

A Sunset in Chomasa....

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After waiting for this moment for months upon months all together and lots of efforts put together, I was ultimately successful today in sipping my tea atop the summit of MOUNT BHAGIRATHI-II (6512 meters) it is located in the Garhwal Himalayas in Gangotri National park right above the Gangotri glacier. My closest companion was with me – my dairy.

Hello! I am Surya, a 25-year-old boy. I am a Mountaineer.... Mountaineering is my passion. I wish that one day I shall conquer the peak of "**Mount Everest**" for which I am making all efforts. It was the last day of sept, 2019 when I succeeded in climbing Mt. Bhagirathi and this meant a lot to me because it was my first professional success as a mountaineer.... It just felt awesome and very satisfying. My savings of the past several months got spent to make this possible.... but all this was worth spending because this very moment was more precious than any amount of money for me.

I was accompanied by nine other fellow members in the expedition, Tyagi Sir, Ravindra Sir with his 3 assistants, 3 men from England and my friend Nitin (*best team, best coordination, best people... I was very happy to be a part of this team*) Me and Nitin became friends during my stay in Dehradun and because of common interest in adventure trips the two of us developed a fine rapport. As we were accompanied by experienced mountaineers like Ravindra sir and Tyagi sir, so we did not need any local assistance beyond the base camp.

After 11days of hard trek, we reached back to our base camp at "*Bhojbhasa*" and next day it was time for all of us to bid farewell to each other to move further towards our individual destinations. Me and Nitin rode back towards Uttarkashi. After covering a distance of around 35 kms on my bike, we finally reached the holiest center of pilgrimage, Gangotri; where pilgrims from across the world come to take a holy dip in the river Bhagirathi. We stopped at a roadside tea shop to warm ourselves with a cup of hot tea. My home town is Uttarkashi, so I had to drive back just up to Uttarkashi from where Nitin had to catch his bus for Dehradun. After finishing our tea as we resumed our journey, Nitin suddenly said to me that he had a great urge to stop for a night in the wayside hamlet called "**Dharali**" because he had read and heard much about the pristine beauty of this place. Dharali is a small village located in Uttarkashi district at a distance of around 75 kms from the District Headquarter and in proximity with the well-known tourist destination named **Harsil**; but in every respect, Dharali is far better than Harsil more so because it has **Saatal** that is a cluster of 7 lakes.

As I am a great lover of natural beauty, I instantly accepted the proposal made by Nitin and within next two hours our bike was running past the rugged terrain and fast approaching towards the fairyland like hamlet named Dharali. I have several memories associated with Dharali because whenever I feel low or depressed in my life I always approach Dharali to spend a few moments in the soothing lap of mother nature which rejuvenates me (*I always suggest to all nature-lover to visit Dharali during the months of Sept and Oct only for the simple reason that at this time of the year there is no traffic at all, no disturbing sounds and one can communicate intimately with mother nature*).

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As the wheels of my bike kept on heading towards our destination, I slowly started feeling a subtle grassy smell entering my nostrils which mingled with the smell of earth had an enchanting effect upon my senses. As I advanced further the gusts of evening breeze brought along a sweet fragrance of ripe apples and also I noticed that the entire area was dotted with shiny red apples and it suddenly struck my mind..... wow! we had reached Dharali. Dharali being a small village, has just a few shops and roadside hotels which constitute its tiny BAZAR. As I keep away from crowded areas as best as possible, so I stopped my bike a few meters away from the market and we got down in front of a small tea shop. Coincidentally, the moment we set foot in that village, tiny droplets of rain started falling down all around us. This being the season called **Chomasa**.

The thirsty parched-up earth gave out an earthy smell which had an enchanting effect upon my senses. For a few moments both me and my friend Nitin were totally lost absorbing within our consciousness the magic of this place. Even more than me Nitin was lost in the spell of this beautiful village when suddenly to my amazement I felt a moist touch of someone's hand upon my back and I abruptly turned around to find an old woman with wrinkled face staring towards us... she was wearing a traditional Garhwali headscarf and had a tiny nose ring (*Murki*) but she looked as if some deep agony was eating her up from within.

