



The Himalayan News

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Dear Readers,

We welcome you to the seventh issue of The Himalayan News.

The COVID 19 pandemic has been sweeping across the planet for the last six months and causing immense hardship and devastation. The entire spring season in the Himalaya has been washed out and indications are that the peak autumn season will also be in jeopardy. Guides, porters, lodge owners, airlines, mountaineering and trekking companies, hotels have all been badly hit. Many have already been forced to close down their businesses and establishments.

We can only hope and pray that this pandemic ends soon and a suitable vaccine enters the market to arrest the spiralling growth of this disease in these unprecedented times.

In this our seventh issue, Jim Wilson, who was part of Ed Hillary's team and worked with him for many years, pens an essay on the Sherpas of the Solukhumbu and their Buddhism with his fascinating personal experiences when he was in the Khumbu in the sixties.

Acclaimed author Mick Conefrey, who wrote two books on Everest and K2, now completes the trilogy with Kangchenjunga – The Last Great Mountain. Meticulously researched, Kangchenjunga promises to become a collector's item for all mountain book lovers.

Award winning photographer Sankar Sridhar who has spent many years documenting mountain communities brings us a photo essay on the Bakarwals of Kashmir and the threats to their lifestyle and migratory routes.

The Himalayan has also made a humble effort to assist the Sherpa community in Darjeeling, shut in by serial lockdowns that has devastated their lives and livelihood. In an attempt to bring back a semblance of routine to the lives of the children, study material necessary for beginning a new semester in school, were donated to children from Nursery to Class XII. This was done in conjunction with IMF Eastern Zone and the Sherpa Mountaineering and Trekking Welfare Association (Darjeeling).

From the desk of Rupamanjari Biswas: I am grateful to our Editor, Sujoy Das, for overcoming his pandemic fatigue and putting this issue together for a timely publication.

Sujoy Das
Rupamanjari Biswas
Editors

SHERPAS AND THEIR BUDDHISM

Jim Wilson



Awaiting the morning prayers at Thyangboche monastery

[This is an abbreviated version of a chapter in my book 'Journey to the Centre of My Being' Zen Publications, Mumbai, 2019]

In March to May 1963 I was part of Ed Hillary's first school building expedition to the Khumbu region of Nepal. This gave me my first real encounter with a religion other than Christianity. Sherpas are Tibetan Buddhists, and, though intensity of belief and practice varied as widely amongst them then as it did amongst New Zealand Christians, their religion infused every aspect of their lives and thoughts in ways strikingly different from the society I had grown up in.

In New Zealand, in those days, people were mostly either religious, and dour and intense about it; or indifferent; or hostile to religion, and dour and intense about it. Here in the Solu Khumbu I was amongst people who were serious about their religion but in a wonderfully relaxed way. Ceremonies were

held, and lamas (monks) came and blessed proceedings and houses and people, for every important stage in the yearly cycle and every important milestone in people's lives. But, instead of the fiercely quiet and reverent atmosphere I was used to in Presbyterian Christian services, Sherpa religious occasions were laid back noisy affairs. People came and went at will, and children were allowed to run around and talk freely, none of which disturbed the lamas or lay people in the slightest. And, because they were not forced to be quiet and still, children and adults were far less fidgety and obtrusive than in a solemn ceremony in church. Nor did this make the ceremonies less impressive; on the contrary it enhanced them. I loved it.

One of the many good things about Ed's aid projects was that he always wanted them to fit into Sherpa or Nepali ways of doing things as much as possible. So he always had lamas, and on special occasions the Rinpoche (reincarnate Head Monk) of Thyangboche Gompa, (Monastery) bless the building or bridge or water-supply. In this, as in all things, Ed was advised by Mingma Tsering, his Sirdar. Mingma was religious in a relaxed Sherpa way. I learnt not to talk to him for the first half hour or so each morning for he was chanting mantra.



