

My Yatra - Mansovar

Why does one knowingly go on a long and tough trek like the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra?



There are two main reasons-one is religious fervor (this being the ultimate in pilgrimages where a Hindu is concerned), and the other is the love of trekking through picturesque places to reach a beautiful place and the challenge of accomplishing a difficult feat---and a rare one at that!!

Ever since he read about **Kailash** and **Mansarovar** in Geography, my husband had decided he would get to this place on the roof of the world some day! As for me, I had no such urge and after last year's tragedy of Malpa where about 200 people had been swept away in a massive landslide, I had thought this was one place I would never attempt! But destiny must have laughed at me all the time. I became part of the XIIIth batch of 1999!

I started with a lot of apprehension in mind. Meeting a few people allayed those fears a bit. But I had just about convinced myself that all would be well when a landslide happened and a girl from the IXth batch was killed! Now it really seemed like we were asking for trouble by planning this trip-that area is always prone to landslides anyway! But my dear husband was determined to go anyway, so it was a choice between staying back and fretting for a month or going along. They say if you can't fight them, join them! So that is what I did. Frankly, I even hoped it would get cancelled, but it did not! So here we are, back in one piece, with an experience that very few can boast about, and a lot of photographs to show!

We were a large group of forty, who travelled a rough and tough path together, for 27 days! The Liaison Officer is the leader who also has the right to send you back if you do not behave! This turned out to be quite an exercise of National Integration. About 50% were Gujaratis, while the rest of us were a smattering each of people from the South, East, West and the Centre. **Food rations had to be carried for the 7 days of the Parikrama in China.** This is something one does not understand, because we pay \$500 to the Chinese Government for our 9-10 days stay there. Only during our stay in Taklakot, which is the town near the border, are the meals provided, which is 3-4 days

The Journey Begins

We left in two buses, for Kathgodam. From the time we left Delhi, we were guests of the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (KMVN). Very warm hosts all the time. The only disappointment was that though they gave us hot and wholesome meals, they never changed the menu!

After Kathgodam, starts the scenic drive, because now we are in the hills. Another 2 days of hill driving, stopping one night at Bageshwar, took us to Dharchula. Just before Bageshwar, we stopped at a very pretty, antique temple called Baijnath. An interesting aspect of this temple was a particular stone. Legend has it, that this stone, can be lifted only by 8 men--they collect around it, place the tip of one forefinger under the stone, give a gentle push and the stone lifts effortlessly! No doubt the men in the group experimented and lifted it. One tried to do it alone but was not successful (only because it was too heavy!). Women are not supposed to touch it!! Ha !

Before reaching Dharchula, we had lunch at a place called Didihat which is known for its glorious view of snow peaks all around. Unfortunately, we got to see only clouds, and no peaks! By now we had started traveling along the Kali Nadi, across which was Nepal--and this goes on all the way till we reach the Chinese side.

Camp life started at Dharchula! Dharchula is one huge shed with 40 beds! The section for ladies, was cordoned off by a curtain. The toilets were a little away. We had running water, but there was no light. Having settled our bags by our beds, we walked up to the river, which was very inviting, and so refreshing after the camp--you could see the river and the scenic view around. Then we decided to go to Nepal, which was across a bridge! Emergency shopping was done in Nepal. What we were tempted by, were the huge, but crisp 'khiras'(cucumbers) and the tender corn. On our return to the camp, it was swarming with porters and horsemen. Not only were these allotted to each yatri, but so were cooks interviewed and selected by the Food Committee.

When everyone was, so to say, 'retiring' for the night, the whole place resembled a railway station, with people talking loud, baggage being packed and dragged, swamis chanting, and so on. Next morning was an interesting sight. All bags were packed in huge plastic bags, secured with thick nylon strings and placed near a huge weighing scale, waiting to be weighed. Each one's bags were weighed. Anything over 25 kilos, is charged extra by the KMVN, before it is loaded on to the bus. Two ladies in particular had almost double the weight, out of which half contained food items. So they had to pay a neat packet, though I must admit all of us benefited from their delicious farsans!

Starting the Trek....

Among chantings of '**Har har Mahadev**', we left Dharchula to drive along the Kali Nadi to reach Mangti, which is where one starts walking from, and where the horses and porters meet you. Here we met the IXth batch returning from their yatra (these were delayed because of the misfortune of losing a yatri in a land slide accident). It is a wonderful feeling of fellowship when two batches meet. Loud greetings of '**Om Namoh Shivay**' and '**Har har Mahadev**' are exchanged before the ongoing group bombards the returning group with questions. A young girl I was chatting with gave me her walking stick, which I took considering it good luck and she was happy to have someone use it! I spoke with a gentleman from Kanpur, who had done this for the second time after a gap of 15-20 years, I think, who felt that Kailash and Mansarovar were no longer so, 'untouched'!



