

Rupin Trek

- Asok Kumar G

They say, when going gets tough, the tough gets going. But the foolhardy-tough needs to survive to tell story! Many times this depends on the collective luck, pluck and destiny of the group members. The trek to Rupin Pass from 23- September to 1-October, 1989 along with 14 fellow officer trainees at the 54th FC at LBSNAI Mussourie is one such experience. As Manoj Yadava, one of the group said later, *“Like a good old Bollywood movie, it was a story of adventure, thrill, suspense, action and romance placed in the backdrop of majestic Himalayas and embellished with the music of gushing rivers and dance of the trees swaying in the gentle breeze.”*

Treks and village visits are two of the vital part of the Foundation Course trainings, stories of which are always talked about in all group get-togethers-even 100 years later. These groupings, mostly decide by the Academy officials, facilitate forging strong emotional bonds (and sometime heart-breaks later). But the team for the “tough” Rupin trek was selected after a competitive run through the ups and downs of the Musoorie town under the scrutinizing eyes of Ranaj. (the ubiquitous PT PT instructor-cum-trekking expert, who remains “fit”, in the same shape and size in all these years). Only the first fifteen who finished this ordeal earned the right to go for this trek. The selected 15- Chiranjeev Chaudhary, Aditya Joshi, Narad Singh Yadav, Sudhir Kumar Shah, Ashok Kumar G., Manoj Kumar Yadava, Pawan Sharma, Bhupender Kumar Dak, Aushuli Arya and Sheeba George - were warned that this was going to be the toughest of the ‘tough’ treks, *tho soch lo....*

On 23-9-89, a Saturday morning, at 6 AM, Ranaji’s long whistle set us off from the Academy in a bus to Shimla 325 Kms away. In the bus we chatted, sang and spent time trying to know-better each other. The first stop was at Shimla where we stayed for the night at the hostel of Himachal Institute of Public Administration near Chhota Mashobra. Early next morning, we left for Sangla 253 kms away, through another long winding bus ride which passed through spectacular sceneries and rugged landscape. We reached Sangla late in the evening and checked into the State PWD Guest House. So it was all “buzzing and bussing” so-far.

Since this was a high altitude trek, we were required to stay at Sangla for acclimatization. We spent the day exploring the village Sangla and walking along the banks of the boisterous Baspa river. We also visited the ITBP camp at Chitkul about 10 Kms. ahead of Sangla for lunch and briefing.

On 26.9.1989, we started the trek. Getting up early we left Sangla at dawn with our rucksacks and crossed the river Baspa which flows by Sangla and began our upward march. On the first day of the trek, we got introduced to the joys and many hued splendor of trekking. By about four p.m., we reached Kanda, the camping ground located on a gentle sloping grassy mountainside where we were supposed to halt for the night. We had gained an altitude of about 2,500 feet since morning and were accompanied by four porters who were carrying our rations and tents. As soon as we reached, they sat about thus tasks with an air of practiced efficiency and after pitching the tents served a piping hot dinner before the sun set.

When it got dark, we retired to our tents after quickly realizing how cold it gets at night time in the mountain.

