

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SMYTHE

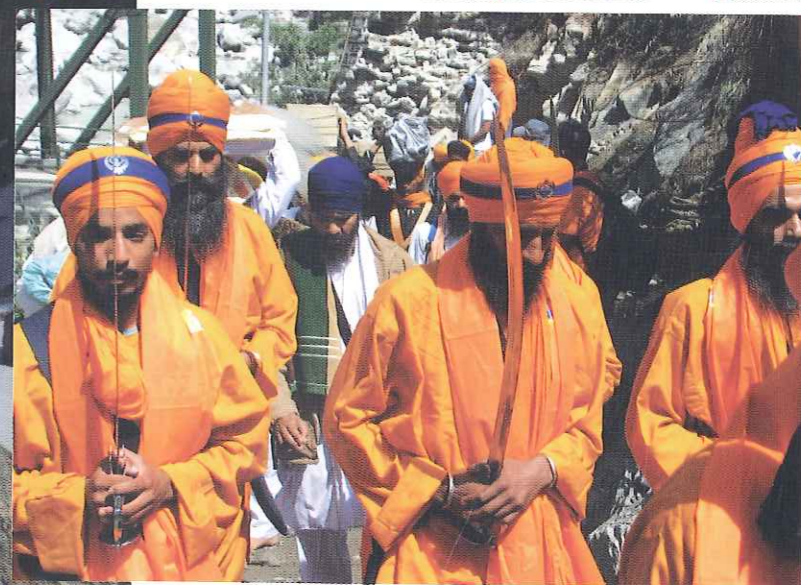
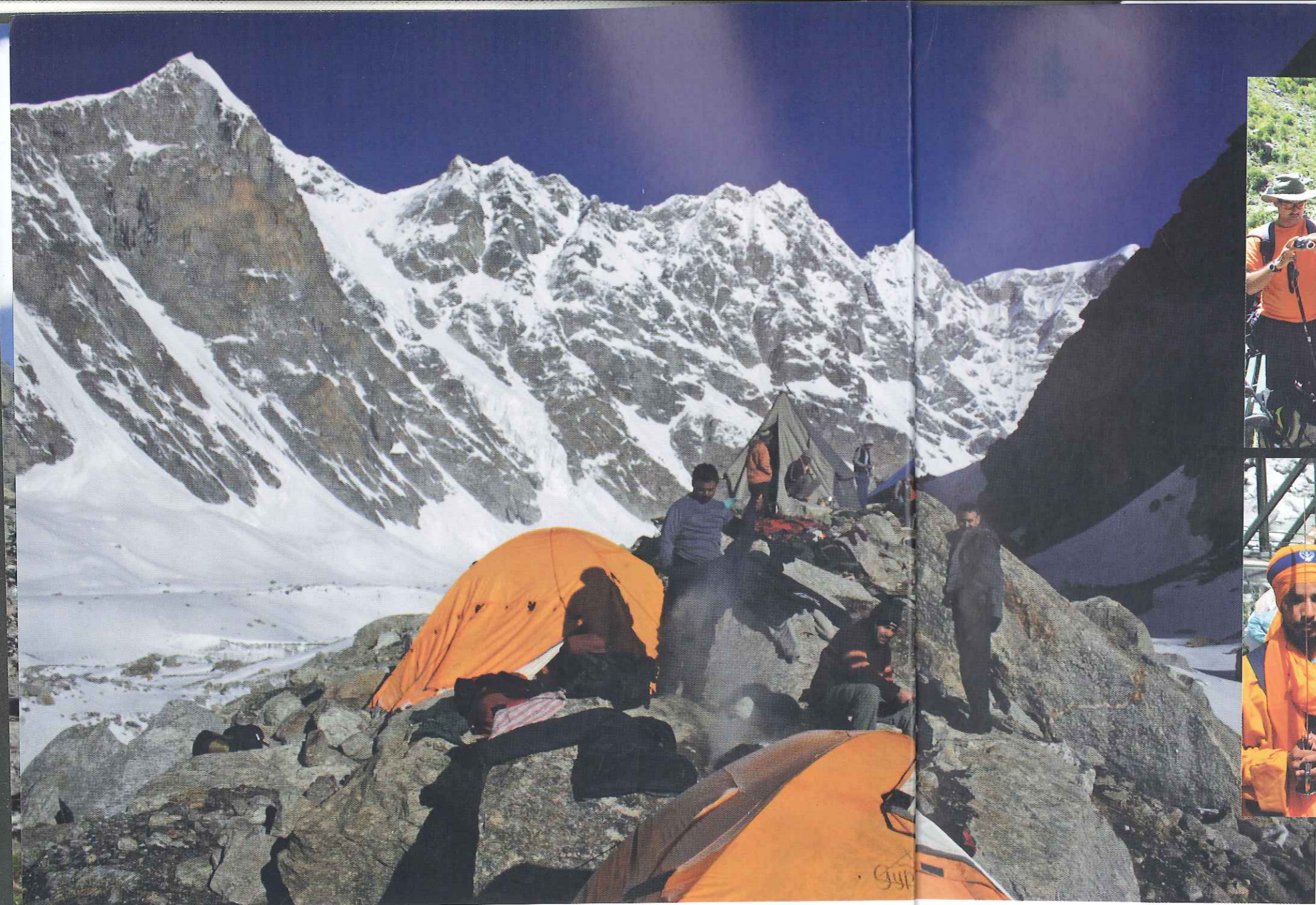
# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SMYTHE