Thus started the 8 kilometer trek from Mangti to Gala. This was a steep climb, but not impossible. No dearth of greenery here. Since there are big trees along this track, there is a plethora of ferns and moss. We reached the camp to be greeted by a cold drink by a smiling KMVN employee. That night we had a kirtan session followed by a poem recitation by the manager of Gala, Mr. Durrani. This was something he had written after the Malpa tragedy the previous year. The weather had become quite dismal and drizzly by now and it was an effort to walk up to the dining hall, which was at a little distance. But the greater incentive to walk in the drizzle was the telephone-- here we had our first experience of using a satellite phone. And it was pretty cheap too. Our call to Delhi was only Rs 15!

Buddhi to Kalapani

The first 3kms from Buddhi to Gunji (third day of the climb), was a steep stony climb to Chialak Pass. Being the beginning of the day, it was not as bad as it could have been if it was towards the end. The walk from Chialak, was pretty level. We were quite excited, when we passed an army bunker with jawans sitting in it, and outside it. The ITBP had arranged tea for us along the way. This lap was one of the most pleasant stretches of the trek. Grassy meadows of grass and flowers. A Valley of Flowers! Next we came upon a village called Garbhian. This village used to be the center of trade at one time and is made up of a cluster of stone houses. Some of the yatriks were carrying earrings, necklaces and other trinkets, to distribute amongst the village women and children, who were thrilled to receive them.

Another 2 hours of walking and the camp was visible on the other side of the river. We thought we had reached. But, the road turns and twists in such a way that Gunji (the next camp) was still far away! In most places the village, if any, was always a little away from the camp, but here you enter through the village. And that was nice, because this was a quaint village, with cobbled streets! The houses are dark and have a little bit of carving. Gunji was to be one of the favorite camps. One good thing was, it had a few taps outside, and the sun was shining, so guess what most of us did? Washed our clothes and had a bath! This is also where you have a final check up by the ITBP. So four o'clock onwards, saw the XIIIth batch trooping to the doctor's office, armed with medical reports. Once again there were smiles all around when everyone was given the Green Signal. And the reports could now be packed away to be got out only at home!

Bags had to be packed again, because we had to get out the winter wear and pack one lot to be left behind at the next stop, Kalapani. Never did understand what caused the name of this place. Throughout the trip, there is a lot of packing and re-packing done every second day. But many thanks to our young porter, who taught us how to pack such, that we did not have to open our big bag every day! Here I have to say a word about the porters on our Indian side. We called them our shadows. They never left our side. My husband's porter Navin, had also learnt to use the

camera, and pack his ruck-sack every evening. As for my Hariram, he was a quiet one. Sometimes when I thought he was not around he appeared, hand extended, if I seemed like I might trip! When I was on horseback, he kept pace, and towards the end of the trek, knew from my expression that I was going to ask for water, so had it ready for me, before I asked! We really have no words to express their devotion. I suppose they spoiled us so much, that it made it difficult for us to get used to the diametrically opposite attitude of the Chinese porters later!

Reaching the Chinese Border

From Kalapani we started for our last stop in India, Navi Dhang. Besides that, Navi Dhang commands a glorious view of Om Parbat, the top of which has natural grooves, etched like a big 'OM'. So when it snows you see a big, white, OM inscribed in it. As we neared it, it was covered in clouds, but we did not lose heart, as we had the whole day to spend in Navi Dhang.