The Rinpoche of Thyangboche at the opening of Thami school

One incident above all others during this first encounter has always for me typified the Sherpa attitude to religion. I was with fellow New Zealander Murray Ellis, and two of my closest Sherpa friends, Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke. We were trying to increase the flow of a mountain spring preparatory to piping water from it to a holding tank we'd had built in the village of Khunde. With crowbars and shovels

we prised and dug our way deep into the hillside, jousting with huge boulders as we dislodged them from above. Just before we finished for the day I spotted a small toad trembling at the back of our hole. I pointed it out to Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke. "Na ramro (not good) Jim, that is the god of the spring" they said solemnly.

All Sherpas love teasing, these two most of all, so at first I was sure they were joking. But they kept perfectly straight faces as they said we must take the toad to Khunde Major (the elected head of the village council) and seek his advice on what to do, for if we had indeed disturbed the god of the spring he might stop the flow completely. I began to get alarmed, for what we'd done to the spring might do that anyway. So I picked up the poor wee cowering beastie and we went to Khunde Major's house, edging cautiously past his particularly ferocious Tibetan mastiff and in his door.

Khunde Major heard us out quietly, looked carefully at my friend the toad, and pronounced him indeed the god of Khunde spring. Help!!! - what to do??? I asked aghast. "Ah" said Khunde Major, "You must take the god to your camp tonight, keep him warm, and tomorrow we will perform puja (religious ceremony) and put him back in his spring." If there was a twinkle in his eye, and/or a wink to him from the terrible two, I didn't catch it. I was so scared the toad would succumb to the fierce frost that I slept with him inside my sleeping bag. To my intense relief he was alive next morning, and even seemed quite happy. Khunde Major and several other dignitaries and lamas, and of course Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke, accompanied me and toad back to the spring, which to my relief was still flowing strongly. In a ceremony as punctuated by laughter as by mantra we restored the god to his proper place.

Walking back with Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke curiosity was consuming me. Did they and/or Khunde Major and the others really

believe this was the god of the spring, or was this an elaborate trick on me? What was all the laughter about? To me, their answer epitomizes the healthiest attitude to religion I have come across. “Ah Jim” they said, grinning engagingly, “this being god of spring, we not puja doing, then spring drying, ekdam na ramro (very bad). This not being god of spring, no harm puja doing, and good time having.” Surely the best of win-win situations.

I remember only the gist of their replies, of course, not their exact words. And since I understood little Nepali and no Sherpa they spoke to me in Sherpa English. I became a great fan of Sherpa English and used it not mockingly but admiringly and for practical reasons, as did Ed when conversing with Mingma who I think was creator, and certainly was master, of this language. Practical as always, Mingma scorned tenses and irregularities of English English and reduced all verbs to present participles. “I yesterday coming” is just as precise in meaning as “I came yesterday”, and the formula can easily and accurately be used in “I now coming” or “I tomorrow coming”. Ed, who was as bad at languages as I am, quickly learned Sherpa English from Mingma, and it was a treat to hear the two of them conversing in a combination of it and mangled Nepali. It was equally a treat to see the looks of bewilderment on passing English English speakers, who couldn’t understand the interchanges but could see that Ed and Mingma understood each other perfectly.

Several weeks later two Sherpas we’d left guarding base camp on the mountain Taweche came hurtling into our village camp late at night, clothes torn and legs bruised from their reckless descent. “Yeti, yeti” they gasped. “Yeti hearing.” Next day I consulted Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke again. “Do you believe it was a yeti?” I asked. “Do you believe yetis exist?” I suspect they secretly sighed at this literal-minded simpleton worrying about what does or doesn’t exist when, according to Buddhism, all life is an elaborate illusion

anyway. But they answered, in similar vein to their god of the spring approach. “Ah Jim, we yetis believing, very careful not annoying them. No yetis being, no harm doing. We yetis not believing then yeti seeing, ekdam na ramro.”



The yeti scalp at Khumjung Gompa

I was delighted with both these answers. They helped release me from years of Christian-induced worries about what is true belief, and philosophy-induced worries about what exists and what doesn’t. As time went on I was to become more and more immersed in Hindu/Buddhist notions of maya - the varied and fascinating but not ultimately real display of the underlying energy of the universe - which infused Phu Dorje’s and Pemba Tarke’s attitude to yetis and gods. But though at this time I didn’t fully understand it I surely loved it.