On 27-9-1989, with the dawn breaking at 6:30 AM we were up in the tents. We had early breakfast. Little did we know it then that this would be the last meal for us for another 36 hours! We had got up earlier than the sun, washed and got ready after the hot puri breakfast by 7:30 AM. The ITBP guide, medical men and the porters advised us that it is better to start off earlier in the mountains to avoid any unexpected twists in the weather, which seemed to be very congenial for a pleasant trek ahead. Sahi and a few of the group were the fast movers who wanted to get off the blocks at the earliest. They caught hold of two porters who had by then packed all the materials under their charge. They had with them all the cooking materials, the tents for night halt etc. They started out by 7:45 AM. The rest of us, packed our rucksacks, waited for the last minute packers and toilet visitors, soaking up the solar energy filtering out through the clouds. Cool breeze blowing flirtatiously fluttered our scarves, reddened our nose tips, but basking in Sun's glory lifted our spirits. Chiranjivi, the group leader blew his whistle signaling "guys, start moving". The group of 12 leftovers from the trekking team-myself, Sheeba, Manoj Yadav, Naradh Singh Yadav, Chiranjiv, BK Das, Anshuli Arya, Phuntsho, Sanjay Dorji, Lakher, Aditya Joshi, Pavanesh Kumar-, the ITBP medical man and the guide- all in the red thick fur coat looking bloated up because of the multi layers of warm clothes underneath, big snow goggles covering the eyes, wooden stick in the glove protected hands and the green colored huge rucksack packed with clothes -soiled and fresh-, some eatables, and thick plastic bed rolled up on the top-perched precariously on the back - started our trek for the day. We felt secured to be in the company of the guide. There was cool breeze blowing. Snow line still far away. We crossed a rivulet and cruised along the left bank of the stream, following our ITBP guide faithfully. We passed by a beautiful placid lake, with the reflection of the adjoining mountains giving a spectacular scenery. Lapped it up in a camera. It was hilly area, with small rivulets and gullies intertwined. No growth of vegetation except for grass covering patches of the ground as `week old beard.

The plan was to cross the Rupin pass by noon, cross over to the Robber's cave, Rock Shelter in Dwar have lunch and rest by 4 PM. This was going to be the toughest part of the trek, for which we all were specially selected at Musoorie. The altitude would be around 16000 ft, breathing would be difficult, snow would be thick and breeze cold and cutting. We were ready for it. After 30 minutes we crossed a small rivulet and move on to its right side, following a circuitous route up. The group had by then split into smaller subgroups, bunching up with equal pacers or friends. ITBP medical man and the guide were in the lead. The Bhutanese contingent was behind them. A few paces behind them were Pawan, Chiranjivi, Sheeba and Ansuli. Manoj, Dak and me ambled about 12 feet behind them. Aditiya was behind us, stopping to click the photos with his DLR camera at regular intervals.

We hit the snow line by 9 AM. We were very glad to see the snow. The first time snow watchers were thrilled. They picked it up with bare hands, watched with excitement when it melted and disappeared between their thumb and fingers in two

or three rounds of rubbing, stooped down to scoop up snow a second time to taste it a bit, and spat it out in disapproval. The snow here was not fresh and mixed with dust. As we climbed higher and higher, the snow got thicker and cleaner. The gentle slope gave way to steeper climb. Breathing was getting harder and difficult. Water bottles were opened to sip up the warm glucose saturated water. The climbing had warmed up the body, covered in heat insulating warmers. Sweat broke out, but nobody dared to open the jacket because of the strong cold wind, now blowing across our way. Not a blade of grass was visible, but rocks were protruding menacingly through the snow blanket. The freshly fallen snow was brighter and crispier and thicker. Our shoes were sinking into them, covering upto the ankles. The plastic cover on top of the socks prevented it from soaking our feet. To play it safe, we were trying to step into the trails left by the person ahead of us. I brought out the ice axe and made pox marks on the snow below. By 10' O clock, frequency of "How more to go to reach the pass" or similar type of questions increased. As the climb was getting steeper, one wisecrack thought of eating up or throwing out things like apples, bananas, Namkeens, sweets etc off from the rucksack to reduce its weight. This soon reached epidemic proportions, when everybody realized its weight easing propensity. Environmental issues were not so hep in those 1989s as it is now. Survival mattered.