We reached Navi Dhang, cooled down with a Rasna and settled down at a spot facing Om Parbat, willing the clouds to lift, they did oblige. Suddenly there was a joyous cry from Alli calling out to everyone to come out and look at Om Parbat. Cameras clicked all around. But there was one snag-- there was no snow on the mountain! Beggars can't be choosers! We could still see the OM, if we looked carefully, and that is how we consoled ourselves. We hoped we could see it in its full glory on our return--there was enough time and the likelihood of snowing was very strong. Here, we had to hand over our exposed films here, and leave the place at 2 am, the following day. This was the tough part. Leaving at 2, in the dark, with torches in hand was bad enough, but it was drizzling and extremely cold. This was the most nerve-racking part of the trek. As I was telling someone, most of us were moving 'ghodewala bharose' and the few who were on foot, were 'Ram Bharose', or rather 'Shiv bharose'. There is no proper path on most of this stretch, and even if there is, we could not see it. Here is where you are totally dependant on your porter and horseman. Once again I wondered, as to why I had undertaken this difficult task! Then they decided to take a 'rest' break on the way, which was really bad! We were so cold and wet, and there is no shelter under which you rest. We just stood in the open where it was wet and windy and were frozen to the bone. In fact this is something one needs to suggest to the ITBP. Every group has to go through this kind of thing, which means about 16 batches each year. Why can't there be a shelter half way and at the Lipu Leh Pass, where one has to wait for more than an hour sometimes? They had a small tent mid-way, which was so suffocating, that those who managed to go in, came out of it as fast as they could. This was by far the most difficult stretch in the whole trek, because one was cold, wet and literally 'groping in the dark'. The 'rest' is no rest, because you have to keep moving to avoid getting stiff from the cold. Climbing on and off the horse became more and more difficult because of the stiffness. In short, it was the most awful, awesome and tiring part of the trek. The altitude was making one sleepy. I was most perturbed, when, sitting on the horse I was dosing off! I could not quite understand it, till I compared notes with some others, who felt the same way. And that, can be dangerous-- if you go to sleep on horseback! We finally reached Lipu Leh Pass, which is at a height of 17000 ft. above sea level. This is where we were to cross the batch returning from China. Both batches have to cross together at a specified time speculated by the Chinese. Unfortunately, we reached much earlier. We kept waiting for the signal from the other side, but it never came. The forty trembling (no exaggeration) yatrīs, with more than double the number of people in way of porters and horsemen, almost numb with cold, wondering what fate had in store for them! After an hour or more, the ITBP doctor who was accompanying us decided that if we stood there longer he would have 3-4 frozen casualties on hand. Orders were given for us to start moving back. With a heavy heart we started moving downwards and had gone down about 10 minutes, when we heard cries of, 'har har Mahadev!' So back we trooped excitedly and literally rushed across the Pass, barely saying goodbye to our porters and horseman. Our good hosts from the ITBP and KMVN were fortunately lined up so we did not have to hunt for them. We just

rushed down the slope hoping to get warmth as soon as possible, with our rucksacks on our backs. What we did not know was that we were entitled to horses, courtesy the Chinese. The horses were visible and some took them, but paid for them! The Chinese guide who met us, should have told us about it, but he did not. We were in so much of a hurry that we hardly noticed the 11th batch which crossed us. Anyway, we needed some solid warming up after the blizzardly experience!

And on to Taklakot

From Lipu Leh, we trekked about 7 kms, to a waiting bus and a land cruiser, with two guides in waiting-Biroo and Poorvu. The bus took 35 passengers, while the rest of us were in the land cruiser. Thus, the drive to Taklakot began. The 'roads' here, were mainly on the hills, which were actually paths, while the rest was plain land and one could drive on the rough surface as one pleased. Talk about contrast-- here the landscape was stark and muddy looking mountains, with snow peaks in the background, and a large expanse of flat land to drive on. What we had left behind on the Indian side, was stony terrain with patches of green, a gushing river all along, and snow peaks in the background.

Soon we came to a river, to be crossed. Our guide obliged us with the 'heartening' information, that the previous batch had got delayed, because the path on which the bus had to cross had got washed away! So they had to get off the bus and 'pave' a way with stones before the bus could cross! You can imagine what that did to our morale! I was in the land cruiser behind the bus. The bus swayed at such angles that we were sure it would over-turn. We were screamed at our guide, saying, that the passengers should be evacuated before crossing, but he merely continued to smoke and smile! Could not believe that they had passed without any harm to anyone! Did make us wonder what else was in store for us!

The 'full' bus was stuffed with some horsemen and their equipment, en route. Finally, we reached the Purung Guest House in Taklakot--the base on the Chinese side. Along with men, Chinese women dressed in western dress, make up and all, looking pretty smart got busy in unloading the baggage and carrying it to the rooms. The toilets were far away and primitive. Nowhere did they have running water--sorry, they had it in the bathing area, where the water was off most of the time! A gong is sounded (actually a metal container beaten with a rod!), to tell us that meals were ready. The meals were vegetarian Chinese, which were duplicated from meal to meal. What we enjoyed most was the tinned fruit served generously (only on our return stay did we discover that it was way beyond the expiry date!!).