It is hard now to be sure what struck me this first time and what I know now from over 50 years of frequent visits to Sherpa land and much study of and teaching about Buddhism and Hinduism. But certainly another aspect did strike me forcefully on this first visit. Again a particular incident highlights it. We were working on Pangboche school when one of our expedition Sherpas recognized a very distinctive and colourful woollen jersey being worn by one of the village elders at the building site. The jersey belonged to a Swiss climber; he and his Sherpa companion had fallen to their deaths while descending from the first ascent of Pumori, a very difficult peak

near Everest. They had been buried together on the glacier at the foot of the mountain, and our Sherpa had been on that expedition and at that burial. He told Mingma, who told Ed, and together they alerted the village elders.

Confronted with their accusation the man broke down and admitted he had reopened the graves and taken the jersey, and also the Sherpa's down jacket. Secretly I sympathized with the man; after all, jersey and jacket were no further use to their previous owners. But everyone else seemed appalled at what they regarded as sacrilege. They debated the appropriate punishment for the miscreant, and decided - I kid you not - on a public telling-off by the elders and by Ed. I have to admit this punishment completely broke the man up. He sobbed and clung to his wife. But it seemed to me very mild given how seriously the offence was viewed. Afterwards the man was accepted back into the community with no further consequences other than his own conscience and - and here's the rub - his beliefs about the consequences of his actions on the rest of this life and on his future lives.

This was my first insight into the way belief in rebirth and karma affects every aspect of Buddhist and Hindu life. I came to understand it more deeply later. At this stage I saw only a simple but very powerful application of it. The community had to act, partly I think because we, and especially Ed, were there, partly to redress the slur on their community that one of their members had incurred. But they felt no need to judge or punish harshly, because what the law of karma says is that every action, good or bad, has its own inevitable consequences. What the man had done would affect him in this life and, if serious enough, for many lives to come. Belief in karma was far more effective in discouraging wrongdoing than any human social or legal regulations and prohibitions could be.

I'm not sure how much I romanticize this aspect of Buddhist and Hindu societies. And it

can and does have very harmful as well as positive effects. But I am sure that, by contrast with judgemental attitudes I'd encountered too often in Christian circles, I found Sherpa and Hindu societies much more tolerant. I thought then, and think now, that belief in karma has a lot to do with this. No need to worry about people getting away with bad deeds; the law of karma is inexorable, and the consequences of those deeds will be borne by the doers at some stage.



Painting on a rock near Thami

Yet another aspect of Sherpa religion that struck me forcibly during this time was the splendid colourful noisy whackiness of it all. Presbyterian churches and ceremonies were austere and bare to put it mildly, part of a ferocious attempt to be as little as possible like Roman Catholics with their rituals and images. Suddenly now, at religious ceremonies, I was surrounded by astonishing masks and images and wall paintings and thanka (paintings on cloth) of the Buddha, of Bodhisattva (enlightened beings), of great

Buddhist teachers and saints, and of innumerable goddesses and gods, some benign, some ferocious. Nor were my eyes only overwhelmed - all my senses were. The lamas in their ochre robes and amazing headgear swung incense burners to add to the fragrance of smoky clothes and human bodies. They chanted rhythmic mantra, punctuated by long thunder-blasts from huge copper and brass Tibetan horns, a high syncopated melody on clarinet-like reed instruments, and booming drums and clanging cymbals. I was touched on the head in blessing by lamas, and ran my fingers along the raised letters of huge copper prayer wheels. And morsels of chang (rice beer) and food, after being offered to the goddesses and gods, were placed in our hands and we sucked them into our mouths.



At the Dumji Festival, Khumjung

So much for the five senses. What of the mind? Aha! Buddhism, as I learned later, distrusts the mind. The mind creates illusory concepts and objects out of the furious flux of reality, most dangerously the concept of an enduring individual self. So best of all, for me, was that my mind was not given the tiniest toehold in all this. Even the chanted mantra, though using intelligible words, were not intelligible to me (and possibly not to many other than the lamas). They were for me pure sound, bypassing my troublesome mind and vibrating instead my whole being. I should add that because of, rather than despite, its distrust of the mind, Buddhism

takes the mind very seriously. The lamas chanting the mantra would not only have memorized them, they would have studied their meaning and history, and engaged in intricate intellectual debates about them and the beliefs underpinning them. And as I was to discover later, and admire greatly, the Buddhist philosophical tradition that developed in India was amongst the greatest and most subtle intellectual achievements of humankind. But for me this initial and hugely influential contact with Buddhism mainly bypassed my mind and overwhelmed instead, and wonderfully, the rest of my being.

