



GOVERNANCE IN THE LAP OF HIMALAYAS

Great things happen when men and mountains meet.

The mountains held an irresistible attraction for me. They represent the impossible challenges, insurmountable obstacles that dare to be summited. These perilous yet majestic landforms continue to hold a position of awe and wonderment in our lives. Ed Bernbaum, wrote a book published by the University of California Press some 20 years ago, entitled, 'Sacred Mountains of the World'. In it he explains that people have traditionally revered mountains as places of sacred power and spiritual attainment and writes that "The ethereal rise of a ridge in mist, the glint of moonlight on an icy face, a flare of gold on a distant peak – such glimpses of transcendent beauty can reveal our world as a place of unimaginable mystery and splendor. In the fierce play of natural elements that swirl about their summits – thunder, lightning, wind, and clouds – mountains also embody powerful forces beyond our control, physical expressions of an awesome reality that can overwhelm us with feelings of wonder and fear."

I had the same irresistible lure for the mountains. I had trekked some of the more familiar locations. The trek that I craved to do was to the Kailash Manasarovar, which somehow seemed distant and elusive. The July month of 2011 was the most memorable one of my life. As Additional Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) I applied for my tour to Kailash Mansarovar in January with not much hope of my leave being sanctioned. I had tried earlier and did not get leave. This time, I also separately applied for being selected as Liaison Officer (LO), which got quickly approved like a sleight of the hand. As per the norm, the Secretary and the Minister are required to grant prior approval to the LO, as LO is completely sponsored by Government and any subsequent withdrawal of permission may disturb the Yatra arrangements. File went up and came back the same day with the prospective gifts of one month earned leave treated as official duty and the entire cost of journey, over a lakh, to be paid by the government. .

My name came through as a yatri in the lottery-based selection process in Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). However, only Government officials from the Ministries and from defence establishments could be appointed as LOs, an onerous responsibility. There were 16 LO's to be appointed for each of the 16 batches and few were kept on the reserve list. I was to appear for the interview chaired by Joint Secretary, MEA and other Director & DS level officers, as members of the Committee. I faced the interview board. They interviewed me in full earnest, despite some discomfort on their part. I made it easy for them by taking all questions in my stride, nursing my cherished aspiration of undertaking the yatra. They wanted to know why, being so senior, I have chosen to at this stage. I told them that I was fond of trekking and had trekked to Amarnath, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Gomukh, Hemkund, Vaishno Devi, etc. in the past. In the past I had applied to go to Kailash Manasarovar, paid the Kumaon Vikas Nigam, but was not sanctioned leave. Now armed with the clearance by the Ministry at the highest level, I said that I may be considered dispensable as Additional Secretary by the Ministry! They laughed. The Joint Secretary also wanted to know how I could keep the flock together knowing that the yatriis coming from diverse cultural, social backgrounds, most of them first timers, who could suffer from high altitude problems, including depression, leading to aberrant behaviours, etc. I responded saying that thirty two years of public administration had taught me the art of the possible.

I left after the interview. By evening, I was informed that I had been selected as LO and that I would have to go for my medical checkup which could conclude confirmation of my selection as LO. I had been selected for leading one of the 16 groups among the 70 -80 people who had appeared for the interview which went on for over 6-7 days.

I was both disturbed and elated. Have I taken a responsibility more than I can handle, I questioned myself. Will I be able to live up to the responsibilities of a LO? Am I physically capable? Did I not have severe headache in Amarnath and had to be given oxygen?

Three days later I was declared medically fit. The yatriis were also called to the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) for medical tests prior to departure. In all, only 56 were declared medically fit. ITBP usually arranges for interaction between the LO and the selected group on completion of medical tests. I interacted with the group after brief introduction of each person. There were about 14 women, the oldest member of the group was a



male, 75 years, an ex-service personnel and the youngest, a male, about 25 years old. There were more than 10 members who were above 60 years. Two members, one male, one female, had already visited Kailash hills more than 10 times, through Nepal and the MEA sponsored route and were welcomed with great adulation and admiration. Still some others had visited more than once.