- A trek to the Valley of Flowers & two high passes -  
Bhyunder Khal and Gupt Khal (May/June 2010)  
By Ashutosh Mishra

The expanse of Valley of Flowers. View east from Bamanidaur bend, looking towards Tipra Kharak.

The name Frank Sydney Smythe is synonymous with "Valley of Flowers". The British explorer and mountaineer, after his successful climb of Kamet in 1931 was coming down into the Bhyunder valley when he saw "... splashes of blue, a blue so intense it seemed to light the hillside." The splashes of blue were the primula flowers and Smythe called it the Valley of Flowers. In 1937 Smythe returned to the valley, explored a few high-altitude passes, and wrote about his journey in his book, 'The Valley of Flowers'.

Inspired by his spirit of adventure, I formed a team of eight enthusiasts to retrace the route he followed during his famous exploration in 1937.



Clockwise from left: Bankund bend ridge-camp. Looking North West towards Mandir Parvat ridge; Waiting for the gates to open at the check post to the Valley of Flowers; Procession of the "Guru Granth Sahib" at Govind Ghat on the opening day of the Hemkund Shrine (30th May 2010)

The team, formed in the virtual world of internet, was an eclectic one - in terms of background, location, profession, age and experience in the high mountains. Madhur Lakhani from Mumbai and Vishwanath Radhakrishnan from Bengaluru made it a pan-Indian team. Arun Negi, Bharat Tomar, Ravin Bhatt and Suraj Mal from the NCR were the younger members while Rajesh Jadhav and I were the senior most - in our early forties.

The route we were to follow was divided into two stages. In the first stage we were to trace the traditional route to "Valley of Flowers" and then go beyond "Bhyunder Khal" to reach the Bankund Glacier. The second stage involved traversing the Bankund Glacier upstream, crossing over the hidden pass- "Gupt Khal" and then reaching Badrinath.

#### STAGE 1

Govind Ghat(1700M) - Ghangharia (3100M)(13 Kms) - Tipra Kharak (3700M)(10 Kms) - Bhyunder Icefall Camp (4300M) (6 Kms)- Bhyunder Khal Base (4600M)(4Km) - Bhyunder Khal (5100M) - Rataban(E) Glacier (4500M)(8Kms)

We chanced upon an auspicious beginning at Govind Ghat where we witnessed the rituals of the "Guru's Procession" marking the opening of the holy shrine at Hemkund Sahib. Fighting the usual fatigue of the 'First Day', we reached the Kanjilla Camping Grounds well before sunset. Ghangharia was still 600 metres away, the GMVN signboard said.