All this was enhanced by the way in which we were made welcome at all ceremonies. Nobody gave a thought to whether we believed or not. I doubt the notion that non-believers might somehow dilute or wreck a ceremony has ever entered a Sherpa head. Partly, I think, this is because they trust the power of their rituals so securely that it wouldn't occur to them that some people not believing in them as they do could have any effect. But, probably more importantly, in Buddhism and Hinduism what you believe or don't believe is really your business alone. Unless your beliefs lead to actions which adversely affect others, there is no need for others to try to change them. If, through the law of karma, they adversely affect you, that is your look out. Moreover, against the vast background of countless deaths and rebirths, it is clearly understood that different people will be at different stages of spiritual progress, and therefore not only will have, but will need, different beliefs. This understanding encourages great tolerance of others' views, or, put another way, a strong inhibition against wanting to convert others to one's own way of thinking. The contrast with the missionary zeal of many Christians was very vivid.

So my new-found Sherpa friends, though happy to share their beliefs and rituals with me, had no desire whatever to convert me to Buddhism. If they thought about it at all I'm

sure their thought would be 'no doubt Jim has the beliefs and habits appropriate for him in this particular rebirth of his.' They may also have thought, 'but how nice that he seems to respect and enjoy participating in ours' - but only if they'd had unfortunate encounters with zealous Christians; I think otherwise they'd simply have taken this for granted.

Consequently we were not urged, but were made to feel naturally welcome, to join in any ceremonies. Not only that, we could request, or have suggested to us, ceremonies specifically for us. I've already mentioned that Ed and Mingma would always get projects we worked on blessed by lamas, preferably the Rimpoche of Thyangboche - deeply moving occasions when we would line up with Sherpas to file past and be blessed by the Rimpoche.

But we also, on this first trip, had a special ceremony at Pangboche Gumpa to placate the god of Taweche, the awesome mountain rearing above the village. This god was represented in the gumpa by a mask as ferocious as ever I've seen, highly appropriate to the mountain as it turned out. With due ceremony, and with our natural trepidation at attempting so difficult a peak both heightened and somehow also eased by the solemn yet noisy and colourful ritual, we appeased this fearsome being with mantra and offerings. Subsequently, elated by our efforts but defeated by the last dangerous 150 feet of the summit ridge, I jokingly chided Phu Dorje and Pemba Tarke about the ritual failing to bring us success. They were never stumped for a

reply. "Ah Jim" they grinned, "puja all safely back getting, not summit getting – that we doing, not doing."