The Committees for Finance, Transport, Luggage, Ration, Food were to be constituted. It was normal practice to have the committees headed by the oft visiting yatris, considered very experienced and knowledgeable. I had already received pairavis (feelers) regarding the habitually visiting yatris for being appointed as heads of the Committees! On an overall assessment of the situation, I felt that no personal agendas should have any place and I decided to ask yatris to volunteer. However, a retired officer of CPSU was chosen as Deputy LO, who was a two timer, by a voice vote, and who appeared very seasoned, mature and popular with the group. My gut sense was that he would serve the purpose of keeping the flock together and assist the LO very well. In hindsight, he was in fact not just the perfect choice, but the only choice. My intuition proved right. The other oft visiting KM Yatris considered it infra dig to volunteer and did not make to any of the Committees. All Committees were formed with leadership and membership as per choice of the group/individual. The leaders of the sub-groups, so formed, were given full authority to decide on issues in consultation with the members. They were to only approach the LO wherever any guidance was required. The working of the Committees was based on full delegation and trust reposed in them that they would function with accountability to the group. The Finance Committee decided to request each one to contribute Rs 3000 to the Corpus to be managed by that Committee headed by a Chartered Accountant by profession. I offered my contribution. But I was prevented, as LOs were not expected to contribute. I insisted saying that I did not believe in exceptions or seek privileges as LO and had my way. The Mess, Finance and Ration committees coordinated and worked together to make the procurements as per their joint assessment and in consultation with yatris.

On the D-day, all 56 members from almost all parts of the country assembled. The bigger contingents were from Gujarat, Maharashtra, AP, Kerala, Karnataka, Delhi, and West Bengal. It was welcome, fun and felicitations for the KM yatris groups all through the way till the 2 buses reached Dharchula on the Indo-Nepal Border side, where the team halted that night. Each one was advised to engage a pony at the start of the climb, as a safety measure, irrespective of whether they would use it or not. Each day the team was asked to assemble for prayers. Any yatri could lead the prayers. This became a habit, as each day, on departure and return for/after safe yatra and thanksgiving was offered by the group.

The first day, as the team had moved some twenty-thirty kilometers, there was a road block by the villagers with local demands. They were polite, but persisted in blocking the way. They mentioned that the LO, as a senior officer, should give an assurance on behalf of Government of India to fulfill all their long-pending demands. I was shocked, as no prior briefing had been given to me by the intelligence officers, who called on me at Dharchula, the previous day. Also to my dismay, I found that all the police and civil officers from the Uttarakhand Government, who had since accompanied the group till then, suddenly vanished into thin air and were not picking up their mobiles. The villagers having held the yatris captive gave us water, snacks, chairs to sit and umbrellas to protect from sun and rain, at various points during this unscheduled halt of over three to four hours, while the leaders made their speeches, aggressively articulating their demands. After discussion among yatris, the response was strategized. Some yatris spread out into the villagers groups, mingled with them and kept them engaged in conversations about their problems. LO & Dy LO and few others called the leaders aside, in separate groups, conveyed their sympathies with their genuine demands and explained to them that the matters raised by the villagers were to be addressed and redressed by the State Government. However, they were assured that their demands will be taken up through the Central Government.

Then from nowhere, the local Revenue official staged his reappearance, as dramatically as he left when the problem started, at a time when the villagers were convinced about my empathy and genuineness and when had almost won the villagers over to our point of view. The Revenue Officer gave his speech, as a State representative using local dialect. I also made a concluding speech on their insistence, followed by applause and only with that appeal, the villagers relented. My debriefing report to MEA, on completion of the yatra, contained due notings on the experience of yatris, including the failure of the local machinery and central intelligence in not briefing the LO in advance and allowing an avoidable embarrassment and undue hardship to the yatris. I made it clear in my report that from the local interactions with participants at the blockade, the



message for massive mobilization of villagers from far off and remote hill areas had been received more than a week back and that the gathering was not as un contemplated or unplanned event, as it was made out to be.

The team reached Gala by evening. The next day was reportedly predicted to be the most difficult and treacherous route. First, the team had to climb down the "so-called" 4644 steps, which were unevenly spaced, some high rise, some low rise steps, some broad, some narrow and all in irregular shapes and sizes. At the end of the steps, started the narrow, 4 to 5 feet wide path of 7-8 kms with the low reaching mountains to the left almost just touching the head in many parts, from one side and the fierce Kali river flowing, on the other side. No pony ride was allowed on this narrow track. I had briefed the yatris on the previous night about this trek. Security personnel from the ITBP/State Government with wireless sets were asked to divide themselves to accompany the batch from the front to the middle and then to the back, instead of walking together. Photography was strictly prohibited for the team as the path was slippery and one wrong move could land a yatri in the river never to be recovered from the watery grave. In the previous year, reportedly, one yatri attempting to shoot photograph from close to the edge of the path slipped into the river and his body was never to be found. He left his grieving widow behind who accompanied him on the yatra, but who was not with the deceased yatri at the time of the tragedy. She was informed much later. My team managed to cross this route with discipline. The yatris who could walk very fast curtailed their speed to ensure that wireless communication was possible among all three security personnel and others got left far behind.