A lot of washing was done before bathing in the icy cold water! Next day we took a walking tour of Taklakot and thought we might find some local food. Saw many restaurants, rather dhabas, but language proved a problem and the Chinese did not even attempt to understand us, so we came right back. Currency had to be exchanged, of course, through Biroo, who seemed to be guide, bank, interpreter, et al. Without Biroo and Purvu, we could not communicate at all, since nobody knew either Hindi or English. And that included the manager. Taklakot has electricity at night, but most of the bulbs have no switches. So you sleep with a lit bulb glaring at you the whole night. The second day in Taklakot, the toilets did not have water for the major portion of the day. I went looking for help and found someone in the kitchen. I used very graphic sign language, but instead of trying to understand me, he looked at me with great disgust and kept saying, with a dismissing wave of his hand, 'huh! huh!' as if to say, 'shoo! Go away!-- Like we would do to unwanted dogs. It was very humiliating. Next, I went to the manager, who was just as rude. One realized now, that the stories about their attitude, was no exaggeration.

You pay the Chinese Government \$501 (supposed to be \$500, but there is no explanation for that extra dollar-one dollar is equivalent to more than eight yuans). But they seem to do us a favor by letting us enter. Did not seem like

the porters and horsemen had any other means of livelihood, even then they don't care if you are not comfortable. It was very disheartening. Biroo was supposed to help us procure utensils for the parikrama, but he kept dodging us. He ignored the LO's messages, till she had a brain wave and sent him a message saying there was a message from India. And that worked! There was a show down where our LO justifiably lost her cool, and only after that did they make some attempt to solve the problem. We ended up buying one pressure cooker and decided to make do with the rest of the shabby beaten up utensils. Why all this drama, one fails to understand. There are 16 batches that go every year, so why can the kitchens at the camps not be equipped with these 4-5 utensils and 2-3 tools? Not only have that, none of the stoves they give you, worked efficiently. They need the managers to light them, and the manager does so at his own leisure.

Closer to Destination



Left Taklakot, driving past mountains which looked like giant ant-hills! There were a lot of caves in these mountains, in which Buddhist monks are supposed to spend two years, with one attendant to look after their needs, so they do not need to come out for anything. We had been going along this dreary and muddy road for about 2 hours, when suddenly there is an excited cry- Kailash Parbat had been spotted! Chanting started again, and some felt very emotional.

In front of Kailash was a beautiful blue lake, which was the beautiful Rakshas Taal. Different shades of blue with Mount Kailash as a back drop. Rakshas Taal is supposedly the lake where Ravan prayed to Lord Shiva, before attaining his powers. Some therefore believe that one should not drink this water, nor bathe in it. Don't think any of us believed so, though. The enterprising ones went forward and washed their face and waded in the water, but I was too lazy to go much further. The drive had been very dusty and bumpy (no roads) and I was not in a very good mood, and wanted to 'get on with it'. We arrived at Zaidi, from where we were to split into the two groups, one to Kailash and the other to Mansarovar. Here we were welcomed and treated to tea by the XIIth batch. That day was their free day at Zaidi before they started on their return journey. A very peppy lot compared to ours--I suppose they were about to start off on their return journey! Luggage was sorted out between the bus and a truck--yes a truck! Fortunately, ours' went into the bus, while the Kailash Group luggage went into the truck.

We arrived at Hore to a mud structure with 2-3 rooms with 5-8 beds each. From now on, till Darchen, there are no toilets. This was the first place where we had to operate our own kitchen. No welcoming cuppa here! And when it was

made, we had to take our own glasses and go to the kitchen for it. **Oh, for KMVN! The luxury of the tea coming to you, and not you, going to the tea, was to be forgotten for some time!** There is a manager at each camp, who also has a shop selling snacks, cold drinks and knick-knacks. The manager took his own time coming to operate the stove, so we had a long wait before our soup was cooked!

Mansarovar



Alli's orders had been adhered to and we were out and ready at 5 am to get horses and porters allotted. There was a curious mixture of men, women and child porters, which was a little difficult for us to take. After a lot of bargaining and blackmailing by the contractor we had to accept the children. All this took two hours! Soon we realized that even though we paid separately for horses and porters, one person's horseman was another person's porter. Porters are usually supposed to walk along with you, but here you don't see them till you reach the next stop. Too bad if you need your water or raincoat on the way. None of them spoke English or Hindi, so we had to use sign language to communicate-which in their case was only, "huh, huh" while pulling at your sleeve to direct you in a certain direction!!

