

# **THE HIMALAYAN DAUGHTERS**

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English translation of the author's original Bangla book 'Himaloy Duhitar Ushnotay' published in 2001.

## Chapter 1

### The Journey Begins

My stomach had been upset since morning. The inner part was making thunderous noises. Sometimes the pressure was such that my stomach seemed to be a football with twenty-two players constantly fighting for its possession. This intensity was accompanied by a very close bond with the toilet.

It had been a couple of years since I developed this illness. A critical stage of typhoid was about to end my journey into this beautiful world, but my parents' tearful prayers made the Almighty gift me a new life. However, that illness probably created a permanent 'hole' in my stomach. As a result, I am struggling to keep my body healthy by carefully choosing my menu, e.g., no scope of eating anything oily or fried or any outside food; but I often fail to disregard the quest for tasty food resulting in the state I was in on that day.

I wouldn't have been particularly worried had it been any other day, but that night I was about to embark on a 36-hour train journey – moreover, alone! What if anything happened on the way? I was getting quite worried when someone called Emran appeared at my door.

5 ft 7 inches tall, slim, long face, fair complexion, a permanent smile on his face, wearing a hat and holding a pen – just give this description at Aligarh Muslim University and you will only hear one name. He was a man of crisis who would do anything to make others feel happy, so I became pretty sure that I would be on my feet very soon. As expected, Emran didn't take long to understand the situation. Within ten minutes we were on a rickshaw to see Dr Asim Rizvi – one of the handful of good doctors in Aligarh. With God's blessings and Dr Rizvi's medicine, I felt much better by the evening.

My train was Shealdah Express to Kolkata at 12.30 in the morning, though it was more famously known as 'Twelve Down'. It was a train, which could easily be defeated by a tortoise in a race. Stopping at every station, overcrowding of passengers and frequent pulling of chains made passengers' lives miserable, and once you finally reached Kolkata, after 36 hours of torture it could easily be conceivable why you were a citizen of a poor country in the underdeveloped world.

My friends in Aligarh came to see me in the evening showing their anxiety over my poor health. They showed concern as to whether I was able to travel in this condition. Some even suggested cancelling the trip. Yet, I had no option but to go, as my friends from Bangladesh, Dipu and Kennedy, would be waiting for me in Kolkata. Keeping faith in the blessings of God I decided to carry on with my plan.

Twelve Down came late as usual, at 1.45 am. When the train eventually arrived and I got on it, I was pretty annoyed to find a lady sleeping on my reserved berth. A

middle-aged man was standing beside her, and realizing my annoyance, said, “Brother, please adjust a bit”. I was roaring with rage and said to myself, “adjust”? Twelve Down and the word ‘adjust’ were two sides of the same coin. You are going through the north Indian state of Bihar, where some people behave in a very uncivilized manner. Here, you will find these interesting human characters getting on the train at every station. Local passengers are not allowed to get on reservation carriages, but who cares? These rules don’t apply to some Biharis. Once they are on the reservation carriage, they will go one step further. They will sit down on your berth and tell you to ‘adjust’, and eventually you will find yourself standing with your seat being occupied by those Biharis.

I was initially very angry as I had had a bitter experience with this word before. However, I realized that the sequence there was a bit different. A Bengali gentleman’s elderly aunt was sleeping on my berth. He managed to get a berth for me in a few minutes through the ticket inspector, so I felt relieved that the ‘adjust’ of the Bengalis were not as dangerous as that of some Biharis. As soon as I got everything sorted, I lay down and entered into deep sleep.

24<sup>th</sup> September, Friday at Kazi Alauddin Road, Dhaka. I was having ‘Haji Biryani’ (a famous traditional Biryani restaurant in Dhaka) with Dipu, who took me there for a treat as I was going to leave for India the next day after three months’ summer holiday. I said while eating:

“I really want to visit Nepal. I have been living in India for so long, but haven’t used this opportunity to visit that beautiful country.”

Dipu said, “I want to go there too and have been looking for a partner”

“Want to go this year?” I asked.

“Of course, when?” Dipu sounded really keen.

“How about October?”

“I have an exam on 15<sup>th</sup> October, let’s go after that.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

The plan was finalized. I would go to Kolkata from Aligarh on 20<sup>th</sup> October and Dipu would reach there from Dhaka the same day. We would first visit Darjeeling (a hill station in West Bengal, India) and then Nepal. One of Dipu’s great-uncles lived in Nepal at that time as a representative of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Dipu also had a couple of Nepali classmates in Kathmandu. We both felt that we would have a wonderful trip, but never thought that it could turn out to be so fantastic. I hope readers will agree with me as you continue reading this book.