I mounted a pony after covering this notoriously treacherous stretch, on the deceptive understanding that the difficult route is over and the rest of the route for the day would be amenable to a pony ride. We had planned to use the pony wherever the climb up/down was not steep and the terrain was relatively plain. The ITBP LO who was specially assigned to go with me up to the Indo-China Border also lagged behind, since I had mounted the pony. The pony man was ahead, I was astride the pony and the bittu was carrying my luggage on his back. Suddenly the pony panicked, kicked off the pony man into the steep slope on the right that would have taken him inexorably into the gorging Kali river. I was thrown off the pony towards the left, on the mountain side, narrowly missed hitting my head on the rocks. But my right leg came off the stirrup and was pointing to the air, while the left leg was still caught in the other stirrup. The pony started to run some distance, as I was being dragged, body and head, touching the ground on the narrow, but tractable path of the swerving mountain path. Fortunately, the Pitthu with some presence of mind managed to move ahead of the pony and stopped the pony, but not before the pony had moved some ghastly 300 meters. By then the hardy and brave pony man also made it to the top, without slipping into the river and we were all saved from a near disaster and tragedy.

The yatris crossed Malpa, where a landslide due to incessant rains washed away the entire village, killing more than 180 people, including 60 pilgrims to Kailash-Mansarovar in 1998. Among the dead pilgrims were Ms. Protima Bedi, the wellknown Odissi dancer. That earlier halt at Malpa got shifted to Budhi, the next scheduled halt, since the disaster.

After covering Budhi, the yatris reached Gunji all in good shape. The yatris met for thanksgiving prayers after covering the difficult route. I did not mention about the fall from the horse, as the morale was so high among the yatris. It was fortunate that none of the yatris had witnessed the fall. On way to Gunji was the Chiyalek plains, a virtual delight for the eyes, with heavenly and colourful blooms of flowers dotting the landscape. The schedule at Gunji involved a two day's stay in the ITBP camp area, where the second and final medical checkup was to take place before crossing Indo-China border. The Annapoorna peak was so overwhelmingly and clearly visible. Two yatris left behind their X-rays at Delhi, despite clear instructions, and the medical officers threatened not to allow them to go ahead. I tried to intervene with the Yatri Niwas at Delhi to get the X ray reports from the lockers left in the Yatri Niwas, where the yatris had stayed the last few days before embarking on the journey. I tried to get a scanned copy of the reports by e-mail to the ITBP office. But to no avail. I advised the doctors to check with the Delhi Lung and Chest Institute, where the first test was done. But nothing worked. I persuaded the Medical officers to allow them, reporting their ability to trek without any problem for themselves and others, till that point in time of the yatra. As per rules, LO's decision is final. However, after consultation between MO and LO, two yatris were allowed.

Most of the remaining yatris cleared the medical test, except two; one was a male pediatrician accompanied by his wife, who was also a doctor, an ophthalmologist. The other yatri was a lady, suffering from high BP and



who was accompanied by her husband, a yoga teacher by profession. The ITBP doctors were of the view that the pediatrician had a serious heart condition and it was not clear how he had been cleared at the first medical test by the Delhi Lung and Chest Institute. The doctors refused to permit both the yatri, which meant that their spouses would also get left behind. The doctors, however, told them it was the LO's final decision and responsibility and that they were unwilling to suggest that I take any risks. The normal practice is that if the MO rejects, LO's normally accept the decision and do not take the yatri, although it was up to the LO to take a calculated risk.

The couples literally begged and pleaded with the LO to let them also go, as it happened with the two yatri who came without X rays. In addition, the other yatri also sought LO's positive intervention and were waiting with bated breath as to what LO's decision would be. I retired to the quiet of her room to ponder over the next course of action regarding the two yatri. I felt challenged by the most difficult and painful moment of the yatra. I knew that in the event of any untoward happening, I would have to stay back and do the all the logistics. I shuddered to think of the consequences. On the other hand, I also thought that both the yatri had their life companions and if anything happened they would be available to provide the necessary support. I sought divine intervention.

