhar.

1. *HJ* Vol. 42, p. 49; *HJ* Vol. 47, p. 42.

The interest in the area rekindled after finishing the Girthi ganga exploration in 2011. After a month-long research, I was reasonably confident that an easy crossover of the Mana dhar was possible. We did stand a chance of being the first civilian team in history to achieve the objective, the idea of which was created by J B Auden about 75 years ago - a crossover from the Nelang valley into the Saraswati valley in the Alakananda watershed. If we could do this, we would also open a new route between Gangotri and Badrinath; possibly an alternative to the deadly 'Kalindi khal'.

We wished to form a strong team for the exploration. Bharat, Rajesh, Ravin, Kalyani had all been in difficult treks together and were seasoned campaigners. Though Anshuman was trekking for the first time after a gap of 10 years, I was aware of his resilience. But, Kuntal and Anant, the new members were the real discoveries. Kuntal was on a sabbatical from his high adrenalin job and Anant, the young entrepreneur and a die-hard 'Crossfit' fan was de-stressing himself briefly from his business. They were interesting, funny and inspiring in their inimitable ways.

Uttarkashi - Dharali 2650 m (80 km) - Nilapani camp 3950 m (54 km)

After finishing the required documentation for insurance and application for ILP (Inner Line Permit) we went over to Matali, about eight km away, to meet the Commandant of ITBP 12th Battalion. ILP was issued the next day and we left for Harsil by afternoon. After four hours of rain-induced traffic holdup in the Sukhi Top area we managed to reach Dharali just before the hotels were shutting shop.

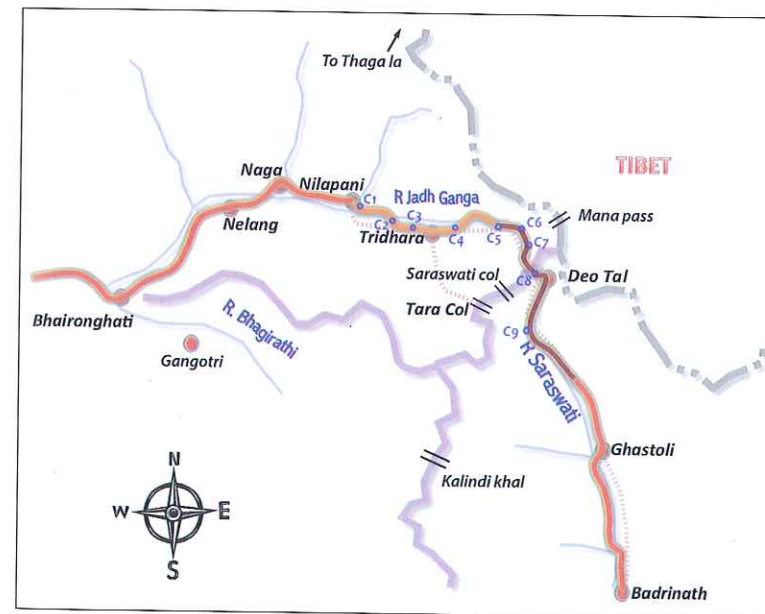
Driving by the Bhagirathi on the gently serpentine roads of the Harsil valley is always a dreamy experience. Before long we were entering the giant bends that leads one to the little *dhaba* junction of Bhairon Ghati and then on to the forbidden area of Nelang. The entrance to the valley is lined with small huts that house the families of the workmen who work on road construction projects inside the Nelang valley. A well-engineered all-weather road has been constructed almost till one of the farthest point in the Nelang valley - till Tirpani!

The Hawa Bend is an area having a thin motor-track built along the vertical face of a rock wall. Mid way through it one can see an interesting looking wooden structure snaking across a sheer vertical

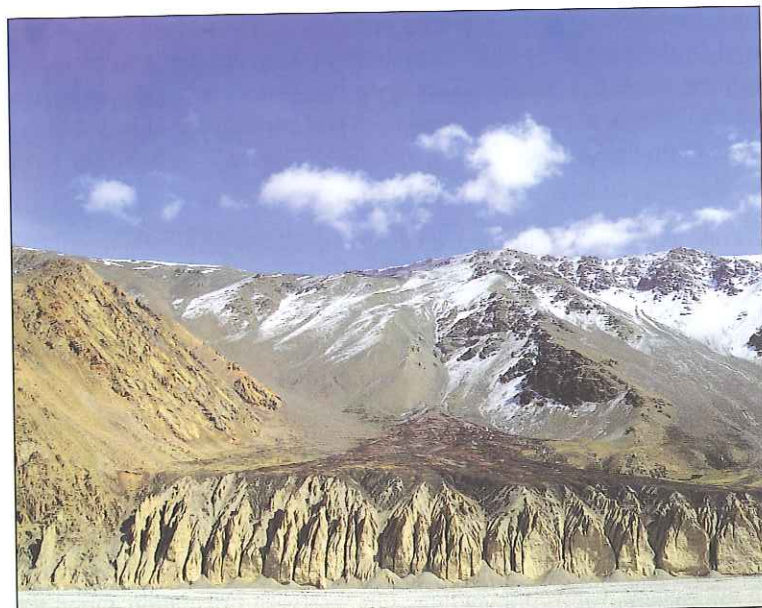
rock face on the far bank. Harrer and Auden describe this part of the trail in their respective books and so do Kapadia and Bhattacharjee in their respective articles. That interesting looking wooden structure was an ancient piece of engineering- a bridge made out of logs that are nailed into the walls of a sheer rock face! The trade traffic from Tibet used to depend on it.

