
KIRTAN NAUTIYAL

The Land of the Gods

EVERY TWELVE YEARS, in my father's ancestral village of Nauti, in the Garhwal foothills of the Indian Himalayas, a ram called the chausingha khadu is born with four horns instead of two. The mountain people there worship the goddess Nanda Devi, and it is the duty of this sacred ram to escort her idol from Nauti to her husband Lord Shiva's home deeper in the snow. As the ram starts through the low green hills it begins to draw a crowd, and as it ascends along narrow rocky paths, the procession grows, local villagers showering it with gold jewelry and other valuables, thousands of pilgrims and holy men grimly trudging alongside, carrying umbrellas of woven birch bark and cloth. They sleep when the ram decides to sleep, then they wake and move wherever their leader goes. For weeks they follow, higher and higher up exhausting slopes, the air thinning, the sun beating down, until finally their trust is rewarded with passage into the highest reaches of this Devbhūmi, the fabled land of the gods. The ram is released on a barren mountainside to make its own way home.

I made my first ascent into the Garhwal hills when I was only a year old. I can't remember anything from that trip, though I've heard retellings of how I swallowed a metal dead bolt when I was taken to my mother's childhood home. In the years to come, we returned to India many times, though as my mother's family completed the same slow move down to the plains that my father's family had undertaken a generation earlier, we now spent most of our time with them in the dusty valley heat of Dehra Dun, the state capital of the newly created mountain state of Uttarakhand.

The hills were reduced to distant curves on the horizon, merely a backdrop to interminable summers spent trapped in my uncle's home. I resented having to be there, imagining my friends back in America at the pool or playing video games while I had to swat flies, hold my nose walking past open streams of sewage, and avoid the outstretched arms of ever-present beggars. I enjoyed hanging out with my cousins, but they were only around for a few weeks before going back to their schools, and I was left alone to spend hours watching dubbed episodes of *Captain Planet*.

Culture became an obligation, time pointlessly taken away from me. I continued with that attitude even after we returned home from India, back to our routine of nightly puja, Hindi class on the weekends, and acting in the terrible plays our parents wrote for festivals organized by the India Association of Greater Tulsa. Culture was not a series of practices and beliefs that constructed positive meaning, but the negative space created in their wake. My name wasn't simply a Sanskrit word describing one way to praise God, but also the substitute teacher not ever being able to pronounce it on the first try. My vegetarian diet wasn't just an expression of religious values, but also not being able to have a Happy Meal when we went to McDonald's during a field trip.

My parents' own connection to culture seemed divorced from the concrete details of how they'd grown up; neither of them spoke nostalgically of their own youth in the Garhwal hills. Instead, they'd come to idealize a more generically Indian culture, speaking Hindi at home instead of Garhwali, and driving us to Dallas to attend the Hare Krishna temple with all kinds of other Indians. Culturally isolated as we were way out in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, maybe all they were doing was seeking strength in numbers, but as we spent weekday evenings learning about the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita, not hill legends and folklore, the specificities of what we were faded out; in their place, we made something new.

The years passed and my conscious memories of the uplands beyond Dehra Dun melted away into one of those blank spots on the map where only dragons roamed. Unmoored from that history by the slow work of time, I wandered through other areas of the world, exploring without purpose. In travelers' haunts, I heard stories from others about the healing powers of the Himalayas. All I had to say in response concerned summer months I'd always dreaded.

I returned to New Delhi in the spring of 2011, alone. In my journal, I wrote earnestly that "there comes a time . . . when you realize that for better or for worse you are what you are, and that if you want to get anywhere in achieving some sort of self-knowledge you better start accepting that." Before leaving, I'd told my relatives I'd visit them only after I had done what I needed to do, and as my plane came in fast and low over a sea of flickering electric lights and village fires, I wondered how I'd make it through the months to come with only the shirts and pants in my backpack.

Unshielded by protective aunts and uncles, I was ripped off by shopkeepers and overwhelmed by street traffic while finding auto-rickshaws, overcome by the crushing heat and hit hard by an attack of food poisoning. Still, I limped on, driven

forward by an urge I only dimly understood. I explored the sandstone palaces of Rajasthan, examined the intricate temple carvings at Khajuraho, overpaid for a sunrise boat ride down the Ganga in Varanasi, and found myself swept up in the frenzy of the nightly India-Pakistan border ceremony in Punjab. I subsisted on streetside samosas. My skin darkened in the April sun. I spoke only in Hindi, my first language. After only a few weeks, taxi drivers who'd probably had too much to drink the night before mistook me for a local student.