The previous night all yatri were at the powerful and widely worshipped Kali temple in the ITBP camp at Gunji in a satsang programme singing *bhajans* and *kirtans*. Truly a powerful goddess, I felt, while at the temple. I decided to ask the two yatri couples to write a note invoking her blessings stating what they wanted to say. I asked them to make the note with copies to (L)O, (M)O, (G)O, i.e. Liaison officer, Medical officer and God, respectively. I called it the LMG!!! 'Trust in God and keep your powder dry' Oliver Cromwell has said. In true Cromwellian spirit, she decided to ask them to place the copy of the letters at the foot of the Goddess Kali. She decided that she would declare her decision in a specially convened emergency meeting of all yatri after full introspection. In the specially convened meeting I announced that the two may continue the yatra and that she would inform the MO of her decision. I did not realize the magnitude of the decision I was taking because of the spirit of surrender. I felt it would have been inhuman to return yatri after reaching a height of 10,500 feet and after almost a fortnight of hard trek. The yatri's joy knew no bounds appreciating, as they subsequently narrated, the bold risk that I had taken upon myself, as a woman, when even many male LOs would be risk-averse in such situations. Bursts of chants of Om Namah Shivaya rented the atmosphere. The yatri gave their thanksgiving again at the temple. That was something unprecedented.

The next day, the trek took off to Nabidang the last point of halt before crossing the Lipulekh pass, a treacherous pass on the Indo-China border. On way to Nabidang, the yatri crossed Garbyang from where the Kali river originated. The Kali river borders the Nepalese zone of Mahakali and the Indian state of Uttarakhand. *Being a very sensitive border area and disputed territory between India, China and Nepal, another passport check was conducted and baggages were scanned..* The ITBP gave the yatri a loving and sumptuous lunch at Kalapani. They showed a cave from below where the legendary Vyasa Muni is known to have lived. They showed the Nagin and Nag Parbat, playing hide and seek with clouds. As the yatri moved along, the only name on everybody's lips was Om Parbat, as they expectantly awaited the prospects of seeing the much celebrated and memorable scene of the Om-shaped snow formation on the Himalayan range of mountains. The pony man was heard to say that not many previous batches/ (this was the 7th) had been able to see the Om Parbat as the Om had remained hidden under a dense cloud cover and had been a big source of disappointment to the yatri. Darshan of Om Parbat in many ways epitomized a successful yatra.

The yatri reached Nabidang for lunch and there was no sign of the Om Parbat opening up. I was heard humming the *bhajan* "*Darshan dee jo bhagwan, parama dayalo bhagwan*". The yatri returned to rest as they had to leave between 12 AM to 1:00 AM that night to cross the Lipulekh pass by 7:00 AM in the morning. Suddenly, hysterical shouts of joys were heard outside my tent, where I stayed. Everybody came out to see the glorious sight of Om Parbat, as if the prayers had been answered. A miracle of miracles. The view itself surpassed all expectations. The clouds actually formed like a halo around the parbat, showing the snow formed Om with striking clarity. Photos and videos went into unrelenting operation, while many wept with joy. I asked myself "Why should it be Om Shaped? Why not any other religious symbols?" Although I got the most beautiful secular answers to those questions, later, at that moment, the rational physical mind was overwhelmed. I realized in good time that it was not the time for analysis, but pure savoring of the moment of the living Presence of



the Supreme Universal God. Excitement got the better of sleep and the yatris had to force themselves to go indoors and rest as we prepared for the most challenging part of the next day's yatra.

By 01.00 hrs, almost the next day, the group was up and about, energized by the darshan of Om Parbat. They rendered the daily prayers. The generator was on, kept operational by solar power. As we left the camp, it was pitch dark and the light came from the small solar lamps installed on the landside of the path and the torches that yatris carried. Still later, as the trekking continued, there was light coming from the stars only. The group crossed the glaciers and reached the Lipulekh pass. The biting cold wind power blew across our shriveled bodies, as oxygen levels dipped and the freeze took toll of our bodies, despite being heavily armed with woolen clothings covering from head to toe. We had been warned.

Lipulekh Pass was an important landmark in the yatra. In a narrow area of 100 sqms, the 7th batch of 56 were to receive the yatris of an earlier returning batch. Indian ponies of 7th batch, meet the Chinese ponies of that batch. The luggage numbering over 1000 are transferred on both sides. The crossing over for the 7th Batch can take place only with good coordination and with the timely coming back of returnee yatris before the unpredictable inclement weather sets in. In this case, the 7th Batch reached a full 2-3 hrs earlier than the returning yatris and the greatest blessing was that it was at least not snowing. Two yatris, one of them the youngest boy in the group developed oedema and required to be moved to the lower reaches as quickly as possible. Another lady yatri required to be given oxygen, as well.