Up ahead onto the northwest, the two lofty pinnacles of Bhyunder Gorge became a dark outline as the sun went

down. Beyond that imposing gateway was our target for the next day- the Valley of Flowers.

As we proceeded forth the next day, changes at Ghangharia were a sad surprise compared to what one had seen a couple of decades earlier. Large concrete structures had replaced little shops selling photos and trinkets. The lovely riverside was now replaced with a bustling pony stand. The stench of mule-dung had now replaced the sweet smell of wild flowers. We entered the Valley of Flowers after the usual procedures at the forest check-gate after Ghangharia. As the valley opened up one could see the Rataban Peak onto the North East. The Bhyunder-Khal lay on its northern flank, faintly visible from where we were standing at the entrance to the valley.

A few hundred metres later our trail turned right at

Bamanidaur, and one could see the entire valley stretching eastwards all the way till Tipra Kharak camping grounds. To the west of this point, a sharply rising trail takes one to Khunt Khal- the pass that connects the Valley of Flowers with Hanumanchatti and then onto Badrinath. Smythe used this pass to cross over to Badrinath during his maiden visit to the valley in 1931.

We carried on with our trek over gently undulating trail that leads through verdant slopes from Bamanidaur to the Tipra Kharak. The rise of elevation is so gentle one barely notices the gradient. At the peak of the monsoons, it would perhaps be one of the most colourful walks on earth.

Dotted with bushes of Rhubarb, the Tipra Camp has a very scenic setting- Tipra Glacier to the East, the Khuliaghata



Clockwise from above: Table rocks (we called them mushroom rocks) on the Garh snowfield. The ice-field has reduced about 1.5 metres in level since the rocks came to rest there; Field of soft snow on the left bank of Bankund Icefall just before ascending the Garh Plateau; The Bhyunder Icefall seen from Bhyunder Khal base camp at 4650m

Ridge to the North, The Spatashringi Ranges to the South and the sprawling meadows of the Valley of Flowers to the West. Smythe mentions bears and Yeti footprints during his stay in the area. Even we had various accounts of bear-vision and bear-sounds to narrate about, the next morning.

From Tipra camp, the faint trail to Bhyunder Khal follows the right-lateral moraine of the Tipra glacier. After reaching the point where Rataban and Tipra Glaciers meet, we were to follow the right bank of Rataban Glacier in a northerly direction till we encountered the Bhyunder Icefall.

By lunchtime we reached the confluence point of the glaciers. There is a campsite here with loads of rusted cans lying under the rocks and a bare trickle of a stream. The post-lunch enthusiasm was neutralized as soon as we started climbing the exposed grassy slope on the right bank of the Rataban Glacier. The Ghorri Glacier looked eerie behind us, under the fast-gathering afternoon clouds.

After an hour, on our right, the bulk of the Bhyunder Icefall slowly revealed itself from under a misty haze making us awestruck with the mighty display of raw power! Tons of masses of ice-slabs and seracs tumbling down in suspended animation!

We found a Campsite on the ridge beside a small rivulet of ice-melt almost directly in front of the icefall. We were in our 3rd day into the mountains and the altitude was 4300 metres. Thankfully all of us were acclimatizing fast.

We wanted to gain some distance during the next day so that a base camp could be established much closer to the Pass. The challenge was to get down to the glacier bed and cross its width and then climb up the right lateral moraine of the icefall. The target was a raised platform under the rock buttresses connecting the Rataban and Nilgiri massifs.

Getting down to the glacier bed required some strenuous step cutting and rope fixing. Two hours later we gained the right bank close to the icefall. After another hour of laborious climb we finally reached what we called "The Balcony Camp".