I headed toward Garhwal for the final weeks of my trip. I hadn't traveled the hills in a decade, and I wondered what family secrets lay in those high valleys. I knew almost nothing about the landscape, though the remote pilgrimage town of Badrinath had always assumed an outsize importance for me; I recalled faint memories of my ancient great-grandmother in Dehra Dun asking if we had recently been there while she hallucinated the presence of old relatives. I decided the temple there would be the culmination of my journey.

The train tracks ended at Haridwar near the foot of the looming hills, and as I rode up to Rishikesh in a shared auto-rickshaw, I admired country that the English soldier and naturalist Thomas Hardwicke had described in 1796 as "elevated and very pleasant," full of "black partridge, hares, and quail," and covered in forests of "trees of greater magnitude than any" he had previously seen. When I got out, exhausted by my journey, I halfheartedly looked for the hotel that had been recommended in my *Lonely Planet*, staggering through an open gate into a large house. A lone housekeeper was the only occupant. When I asked if this was the hotel I was looking for, she replied in a quiet voice, telling me it was not, but that I might try farther down near the river. She went back to her work without another word. No owner hustled out to put the hard sell on me. No children tugged at my sleeve. A soft breeze dried some of the sweat on my forehead, and I wondered at the different India I had seemingly entered.

I found a room for five dollars a night. I'd been given a discount, because there was no air conditioning and the toilet tank didn't refill after every flush. A steep path zig-zagged down to the Ganga, and I spent my days along the riverbank, finding secluded spots to read a secondhand copy of *The Beach*. Nearby stood dozens of ashrams purporting to teach yoga and meditation to Westerners, many that'd been around when the Beatles had come here to learn from the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968, others for millennia before that. At night, I watched the Ganga Aarti, marveling at the countless clay lamps floating away down the river, the smell of incense and motorcycle exhaust heavy in the air.

One afternoon, after two cups of tea with a man who owned an outdoor adventure company, I found myself in an inflatable boat paddling down nearby rapids with a group of Punjabi students. Bordered by emerald forests and steep slopes, the river was clean and cool. Save for our guide's instructions and the students' chatter, I could not hear another human voice. Our raft undulated with the swift current, and I was soon completely focused on the task of keeping ourselves upright. When we reached the end of our run, we climbed a high overhanging rock and leaped into the Ganga below, swimming lazily in that holy river of legend.

A sickness can quickly overcome outsiders in these lands. The mere sight of the mountains can induce extravagant visions of what the world is and what it might be. As the soldier and explorer Francis Younghusband wrote after glimpsing distant Kangchenjunga in 1921:

"We are uplifted. The entire scale of being is raised . . . Meanness, pettiness, paltriness seem to shrink away abashed at the sight of that radiant purity. The mountain has made appeal to, and called forth from us all that is most pure and most noble within us, and aroused our highest aspirations."

Something of these overheated sentiments mixed in me with an outsized sense of nostalgia, and when we returned to town, I signed up for a multiday trek deeper in the Himalayas.

Yet the temple of Badrinath still beckoned from somewhere in the snows, and I felt I had no choice but to spend the five days before our hike trying to get there. The ex-soldier who ran my humble hotel told me all I needed to do was wake up early and catch the first bus I saw heading north. All vehicles used the solitary paved road in these parts, all would get me where I needed to go.

The next morning, crammed into the driver's box of the compact bus, I flew upward along the narrow, potholed ribbon of asphalt, the chain-smoking driver sending us into each blind, hairpin curve at speeds approaching insanity. Behind every few bends, we found a cargo truck hurtling toward us, and our driver suddenly swerved to the edge of the road and slammed on the brakes, the front edge of the bus hanging over a thousand-foot drop as the oncoming truck driver laid on his horn and sped past. I braced myself against the metal box that housed the gearshift, thoughts of the news story that would announce my anonymous death in this remote place running through my head.