The Chinese diplomat from the foreign office and his team, who check the visas, also took time to arrive, as clearances take place at the spot. But the Chinese begin the formalities only when the last of the returning batch crosses over to the Indian side. The intolerable wait went on for long as the last of the returnee yatris arrived, tired and barely able to speak. The anguish of the 7th batch for their own selves melted away on seeing them. The LO of the returning batch met me and completed certain debriefing formalities. He also said that we need to be careful with the rations on reaching Taklakot, the first but next halt in China.

The team of Chinese officials arrived late. The towering and stern official looked up and down, before clearing me first as LO, as she had to quickly move with the young boy and a doctor in the group across the pass. Crossing the glaciers, the three trekked to the lower reaches, but the young boy was still very sick. To my dismay, we were told that the paid-up Chinese vehicles would not come to pick them up. No vehicle in sight, they trudged up a long distance to a further pick up point and eventually all yatris reached Taklakot, a plain area, by road safely. This started our first halt in China.

After two days' rest, the yatris drove to the Mansarovar Lake on a bright, beautiful day on a broad eight carriage way road. Earlier, yatris used to do the lake *parikrama* by foot covering a distance of over 60 kms. On way to Lake Mansarovar, the yatris saw the Rakshas Tal, where legend holds, that Ravan did Shiv Pooja. This still lake is used for nothing, neither drinking, washing nor bathing. No fish is caught. It is still believed that demons (*Rudram, Chamakam, Purusha Suktham, Durga Suktham, Dewaram, Skanda Ashthotram, Manimanthiram Aushtham and other holy hymns*) live there in the middle of the lake. On the banks of Mansarovar still, clean and clear like a mirror, we had our daily, holy dips to our heart's content. On a clear day we could see the image of Kailash Parbhat reflected in the waters of Mansarovar. If there was heaven, this was it. I took dips in spine chilling cold water, in and out, in and out, all in one go. The belief is that seven generations of forefathers and seven succeeding generations get the benefit of the standard 21 dips. I had suffered no such illusions. I just enjoyed the dips each day of my stay.

Some mysterious lights are seen over the Mansarovar leading to a belief that the astral bodies, the devatas, descended as meteors on the lake at night for bath and play. Anxiety to see the scene killed one and all, as the yatris sat up in the chill of the night in the bus by the banks of the lake, wide awake from 12 o' clock in the night to about 5:00 AM in the morning to witness the legendary grand spectacle. The yatris did see meteors fall and then the light wading across the lake. Some such phenomenon was captured in the powerful cameras of some yatris. In the sheer darkness of the night, the lights that appeared as three spots sporadically ran across the horizon, thereby leaving the pilgrims awestruck. I had not been able to delve into the science behind this spectacle, so far.

The yatris moved to Darchen, literally means Darshan. Several interesting events happened at Darchen. I was informed by the Food Committee that from the ration they carried and being cooked for yatris, the yatris



take larger helpings than they can manage to eat and are wasting food. Since yatris still had a long way to go and had to survive on the depleting ration for some more days, I decided to call an emergency meeting of the yatris just before dinner. I talked to the yatris to have food whatever quantity they wanted to have, prepared with love and care, happily, but that wastage shall not be tolerated, because it can become a serious issue for the group's survival with a few days still left for the climb to be completed, should food shortage arise. The night prayers were led and the yatris began a quiet and sober dinner session with not an iota of food wasted. The positive impact was for all to see, during the rest of the yatra.

From Darchen, the Mt. Kailash, believed to be Lord Dakshinamurthy became visible. We engaged land Cruisers and two groups left for darshan. The vehicle negotiated swift rivers and mountainous and rugged roads and after about an hour drive, the group reached a plateau area Ashtapad, full of flowery meadows from where a direct (although distant) but grand view of Lord Kailash view of Mt. Kailash is considered possible on a clear day. Jain swami Shri Rishabh Dev did penance at Ashtapad. He went 7 steps on a mountain and on the last step (8th step), he is believed to have vanished. There is a monument (Mandir like), where his chappals are said to be found.

There was cloud cover and the Mt Kailash was not readily visible, to start with. There was some disappointment, but the yatris arranged themselves seated in a row, took sankalpam and started chanting the *Rudram*, *Chamakam*, *Purusha Suktham*, *Durga Suktham*, *Dewaram*, *Skanda Ashthotram*, *Manimanthiram Aushtham* and other holy hymns. Not knowing any of these, I remained a silent witness to the holy surroundings, the magic and mystic feelings aroused by the holy hymns. Some were doing Pooja using the small yellow flowers from the meadows around. The chants gathered intensity, as disappointment grew.

