

TO THE LAND OF SNOW:

A Walk to the Milam Glacier on the edge of Tibet.

- Ahtushi Deshpande

A 24-hour journey in a UP Roadways bus is not the most comfortable way to get to **Munsiyari**, I realise, as I count the numerous bumps on my head the morning after. I had been rudely awakened, several times during the journey - most notably around midnight, when the bus followed in hot pursuit of a rabbit, the passengers cheering on the driver. (The rabbit was eventually caught, put in a sack and locked up in the glove compartment.)

But when I step off the bus in Munsiyari, all memories of the bizarre journey vanish - the five mythological Pandavas stand proud before my eyes, their legend forever ensconced in the five majestic peaks of the **Panchchuli range**. Situated in a remote corner of **Kumaon bordering** Tibet and Nepal, Munsiyari was once a bustling entrepot of trade. On a trekking trail north-west of Munsiyari is the **Milam Glacier**, one of the longest in the region. The four-day trek to the village of Milam at the end of this old trade route to Tibet is dotted with abandoned **Bhutia villages**. In the wake of the India-China war of 1962, trade came to a halt and the hardy Bhutia traders migrated to the towns and cities below.

I am eager to set off on the trek to the glacier. **Mr. Rare**, the KMVN (Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam) manager, is helpful and tells me that his father, **Khem Nam**, could act as guide on my trek.

Khem Nam turns out to be fully 65 years old, a veteran of these valleys. We make a list of provisions and set off shopping at the Munsiyari

bazaar, a stronghold of the Bhutia traders. As I make my purchases, the shop-owner proudly tells me that his daughter and son-in-law hold important IAS posts in Delhi. The Bhutias, who once ruled the trade routes, may have lost their business, but they have retained their enterprise.

It is heartening to meet **Laxmi**, our porter, the following morning. He is a sturdy young man and seems like just the support frail Khem Nam and I need. Rucksacks loaded, we head straight down to the Gori river.

For three days our path first takes us upstream along the **Goriganga**, and then into the shrouded Milam valley where the narrow gorges afford few views. Abandoned Bhutia villages dot our path and I increasingly get the feeling that we are traversing a long-forgotten route. On the fourth day we cross the ghost villages of Burfu and Bilju before we reach Milam.

It is now our sixth day on the trek; it has rained the whole night, and the morning brings even drearier weather. At over 4000m, firewood is hard to come by. Keeping warm is tough, and distraction is the best recourse. The sun plays truant for most of the day, raising doubts about the feasibility of our venturing further up. Howling winds, clouds, bright sunshine and hailstorms chase each other through the skies, and I spend the day moseying in and out of our cave.

We are camped at **Ragash Kund**, a little pond with a shepherd's cave on a grassy meadow above the glacier, where we sit out the bad weather for two days and nights. From Milam village it has taken us a day to get to our current position, en route to **Suraj Kund** which (as I am later told) takes a

detour via heaven because “you gotta be dead first” before you get there. The rains of 1997 caused a lot of damage to the terrain and we are told that no one ventured beyond the snout of the glacier that year. But Khem Nam is not to be deterred. “I know the glacier like the back of my hand, I will find us a way”, he insists. His confidence is heartening – my map does, after all, show a trekking trail, and I am fascinated with the idea of seeing this sacred lake nestled in a far nook of the glacier.

On the slope opposite our camp is the fascinating summit of **Mandayo**, which spirals up into the blue sky like a giant corkscrew.

Slapped with steep cliffs on all faces, it looks every inch an insurmountable peak. To my immediate right the Nanda Pal glacier slopes down sharply. It could easily have been built up as a very challenging ski slope except, of course, for the fact that it ends in a cold and menacing snout with icy waters flowing beneath.

I feel as if I have trespassed on some hidden and forbidden world of beautiful peaks and ominous glaciers. For the locals the glaciated region is one to be feared - a land of demons and spirits waiting to devour the unholy, but for the avid trekker, a journey into what is literally a no man’s land can be the experience of a lifetime.

To see the cold snowy peaks coming to life with the first rays of the sun is simply magical. Getting to **Suraj Kund** is now the task at hand. Entire slopes have, well, slid down, taking with them the centuries-old path. To my untrained eye, the glacier looks impossible to walk on. Luckily, Khem Nam thinks otherwise – he has done a recce the previous evening and is now sure of our route.

After a big breakfast, we set off on the final leg of our pilgrimage to Suraj Kund. It is not an easy path - we hop over stones on landslides and delicately tread on the glacier rubble. The majestic mountains towering all around still look surreal, offering distraction from the fretful path. In all, nine smaller glaciers feed the Milam glacier system, each with its own set of peaks from which they emerge.

Crevasses dot our route as Khem Nam lines it with dark stone markers to help us return. As we walk dead centre of the glacier, the 80m icefall starting from the base of the **Hardeoli and Trishuli peaks** comes into fuller view. The last leg is up a landslide.

I turn a corner and there below, in a hidden nook sandwiched between two glaciers, stand the **twin ponds of Dudh and Suraj Kund** with the stunning icefall forming a magnificent backdrop. I greedily bend down to drink some water from the holy pond - it is the sweetest I have ever tasted.

It is a long haul back and we reached our camp at **Ragash Kund** only after nightfall.

The following morning we return to Milam; by afternoon, the skies are showering down snowflakes the size of my palm. It snows continuously for the next three days and nights, leaving us stranded in the ‘civilisation’ of Milam. Patience is an art well learnt when one is at the mercy of nature. Just when mine is beginning to wear thin, the skies clear. The autumn landscape is turning wintry.

I am out on the path by six³/₄ there is something I am keen to see. Three kilometres down from Milam lie the ruins of Bilju. Icicles hang from abandoned roofs, and fields of creamy snow line

the tops. Facing the ghost village stand the twin peaks of Nanda Devi main and Nanda Devi east. I am transfixed. It is like the view you get from Binsar, but with an 800mm zoom lens attached to your eyes!

I look deeply into its visage, trying to etch in my mind every detail of the vast expanse of the valley

and the forlorn abandoned village, blessed by a goddess no less than Nanda Devi herself. I pay my obeisance, Khem Nam and Laxmi arrive, and we head back towards Munsiyari^{3/4}and traffic.

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