We climbed through the same hard country that Anglo-Indian hunter Jim Corbett had while tracking the man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag in 1925. He, too, noted the

terraced fields that overlooked the route and the small villages scattered alongside; the “whole country . . . rugged and rough . . . cut up by innumerable ravines and rock cliffs.” Over the course of a long year, he tracked the leopard as it terrorized the region and killed dozens of villagers before he finally brought it down on a moonlit hillside overlooking the Ganga. Gaining altitude, I glimpsed the same silver river as it wound its way down to give life to millions on the distant plains.

After a rainy night spent totally alone in a musty government rest house, I headed yet higher in a series of shared taxis, hoping to reach the town of Joshimath by early afternoon. We twisted and turned at incredible speed; midway through the journey, the woman next to me suddenly vomited her breakfast out the window. Large boulders on the roadside were the only remnants of the frequent landslides that continually threatened the tenuous route. Rough patches sent us skyward, clutching the door handles for dear life.

Feeling sorry for myself, I finally got out a few hours later in Joshimath where the crusading Hindu revivalist Shankaracharya had established his northernmost monastery over a thousand years before. In recent years it had transformed from a collection of small slate-roofed houses into a bustling warren of snack stalls and concrete hotels servicing the increasing traffic of pilgrims. Yet unlike the booming cities on the plains, there were no gleaming skyscrapers or billboards advertising foreign vacations, no Pizza Hut or KFC. Dogs fought in the street, nipping at each other’s heels, while a group of about fifty unemployed men loitered around a large backhoe as it broke up some crumbling asphalt near the center of town. This was still a poor place, just as it had been for years.

A stiff breeze blew down from the surrounding snowcapped peaks. I trudged uphill to a shabby hotel and sat down with the skeleton crew working there. One of the boys, Rakesh, boiled some chai, and while I filled out the paper work to stay the night, he asked how much money I made in America and if I was married. I replied as best I could, going on to tell him by way of introduction that my mother had been born nearby in the town of Karnaprayag.

Rakesh goggled, “No way! I was born there too. Where exactly?”

I told him her home village was Nagkot, a few miles from there.

His eyes opened wider. “No! Me too!”

He called over his coworker, Tiwari, who worked as a priest in Badrinath during the high season but made extra cash changing bed linens in the hotel during the winter. He asked me to repeat where I was from.

“This can’t be! An American from Nagkot. I don’t believe it!”

Rakesh flew out the door. Soon, he returned with everyone in town who was from my mother's small village, all of whom were eager to shake my hand. We drank more chai, we talked, and through conversation, details emerged—my grandmother had worked in the school Rakesh's older sister had attended many years ago; my distant relatives owned the nearby Khanduri Hotel; my great-grandfather had been a local leader in the struggle for Indian independence, known for organizing to end British rule. Not many from the mountains ever made it abroad. The joy these men showed in meeting me was the sort of emotion one showed a local boy made good, and though I knew even then that's not what I was, in that moment, it warmed my heart to tell myself otherwise.

I used a lull in our conversation to step out on the broad back landing, where I leaned on the metal railing and gazed at the sharp sunlit edges of the mountains. Sounds of hammering drifted through the air. I looked downward to see workers yelling at each other as they negotiated the wooden scaffolding surrounding a half-finished building. On my right, a small, bespectacled man had silently joined me in watching the construction. He introduced himself as Omprakash Thapliyal, and I shook his hand, telling him my name.

He later told me that my last name had immediately marked me as a local member of his caste, and he'd wondered how that squared with my foreign appearance. At the time, he informed me that the building beneath us was a new house his family was building, and he'd come to see if the workers had slacked off without his supervision. I told him that I'd come this way to see the temple at Badrinath. He shook his head.

"The road's closed for another two weeks. It's still snowed in this early in the summer."

My heart fell, and my pilgrimage seemed over before it had even begun. All I could think about was another solitary night filled with a boredom bordering on a physical pain.

He noted my crestfallen expression. "Why don't you come back for dinner at my place? You can stay the night, too. A hotel like this is no place for an American!"

A little too quickly, I said yes, and, telling Rakesh to keep an eye on my things, Omprakash and I were soon in his white Maruti hatchback, slip-sliding up the muddy road.

"You take beer in America, Kirtan-ji?"