It provided a 360-degree view of the panorama around the Nilgiri to the north, the Valley of Flowers and Tipra Glacier to the south, the Khuliaghata ridge to the west and the Bhyunder Icefall to the east. A low cloud hung everywhere like a false ceiling, filling our minds with foreboding about the oncoming weather conditions.

The next day, we were on a near vertical slope within an hour of starting the trek. At about 4900 metres, the view opened up as wide as we reached a snow plateau. The route that went east was a tricky traverse with some areas marked with rock-falls from above and the slope falling at an alarming angle to our right.

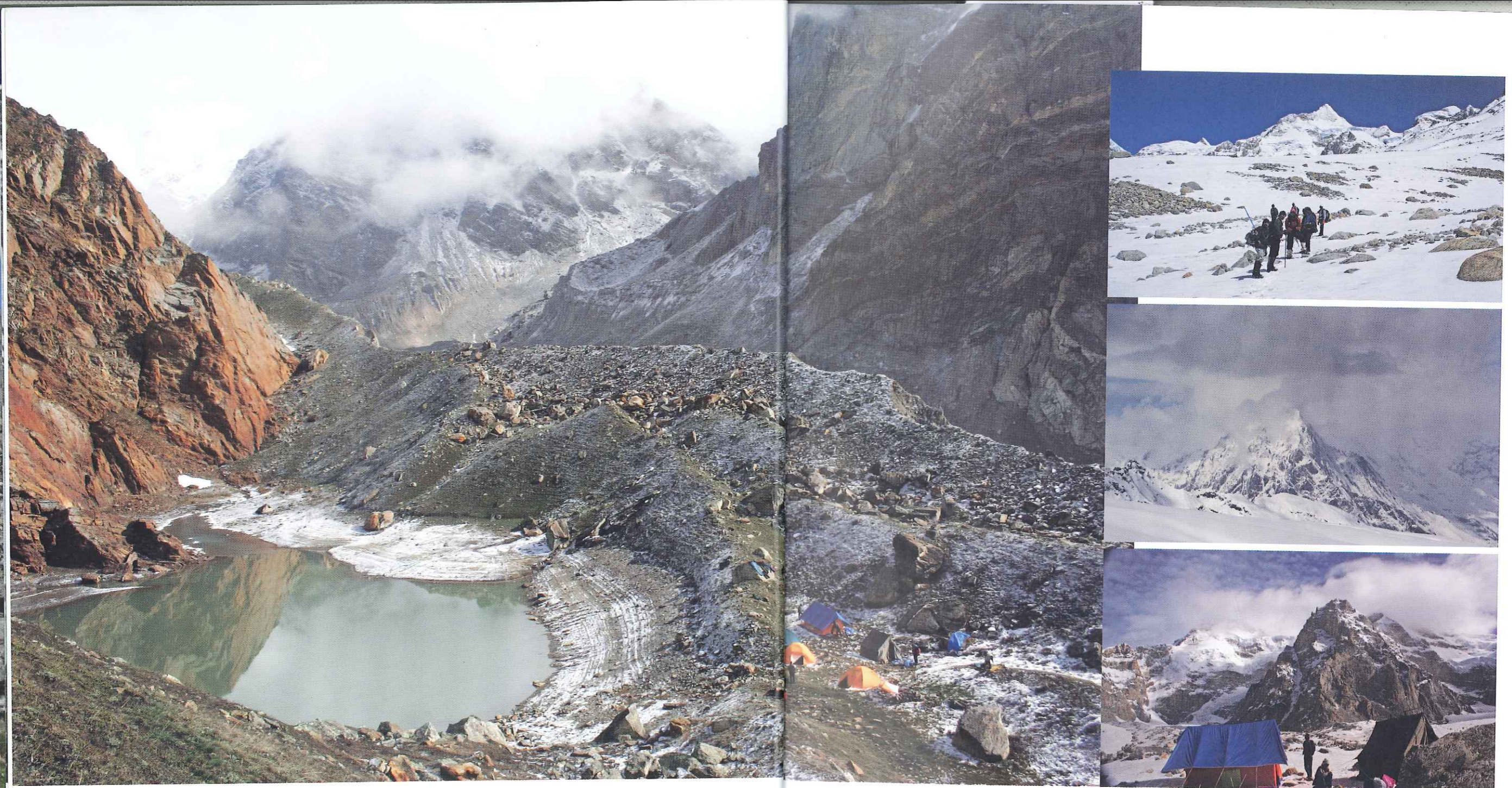
After a few hundred metres, we took a northerly turn and saw a prominent depression directly ahead. The GPS pointed straight towards this depression. It was our first view of Bhyunder-Khal.