I hastily asked her what the matter was but instead of replying my question she simply asked... *"baba app log fozi ?? mera "Fozi saab" bhi fozi pr kayi salu bitin ghor na ayi .. oh! this was garhwali language and she was asking us that...are you both in army .. my husband ("fozi saab") too is an army man but he has not returned home for years. She paused for a moment and then a sparkle of hope flashed upon her face and she further said will you kindly give my man, my message. For a moment I was confused and rather perplexed by this type of strange behavior of this old woman whom I had never ever met before but then it suddenly flashed upon my mind that it was actually my costume and boots that gave her the misleading impression of my being an Army man.*

I was about to tell her my reality of having nothing to do with Army and clarify that my cargo and boots just resembled that of an army man's costume but she held my hand and in a pleading tone with eyes ebbing with tears she repeated her request and consequently I just happen to say "yes off course! I will"

The very next moment she giggled like a sixteen-year-old girl and her eyes beamed with happiness making me conscious of the mistake that I had committed unconsciously. Somehow in a moment of confusion, I had just now promised her that I would deliver her message to her husband who was an army man and had not returned home since past several years.....

After the old woman went away smiling, both me and Nitin stood perplexed for a few moments trying to overcome to terms with what our eyes have just now witnessed. In the shadow of approaching twilight, both of us advanced towards a roadside hotel to rent a room for the night. Overcome with fatigue, we took an early dinner and slipped into our quilts. Next morning, we got up before daybreak and decided to go for a long walk toward "SATTLE" we deliberately took the root towards "SATTLE" which past through a nearby village. As we started climbing upwards through that village my eyes suddenly struck upon a short woman figure carrying a **Ghilda** (bamboo basket) on her back. The next moment I identified her to be the same woman we had met the previous evening at the road-side.

She kept on moving ahead of us without noticing that we were prodding a little distance away behind her. After a few minutes, we passed by a field where three other women were working in the field, we just halted there to take a little rest. I simply asked an elderly woman working next to me if the husband of that old woman with the bamboo basket was an army man to which she responded that it was true but her husband had died around 25 years ago, I briefly told her about the awkward behavior of that woman and her request to deliver her message to her husband, at which the elderly woman smiled faintly and said with a sigh that she is still waiting for the man who never will come home. Then she revealed to us the entire detail of that old woman and now it was clear to us why she behaved so strangely with us the previous evening. Her husband had died during some war while serving in the army but unfortunately his body could never reach back his village.

When I further asked that elderly lady if that woman had turned mentally insane due to this shock; she replied that for the most part of the year that woman behave normally but during the months of CHOMASA something happens to her. During CHOMASA she would often walk all the way from her village up to the DHARALI bus halt and keep sitting there for hours all together watching every bus that passed by. She would ask at all that roadside shop if they had seen her husband getting down from any bus then at dusk, she would return home mumbling something that no one could understand. By this time tiny droplets of rain had started sprinkling all around us and the morning sun was peeping from behind saffron hue clouds. We realize we had halted at this spot for quite long and so hastily moved further to resume our walk towards "SATTLE"and finally we reached the first lake which is approx 3 KMs away.

The water is so clear you can actually see right down to the lake bed. We enjoyed the view and cool breeze for a while and then moved on. The real steep section starts after this. At some places, we were hard-pressed to find the route. The second and third lakes are situated close by, the second one has completely dried up and have converted into a swamp now. The third one is also on the brink of extinction. There is a temple on one side of this second lake. There are some interesting stories about this temple and various caves on the hill face, some distance away. The fourth lake is just around the corner from the second lake it was close to 1 PM. It took us roughly 2-2.5 hours to climb this far. We gained an altitude of approx 1000 ft. during the trek. The other three lakes are a couple of miles away from this place. We were tired, hungry so we decided to get back to our hotel.

While returning from "SATTLE" we reached the spot where the path bifurcated. One way could lead us directly to the bus stop where we had parked our bike, while the other path entered the village. we had proceeded around 200 Ms towards the direct path to the bus stop, but then my step suddenly turned back towards the village and I told Nitin that we are going to visit that elderly woman whom we had seen moving ahead of us with the grass basket in the morning. We climbed up through the fields and finally reached that spot where that madwoman lived. There on the top of a cliff stood a small wooden hut adjoining a beautiful garden adorned with shiny Fyoli and **Rose** flowers, which were dancing in the moist breeze of CHOMASA, these flowers need a lot of care; and I was a little surprise if this woman whom I thought to be mentally insane could grow them in her backyard.