When I replied that I did, he pulled over to a roadside shop and picked up a four-pack of Godfather. We then continued toward the family compound, which

Omprakash told me he shared with his wife, two children, father, mother, uncle, aunt, and grandmother. After about thirty minutes, he made a sharp right turn, and we rolled up a narrow, rocky driveway to an expansive two-story structure isolated on a hilltop, mountains all around.

I was leery about making small talk in Hindi for hours with such a large group of people, but my fears were allayed when, upon arrival, the two of us were hustled upstairs to the guest room. Omprakash told me it had to be this way, because though his father knew he was drinking tonight, he could not actually drink in front of him. In an arrangement that struck me as strange, we'd have to down our four pints in this back room and hide any empties under the table if his father were to come upstairs unannounced. He went out for a clandestine cigarette while I cracked open the first tallboy and turned the television to a cricket match.

We talked and drank while Omprakash's wife delivered dinner—fried karela, dal chawal, roti. Halfway through my second can, I was loudly explaining the average salaries for various professions in America, when his father suddenly walked into the room. As the night had gone on, I'd examined the framed pictures of him on the wall with various political dignitaries including the former prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Dressed in kurta pajama with a sweater vest and the traditional round woven hat, he turned toward me sternly, and I tried to pull myself together.

"You are from America?" he asked in a flat, deep voice.

After I told him my name and where my family was from, he told me in surprise that he knew my great-grandfather and all he had done to win independence. We exchanged a few more pleasantries before he cracked a half grin and begrudgingly told me, "Your Hindi is pretty good," before leaving the room as suddenly as he'd come.

Later that night, I lay under freshly laundered sheets, staring at the ceiling as the effects of the cheap lager wore off, and what I had endured to get to this place faded away. Though my pilgrimage had not culminated in Badrinath, where I'd ended up instead was even more right for that serendipity. In my mind, the pieces fit. I was conscious even then of the long lineage of Westerners who'd projected their own insecurities on this inscrutable landscape in the guise of finding themselves, but I told myself I was not one of these dilettantes; this was the land of my forefathers, my rightful spiritual home, and I felt the benevolent gaze of those unnamed forebears looking over me across the bounds of time and space. I soon fell into a deep, long sleep.

One week later, following a days-long hike past tadpole-filled ponds and up

wooded peaks, I stood with my trekking group at the top of Chandrashila, more than twelve thousand feet above sea level. Nearby, the righteous Pandavas, heroes of the Mahabharata, had performed their final penances before leaving this mortal world. We had been promised the most spectacular view in the inner Himalayas, yet as impenetrable mists swirled, I instead found myself forced backward into my imagination, where I had already begun to construct my own symbolic mountain range, a place of purity where I would eventually convince myself that my soul could be at home, even if my body could not. In that place, my last name would spark immediate recognition in everyone I met, and what my ancestors had done would always be known. In that place, the legends of the Mahabharata that my parents had taught me, all the battles and intrigues, would be made forever real by the peaks and the villages between. In that rarefied land of original virtue, there would be no swindling, no filth, no overcrowding, none of the so-called evils I associated with the far-off plains. The fog continued for the entire time we were at the summit, yet in my mind's eye, I saw it all with perfect clarity, not yet aware that there is no mountain range, however mighty, that can carry the weight of infinite expectations. That lesson would have to wait for another eight years.

I'd first heard about the arduous climb of the chausingha khadu from a paternal uncle, who told me how every twelve years, the sacred ram traveled with thousands of devotees through our ancestral village of Nauti. He'd gone there himself some time before to learn something of our family heritage, but found only a few houses and a small temple where he'd made an offering before returning to New Delhi in a rented jeep. I was immediately captivated by those scant details—the story of this remote village and its arcane ritual gave my abstract family history a reality it didn't otherwise have, and I dreamed of what it would feel like to one day make the ascent into Garhwal, returning to a home I had never known.

When I came back from the mountains and told others about the specifics of my journey, I took their general ignorance of the Garhwal Himalayas as proof that I'd brought back with me some secret wisdom. Even my parents were taken aback by my stories, seeing through my eyes the people and places they'd left behind decades before. Refracted through the indelible experiences of a few months, the differences that had once marked me as forever apart now seemed suddenly precious, the product of an obscure, romantic mountain bloodline. With every approving comment and interested gesture, the vague, jagged mountain range I had begun to subconsciously outline while still in India took on more realism, more heft.