We reached the Pass at 1240 hours. Within minutes, a storm hit us, its speed increasing with furious rapidity. Soon came the heavy snowfall and the loud thunderclaps. The altitude read 5092 metres.

In the snowfield below we came upon a long crevasse, which required us to get roped up. The storm abated an hour later, only after we had safely regrouped on the left bank of Rataban (East) Glacier.

We had trekked for six hours and the water supplies were woefully low. We didn't have the morale to cross another six kilometres to Bankkund lake camp before sundown. Tents were pitched on the glacier floor.

Far ahead was a bounding ridge with lofty peaks and hanging glaciers. We could see the Thur Udyar route to Devban Plateau that Smythe describes in his diaries. High



Clockwise from above: The Bankund Lake campsite at 4500m, overlooking the Bankund junction (Confluence of Nilgiri, Rataban and Bankund Glaciers); Kamet (top-left) and Mana (top-centre) seen from snow-slopes on left bank of Bankund glacier; Dark clouds over Mt Nilkanth, seen from Nakthani snowfields; Garh campsite (5430Mtrs), Pk 6977 is to the right of the prominent rock mount in the centre.

above the wisps of misty clouds it was like a paved road leading skywards.

## STAGE 2

Rataban(E) Glacier (4500M) - Bank-Kund Lake (4500M) (6Kms) - Bankund Bend (4900M)(6Kms) - Garh Camping Grounds (5430M)(8Kms) - Gupt Khal Base (5700M)(4Kms) - Gupt Khal (5835M) - Nakthani Snowfields (5650M)(3 Kms) - Nakthani Glacier Snout (4950M)(6 Kms) - Badrinath(3100M) (18Kms trek and 4 Kms drive)

We started a bit late next morning. Starting off on the left bank of Rataban Glacier, we reached the Bankund Junction after three kilometres of easy walk on the left lateral moraine.

It was a vast amphitheatre of a glacier field. The Bankund glacier described a gigantic curve and led on to our east towards Ghamsali. Two other glaciers were joining in at that point. The Rataban Gl (one from which we came) and the Nilgiri Gl. to our west and left. Right ahead in front of us to the North was the imposing wall of the Kagbhushand Mountain.

Somber brownness of the glacier pervaded everywhere made bleaker by the pregnant clouds overhead. Here and there one could see dark-green puddles of glacial pools.

By noon we had re-grouped upon a large heap of boulders on the bed of the Bankund glacier. A new challenge had cropped up. We weren't able to locate the Bankund Lake!!

After extended scouting around, the lake was finally located on top of the right lateral ridge near the Nilgiri icefall; a little oasis of green amidst all that brown.

The grass on the lakeshore was a spongy foam mattress, which allowed us to compensate for the discomfort of the previous nights!

Planning the route the next day, we chose the inviting slope up a gentle gradient on the ridge we were standing upon. After the first bend to the left the vista changed dramatically

revealing a wide valley from whence came the Bankund Glacier. A few hundred metres ahead we came to a point where the ridge ended abruptly, cut in by a steep snow slope coming from above.

The icy slope was highly exposed made up of unpredictable ice and snow. During the next hour, Suraj had an unfortunate slip and was a considerable way down before he self-arrested.

By late afternoon we reached the top of the left bank after a frustrating kilometre of boulder hopping on the glacier bed. We would now remain on this side of the glacier till we reached the snow flats of Garh camping ground.