Suddenly, the second miracle of miracles happened. The cloud cover gradually lifted like the receding waves of the ocean on the sea shore, or like a curtain folding upwards and displayed the full face of the Mount Kailash. When the cloud cover lifted completely and the eight steps or the Ashtapada on the Mount Kailash peeped through the snow-clad Mount Kailash, these were the most spiritually elevating, ecstatic and exhilarating moments that one could ever experience, but cannot adequately describe. To me, the whole mountain took the profile of Lord Shiva with the flowing matted hair, the Jatadhara. Thankfully and with tears of joy and reverence, the yatris returned to Darchen to prepare for the final climb to the Dolma pass 18,200 ft (5,500 m).

From Darchen, the yatris reached Yama Dwar by road. It is said that "Yama", lord of death comes from this gate to take the life of a person. The practice is to do *pradakshina* three times on Yama Dwar. Three Kilometer from Yama Dwar, the bus took the yatris to a place where ponies and porters were available. From this point the *parikrama* started. By that afternoon the yatris reached the Derapukh camp. After rest, some visited *Charansparsha*. This is the closest view of Lord Kailash.

After a few days halt at Derapuk, the yatris embarked on the final and a seriously challenging kora - a walk circling a sacred site - or *parikrama* around the base of Mount Kailash. This is no walk in the park - the Kailash kora is a 32 mile (52 km) trek that starts at 15,000ft (4600m) and includes an 18,372ft (5600m) pass called the Dolma Pass all in one day.

As the yatris were departing from Derapuk to reach the Dolma Pass, some other very revealing events happened. The young yatri who had suffered oedema due to altitude sickness earlier was continuing to be administered medicines and some injectables. The doctor who was given the responsibility to watch his health parameters regularly expressed concern that medicine shortage could arise, in case any other person suffers similar medical condition involved in the highest climb to the Dolma Pass and that it would be better if the young boy is advised to stay behind and can join the batch on return. In this way the medicines are conserved for emergency. I met the young boy, who remained adamant that he would go. He even said that he had spoken to his mother and she has said that he should go ahead without any fear and that she will take care of him through her prayers. Given the situation, I was in no mood to hear anything more and as it was getting delayed for the final climb to the Dolma Pass, I finally conveyed my decision, as LO that he shall remain behind. Dejected he moved away. As I found my pony a little short for my height, I decided to use the pony engaged by the young boy, leaving my own behind for use by the young boy. However, the pony would refuse to move ahead and was literally bent on throwing me off. After the experience on horse earlier on in the yatra, I decided to take my pony, for which I had to wait. Finally, the last to leave Derapuk, I resumed my trek on the pony I had engaged. An uncanny and surging feeling arose in me seeing the horse's resistance and whether it had something to do



with the young boy having been left behind. But it was too late to have changed my mind and I walked on with the pony moving along with a strange feeling of discomfort and sadness at having left the boy behind.

The climb to Dolma Pass was an uneven one with huge boulders and smaller ones scattered all over, rendering the trek difficult, without any regular path. Hence, it was unsafe to use the pony. Suddenly, as I walked on, I heard the greetings from behind: 'Om Namah Shivaya'. Lo and behold, it was the young boy I was relieved to see the boy coming along. But having exercised the authority of LO to ask him not to move beyond Derapuk, there was seething anger and sternness in my voice as the orders of LO had been disobeyed. Even as he pleaded guilty of disobedience, I asked him in a loud angry and resounding voice, that he should not come anywhere in my vicinity. The boy continued to greet me at the beginning and end of each day saying that in me he had seen his own mother. I realized that the sincere desire of the boy, as also the power of love of a doting mother outdid the exercise of authority of a mere LO. The mother's positive energies traversed miles to see that their wishes were fulfilled. My decision in the face of his self-confidence could have been changed given all the intuitions and physical indications I was getting when even the horse power added to the mothers prayers and the family wish. Some two years later the boy got engaged to be married. He sent the girls photograph by mail and sought my blessings and invited me to his marriage in Kerala!!!