Some of us began walking, while most were on horseback. We crossed some small streams, which were not too difficult. Let me tell you something about the efficiency of the horsemen---in this short distance they not only managed to drop our food packages into the water, but Padmaji also had a fall in it! By now my husband who did not manage to get a horse, needed to sit on a horse. We had been warned that the horses were not transferable, even for a short while. On asking, sure enough, my horseman refused point blank. I argued that I had not yet sat on the horse, so he could consider it allotted to my husband instead, but to no avail, till the LO intervened and managed to tell the contractor to do the needful. So a head count was done after which horses were adjusted (some with luggage were made available for riders). Then, I decided to get on to my horse and was being helped by the 'ghodawala'. He was adjusting my stirrup, and I was watching, when he looked at me angrily with a 'huh!', as if I had done something wrong. Since I did not understand what he meant, I chose to ignore it. So that is how we started on our 45 kms trek for the day.

The morning's experience with the horses, and the trek being mostly away from the water, left us all quite disappointed this first day! Made us wonder what was so wonderful about Mansarovar that everyone goes into an ecstasy about! After the first stop for rest, I decided to walk along the water for some time. My horseman came, and pulling at my sleeve, asked me to climb up on the horse, using his 'huh' language. I conveyed in polite sign language

that I wished to walk. He wouldn't hear of it and continued to pull at me again and again, getting more aggressive progressively. Finally, he came close to me and repeated 'huh' very menacingly, as if he would hit me if I did not listen to him. I was absolutely shocked and shouted back at him, with angry tears in my eyes (he had scared me)! Just then Alli came upon us, heard me out, and exchanged horses, saying she would handle the guy. So now I had a child 'ghodawala' called, 'Sang' and Alli had 'Nigar'.

Sundar, a porter from Nepal was without a 'client', and somehow became our unofficial porter. A gem of a person, who, like the typical porter on the Indian side, was like a shadow, always beside us! Certainly made our trek more pleasant. Two-thirds of the way down the 45 kms The Chinese decided to rest, which was fine, not realizing that the rest would last three hours! They cooked their lunch and drank innumerable cups of tea, while we looked on, pretty hungry by now, and wished we could do the same. They tried to tell us to go ahead, but we had been warned that, unless we did not mind losing the horse all together, we should never take this suggestion. So our trudge towards Qugu continued.

We settled down in our mud huts at Qugu, dreaming of the rotis that the cooks promised to make us. Right behind the camp Alli discovered a sweet old lady, who had some curds to sell, and that became an added treat. The next day's trek was more as I had visualized the Manasarovar Parikrama to be like. We walked very close to the water, and all level walking. We did the whole thing on foot and enjoyed it. We stopped and hunted for stones, had enough time to 'stop and stare' and take photographs. Kailash was visible for a great part of the walk. As the sun kept going down, the colors of the water became deeper. So we went on, taking in the lake and its changing colors. We reached Zaidi around sunset. The Mansarovar Parikrama was over and this is where we would spend two nights.

Zaidi

Zaidi also had mud huts and an ill-equipped kitchen. On reaching Zaidi, we lost no time in going out to the water. It was rather cold, but most of us had a 'dupki' in the lake. Certainly refreshed us. After dinner we decided to go out and sit by the lake, as suggested by some people. The sky was like a dome and the stars so bright, they were actually like jewels. Could not sit for long, because it was very cold.



The next day, when the sun came up, everyone had a proper bath in Manasarovar before attending the havan. Narayan Swamy dressed in an orange dhoti, was the one who performed the havan. After the havan was a special treat of poorie aloo and soojee ka halwa. Even though we had to wait a couple of hours before making enough poories (the inefficient stove!), we thoroughly enjoyed this meal! After all it was a great occasion! How many people can say they did a havan on the banks of the holy Manasarovar? Since you are lucky enough to reach there, you

remember all your near and dear ones, and pray for their well being, too. It was quite fascinating to see everyone's enthusiasm. They had carried their 'samagri' and other things all the way, some wore brand new clothes, and so on. Made me feel like an atheist at times!

Most people spent the afternoon filling water in their containers, for themselves and to be taken back home for distribution. This was a free day and one just relaxed. Works out well because one needs the rest at this stage and the havan rituals can be performed without haste. We left for Darchen the next afternoon. It was now our turn to go by truck. First the luggage was hoisted into the bus, then the passengers. A pretty rough ride of 2 hours to Darchen, where one felt every bone in the body was shaken!!