Thankfully the ridge provided a much easier and faster trail. Soon it vanished into a rocky slope that cut in from above. We were still 800 metres away from the planned campsite, when we decided to call it a day.

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Below: Worsening weather as we approach the Guptkhal ridge (seen faintly behind); Right: Play of light and shadow over Gupt Khal (centre frame)



A bright sun next morning revealed the spectacular panorama around. The wall of the Nilgiri Ridge stood tall across the glacier, its top shining with the first rays of the sun. The shapely Kagbhushand stood silhouetted against the glittering golden of the sun to the southeast.

After some careful boulder hopping in the rocky slope, we emerged on a vast sloping field of snow, extending for several kilometres. The GPS beep indicated that this field was our intended campsite of the previous day. A beautiful campsite probably used by Smythe and Kapadia's teams. The divine spectacle made us forget the travails of the previous days.

The Bankund icefall was the first recognizable landmark, carefully recorded by Smythe in his account. A massive snowfield extended towards left on top of the icefall. Far away was a ridge defining its boundary; a raised mound of brown in all that whiteness. That seemed to be our target—The Gupt-Khal ridge!

If one trained the eyes up in the northern skies, one could see two distinct pyramids. The one to the left was the Kamet, the tallest of the mountains in the Zaskar ranges and to the right—the Mana, both 7000ers. The Mandir massif blocked our view to the West to our left. Devban peak was somewhere invisible above the tall slopes to our right, said the GPS. The Nilgiri with its sprawling arms towered behind us, to our south.

Three hours later, after a long trudge on a gentle slope of frustrating soft snow, we reached the Garh campgrounds at 5430 metres. The Gupt-Khal ridge wore fiery clouds to our far west. The lovely play of light and shadow in the setting sun made the atmosphere surreal.

Little snowflakes filled the air as soon as we started the

walk next morning on the long medial moraine that led north. Our idea was to avoid the snowfield as far as possible and then take a westerly turn to our left, which would lead us straight to Gupt-Khal.

On the giant snowfield, aeons of winds had sculptured the surface into various patterns of waves as one sees on sand dunes in the deserts.

Soon we saw an interesting spectacle—there were rocks, the size of a small car that were robustly resting on thick stems of ice about three feet tall, closely resembling the shape of giant mushroom. Evidently, the entire snowfield had melted and reduced its level by about three feet since the time the rocks came to rest on these fields. Those were probably the times when Smythe came visiting.

An hour later, the snowfall increased in intensity and we had to camp there at the foot of the Gupt Khal ridge, albeit reluctantly.

It was our highest camp in the trek. The worry was not the altitude, for all in the team seemed to be in fine fettle. The worry was about the relentless snowfall!

We had to scale the imposing wall of the Gupt Khal ridge and get on to the other side—our easiest way to safety. We could do that easily but only if the snow allowed us to!

The snowfall finally stopped around 10 in the morning, allowing us the window to start cutting the route and fixing the rope. Within two hours we got an OK from Jaishin, the head guide to proceed for the top.

Strangely, the sky began clearing up just as we started off towards the ridge. It was a near vertical ascent and all of us focused on holding on to the rope and putting our feet on the next step, which was sometimes chest high. We later calculated the climb to be about 400 feet.

At about 1300 hours we reached the top! There was no jubilation or victory cry as one usually finds in such

moments. Everyone was just happy and thankful. It was a mixture of too many emotions, anxiety about the route and weather ahead, the joy of being there at 5835 metres and an utter sense of thanksgiving!

As Negi and Bharat wrote later "We could do it because the mountain allowed us to".

How true! We might conquer and re-conquer the loftiest summits and the most inaccessible cranny of the Grand Mountain; but whenever and however we do it, we must remember, it is an act of permission by the Himalaya. It's not an act of submission, for if it wishes, it can strike off a puny man with the faintest brush.