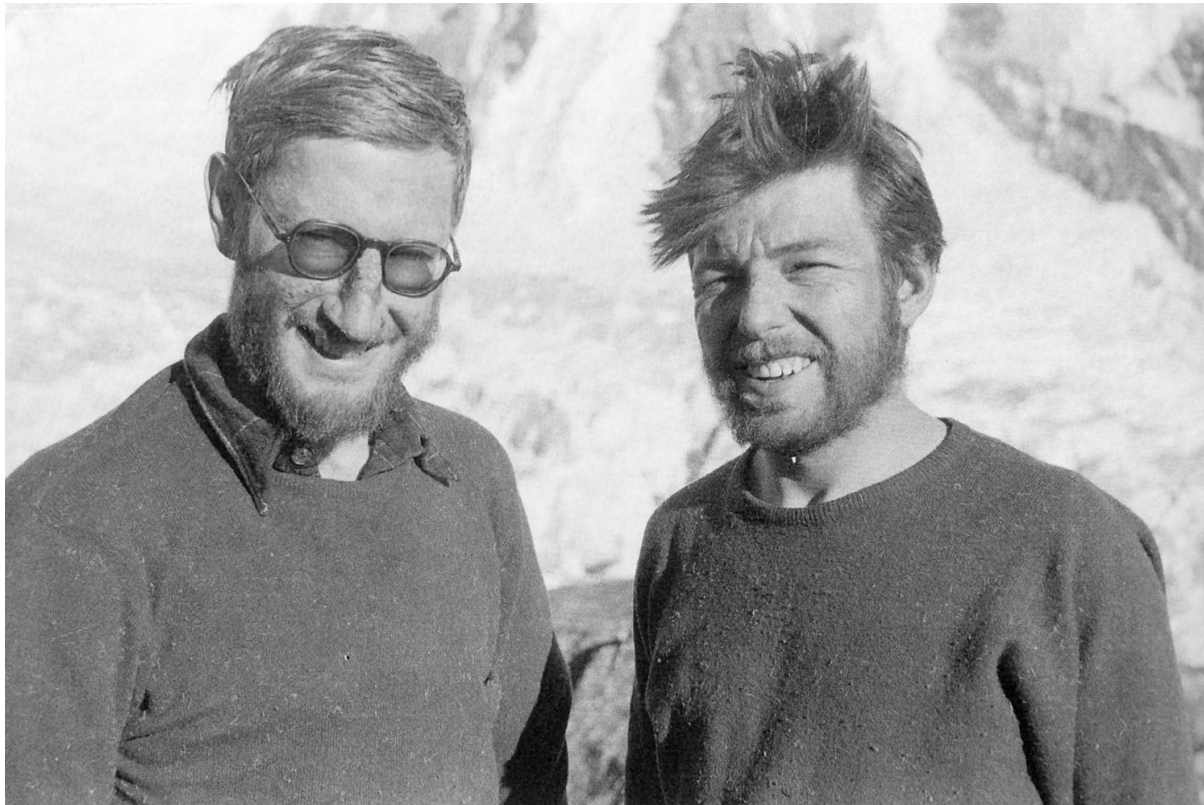


Masked dancer at Khumjung monastery

We still had the mountain Kangtega to attempt. This time we had no pre-assault ritual; Kangtega, by the route by which we tackled it, was too far from any village or gumpa to have a god in residence to placate. And this time not only did we all return safely from the mountain - just - we also succeeded in reaching the summit. What price ritual then? Get thee behind me, oh sceptical mind.

KANGCHENJUNGA - THE LAST GREAT MOUNTAIN

Mick Conefrey



George Band and Joe Brown at the Kangchenjunga Base Camp 1955 – Photo Royal Geographical Society

At around two in the afternoon on Wednesday 25th May 1955, a pair of young British climbers, George Band and Joe Brown, found themselves sitting on an icy ledge at the top of a steep slope. Back home George was a geology student who had recently graduated from Cambridge, Joe a general builder who had left school at fourteen. If it hadn't been for climbing, they might never have met but right now they were partners, the spearhead of the British Kangchenjunga Reconnaissance Expedition.

While they gobbled down toffees and swigged back luke warm lemon cordial, the wind blew flurries of snow over their heads. At around 27,800 ft they were undoubtedly the highest men in the world but they were still some 350 vertical feet short of their goal. And that was a big problem because they were way beyond their turnaround time.

If everything had gone according to plan, they would have been on their way down. Time was running out and so was their oxygen. They had just two hours left, enough to reach the summit but not enough to descend safely. If they went on, there was no guarantee of success and they risked having to sleep out in the open with nothing but the clothes they were wearing to protect them from the freezing cold.

So what should they do – stick or twist? Carry on up or retreat to hand on the baton to their teammates in the second summit party? Over the last five decades there had been four previous expeditions to Kangchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world. Nine men had died, trying to achieve what Everest leader Sir John Hunt called “the greatest feat in world mountaineering.” Were they willing to risk

everything for fame and glory or was it finally time to turn back?

What happened next is an extraordinary story in itself but it's also the final chapter in a much longer saga which goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. It's a tale whose cast includes some of the most talented, most driven and occasionally most eccentric characters in the history of mountaineering: men like Aleister Crowley, the occultist nicknamed the 'Great Beast 666', Paul Bauer, the fanatical German climber and Nazi official, and Gunther Oscar Dyhrenfurth, the mountaineer known to his friends as GOD.