We trudged forward and ever upward. The gap between the sub groups widened. Depending upon the pace and need of rest, the constituents of these sub groups changed frequently. "Chalo yaar, Aur dhode se to he" were thrown at those puffing and panting for breath, by those catching up with them. All knew that these words meant nothing, as none of us were sure how much further to go. In the ITBP medical man and guide ahead of us, we trusted blindly. It started drizzling and it added to our woes. Cold winds cut like knives. The sun hid behind the clouds, spreading a pall of gloom, dampening our spirits further. Suddenly I noticed a brown dog, which had joined our convoy, but was too tired to think more about it. It was 1230 now. We reached the edge of a cliff. The group was bunching up around the ITBP guide, seeking directions to move ahead. But to our utter shock he confessed that he had lost the way and we have reached the top of the peak instead of the pass and he did not know how to proceed. Our "pied-piper" has let us down and led us up to nowhere! Ahead of us was a steep downward slope, almost like an exponential curve! It was covered with thick white snow, with a smattering of white rocks protruding up as toppings on a pizza. We cannot think of turning back, as the trek plan as to cross the Rupin pass and get down to Uttarkashi, where the bus which dropped us at Sangla two days back, would be waiting to pick us up the next day evening. The guide's confession of not knowing how to go ahead was so chilling as if a thunder bolt had struck us. The gnawing hunger suddenly disappeared. Throat became dry. We were very tired to even shout at him. Here we were, a group of civil service probationary officers who were hoping to guide the destiny of the country some day in the future, left high and dry, lost on a mountain peak. The two women of the group broke into tears, their most potent weapon in crisis. Some men got around consoling them. Some "boys" were also breaking out into tears. Some started moving on the ridge line, hoping to find any safe way downward. Gods of all

religions were being collectively and separately invoked. To one “now-melted-tough-one”, the brown dog, reminded of the Pandava’s last journey to Himalayas.

The wind started blowing stronger, carrying clouds. White fog played hide and seek. The longer it engulfed us, the darker our thoughts became. Time may be ticking faster at higher altitudes, for suddenly we realized that it was 2:30 and we were fleeting in and out of hope and despair, with no way ahead to go. We had to move ahead, somehow. In a place where the snow appeared hard, Nimjin flung his red rucksack down, as a pilot project. It bounced on the hard snow-one, two- rolled over, slid down a few meters and smashed against one of the protruding rocks. The top cover burst open, out came a plastic bag of dal, spewing all its contents as in a diwali chakra, on its hasty way down. Some of us had a gory image of our brains getting sprayed all over in our way down. The rucksack had ripped open further in its impact with the next rock down, throwing up most of its remaining contents and making a trail of colorful pattern on the snow. It all happened in about 30 seconds, the red dot of the bag in tatters now, remained stationary on the backdrop of pristine white snow, 600 mts below, at the base of the exponential curve! We all were terrified. As the winds were becoming stronger and stronger and thicker fog looming large, it was collectively decided to move forward at any cost. It was survival of the fittest.

Phuntsho made the first move downwards. He stuck the stick he was carrying, deep into snow and made one step down, and then another and then another, reminding me of the moon walk in very slow motion. Every step seemed to take two to three minutes. After some time, half of his legs were sinking in the snow. He was leaning into the mountain side to keep his balance and prevent himself from tipping over. But not for long. He teetered on the point of imbalance and tumbled over. As he tripped over, the stick he was holding to was uprooted from the snow and thrown up into the sky. (The highest point it could reach was a few feet below where we were standing.) He was quick enough to land on his out stretched hands and then on his feet and went cart wheeling down wards. In the latter part of his downward journey, he was sliding on the snow on his chest, head down, hands above (actually below) his head, legs splayed and bent at the knees, like a wifi antenna! It had happened so quickly that we all were shocked and dump stuck. We waited for any sign of movement of our fallen friend. After what seemed ages, we could see the red spot moving on the white snow background. Yes, he has survived the fall. Now it was our turn. We all threw our rucksacks down. Many of them survived the fall and lay scattered in the snow far below. We saw the red dot of Phuntsho moving around to collect these and piling them up. With the rucksacks gone, Now it was OUR turn to go down. I saw three of the group clutching onto a rope and trying to go down as a group. They made more squealing noise than progress, so I started concentrating on my escape plan.

