

KHANDEDHAR - ORIGIN OF THE JIWA NAL

The time is five in the morning. I unzip the flap of the tent and peep out. Right before me, the gigantic Khandedhar range appears like an ancient sentinel, shrouded in the raw shades of dawn. The river, Jiwa Nala slithers below like a pale grey snake, winding its way along the deep, dusky valley on the west.

A thick blanket of fog silently creeps into the valley and engulfs the whole area in a matter of moments. Visibility has been reduced to ten metres. Half an hour later, I gasp in wonder. The scene is changing at an amazing speed. The fog is quickly retreating. The first rays of sunlight pierce through the sky, casting a dark silhouette on the white windswept ranges of the Himadri, which lie to our east. As the intensity of these radiant lances of sunlight increases, the valley begins to reveal its splendour. Huge granite boulders gleam defiantly; the serried soft alpine grass on the meadow sways and betrays the whistling of a gentle breeze. And so begins another day among the lofty precipitous ranges of Khandedhar, the source of the Jiwa Nal.

This was the start of a seven day trek that followed a hundred kilometre long circuit through the Sainj and the Jiwa Nal valleys. Commencing at Neuli, where the road-head ends, we would follow an upstream course along the

river Sainj till Shakti. Turning north, our route would go through the high mist-veiled meadows of the Satogni and Khandedhar regions, at last reaching the source of the Jiwa Nal. After a day's rest at Khandedhar, we would follow the river downstream, and via Dwada climb to Subli Thatch that is covered with the melora shrub. We would then cross the Kandi Galu pass, and re-enter the Sainj Valley and would finally be back at Neuli.

The path from Neuli to Shakti was well beaten and went by several waterfalls and through a deep deodar forest. After several ups and downs along the gurgling waters of the river Sainj, we reached the Shakti trekkers' camp in the evening.

After an overnight stay at the trekkers' camp, we geared up for the day. The beginning was auspicious for we received the blessings of the Devta at the village. Our guide was Durga Lal, a forest worker. Only he, a former shepherd, and a few others knew this area well as this route to Khandedhar was rarely traversed and is not marked on the Great Himalayan National Park's trekking maps. There was no trail of any sort, so we bushwhacked our way through the thick undergrowth of ferns and scorpion bush, slippery mulch with rotting vegetation,



Camping at Khandedhar



Brook in Khandedhar

entangled roots, fallen trunks, treacherous wet rocks and countless water streams that made the climb even more challenging. Sunlight filtered through the dense canopy of cedars, kharsu oak, bamboo and ancient moss-laden, wraith-like taxus trees. After an extremely strenuous five hour hike, we rested by a stone cairn, the only marker of the route. From here, the gradient became gentler and the vegetation showed a gradual shift from temperate rainforest to sub-alpine vegetation. We spotted distinct patches of 'dhoop', Jurinea and 'hathapanja'. En route we also came across some megaliths of unbelievable proportions, towering over us to nearly two hundred feet or more. I felt humbled and at the same time awed by their grandeur. After another two hours of moderate climbing, we reached the campsite, Satogni Thatch. After a quick dinner we collapsed into our sleeping bags.

The next morning was cold and foggy. At some glacial debris nearby, we watched a large colony of Indian pikas, typical dwellers of these alpine regions. It was interesting to watch these small rodents scamper about the rocks. Soon we bade farewell to our alpine friends and got going. Our legs, which had received a real beating the day before, could only carry us slowly. The slopes now became steeper, the air grew correspondingly thinner and the climb became harder. After an hour's demanding hike, we suddenly touched level ground. This, as our porter Lal Singh informed, was the Santogni Galu. After crossing this we would finally enter the Jiwa Nal valley, through the gorgeous meadows of Khandedhar. The altimeter

read 4,430 metres and this was the highest point on our trek. This small rocky pass had some patches of hardened snow with no vegetation except some tiny clusters of hardy weather resistant herbs.

After a short descent through a maze of moraine, we came upon the astoundingly beautiful meadows of Khandedhar. The gently undulating meadows stretched a mile in front of us, enclosed on two sides by gently rising slopes and the Satogni Galu on the third. A brilliant riot of yellow, purple, red and blue flowers spangled the meadows completely enchanting us. After joyously tramping through these silky grassed grounds, we descended to a large level area, the size of a football field. It provided with an excellent view of the Jiwa Nal, no more than a small rivulet here, and a grand vista of the valley opening towards the west. As it was already evening we decided to stop for the day there and pitched our tents.