The Dolma Pass is at an elevation of 19500 feet, which is the highest altitude of the entire yatra. Dolma is the Tibetan name of Goddess Parvati residing at Mount Kailash. The Pass can be treacherous if the weather is not favourable. The yatris were warned not to linger around for too long at this altitude for the air is very thin here. Crossing granite boulders of all sizes, one comes down the steep slopes to reach Gauri Kund. This is where Dolma Tara Devi is believed to have disappeared in the form of 21 wolves. It is believed that bathing in Gauri Kund cures people of many a disease. It is said that one can cross only if Goddess Dolma allows you to. Known in Hindu *tantric* tradition as Nila Saraswati, she was kind enough to bestow her blessings and all the yatris crossed the Pass with no hindrance at all.

After Gauri Kund, the descent is arduous, to say the least. Very steep, and the path is strewn with boulders. One has to watch the next step as one descends this rock maze. And then a large glacier presents itself. Soon one comes to the bank of Lham-chukkir river. One feels a huge sense of relief, although a substantial distance to be covered still lies ahead. Yet, one is down from the embrace of Dolma, and has one's feet now on gradual slopes having green marsh lands. Descending further through marshy slopes, some half an hour or so before the end of the descent, one comes across a region where river Khando Sanglam chu comes down. This comes from the valley of the same name, which falls in the path of the inner kora. Those who traverse the inner kora would rejoin the main trail here (presumably). Descending further, one comes to the confluence of Lham Chu river and Topcchen chu river which comes from the direction of the region of the source of the mighty river Indus. This eastern valley itself is variously referred to as Lham Chu valley or Zhong Chu valley. From hereon, the combined river is known as Zhong Chu.

We did this long trek mostly on horse back. And may it be mentioned once again that riding on a horse back is not the most comfortable of poses. *"There is a proverb in Tibetan that 'if a pony does not carry the rider during the ascent, the pony is no pony ; and if a person does not get down and walk on the descent, the man is no man.' So one should get down the pony during very steep descents, for it would be advantageous for both."* Any descent, you are off the horse. In any case, one cannot imagine how one can negotiate the journey down from Dolma on horseback without being thrown head over heels.

It was time to reach Zongzerbu after trekking more than 30 kms, from Derapuk including the Dolma Pass, all in one day. Whoever has done it, comes back like a survivor knowing that one has survived because of some unseen force that has protected, guided, and goaded him or her along.

The yatris returned to Taklakot and after two days of rest, it was time again to cross the Lipu Pass to enter India. The return was better facilitated by the Chinese after I briefed MEA on satellite phone and also took up with local Chinese officers about the earlier difficulties experienced in crossing Lipu Pass into China given the unsatisfactory arrangements. On return, there were better arrangements for transport to reach the Lipu Pass. I had ensured that the yatris leave early and also kept contact at Nabidang on phone to coordinate the arrivals of another batch on their onward movement with the timing of arrival of the returning 7th batch at Lipu Pass. The cross over, debriefing and exchange of luggage went smooth and without any untoward or medical or



other event, although the weather continued to play hostile. I, however, saw some of the yatri of the eighth batch disgruntled. As they had an LO of their own, I moved on with my flock of yatri to Nabidang. On reaching Nabidang, there was expectation and excitement to meet up with OM Parbat, yet again. But that was not to be, as there was no long halt scheduled at Nabidang except for a short break and the yatri straight away moved to Gunji for that well earned two days' rest at the ITBP camp.

I heaved a sigh of relief as there was no injury, no medical issue and all yatri returned in good shape and in one piece, as jolly good fellows. The doctor couple however, had voluntarily decided not to climb the Dolma Pass. The couple stopped at Derapuk, partly because the male spouse was advised by the medical officer at Gunji not to go ahead after medical checkup and partly also because the female spouse had to be administered oxygen at Lipu Pass on her onward journey, her condition having deteriorated. However, the lady with blood pressure issues and the young boy were hale and hearty. In the thanksgiving at the Mata temple, where the written notes were left by the two couples for her blessings, the papers found blown around at the sanctum sanctorum. Celebrations marked the stay at Gunji.