Crossing a crevasse, 1955

For the last three years, I've been researching the climbing history of Kangchenjunga for my book *The Last Great Mountain*, talking to survivors of the first ascent and tracking down diaries, letters and other documentary evidence. It is easy to see why so many climbers became so obsessed with 'Kanch'. Unlike Everest and K2, it is relatively accessible and is visible from the hill towns of Northern India. Initially it was thought to be the highest mountain in the world and even when British surveyors discovered that Everest was about a thousand feet higher and K2 about eighty feet its superior, Kangchenjunga was still regarded as a great, if not *the* greatest challenge in Himalayan mountaineering. It's combination of extreme altitude, climbing difficulty and appalling weather made its ascent a virtually impossible task.

Aleister Crowley, the man dubbed 'The Wickedest Man in the World' by the British press, was the first to have a crack at it, leading a team of Swiss climbers. Crowley had made the first attempt on K2 a few years earlier and had famously become so ill with malaria that he started threatening to shoot his team-mates. Kangchenjunga went better but ended with an accident which killed four members of his team and prompted a very bitter and acrimonious controversy.

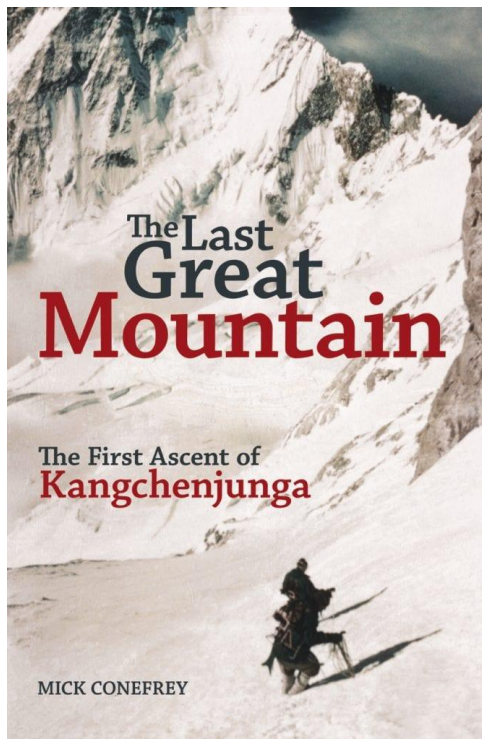
In the late nineteen twenties, a team of German climbers led by Paul Bauer, made two quite amazing attempts, in which they spent weeks literally trying to tunnel their way through ice-formations on the North East Ridge. They didn't get anywhere close to the summit and only narrowly escaped with their lives, but their 100% commitment won them praise from climbers all around the world. In between Bauer's two expeditions, an international team under Gunter Dyhrenfurth made an attempt from the other side of the mountain in Nepal. It climaxed in a huge avalanche which cost Sherpa Chettan his life and almost wiped out the whole climbing party.



The Icefall, 1955

When Joe Brown and George Band arrived on the mountain with an all British team in 1955, no-one was sure whether Kangchenjunga could be climbed at all. The expedition was led by Charles Evans, who had come within a whisker of being the first man to summit Everest two years earlier. He was an inspirational leader who had learnt his lessons well after spending much of the previous five years in the Himalayas but he knew he had a job on.

At 24, Joe Brown was the 'Theo Walcott' of his team, utterly different from the usual Oxbridge educated elite who dominated British mountaineering. Some in the climbing establishment were very dubious about his inclusion, but Charles Evans was willing to take a risk and as the expedition progressed, he was more and more sure that he'd made the right choice. Joe ate more than anyone else, smoked more than anyone else and spoke with such a strong accent that the Sherpas thought he was from another country but he proved himself to be an exceptional all-round mountaineer.



Charles Evans's team overcame altitude sickness, avalanches and freak storms to get themselves into a position where Joe Brown and George Band could strike out for the summit. Right at the end of their attempt, they came up against Kangchenjunga's equivalent of the Hillary Step on Everest, a steep wall of rock just under the summit which at just under 28,000 ft looked like an impossible climb. Fortunately, Joe Brown was up to it, using his favourite technique of 'hand-jamming' to work his way up a narrow crack in the rock.