That is the way of things in the Himalayas. Every place is not just what it is, but what it was, and what we dream it might be. The mountains are the setting of our most powerful mythology and the abode of our most revered gods, and where, since before recorded history, the rishis have retreated to meditate upon eternity. Vienna-born indologist and Hindu monk Agehananda Bharati wrote, “that to all Hindus, except those who live there, the Himalayas tend to be ascriptive rather than actual mountains,” going on to quote philosopher TRV Murti, who said that “the Himalayas of the rishis and the yogis are more important as an ideal to us than are the actual rocks and the miserable huts of the people there.” For me, the compulsion to sublimate the harsh reality of the Himalayas into pure symbolism was overpowering, filling as it did the void left by my slow drift from my parents’ values.

My journey had been but a short drink from an infinite pool, and I yearned to return, better prepared physically and mentally for the lessons the land had to teach. I was not yet aware that despite one’s best intentions, what is found on a pilgrimage is not always what was sought.

Years passed, and I got married. My wife was Tamil, her family from South India. Our cultures were based on the same Hindu precepts, yet the language she spoke with her parents was incomprehensible, the food they ate at home like nothing I had on my own table growing up. When we went to her parents’ house for dinner, she explained how to properly eat all the dishes lined up in front of us, yet all I could think about was the distant, windblown peaks where I had once felt at home.

A year after our wedding, we traveled to India together, planning to spend two weeks in the mountains followed by two weeks in the lowlands of Tamil Nadu, paying homage at the still-elusive Badrinath and then my wife’s family temple.

As our plane descended into the cool greenery surrounding Rishikesh, the heat and dust of Delhi seemed a lifetime away. We made our way into town, the headlights of our taxi illuminating new billboards and designer hotels along the winding road, the stress of the interminable journey to get here quickly forgotten as night fell. I looked out of the window at motorcycles speeding by, the traffic thicker than I’d remembered. On the way down to our hostel near the Ganga, we walked past the location of the dilapidated joint I’d stayed in my last time in town eight years before, but it was long gone, replaced by a glass-fronted building and brightly lit signs.

At dawn, we swung up into a green and white bus heading north. We hit our first pothole, flying out of our seats, and I laughed with relief at all that had remained the same. After a few minutes, we realized that seats toward the front of the bus offered

a smoother ride, so we moved up near the door, leaving our backpacks shoved under the back bench. My wife expressed worry that they'd be stolen, but I knew we were now home, and I reassured her that here no one would touch our things.

We traveled northward, gaining elevation, sweatily packed together. My father's father had taken some similar road downhill in the days before cars reached these parts, traveling to Agra University to study English literature while the British still ruled, and my mother had, too, descending to Dehra Dun to marry my father, in 1983. The forested curves of the hills were silent, unchanged since the time of the Pandavas thousands of years before. I glanced over at my wife. For her, this was no homecoming, but I needed her to see this place as I saw it. Everything rested on this, an obligation that hung over me as a constant anxiety, but as I watched her hold on gamely through yet another sharp turn, I could not make out her thoughts behind the grim set of her jaw.

When we finally tumbled out of the bus in Joshimath, road weary and famished, it was all we could do to make the walk to our hotel. Instead of returning to the run-down government rest house where I had met all those men from my mother's home village, I had decided to prebook a room at a new resort-style development at the edge of town. I wanted my wife to be comfortable, and I thought clean sheets, warm water, and satellite television would do where musty pillows and communal showers would not. Collapsing on the soft bed, we spent the night eating room service and watching Bollywood music videos on the wall-mounted flat-screen.

We had planned to spend the next days hiking the Valley of Flowers, a nearby nature reserve of some renown, but when I woke up in the morning and threw open the balcony door, I found a thick fog limiting visibility to only a few feet. As the morning passed, the impenetrable haze remained, and we knew there was no way we could make it to the trailhead in time to reach the first planned stop by nightfall. Dejectedly moping around the hotel, we were elated when wind cleared the air shortly after lunch. There would not be time for the Valley today, but Badrinath remained only a two-hour drive away. We dashed out to the road and squeezed into a shared jeep heading there.