The panorama from the top was spellbinding. To the North was the route that Smythe had followed over the pyramid of Pk 6600 on his way to Mana. To the south were the Pk 6029, the Mandir Parvat and its two lesser subsidiaries. To our East, the Mana stood tall. The Garh





Gupt Khal (the prominent depression in centre frame) from Garh campsite

camping ground was under the shades of the clouds far away in the south east.

The Alakananda valley and the peaks flanking it dominated the view west. We could recognize the Neelkanth, Chaukhamba and Arwa Tower. To the south-west and north-west were the two glaciers that emanate from the Nakthani snowfields - the southern and northern Nakthani Glaciers respectively.

It was a tricky descent through a near-vertical gully between two imposing rock walls. It was an individual ordeal for each of us as we descended down a route far steeper than the one we used to climb up.

We had crossed Gupt Khal and were now on the highest parts of the Nakthani snowfields. I had never seen anything

so utterly virgin, serene and surreal where the colours nature created such variety of illusions.

It must have been five in the morning when we heard an agonizing cry of pain from the porters' tent and a commotion that followed. One of the porters - Prem Singh had succumbed to his illness on the way down. Shahi had developed severe stomach pain and was screaming in agony. We suspected altitude-related complications and released two porters to help Prem Singh get down quickly.

Soon we were on the boulder filled right bank of the Northern Nakthani Glacier, inches from the dreadful Nakthani snowfall. Afterwards it was a painful struggle on the right bank, filled with large snow covered boulders.

We could locate a campsite where the glacier converted into a thin stream. At about six in the evening, with the snow falling hard, we set up the tents.

Within an hour came the sad news that the sick Prem Singh had succumbed to his illness on the way down. The mood in the camp was that of sadness, frustration, and anger. There was no sign of altitude sickness, nor was there any accident. Having weathered the worst of the weathers and now on our way home, and the end of the trek barely few hours away, we had lost a man!

(Prem Singh succumbed to a punctured appendix as the post mortem revealed later)

We had run out of our supplies and already lost a man. The mountains had struck a decisive blow to the team morale.

We navigated the entire way from Nakthani snout till Badrinath the next day through unforgiving and unmarked terrain, through changing moods of weather and unsure trails that threatened to disappear frequently. After 8 hours and 18 kms we finally reached Mana village at 1700 hours.

News had been pouring in about the latest victims of the Himalayan weather. There had been lives lost at Mount Trishul; a heli-rescue was going on at Mayali pass. We seemed to have suffered the least on account of the unexpected weather. Smythe was correct - the weather in Bankund area, protected by the Zaskar Mountains, is forgiving compared to that in the major valleys of the region.

This was an experience unlike any other that I have experienced so far in the Himalaya. There was a bit of everything - sunny days, avalanches, rock falls, vertical ascents, animal sightings, glacier crossings, near vertical rappelling, crevasse traverses and blinding blizzards! We had our moments of ecstasy and hours of grief.

Just to repeat a route with modern information and gadgetry was such an experience! What romance and adventure would it have been to carve out a virgin route almost a century back, one wonders. It is one thing to read up the Shiptons and Smythe's of the world; quite another to sample even a fraction of that experience.

Perhaps that's what prompted Smythe to write thus in his work - "Kamet Conquered"

".....The successful carrying out of an expedition to the summit of a Great Himalayan Peak depends upon so many factors that it is difficult to enumerate them in order, yet however well planned an expedition may be, and however well the plans are executed, there is always one link of strength unknown in the chain of circumstances, and that is luck. That solitary link may be stretched unreasonably and not break; it may be strong and unyielding or pitifully weak; when apparently strong, it may develop an unexpected flaw, when apparently weak, it may continue to hold. Luck is blessed and cursed, but without it mountaineering would be a dull, mechanical pastime. Luck depends largely on the weather, and what the weather has done, or may do, to the mountain. Bow therefore to luck, accept it and forget it, making sure at the same time that all other links in the chain are as strong as human ingenuity and forethought can devise..."