Kailash – Dera Puk

The bus reached us to Darchen, which is where we spent the night, before starting the Kailash Parikrama. This was guest house like Taklakot, but on a much smaller scale, and one where we had to fend for our food, unlike Taklakot. Also it had toilets but no bathrooms. Kitchen was as bad as the ones on the Manasarovar Yatra. This is where the people who come via Nepal arrive. Met some people who had come from the US. They had just returned from Dera Puk (the first stop of the Kailash Parikrama), because some members got altitude sickness and could not continue. They were planning to drive down to some of the Mansarovar spots the next day. Then there was a Swedish group, that was also to leave the next day for the Parikrama.

Early next morning we were ready to start off for Dera Puk. There was a stretch of about 8 kms, which was motorable, before the walk started. A vehicle was arranged, and we awaited it happily. The vehicle arrived and it was a truck again! In spite of the 'Oh Nos' we all welcomed this 'luxury' and got in, preceded by our baggage. But there was one big difference-this truck had dung and manure piled at one end (with some naturally spilling over the floor of the truck). Ignoring all that, all of us sat down and braced ourselves for the drive. And for this, we had to pay Yuans 250! Once again we felt this was very unfair! It is rather ironical that usually we never go to a temple without a bath, but here we were, embarking on this, one of the greatest pilgrimages for a Hindu, feeling so dirty. When we got off the truck, the yaks that were supposed to be waiting for us, were not there. It was a very cold morning, which made it even more difficult to wait. So some of us decided to start walking.



This was a nice trek. A meadow like valley between jagged brown peaks on one side and the range along which was the Kailash Parbat on the other side. Kailash decided to stay in hiding for most of the time that we were walking along it. Here, there were a fair number of Tibetan yatis too, unlike Manasarovar, where we did not see anyone at all except our batch with our horsemen and porters. We stopped at a dhaba and enjoyed a Chinese version of Maggie

Noodles, rested a while, expecting to see the rest of the party approaching, but in vain. So we continued leisurely till we reached a point, where we were not sure which way to go. We had a snooze for almost 30 minutes, and just as we woke up we saw the XIII batch, but they were on the other side of the river! Oh dear, how do we cross? Our desperation turned into smiles as we noticed Sundar and the two cooks walking towards us. They were planning to cross the river on foot! Well, that is exactly what the two of us had to do, but with Sundar's help. Out came our shoes and socks and into the cold water we stepped, holding on to Sundar. We were now very close to Dera Puk. As we approached the camp, the clouds lifted and Kailash made his majestic appearance, black, with snow trailing down its length. Click, click, went our camera at the various stages of the snow clearing. Feeling quite a sense of achievement, we went to the camp-one was always full of suspense as to what each camp would be like! Well, this one had one big bunker in each room, with enough space for 6 people to sleep closely, but we were seven and we had to pack in like, 'sardines'. So one spent the night not being able to move sides and I was very happy when it was day-break, and we started getting ready for departure to Dong Zerbu. I was most apprehensive about the yak ride--I had avoided it the previous day, but this day was a tough one. I had heard that the yak men are not beside you all the time and there is no saddle...

Kailash – Dolma Pass...

All of us walked up to where the yaks were gathered and were allotted yaks. I was helped on to one with a saddle (the only one!) and we started off on the climb to Dolma Pass. Even before we started our friend Shivaramaiah fell off his yak. Fortunately did not get badly hurt, but what was disturbing was, that the yak men looked most unperturbed and took their time to help him up. I was beginning to think that a yak was not bad after all, when a rest halt was called for. We were now at about 18000 ft. above sea level and felt so, because we could hardly climb up. Got terribly out of breath. There were a lot of clothes scattered around, on inquiring I was told, these are left by people. Why? Because it is believed that one should leave behind something (mostly a bad habit), when one goes on a pilgrim like this one, so an old piece of your wardrobe is the easiest thing to discard! Who wants to give up things like smoking and drinking, right?

When we started again, to my dismay, the yak man put me on to a different and bigger yak, without a saddle. I tried to tell him I wanted the same one but he merely kept smiling broadly and pointing to the other one, nodding his head negatively when I pointed to the old one. Having no choice I got on and was just moving off when I heard a commotion behind me, and this time it was Narayan Swamy who fell off. Now started the steep, stony slope! As we progressed up this slope leading to the Dolma Pass, I kept slipping on the yak. There was no saddle and we held on to a wooden contraption, struggling to keep our balance on the back of the yak (one tended to slip on the warm hairy back). I had this very insecure feeling that I am going to fall off the yak, and soon I was almost off the yak and kept shouting to be helped off the yak. Finally, I spotted good old Sundar and Vinod, and they came forward and helped me out. Once I was off the yak, I just let go of my temper on the yak men (they may not have understood anything). I was determined not to get on to the yak again. I was being pulled by my sleeve towards the yak. I walked ahead saying I would not. I realized then, that my shouting was intercepted with heavy breathing, and that the altitude was affecting me. So I thought it prudent to let myself be persuaded to climb up on the yak, without much delay! And that is where I stayed till we reached the top.