When we updated our family in Dehradun about the change in plans, my uncle surprised me by replying that they themselves had spontaneously decided to go to Badrinath earlier that day, and he was already in the car with his wife and children, several of my aunts, and my grandmother, who, despite the difficulty she had breathing at higher altitudes, had decided to make one last journey north. The misgivings the changed landscapes had instilled, the physical discomforts of the road,

the disappointments of sudden changes in plan, all had been suddenly replaced by the same feeling of accidental fate that I had first found in the back room of Omprakash Thapliyal's home all those years ago. Once again, these mountains were where we were supposed to be.

We arrived a few hours before the others. Set in a high bowl, the town had haphazardly grown into a disorganized sprawl. The history of its famous temple was obscured by millennia of conflicting local legends, though its brightly painted facade and polished golden cupola testified to the money recently poured into its restoration. Jostling past a tour group of South Indians, we reached the inner sanctum, where we admired the small ebony deity while listening to the chanting of the holy mantras. Outside, I made a donation in our name, and when the priest asked for my caste, I felt a silent pride when I replied and was understood. We sat outside next to the incense sellers overlooking the raging Alaknanda River, gazing upon the slopes rolling upward and the wispy clouds blowing overhead.

My family arrived, and we hugged them for the first time since our wedding the year before. We helped my grandmother negotiate the steep path, and she went inside the temple to pay her respects. Afterward, we took photos together, smiling in the place my great-grandmother had once visited and her great-grandmother before. Night falling, we drove back to our hotel, where we ate dinner in the common room, served dish after dish as though we were in our own home. My aunts talked with the servers about their plans for the future while the rest of us made the small talk that relatives do. When they finally took their leave, heading over to their own hotel, we too descended to our room for the contented sleep that only comes when one's worries have drifted far away.

As if under the same spell that had fallen over us, the weather remained clear, and the next morning we were able to begin our trek to the Valley of Flowers. Before our departure, I decided that we would leave our bags locked in the manager's office rather than carrying them up with us on the demanding climb. Of course, the manager said smilingly, of course. The hotel was top-of-the-line, Western in every way, and we trusted our belongings would be kept safe in a place reviewed so highly online.

We departed, not a cloud in the sky.

Midway through *Mountain Goddess*, his study of the traditions surrounding the Nanda Devi pilgrimage, anthropologist William Sax relates the tale of King Yashdhawal, who was once visited by the goddess herself. In the local tradition of

hospitality, she was entitled to every comfort, so after being offered gold and jewels, she asked Yashdhawal for his very kingdom as a gift. When he refused, she cursed his lands and returned to her home on distant Mount Kailash.

When the crops failed and maggots filled the rice stores, the penitent king knew he must make a pilgrimage to Nanda Devi and ask for forgiveness. In the ancient tradition, none but males of high caste could proceed on the pilgrimage past the village of Bhala, yet the king could not deny himself what he saw as his royal prerogatives, bringing along his pregnant wife, his children, much of his army, and even his dancing girls.

The procession soon passed Bhala and halted for the night, where the king asked his courtesans to dance for his entertainment. Nanda Devi, further enraged by this blasphemy, turned the dancers into stone. Uncowed, the king continued his quest the next day, but had to halt again when his wife went into labor in a nearby cave, eventually giving birth to a baby boy. Her holy place forever defiled, Nanda Devi sent down a terrible hail near the lake at Roopkund, smashing the skulls of the king and everyone he had brought with him, including his wife and newborn son.

Every twelve years, the chausingha khadu recapitulated the route of the doomed king, just as it had for centuries before. Near its prescribed path was a curious rock formation said to be remains of the petrified dancing girls, and higher still, the frozen lake of Roopkund, where hundreds of shattered skeletons lay where they had fallen, still visible to this day.

Our hike began in nearby Govindghat, where we joined a paved trail winding upward through a narrow gorge. Our route was similar to that taken by mountaineer Frank Smythe when he returned in 1937 to the place he called “a valley of peace and perfect beauty where the human spirit [could] find repose.” Much had changed in the decades since, and now donkeys and clamoring porters crowded the first sections of the route, the stench of the animal dung quickly putting paid to any uplift.

Countless Sikh pilgrims also accompanied us, happily making the grueling climb to nearby Hemkund Sahib, the world’s highest gurdwara. As our lowland lungs quickly tired, we were encouraged by their unflagging spirit. “Waheguru!” they cried, clambering past, often barefoot and much older than us. Thin waterfalls threaded down cliffs high overhead, while the songs of strange birds filled the air.