I had one of the three ice axes with the group. I would strike it hard against the snow and using its firm grip, I would make a few steps down wards. First I went with my back against the snow, digging my heels into the snow for grip. The sight of the deep valley was frightening. So I turned over, with my chest against the snow and using the front of the shoes to dislodge snow for making small crevices in it as “toe holds”. It was not useful after a few steps, when the snow got thicker and legs

got sunk knee deeper into the snow. Moreover leaning to the mountain side to prevent tumbling over was becoming increasingly difficult. The occasional slipping of the foot on its endeavor to make toe holds added to the anxiety and increased the pressure on the ice axe. I had to find out another better way of going down.

The slope was about 60-70 degrees. So I decided to turn around, sit on the snow and slide down. But this was also dangerous as there were many small rocks popping up its head in the snow. I thought of turning this adversary to my advantage. I decided to aim to the nearest rock below and slide straight to it, using the ice axe as "speed governor". I held it close to my hip, its wooden handle parallel to my right thigh and clasped in front by my left hand. My right hand was at its T junction, pressing it firmly to my right hip. The steel blade of the ice axe was sunk into the snow. The more it sunk, the lesser the speed of sliding down. I would lift it up a bit, gain some speed, press it into the snow to regulate the sliding speed, till my feet slammed against the rock below. I was so immersed in my "bum skiing" that I did not notice some of my colleagues hurtling down, screaming past me- some rolling, some cart-wheeling, some sliding head down - each to his or her own fate. But fate, sure, was good, for all of them were down from the "commanding heights" without much causality. In my seventh segment of the "bum skiing" I reached the level ground. I looked up to many fear stricken faces in various shades of paleness. Fear, anxiety, relief, gratitude to gods, sense of achievement all were playing on their faces. It was all summed up in a statement made by one of the female survivors "Yar, aaj meri phat gayi". I got up to a stagger, unbelievably. Checked up whether all joints, bones were in place. Just then saw, Manoj whizzing past me, in his plummeting trip, head leading. Well, he was also safe! We got to collect our rucksacks lying scattered in the snow. In a few minutes they were all piled up in a heap. We were still shaking with fear. Our pants, drenched in snow, added to the discomfort. When one of the female colleagues made a big issue of snow getting into all wrong places and possibility of thigh muscle cramps, Manoj and Pawan, the mature most among the motley group, offered to massage to warm up the affected areas. Narad produced a bottle of kerosene, meant for cooking in normal times, from his torn rucksack. We poured it on some of the drenched disposable clothes and set them on fire to generate heat. It was 4:30 PM and light was falling. We had to get out of the snow line. Chiranjiv, ordered quick retreat from the area. He counted those present and picked up his rucksack to lead from the front. Limping with the minor injuries from our rocky encounters, we huddled down in file formation. The light was fading, so all of us took out our torches, switched them on for our journey downwards. Our inexperience with these type of treks was exposed, when one by one the batteries of our torches ran out of charge, in about an hour's time leaving us groping in the dark. In the darkness, Hunger slowly made its presence felt. But we had nothing left to eat, as all eatables we carried were thrown away during our ascent, on the other side of the mountain and the last meal we had was the breakfast at 8 AM, almost 10 hours before, barring, of course, the fistful of fresh snow many had gobbled up for fun. We were getting thirstier by the minute. Smashed and crumbled water bottles were bereft of any water drops to give succour to the parched throats. Adding to the woe was the sound of water fall nearby, which sounded so mellifluous, given our craving for water. We wanted to reach the spot, but it was a case of a elusive oasis. Though moon