Dolma Pass is at the height of 19,500 ft. The huge rocks at this point are all strewn with flags tied by Tibetan pilgrims and smeared with 'roil and haldi' by the Hindu pilgrims. We did our little puja, once again conducted by Narayan Swami. We rested a while and took in the view from atop. Not too far below we could see Gauri Kund, but otherwise it was one big mass of stones at a steep decline, which was our path for the next 6kms. This was tough going on the knees and toes, but we had been warned about it, by one and all! By the time we reached level ground, I was famished. But it was an hour before we reached where the porters and yaks were resting and I could get hold of my

rucksack! After resting a while we started to move again. We were crossing a stream when my husband's yak decided to have some fun, and dropped him into the stream! Fortunately, he just had a few bruises, but we ended up walking the rest of the way to Dong Zerbu.

We passed a Tibetan couple, doing the Kailash Parikrama by lying prostrate at every step--'Shashtang Parikrama!' Wonder how long it took them--you lie prostrate on the ground, mark the point where your stretched out arms reach, step up to that point and repeat your way through! I am always amazed at such dedication. I suppose if you do not have it, you cannot understand it. Like we had young Gopi with us, who was doing the whole yatra on foot! Reached Dong Zerbu and settled into our rooms, rather 'beds'. Along with tea, we were all treated to 'bhel puri', by Asha and Urmila. Yum! Did we enjoy it!! Just as we finished tea, one of the Swedes arrived, needing help, because their yaks had not arrived with the luggage and they were all cold and hungry. We informed about the little shop with drinks and snacks, where they were happy to get something. Another khichdee dinner and off to bed. But, not all of us. It was Janamashtmi day, so some of them went off to have a bhajan session in the next room.

The End of Parikrama

Dawned, the last day of the Parikrama. We started for Darchen, before the group started, leaving our yaks behind. This was one of the prettier walks on the Chinese side, and I was happy that I did not need to get on to the yak any more. The mountain was very colorful. There was one little hill, which was made of granite like green stones, and right next to that was one made up of orange stones (unfortunately the photographs of these were not good!), followed by a portion, which had a variety of colors. It was a wonderful feeling to reach Darchen this time, knowing we had achieved our goal, luckily without any major problem.

When we were fairly relaxed, the two of us decided to try out one of the local Dhabas for momos. Found one with Sundar's help, and had momos and noodles. By the time we came back, the rest of the party had arrived too. Accounts of porters and yaks were settled and we were relaxing on our beds, when our LO called us all out excitedly--there was a huge rainbow, a perfect semi-circle! So everyone rushed out with cameras. At Darchen, there are a lot of Tibetan women selling their wares from room to room. They are so persistent, that you have to shoo them away. But a lot of shopping was done. This day we had a treat for dinner--paranthas and Aloo rasedaar ! Yum! We left Darchen the next day for our return journey! A wonderful feeling! We drove down to Zaidi to pick up the 'A' group and then on to Taklakot, via Rakshas Taal.

Taklakot re-visited...

When we reached Taklakot, it was bright and sunny so I decided to wash some clothes and have a bath. But alas! there was no water in the bathrooms, so no bath (it was now the sixth day without a bath). We were all disappointed, that we had to stay an extra day at Taklakot. The meals were exactly what they were during our earlier stay. Then we discovered one horrible fact---the one thing we had been enjoying, was, plenty of tinned fruit at Taklakot, till someone came across an empty can and noticed that the date on it was 1995! On questioning the kitchen staff, we were told, that Biroo was the one who got these provisions, and Biroo had no explanation except pretending ignorance! And there, the matter ended. Most of us felt very strongly that this matter along with the other matters should be taken up with the appropriate authorities. Frankly I don't know how much will be done, but I do feel very strongly that these matters should be taken up with the Chinese Government who may not even know certain facts. I feel the Indians take these unsavory facts as a penance towards the pilgrimage. Other wise there would be some reaction to all this.