In his seminal article, “Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization,” Agehananda Bharati had written that “in all Indian languages . . . the word for pilgrimage contains the root for ‘to go,’ ‘to move’ . . . it was the motion, the effort of moving on and then

up the steep mountain . . . which [was] the key element in the whole undertaking.” Only through long, laborious movement and ascetic self-denial can the seeker generate *tapas*, or inner heat, and earn the expected fruits of his pilgrimage.

Halfway through the miles-long trek, we had gained thousands of feet in altitude. My legs burned and my back spasmed. Two hours later, we’d run through our snacks and much of our bottled water. Just when no end seemed possible, we staggered past the helipad used by those impatient and wealthy enough to spend a few hundred dollars on transport, and relief cascaded over me with the knowledge that we were finally nearing the village of Ghangaria. We stopped at the first rest house we passed and rented a simple concrete-floored room. I collapsed on the cheap foam mattress, feverish with exhaustion, and pulled the woolen cover over my chin before falling into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, my joints still ached, but after paying a few rupees for a bucket of scalding hot bathwater, I felt ready to push on. We climbed to the park gate, and I spoke with the rangers in Hindi, telling them we were students from Delhi so we only had to pay the Indian resident entrance fee. I signed into the large logbook with an aunt’s address.

The track was roughly paved, but we made quick progress over a roaring rapid and up a mossy slope. Finally, we made the crest of the last hill and reached the Valley itself, thick with green vegetation, surrounded on three sides by snow-covered peaks disappearing into clouds. Fooled by photoshopped images we’d seen online, we had expected a technicolor expanse reaching the horizon, but the tremendous variety of flowers was not apparent until we descended to the Valley floor. There, the bushes, which from above had seemed a uniform deep green, were revealed to harbor blossoms of every color. Frank Smythe had written that this valley could not “fail to inspire in the dullest a nobler conception of the universe,” and indeed, a mysticism even more ancient than that we had found in the temple of Badrinath flowed through us. Lost in the waist-high vegetation, we covered our heads as a light rain began to fall.

In a matter of hours, we wandered so far into the Valley that we were not sure how to get back. The mountains that had been so alluring only a short time before assumed an air of unfeeling menace as the sun began to set. They towered over us as we stumbled over loose rocks, looking for the way out before the park closed. Just as a real edge of fear began to enter our search, we found a group of college students from a hiking club in Delhi who told us the only way out was the way we had come in. We raced back up the trail, making it to the entrance with minutes

to spare. As we scrambled down the last decline, I was simultaneously filled with the satisfaction that comes with overcoming physical challenge and the knowledge earned from another ascent. My mountains had gained yet further concrete detail and conceptual depth, gleaming serenely in the light of my mind.

By the next afternoon, aided by gravity, we had already returned to the commercial bustle of Joshimath. As we walked into our hotel, the staff, who had been so friendly a few days before, didn't make eye contact as they greeted us at the front desk. We walked down to the restaurant to eat lunch, and the manager of the hotel came by our table, quietly solicitous. Unnerved, I joked with my wife that they'd probably lost our backpacks.

We went back upstairs, and I walked to the manager's office for our things. My bag was where I'd left it, but my wife's was not. I looked behind the door, underneath the desk. The backpack was gone, and the clothes and iPad inside it. I yelled out to the front desk, and one of the boys who'd served my family with a large smile a few nights before stammered through nonsensical explanations. I demanded to see the manager, and he glided in after a few minutes, gesturing us back to his office. Taking a seat behind his desk, he smoothed his hair and adjusted his glasses. "You see, Mr. Kirtan, there has been a misunderstanding."

He told us that another large group had stored their bags in his office, and that when they had left for their own journey to the Valley of Flowers, they had accidentally loaded my wife's bright blue backpack onto their jeep in the dark predawn hours. "Why can't you just call them now?" They're on the trail, he said, and you know what reception is like up there. Just wait for a few days, Mr. Kirtan, he said, and we will get your bag when the group returns.