We rose to a brilliant morning. The sun majestically shone upon the source of the Jiwa Nal, heralding a great beginning to our day of rest. After a late breakfast, most of the party just lazed around. I did some sketching and had a good look at my surroundings. Before me stood the massive barrier of the Khandedhar range, beyond which lay the Parvati valley. It was almost a vertical wall of sheer, craggy, fog veiled slopes, towering nearly a thousand feet above the river. Below us, several small streams from the



Brahma Kamal in Khandedhar

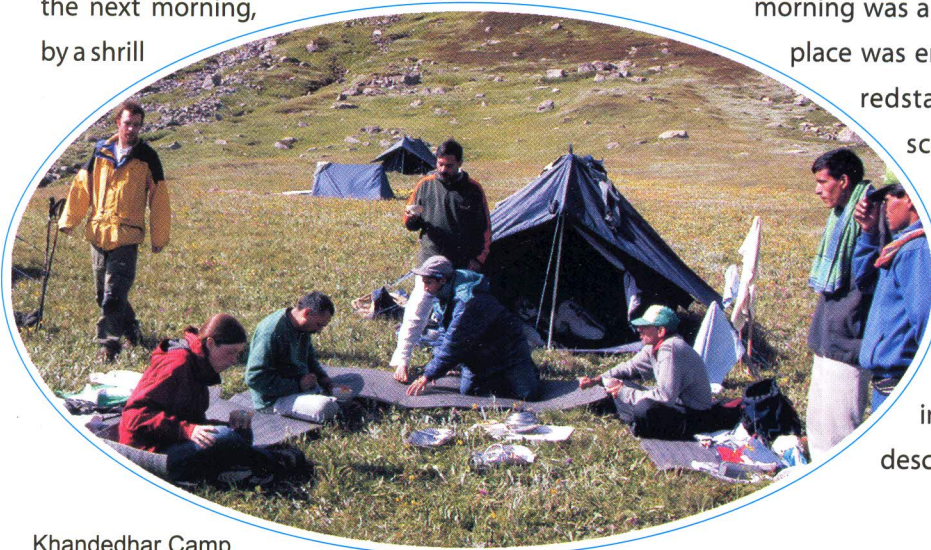
eastern snow-capped mountains merged together to form the Jiwa Nal river. The river gains volume as it receives the waters of several nullahs downstream, notably the Dwada Nala and Guddum Nala. The vegetation around consisted of diverse alpine grasses, rust-coloured juniper and rare herbs such as 'hathpanja', Daclorhiza hatagirea, 'brahmakamal', Saussurea obvalatta and the beautiful Himalayan blue poppy, Meconopsis aculeate. Towards the west, the valley gradually deepened, and was covered with thick woody shrubs and 'bhojpatra', birch trees. The higher reaches of this region are considered the realm of the Himalayan Tahr and the snow leopard.



Crossing the glacier in Khandedhar

Crossing the Jiwa Nal was quite an experience and then, we passed by the charming little glacial pond called Sartoo. The path ahead was precarious. At several places, it had been washed away by cloudbursts and we literally had to cling to the adjacent rocks for our transit. By noon, we were at Dwada, a photogenic meadow on the riverside with a forlorn patrolling hut. We had now entered a region of evergreen forest, with closely spaced trees of oak, taxus, Himalayan fir and rhododendron. Our evening halt was at Suli, a three hour climb from Dwada. This place is delightfully rich in the population of endangered animals such as scrows, brown bears and ghoral.

At dusk, Providence gifted us a rare opportunity to listen to the calls of the elusive Jujurana, Western Tragopan locally considered 'the king of birds'. I was awakened quite early the next morning, by a shrill



Khandedhar Camp

cacophony of birdcalls: warblers, monals and koklash all chattering noisily, like a vibrant orchestra without a conductor. That day we made an exit from the Jiwa Nal valley and re-entered the Sainj Valley, by crossing the 362 metre high Kandi Galu notch. It provided an unbelievable panoramic view of cascading green ranges, dotted with pretty villages. Even the far off Shangar meadow was clearly visible from there. The local porters offered flowers to the deity guarding the pass and burned incense. Ahead lay a very steep descent through a pristine forest of birch, oak and fir in which we would drop nearly 2,700 feet. At Guddum Nala there is a vibrant cameo of a meadow with a crystal clear emerald pool and a deodar forest.

Our final night was at the pretty village of Bagi-Keshari, surrounded by ancient sacred groves. The next morning was a real treat for the bird watchers, as this place was enlivened by vibrant flights of minivets, redstarts, and a stately Griffon vulture, scrutinizing its territory. We passed through several picturesque villages on the trail, which blended perfectly with the unprecedented beauty of this lush green valley. Finally, after visiting the pagoda style Manu temple in Shenshar village we made our last descent back to Neuli.

- Abhimanyu Pandey