As one looks back along the Jadh ganga valley, Shrikanta stands tall and majestic, guarding the exit. Soon baby pines started appearing on the roadside announcing our arrival at Nelang. An ITBP guard examined our papers and waved us in. We were now deep into the military area. The landscape had become a shade trans-Himalayan; shallow and brown rocky mountains with sprinklings of snow and dotting of green at places.

Nine km ahead of Nelang is the Naga Post where the Tirpani gad and Mana gad meet. Beyond this point our route took an easterly course and moved along the right bank of Mana gad. During the rest of our stay in the Nelang, we would continue this west-east orientation. Good for camping. One would have longer hours of sun! It was midday when we



Auden's Trail Sketch Map.



Ghora dhar seen from Trimukhi nala camp. (Kuntal Joisher)

reached the Nilapani post, where the motor-road ends. Supplies were unloaded and ferried across the river to the campsite.

Nilapani 3950 m - Trimukhi gorge CG 4150 m (5 km) - Trimukhi nala valley 4300 m (4 km) - Upper Ghora gad valley entrance 4600 m (7 km) - Basisi Bend 5050 m (5 km)

We took the crucial decision of following the right bank of the river. ITBP Jawans had told us the previous evening that the trail along the right bank would easily take us all the way to the Tridhara boulder field. Something wasn't ok. All the research have always indicated a river crossing to the left bank at the Nilapani confluence. But here we were, trudging up the right bank where the route was appearing too easy to believe!

After negotiating a nasty descent on a rock about 30 m high, we walked for about four km after which the trail disappeared! The only choice we had now was to cross the Mana gad and hope for a better route on the other bank. The topography on the far side looked friendlier. After an eventful crossover we found ourselves a nice campsite with a visible trail alongside, above the high left bank of the river. Somewhere over

our heads Shri Kailash ruled supreme. We were so near it, the mighty peak was beyond our line of vision.

We had to reach the large boulder visible due southeast and then veer into an easterly course. I was happy to be back on my ever-trusted GPS route. There were no guides here. We were self-navigating a route dangerously close to the not-so-friendly borders of our neighbour. After an arduous climb that lasted over couple of hours we arrived at a flat terminal moraine of a glacier long dead. The route ahead looked quite friendly for a very long distance.

An hour later we were looking down at a wide-open valley from our high rocky platform. The place wore almost Harsil-isque dimensions in terms of width of the riverbed. To our right, the tall summit of Trimukhi Parvat pierced the skies. We decided to camp there an additional day to acclimatise better and manage some load ferries. The walk next day was indeed fun. Rolling meadows spread out unendingly. The Ghora dhar on the far bank wore a thin veil of snow.

Soon we were in the middle of the colossal boulder-plains of the Tridhara confluence. This is where we shall deviate from the documented historical trails of J B Auden and Harish Kapadia. The Mana gad led in from the south to our right, the areas that Auden and Kapadia had explored. The Ghora gad valley, our intended destination was straight ahead. Proceeding deeper in that valley we found a nice campsite, after a couple of kilometres. The Ghora gad gurgled not too far away and the tall walls of the Suraji glacier were faintly visible above the horizon to the east.

The next morning, the skies seemed to be clearing up. We were looking forward to a long-march day that could potentially put us close to the snout of the farthest and eastern-most glacier of the Nelang watershed-the Basisi glacier. Our plan was to explore the inner sanctum of the Basisi (west) glacier and go over the southern ridge wall to enter the Saraswati valley almost near the Mana pass. We needed to get close to this glacier as early as possible, before the weather and the season turned for the worse.