I was disoriented by the beauty and exhaustion of the preceding days, and besides, this was still Garhwal, the land of the gods, where we dealt honestly with one another. After perfunctory questioning, I accepted his story, the hundred dollars he gave us to buy my wife some new supplies in the meantime, and the offer of a taxi ride to wherever we wanted to go. Before we got up to leave, he handed me a signed check for the equivalent of seven hundred dollars, telling me we were free to cash it if we did not receive our belongings within the week. I looked him in the eye as we shook hands and walked out the door. The young men at the front desk fell over themselves in apology, and the guard at the gate dropped his chin, shaking his head regretfully. As the sun set, we stepped into the taxi that had been

called, still aching from the exertions of our hike, drained mentally after everything we had now lost.

Two weeks later in Tamil Nadu, we still had not heard from the manager. I dialed the hotel's front desk every few hours with no answer. I called the manager's cell phone and let the line ring for minutes before hanging up. There was no need to worry, I told my wife. No need to worry.

In the car driving back from my wife's family temple, I finally received a text message containing a blurry picture of the backpack. Triumphant and relieved, I sent them the same address I'd used to sign into the Valley of Flowers the week before. The package would be in the mail that evening, they said. I asked them to send a picture of the addressed box, but they never responded.

I updated my uncle, and he made his own inquiries while we waited. That evening, he called to tell me that he'd gone to grade school with one of the maintenance staff, and he'd asked him for the straight story. "He said you need to forget about ever getting that backpack. The day after you left for your hike, the hotel reported it stolen and police found it in an abandoned building nearby. The back panel was torn out and everything inside was gone. Go cash that check. Now."

My head spun. These facts did not fit into the reality I had spent years painstakingly creating. I felt the vertigo of characters in a Graham Greene novel, ignorant Westerners made suddenly aware that they did not understand even the most basic rules governing the world around them. I walked out of my room in a daze, telling my wife the news. We walked to the nearest bank branch together.

"Sir, we can't cash that here. That's not a bearer check. You must have an account with us to deposit the money, and as you are not an Indian citizen, you can't open one."

"No sir, though your wife has an OCI card, she can't cash the check either, because it's in your name."

"No, you can't sign it over to one of your Indian relatives with an account."

We were directed to the branch office dealing with nonresident Indians, where a sharp-eyed manager told me I would never get the money. She pursed her lips and shook her head, her eyes telling me what a fool I'd been.

Pacing outside, I dialed the manager again. He finally picked up on the second try.

"Now listen here, we know what's going on, and we know you purposely gave us a check we couldn't cash!" I stabbed the air with my finger, my voice rising into a yell.

He listened calmly and told me I must be mistaken and to hand the phone over to the bank manager. When I did so, she explained to him what she had explained to me.

“You know what you did! Now make it right!”

He asked me to give him my bank details, including my account number, so he could wire me the money. I refused.

“Why did you lie to me? Why?!”

“Nothing has been stolen, Mr. Kirtan,” he said. “Just give us a little more time and you’ll have the backpack and the money.” When confronted with the details we now knew, he hung up the phone.

I raged through the days that followed, our last in India. I called the manager again and again—from the mall, from the car, from my relatives’ home—cursing, making threats. After each conversation, I’d throw the phone across the room or scream into a pillow, then I’d redial his number, but he wouldn’t pick up for hours. He eventually told me he could not wire the money due to tax reasons, but that he would be happy to send me the funds via PayPal, transferring me to another man in the hotel administration. We repeated the dance of ignored phone calls and flashes of violent conversation. His promise shifted to a guarantee that he would send me the seven hundred dollars via Venmo once he got approval from the head office. I knew that what they had taken from me was not in their power to return, and with that knowledge, my anger renewed, incandescent.

On the long flight back to America, I slept fitfully, visions of sandblasted deserts and endless ocean alternating with those of our forlorn backpack ripped apart, violated, lying in the muddy corner of a ruined shack, my wife’s belongings strewn across the bed of some nameless thief. In dreaming my mountains alive I had succumbed to romanticism, and for that, we had paid a terrible price. Perhaps I was nothing more than the bewildered *chausingha khadu*, laden with expectation, doomed to make the same ascent again and again, forever searching for a home that didn’t exist. As we descended into coastal Houston, my thoughts returned to the lonely and holy Garhwal peaks, and what the Indian author Ruskin Bond had meant when he had written about them, “It is always the same with mountains. Once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape.” The wheels touched down, and I closed my eyes, dreaming of my return.