As we approached close to her hut, I suddenly got apprehensive about how she would react on seeing us at her doorstep. Suddenly my eyes observed her bending in a corner and feeding her cow and its calf the moment we noticed us she hurried towards us and asked from a distance "*baba ap log pension wala ya bijli wala*", she meant to ask if we were from the electricity

department or pension department. We were wondering what to say and a bit timidly we explain that we were travelers who came here to visit "SATTLE", she smiled at us and warmly said "baba then you both are guest in village kindly have some water" we heaved the shy of relief to see that she was treating us nicely. She extended a mug of water towards us.

The water was ice cold and it pinched by gums slightly. We were wondering how to start a conversation with her when she requested us to wait a little while she could prepare some tea for us. She made this offer in such an affectionate manner that there was no question for us to refuse. Rather this made me wonder how the same woman who seems to be mad on the previous day was behaving like such a wonderful noble lady. The next moment she busied herself in preparing tea and we stepped a little towards the side of her garden; this entire area was interspersed with "**Deodar**" and "**Apple**" trees and in the area underneath she had planted various colorful flowers most of which were blooming in this season of CHOMASA. At this part of the day when the sun was heading westwards, the clouds had scattered a little and bright sun-rays peeping through them waved a magical spell around her garden which was enchanting our senses. Our spell got broken by her faint voice calling us to have our tea. Taking our tea glass steaming with creamy tea we started enjoying her gentle hospitality right in front of her beautiful garden but tea was really nice and on that chilly evening was giving us great pleasure. After finishing our tea, we took leave of her although in my mind I kept on thinking that the purpose of coming here to her hut was still unachieved.

Returning to our hotel we slept soon after finishing our dinner because the exhaustion of such long walk all through the day had drained our energy by evening time. The next morning, we woke up late and noticed that it was raining heavily outside. Packing our bags, we sat on the porch of our roadside hotel waiting for the rain to stop so that we could proceed towards our homes. In the meantime, we had finished our breakfast but again and again the thought of that old lady kept on making me restless. I was very curious to know the reason due to which such a wise noble lady behaved like a madwoman in front of us when we have reached DHARALI.

Around 1 o' clock in the afternoon the rains subsided and once again the sky became clear the sun shone brightly over our heads and so we made up our mind to proceed but then I suddenly asked Nitin if we could once again visit that old lady before leaving DHARALI. He agreed at this and so both of us climbed up once again to the hut of that old woman. After prolonged rain for several hours DHARALI looked very fresh as if basking in the sun after a bath, the grass seemed greener, red and green apple shone brightly through the trees, the entire DHARALI shone bright with tiny raindrops sprinkled all around, it was so quiet all around that I could hear my own heartbeats while climbing uphill.

Finally, we reached the hut of that old lady but my heart sank to see that her doors were closed and she was nowhere around. We thought that it was all in vain to climb up to her hut but then we beamed with a smile to see her coming towards the hut with a "**banta**" filled with water; she had actually gone to fetch water from the nearby stream. On looking at us, she gave a gentle smile. As soon as she came closer I extended my hand to dislodge the "**banta**" off her head. At this moment, I simply felt nostalgic and my thoughts wandered into those childhood days when my "**Nani**" used to bring water in a similar way and I used to help her in keeping the "**banta**" down.

Nitin told her that he had once again come to bother her, but She replied with a smile that hardly anyone comes to meet her and so she was very happy that the two of us had come again. Today that old lady asked us affectionately to have food at her house. I would have refused but no.... I wanted to spend some more time there so that I could know her better, and so I stayed back. It was 4 o'clock by this time and the sun was advancing westward to set behind the hills. Suddenly my gaze fell upon the hill opposite the woman's hut behind which the sun was about to

hide. It seemed as if it was kissing the entire earth as if promising her to return the next morning and saying, wait for me I will come again; and the earth, on the other hand, was growing faint in despair of parting away from the sun. Probably I can never capture in words the emotions that rose in my mind at that time beholding the setting sun from the garden of that woman's hut... but all I can say is that this sunset looked magnificent beyond words. In the meantime, she milked her cow and offered us 2 glasses of fresh warm milk. usually, she sold off the remaining milk to the villagers but today she did not sell the milk and kept it on the earthen stove to boil for preparing KHEER. While cooking she told us that today after a long long time kheer was being prepared in her house.