The next day we went to a temple called Khojar Nath, which is a two-hour bone rattling drive from Taklakot. This is supposed to be a temple of Ram, Laxman and Sita. Pretty quaint! That night there was excitement because we were

returning to Motherland, and a little apprehension, because of Lipu Leh Pass. Will it be as cold as it was last time? Will we have to wait long? As a farewell, we had an antakshari session that night and everyone was in good spirits.

Next morning we left around 6 am. Stuffed into the bus, along with the hand baggage, which had increased two fold because of the water carried by everyone. One and all were relaxed and set for the drive. But one was not to relax too long. As we started to climb up, the bus kept stalling-too much weight! The capacity of the bus was 35 passengers. We had 35 yatris, about 10 horsemen with their saddles and all our baggage. Obviously the bus could not take it! Many of the yatris had to get off and walk for almost an hour in the bitter cold till the downward slope started. It was quite pathetic. This naturally delayed us by about 1 ½ hours and, the rest of the 5 yatris who were in the van ahead, got quite worried. Finally, we reached where the horses were waiting and started the concluding trek in China. We were warned by the LO that the horsemen will try and put us down much before we reach the top, and that we should insist on going right up. Just as well, because that is exactly what they did. One had to be very insistent to overcome their aggressive attitude in trying to make us get off. Finally, in fact only on a promise of a baksheesh, did they let us continue.

The Re-union

As we neared Lipu Leh Pass, we saw the XVth batch, who were also as cold as we were, when we were waiting for the XI batch. As we reached the top, a whole line of porters and ghodawalas awaited us. Just as enthusiastically as they were looking out for their clients, we were looking out for them! A very warm reunion it was at the top. And the ITBP boys too, all waiting to say hello to one batch, just having said bye to another. It was not raining, but was certainly very cold this time too, because it had snowed the previous evening. The ITBP wanted us to stand around till they counted each one of us, but it was almost impossible. One needed to move to get warmed up. There was a curious spring in everyone's walk. Some of the yatris were so emotional, they cried, one was even sobbing.

Since it had snowed the previous day we were hopeful to see Om Parbat in all its glory. As we neared Navi Dhang with anticipation, our hopes were dampened because the clouds did not lift. So be it! After a breakfast of halwa and tea, a little rest, and phone calls to near and dear ones, we started for Kalapani. The day was cloudy, walk pretty and down-hill, along the river and lots of greenery. So we all reached Kalapani in good humor, in time for lunch. By now all of us were raring to go, and reach home as fast as possible. So after a bit of rest we continued on our way to Gunji.

The next morning saw us off to Buddhi, a 17 kms trek through some of the prettier parts---via Garbhian, Valley of Flowers and Chialak. It was in the Valley of Flowers that we crossed the XVIth and final batch. The steep stony descent from Chialak to Buddhi, was wet and slippery and very tiring! The day continued to be wet, so we had to stay indoors in our 'room' with all the baggage for company. It rained the whole night and whenever one woke up, one was conscious of it, because 'tomorrow was the Malpa stretch!'. Thankfully, the rain stopped the next morning, but we were warned of road blocks along the route, were made to wear helmets, and asked to travel close to the group, etc. All this was enough to make people like me more worried. I decided to chant 'Om Namo Shivaya' and start off, and actually enjoyed the first half of the journey. Once again, by the time I reached Lakhanpur, the paranthas and pakoras were finished!! The last quarter where we had to negotiate the 4444 stone steps, was absolute murder!! At times I did not think I would manage. But a stop here and there, including one for tea and one for pakoras, and we finally reached our destination for the night, Gala.

Gala had the inauguration of its new temple that day and the villagers from there and the neighboring villages had all collected to celebrate. Food was on till 6 that evening, and naturally the menu was festive. That night the manager of Gala entertained us with songs he had written himself. He treated us with pakoras and tea served in our rooms.

The morrow was to be our last trek, a small one, only 10kms or so, and not a difficult one. All of us slept in a very relaxed frame of mind.

We were to leave at 7 am , but there were road blocks on the way and by the time we got the clearance by wireless, it was 8.30. We had to wait 2 hours at Mangti for the buses. When you know you are nearing the end, each minute seems like 30! There had been a few landslides on the way, and in one place , we had to get off the bus to cross a landslide, but otherwise we reached Dharchula safe and sound. This is where we left the group and went off in our own car, to reach Delhi on the 12th. The batch reached on the 13th---hey, XIII batch reached on the 13th!! **Om Namo Shivaya!**