The Sherpa team of the 1955 expedition

When he and George Band eventually got to the top, following an agreement with the Maharajah of Sikkim, they left the final snow cone on the summit ridge untrodden. It was an amazing achievement: the last great mountain to be climbed, the first time a pair of British mountaineers had stood on top of an 8000m peak. Back home in Manchester, Joe Brown, got a typically effervescent reception from his mates at the legendary *Rock and Ice* club: "No man is a hero in his own house. The *Rock and Ice* were like brothers, how would you expect them to react? They're British, the most you'd get was 'well done lad'. I got no free drinks."

THE GOOD SHEPHERDS

Sankar Sridhar

Each year, as the snow melts, streams brim over, and meadows return to life, Bakarwal pastoralists begin a long march from the lower reaches of Jammu to the alpine pastures of Kashmir.

These keepers of sheep – which is what their name translates to – remain on the move from May and until autumn, when the wilderness is ablaze in all hues of red yellow and rust. Their 'territory', if we could call it that, covers a host of different terrain – from the Kashmir Valley, the Kishtwar region, Zaskar and even Spiti. But the tribe that is divided by mountain passes during migrations, is united by their lifestyle: living in makeshift shelters, fattening their flock for a winter many months away, while also protecting them from rustling and predation.

While their time in the high Himalayan valleys may seem like the perfect idea of a vacation, it's far from it. Protecting the flock against wild animals, timing the move from one valley to another to perfection, treks over several days to restock rations, weathering everything the elements throw at them – the list of challenges are long. And yet, by compulsion or choice, it's an affair undertaken annually, and completed well, thanks to the Bakarwals' survival skills, honed over time and passed on from one generation to the next.

Today though, new and more fearsome odds face this nomadic community. Roads now run through many sections of the migratory routes, and speeding vehicles often exact a heavy toll on the flocks. Meadows that once were the sole reserve of Bakarwals have now turned hotspots where the only herds welcomed are those of tourists. The weather, too, they say, and we know, is turning stranger by the year.

As the younger generation is weaned away, some thankfully through education, and others sadly by the glitter and spurious prospects promised by towns and cities, it'll be only a matter of time before the meadows and valleys lose their zero carbon footprint visitors, and we lose the indigenous knowledge they possess.

This truth isn't lost on the Bakarwal but in the spirit of true pastoralists, they refuse to mope on a future just because it looks grim.

Their attitude stems partly from the daily hazards their occupation comes with, and partly from a resignation to fate. And between these two truths, they are left with only the option of adapting and hoping for the best.

So they're fine running the gauntlet and the modern additions to them to get the peace they're used to in the high valleys. As Pervez, a Bakarwal elder, put it: "We might as well enjoy the peace as long as we are able to."



A storm brews overhead as a couple of bakarwal make their way back to camp.



In valleys not connected by road, the Bakarwal have only natural predation to contend with. The Bakarwali dogs manage the wolves well, and a fire and well-aimed stones keep the hungry bears away.



Rations, utensils and children too young to walk long distances are carried on horseback, while live and fragile cargo - like chicken - make the journey in the nomads' arms. This makes sure they weather the journey well and remain in a condition to lay eggs during the Bakarwals' journey away from civilization.



The first signs of spring appear as tufts of grass on mountainsides, but snow on the valley floor means the sheep have slender pickings while on the move. The Bakarwal begin their day early to take advantage of lower temperatures, which allow them to walk longer distances without tiring. On snowy stretches, a lot of thought is put into how much to walk, how much rest to give to the sheep, so they don't grow weak from hunger, or worse, die.





Winds are often a force to reckon with, though above the treeline, it's difficult to capture their ferocity. The flapping shawl comes to my rescue in this image. For these brothers, as it is for most bakarwal, a thick woollen shawl, offers protection from more than just winds. The warp and weft also make it heavily water resistant, allowing these pastoralists to spend entire days hunkered down in the open while their sheep graze.



Shearing is an early summer activity, usually carried out in the mid-reaches of the mountains. While most Bakarwal can shear sheep, they usually employ the services of community members who specialise in this activity. Getting the coat out in one piece is the gold standard. And an expert shearer can lighten the load off as many as 40 sheep in a day, with a zero nick-or-cut track record.

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