was out, lighting up our path, the visibility was not more than a few feet, making the lure of the waterfall very adventurous. We had to take a call, either to proceed even at the risk of tripping over rocks and getting injured in our directionless pursuit of the water source, the presence of which was only aurally sensed, not seen or stay put in a safe zone till sun comes up next day. After quick confabulations, we opted for the latter. We piled up our rucksacks into a heap. The ladies went to a rocky shelter found nearby. All men and rucksacks into another pile, one on top of other to keep us warm, with a tarpaulin sheet drawn over as the cover. Narad had earlier fished out a can of baked bean with sauce, before his rucksack was thrown into the heap. This can was passed around as the nightcap for the last few drops of moisture down our throats for the day! Adversities bring out the best of camaraderie! Soundly did we sleep, that when the dawn broke out next day and the first man stirred out of his slumber at 6:20 AM by his watch, pushing others on top of him, it was indeed a good morning. The flaccid tarpaulin sheet had become stiff overnight, with the layer of white frost covering it. The early movers for relieving, came with the report how wise was the decision not to beckon to the call of water falls last night- it was just a few hundred meters away, alright, but there was a big cliff in between. We were just a few hundred feet away from a precipitous cliff, beside a small rivulet, down below. The gurgling sound of water fall from a gushing water body was on the other bank of the rivulet flowing in between two cliffs. Drawing inspiration and energy from our perceived luck and abundant solar power beating us from the azure blue sky above, we walked down the cliff to the rivulet below. We hurled our rucksacks and lunged into the stream to drink water- the elixir of life. Plenty, We drank. Washed our face, jumped into the ice cold water. It was paradise regained. Still no sign of food, but we were not bothered. We had water and we are alive and kicking!

We walked down the frosted meadows and fields of thorny bushes. The solar powered marchers were hungry, but no relief was in sight. Hence the progress was very slow. We prayed that we were on the right track. Stopped occasionally to drink water from a natural stream or water fall. At about 2:30, we saw a bunch of Gujjars or traditional shepherds. Luckily they had not eaten their lunch and were willing to give it to us. The plain, half cooked rice mixed with watery dal they offered, tasted like ambrosia. We thanked them profusely for their generosity and gave them some trinkets like whistle, torches etc in return as they refused any money for the food given to us. We reached the robber's cave by 15:30 and found Sahi and co waiting for us. They were sure that we would be coming along as there was no way that we could have gone ahead of them. The villagers also confirmed to them that no group had gone ahead. Our official cooks prepared some good meal, which we all ate greedily. This was about 30 hours since our last proper meals- the breakfast at 8 AM, the previous day! The bath we took in the cold running water in the nearby rivulet washed all our tiredness. Slept early to relax our aching muscles.

The next day we started early so that we could cover up for the one day lost and reach the pick up point at Netwar, across the river. It was supposedly a short walk of 11 kms. but when we reached Netwar, we were told that the bridge connecting to the other side of the river bank got washed away recently, and that the nearest bridge was another 10 kms down the road. Any alternatives? Yes, Enterprising villagers had tied an iron rope across the gushing river, and had hung a small pulley attached with a small wooden box with two holes to put the legs out. Men stood on either side of the river and pulled the

pulley, which rolled over the iron rope. We could cross the river in this improvised cable car, or walk 10 kms down to cross the river. By then contact was established with the bus driver who was waiting on the other side of the river since morning to pick us up. Mind you, there were no cell phones or proper telephone facilities in those days in 1989. We decided to take the plunge, to cross the river in a Lipton tea carton box, hanging precariously from the pulley on a iron rope, rather than walk another 10 kilometers. We were just too tired for that. We were sure that destiny was with us, after all we had survived the fall from the Rupin peak! The rucksacks went first as Guinea pigs, as if to test the strength of the rope. Then one by one we crossed over, dangling our legs out through the holes in the wooden carton box, clinging with all our strength on to the thick nylon rope attached to the pulley. Most of us had our eyes tightly shut, especially midway, when we hovered in the air, over the river flowing at very high speed almost 40 feet below us, drowning our screams in its treacherous roar.

All is well that ends well!