The climb ahead of the campsite involved many nasty scrambles over boulders. After an hour of grueling trek, getting to the river bed and crossing over the not-so-deep Ghora gad we gained the right bank that



Team on the Basisi west glacier moving towards Basisi col. (Ashutosh Mishra)

led us to a lovely meadow with a little shepherd shelter on one edge. We called it – Suraji nala CG (camping ground). On the other side was the entrance of Suraji glacier. The waters of the Suraji nala coming from there had a thick cover of snow. The skies inside the little enclosed valley looked fogged out.

The route ahead of Suraji CG is on the right bank over a rocky boulder strewn area. Ahead to the east we could now see the bounding ridge that defined the eastern extremity of Basisi east glacier; beyond that was Tibet. We could, for the first time, see the International boundary! After a while the route lost altitude and leveled close to the river. The valley widened out and seemed to be veering rightwards, about a kilometre ahead. We were looking at the 'Basisi Bend' - that sharp turn to the south at the eastern extreme of the Ghora gad valley. This is where the shapely Basisi glacier gurgles out its waters into the Ghora gad from its forked formation - the Basisi west and the Basisi east glaciers.

The route on ground was following our well-researched GPS plot with an accuracy of about five m. Few hundred yards further ahead, a lovely site was visible on the far bank where we decided to camp. Today was

one of our longest walks; of about six km. We were back to the true-left, the altitude was now 5050 m and we were within striking distance of the Basisi west glacier.

Basisi Bend 5050 m - Basisi west glacier snout 5350 m (3 km) - Basisi Kund 5585 m (3 km) - Basisi col 5900 m (1.5 km) - Blue Mountain Hollow 5750 m (0.5 km)

As one takes the sweeping turn to the right, going upriver at Basisi Bend, one is suddenly made aware of the relative puniness of one's own being against the Himalayan dimensions all around. It was time to scale some height rapidly. Straight ahead to the east we could see the cairn set by the Army-men. That would lead to the Basisi east glacier-whose eastern extreme was the International border with China.

Within an hour we began a steep climb on the heaps of the boulders that defined the terminal moraine of the Basisi west glacier. The glacier snout was somewhere high above. By about noon we reached a small meadow on the right lateral moraine ridge; perhaps a meadow of 100 m on each side. A small stream flowed silently in the middle emanating from a small field of melting snow pinnacles. The porters' train was



Camp after Basisi col at 5750 m. (Kuntal Joisher)



Saraswati valley seen from the rocky balcony. (Ashutosh Mishra)

moving up laboriously, the Basisi Bend area looking far and deep below them.

The GPS showed the Basisi Kund to be three km away. The route ahead was full of loose scree and was looking to be forever winding heavenwards. Soon clouds started rolling in from the south. Rather than risking a misadventure I decided to camp for the day. The only prayer that went up silently that night was for the weather gods. If we had a few bad days now, all our plans would be up in smoke.

The next day, an hour's snow trudge from the previous camp brought us to a rocky platform where the view of the Basisi west glacier opened up - a massive virgin snowfield, spread over about six square km of pristine white snow. What a view that was! The view of the southern ridge wall opened after another hour of arduous labour. That was the Mana dhar; our ultimate objective. The Saraswati valley and our exit route to Badrinath lay beyond that.

A short walk brought us to a large water body, nestled right below the ridge wall that we were gawking at so far. Google Earth proved

correct yet again. The frozen pond was indeed 160 m long and 60 m wide. This was the first glimpse of the Basisi Kund. The altitude read just below 5600 m.

The morning broke sunny; just the kind of weather one hopes for on the summit day. The route plan was discussed as we geared up for the tough climb ahead. We had to get down to the glacier floor to about 5600 m and then march up till the foot of the Mana dhar at about 5700 m. From there we would attempt a diagonal ascent to the top of the prominent saddle that was plotted at about 5900 m. The cwm of the Basisi west glacier has a lovely layout. It is not too large, gently undulating and all covered with a thick layer of virgin snow. On the one side are the brown rocky walls of Mana dhar and on the other side, lovely unnamed snow capped peaks; a typical cranny of the majestic Himalaya.

We needed to reach the top as soon as possible, before the afternoon weather took over. In spite of the terrible struggle through the loose scree, we managed. The clouds were beginning to roll in when we stood on top of Basisi col - 5900 m. We had achieved our objective.



Steep scree slopes on the way to Basisi col. (Kuntal Joisher)



Getting down from Basisi col to frozen Deo tal in the Saraswati valley. (Bharat Tomar)

Our hands folded in prayer to the great mountain for having allowed us this far.

Ahead to the east we could see the brown hills of Tibet - totally devoid of snow; a sharp contrast with the view south towards the Saraswati valley. The Mana pass looked pretty, far below. A large glacier led away into the Tibet plateau near the pass. On its left bank would be the century old trade route that went to Guge and Tholing Math in Tibet. In all travel writings about this region, one finds the mention of the treasures of gold that used to be in this monastery.