When I asked her, "Maa Ji when did you make kheer the last time" she just gave a mute smile without answering my question. After sometime when she had prepared food for us she called us in her kitchen and offered us Kheer and aloo sabzi all prepared on a wood fire. Really this food prepared on the earthen stove and forest wood tasted much more delicious than the food we eat in cities. She kept sitting beside us while we ate and now for the first time faintly mentioned about her husband who was Rifleman in Indian army. All she told us was that 25 years ago when he was posted somewhere in "Kashmir" near the LOC he wrote a letter for her and this was the last time she heard from him. I asked her what happened after this and what was written in that letter at which she rushed to the corner of her room and hastily dug into an iron trunk from which she took out a letter preserved safely in a small polythene packet.

I was amazed to see that after such a long time of 25 years she was holding the same letter in her hands. But for a few moments, she was lost in the haze of memories and her wrinkled eyes ebbed with two drops of tears. Holding her head down and staring at that letter she meekly said in husky voice "baba this letter came 25 years back... but my *"fozisab"* never came since then". She took out that letter carefully from the tiny polythene packet and left it in my hands. I hesitated a little to open her letter but then slowly unfolded the yellow paper with tender hands and started reading. It was a small letter that gave me the answer to all those questions that had kept on whirling around my head for the past two days.

After reading it fully, I silently folded it back and handed it to her. She quietly got up and placed it inside her iron trunk. The kheer she had so lovingly cooked for us was probably the best in taste that I had ever eaten. Having finished our dinner, it was time for us to leave and so with the fall of dusk, we bid her farewell. When both of us bent down to touch her feet she gently caressed our heads that once again reminded me of my beloved grandmother. As we were descending down the slops towards our hotel through the moist earth, I could feel my cheeks getting wet by tears that effortlessly ran down from my eyes while every word that I had read in that letter echoed into my ears and I could control my emotions no further. It was this that the letter said

भारत माता की जय!

प्रिय गोमती,

आशा करता हूं कि आप राजी खुशी होगी, मांजी पिताजी का ध्यान रख रही होंगी। मां जी पिताजी को मेरा नमस्कार कहना और शायद इस पत्र के पहुंचने तक हमारी गाय ने एक बच्चे को जन्म दे दिया होगा उसकी बधाइयां। मुझे पता है, आप इस पत्र में लिखें हर अक्षर को छूकर उस पल को महसूस करने की कोशिश कर

रही होंगी, जब मैंने यह पत्र लिखा प्यारी सी मुस्कान आपके चेहरे पर होगी, भगवान करे वह हमेशा बनी रहे, आपकी खीर कि मिठास अभी भी मेरी जीभ पर बरकरार है, माफ करना मैं पिछले चोमासे घर न आ सका, यहां कश्मीर में माहौल थोड़ा गर्म है। पर चिंता की बात नहीं हमारी सेना ने परिस्थितियों पर काबू पा लिया है, जल्द सब सही हो जाएगा और मैं इस वर्ष भी हर बार की तरह चोमासे मैं घर आऊंगा। एक बार फिर आप और मैं घर के खलिहान में बैठकर चाय पीते हुए सूर्यास्त देखेंगे, मुझे पता है आपको हमारे घर से होने वाले सूर्यास्त का दृश्य बहुत सुंदर लगता है- और क्योंकि चोमासे में मैं आपके साथ होता हूं तो वह चोमासे का सूर्यास्त आपके लिए सुंदरतम हो जाता है।

इस चोमासे हम साथ होंगे, आप मेरा इंतजार करना मैं जरूर आऊंगा इसी वादे के साथ अपने शब्दों को विराम देता हूं।

राइफलमैन सुंदरलाल
गोरखा राइफल