As evening approached I found some persons from the eighth batch whom I saw in heated discussions with their LO at Lipu Pass back at Gunji. Four Yatri of that batch returned merely because, reportedly, their names did not figure in the Group Visa although they had cleared every formality including the medical tests. This was noticed only at the Lipu Pass when the Chinese authorities pointed out to the LO/Yatri that their names did not figure in the Group Visa and that they could not be allowed to enter into the Chinese territory. The disappointment of the concerned yatri was writ large and understandably so, since even while being medically fit they were asked to go back after an arduous journey up to Lipu Pass. As the LO of Batch-7, I had to bear the brunt of their anger, disappointment as a result of lack of concern and advance action by whosoever concerned. The yatri sought appointment to meet me in my room. They gave vent to their anger, even though they acknowledged that I had nothing to do with their misfortune. But they wanted to take out their pent up anger on someone from Government and at that point in time, I represented the face of Government for them. My batch of yatri put them at ease and consoled them. I called aside some smart yatri of my batch to ensure that these yatri were given first priority in occupying rooms and beds of their choice for the rest of the journey and that their comforts are specially looked after and that they take food first before the 7th Batch. Yatri were also detailed to walk with them and engage them in conversations so that psychologically they do not get affected by what had happened.

As yatri reached Budhi, more yatri were found left behind from two of the subsequent batches as they fell sick and could not undertake further trek. Again I asked yatri of 7th batch to do whatever form of seva that was required by the ailing yatri and to put them psychologically, also, at ease. The care and concern extended to the additional yatri of subsequent three batches who joined the 7th batch on return paid rich dividends. They were very happy to have spent time with the group, as the 7th batch was always up to some community-based activity, viz. *satsang*, song, dance, prayers, etc. with never a dull moment. They were happy that they were not neglected or left to languish, being part of another batch. Knowing that the strength of returnee yatri had increased and that one bus would not be sufficient, in full anticipation, I tied up well in advance seeking two buses before reaching Dharchula from where the return road drive would start.

In some of their own private conversations, the yatri whose visit to Kailash had got aborted, were heard saying that back in their villages it should be told that they have completed the yatra successfully, even though they could not even cross over to China, leave alone not see MT Kailash or Mansarovar or do the parikrama at Dolma pass. They feared the stigma back home after the warm and hearty farewell given by the villagers from the scarce resources pooled by their community. This attempt at blatant lying revealed the significance that the KM Yatra held for them.

At Dharchula, the finance committee leader, a Chartered Accountant, came to me revealing that out of Rs 3000 contribution made by each yatri, they are in a position to return about 50% to each yatri. He even informed that he had audited the accounts and detected some double counting, which has since been rectified, and therefore, after rigorous scrutiny of the finances, the amount left can be shared equally among the yatri. I called a formal meeting of the yatri to make the happy announcement. As she announced, the yatri grew quite hysterically happy and riotous in their behaviour, understandably so, being very happy with the way the finances had also been managed with integrity, due diligence and without any trivial spending, even as



the sense of plentitude of food was felt all through the yatra. More money was available for some last minute spending at the vibrant Dharchula market.

There is no doubt that a trip to Kailash Mansarovar is an intense spiritual and transforming experience. The imposing and majestic Mount Kailash, believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva and representing the holy centre of the earth is more than just a mountain. Buddhists believe it is the home of Buddha Demchok, who symbolizes supreme Harmony. In Jainism, the MT Kailash is referred to as Ashtapada, the place where Rishabadeva, creator of Jainism, attained freedom from cycle of birth and death. The lake Mansarovar, a symbol of purity, is believed to have been created in the mind of Lord Brahma and therefore called Mansarovar. This incredible journey is both outwards and inwards, but significantly more a journey within one self.

The focus of the trek was on “fallure,” not on failure. Fallure is derived from a decision that rock climbers make if they know they cannot complete the route they have chosen for a climb. They allow themselves to fall, knowing that the bolts attached to the side of the rock face through which their climbing ropes are threaded will break their fall. The climb is based on the faith and belief that while the constant chants of OM Namah Shivaya would never allow the bolts to come off, yet in fallure, a climber pushes to the ultimate limit based on a commitment to make the ascent, despite the odds. Every yatri would at some point have experienced this as part of the outward and inner journey.

To me with over three decades of experience in governance and administration, there were strong, practical parallels between what it takes to lead a mountaineering expedition and practicing managerial skills in the lofty Himalayas. The KM yatra offered lofty lessons in leadership and management in:

- Taking action, driving, delegating and supporting;
- Questioning, researching and verifying understanding;
- Expressing convictions and championing ideas;
- Evaluating resources, choices and consequences;
- Conflict resolution confronting and resolving disagreements;
- Anticipating problems and risks and preventing disasters;
- Dealing with problems, setbacks and failures with resilience; and
- Collectivising and sharing leadership duties, even as to not allow personal agendas to come into play.

One of the essential and often overlooked components of leadership is ‘How to serve’. This is the true connection between leadership and altruism.

AUTHOR



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