On another day we would be on that path which many a traders, armies and bandits have followed in the heydays of business between Badrinath and the Tholing monastery in the Kingdom of Guge. Jaisingh had already identified a possible route of descent. The route looked good and led us directly to the hollow at the bottom of the Blue Mountain on whose west shoulder we were now standing at Basisi col. The two tarns predicted by Google Earth were clearly visible. They could help set up a camp nearby.

In another hour we set up the highest camp of the trek – at 5750 m. In spite of the apprehension about the proximity of the Chinese border, we were surely a chirpier lot that evening. The mercury dropped ten below freezing that night. It felt good to imagine that Delhi was reeling under a 40° heat wave at that time.

Blue Mountain Hollow 5750 m - ITBP New Jagraon 5050 m (12 km) - ITBP Rattakona 5000 m (5 km) - Ghastoli 3600 m (18 km) - Badrinath 3100 m (20 km)

Now we were homeward bound. The only little issue was about finding out the road. We knew that we were very close to the fair weather road that the BRO maintains till Mana pass. A gentle slope led us to a snowfield from where the view opened up. Saraswati and Balbala were glistening in the sun with many subsidiary peaks in their attendance. The taller stalwarts - Mukut, Kamet and Mana were hidden behind towering outlines of these immediate neighbours.

We arrived soon at a platform from where we could have the unobstructed view of the Saraswati valley to our right and the small



L to r: Saraswati (6940 m) and Balbala (6416 m). (Kuntal Joisher)

bowl of a frozen lake below - Deo tal, the glacial lake that gives birth to river Saraswati. Compared to that, the area towards Tibet looked a drab brown and purple. Soon the team gathered at the shores of Deo tal where we caught up with the motor road that leads to Mana pass. The pass was about a kilometre away from where we stood. It was time for kissing the earth in thanksgiving.

The hike downhill was in double fast forward - we marched for another three hours and 10 km to reach the Army hut at New Jagraon post. The distant reflections from solar panels of the Rattakona post were visible from there - five km away. Next day, the route leveled us close to the riverbed as we approached the vast snow-plains of Rattakona. In couple of places runaway glaciers from adjacent slopes invaded the road. The ice slabs were thicker than seven m in some places requiring us to rely on some ice-craft.

The team grouped at the Rattakona post. As we drove back to Badrinath, the long road leading to Tirpani area flashed before the eyes and also the small bridge at Dumku leading to Chor gad valley. The imagery of clear blue lakes ahead in the valley of Jadhanga beckoned for the next adventure.

But our thoughts also warned of the complex passage through the corridors of bureaucracy to obtain the ILP. All this, to explore some corners of my motherland!

Summary:

An exploratory trek from Jadhanga (Nelang) valley to Saraswati valley crossing a new pass, Basisi col in June 2012.

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In the Shadow of the Elephant

An account of the 2012 Alpine Club Expedition to the Semartoli Valley

Derek R Buckle

Initially we had intended to visit eastern Spiti but a combination of large team size, inappropriate timing and border sensitivities eventually necessitated a change of plan. The new venue that we chose was the Semartoli valley, south of the popular Valley of Flowers and hemmed in by the Himalayan giants Hathi Parvat (Elephant peak, 6727 m) and Ghor Parvat (Mare peak, 6708 m), which dominate the horizon on the road to Joshimath. At the head of the valley, lesser, but nonetheless impressive peaks, such as Barmal (5879 m), Oti ka Danda (5782 m) and P. 5855 m, now believed to be Danesh Parvat, form the skyline. It was one or more of these 5000 m peaks that we hoped to climb from a base camp at Raj kharak, which at 3810 m was just below the well-defined lateral moraines of the Semartoli glacier. Once again we are indebted to Harish Kapadia who suggested the alternative venue and was a member of the 2007 joint Alpine Club - Himalayan Club expedition to the area to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the AC¹. Photos of the area were gratefully provided by Dave Wynne-Jones, who was also an active member on the 2007 expedition, although they failed to prepare us for the complexity of the subsidiary ridges and peaks that we were to encounter on closer inspection.

The trek to base camp began at the Sikh pilgrim centre of Govind Ghat on 19 September. After initially following the pilgrim route on a well-made paved track leading to the holy lake at Hemkund, we finally left the crowds at Bhuidhar when we made the first night's camp just beyond the village. The second day seemed remarkably short, prompted perhaps by the extensive *ganja*² fields at Kargila kharak, but the lost time was recovered on a third long day when base camp was finally established by the Semartoli river at Raj kharak.

1. D. Wynne-Jones, *Alpine Journal*, 113, 167-173 (2008); *HJ* Vol. 63, p. 106.

2. Canabis