19<sup>th</sup> October morning; the sweet morning sunray woke me up. It was 7 am. It took me a few seconds to realize where I was. The train was moving pretty fast – quite unusual for Twelve Down. I looked around. Everyone was asleep. The train was moving forward, but I went backwards remembering all the past events starting from ‘Haji Biryani’ to the previous night’s train journey. I became a bit philosophical and remembered a couplet from a famous Carpenters song:

“Everything I want the world to be  
Is now coming true specially for me”

Yes, a long-time dream of visiting Nepal and Darjeeling was about to come true. God was so kind to me! I also felt the opposite. What if Dipu didn’t come? Kennedy was supposed to come from New Delhi. What if he didn’t make it either? What should I do then? Should I dare go to Nepal alone? That wouldn’t be possible as Dipu was supposed to bring money from home without which there was no question of going anywhere. Probably the only option would be ‘back to the pavilion’, that is, returning to Aligarh. Eventually common sense prevailed and I decided to leave my worries for future.

The morning freshness soon disappeared. Dirty bathrooms, unnecessary delays at every station, the unbearable attitudes of some Biharis – everything challenged my good feelings immensely. Why was I traveling on this train? I was cursing Dipu – why hadn’t he confirmed a bit earlier so that I could get a ticket for the Kalka Mail or Poorva Express?

The Bengali gentleman seemed to be very eager to talk to me. His name was Mrinal Kanti Sarkar, a 50-year-old employee at a pharmaceutical company in New Delhi with an MA in English literature. Knowing that I was a student of Linguistics, he became even more interested and started asking various questions about English literature seemingly testing my intelligence. Many people in South Asia have this habit of trying to become Socrates or Plato in every opportunity they get. I was already devastated with my surrounding at that time, so I had no interest of turning into a literary critic by discussing Shakespeare or Milton. To change the topic I asked him:

“Do you like cricket?”

He said nothing, just gave an annoyed glance showing that he didn’t like my question.

“I don’t like this game for rich men.”

What? An Indian Bengali didn’t like cricket? I couldn’t believe my ears. If Indians love cricket, Bengalis worship it. They have the biggest cricket stadium in the world with more than 100,000 seats. Yet, the person in front of me said that it was a rich men’s game! I realized that this gentleman had spent 80% of his life memorizing names of medicines, and had little time for cricket. How he survived in that cricket crazy city is still a mystery for me.

I reached Shealdah Station at 10 am the next morning. Before getting out of the train I looked at the mirror to check how I looked after such a terrible journey. As I thought, I looked so devastated that I was wondering whether my own mother would have recognized me in that state. Twelve Down, you are great!

My exhausted body could take no more, and I fell into a deep sleep at the hotel where my friends were supposed to meet me. It was about 1 pm when I heard someone knocking at the door. In came a six-foot tall young man who happened to be my childhood friend Dr Hossain Imam Al-Hadi alias Dipu. He was not only my friend but also my nearest neighbour in Bangladesh who played the role of my ‘liaison officer’, i.e., while I was in Aligarh, everyone would know about me from him. He was one hell of a character. Readers will know what I mean in due time. The only thing I can say now is that it is impossible to have an enjoyable trip without someone like him.

After Dipu took some rest, we went out for a bit in the afternoon, but couldn’t enjoy ourselves much as we were edgy about our third partner Kennedy. He was the joint secretary of Bangladesh Roller Skating Federation and had come to New Delhi for a competition. He was supposed to join us at our hotel ‘New City Lodge’ that day. We were about to get really worried when Kennedy finally appeared at 10 pm.

Our first destination was Darjeeling, so early next morning we first went to ‘Fairly Place Railway Reservation Centre’ for tickets. This is where foreign tourists can get tickets for an immediate rail journey by showing their passports. One would need to wait for more than a month to get a reservation in a decent train for long distance travel in a country, which has the world’s largest railway network.

We had to go to Shiliguri first to get to Darjeeling from which there is a choice between taking a bus or a ‘toy train’. We got tickets for the evening train of that day to New Jalpaiguri – the train station of Shiliguri. I also got a ticket for my return journey to Aligarh by Kalka Mail. This type of facility is available in major Indian cities, but not in places like Aligarh. That is why I had to travel by Twelve Down. I wanted to make sure that I didn’t have to travel back by that same train, which was one of the worst trains of that route. The best train was Rajdhani Express, which took only 17 hours from Kolkata to New Delhi. However, that was generally not an option as the train did not stop at Aligarh. The other two trains were Kalka Mail and Poorva Express, which generally took 24 hours. These trains were quite good, and the rules were also applied strictly to ensure convenient journey for passengers. I generally traveled by one of those two trains.

Our train was at 5.45 pm, so we reached Howrah half an hour before. Not surprisingly, the train left half an hour late, i.e., at 6.15. As soon as the train moved, we started singing. Kennedy loved singing and he found in Dipu a strong admirer. His voice was not bad – at least good enough to excite a small gathering, though he was a bit overenthusiastic about his songs, often leading him to start his songs on high scale. Although I don’t sing very well, I do have some idea about song scales, so I often had to correct his scale when he sang.

We selected two songs as our ‘tour anthems’, i.e., we would start every journey with those two songs. The first one was a romantic Hindi song, the first few lines of which are below:

*jab koi baat bigar jaye  
jab koi mushkil par jaye  
tum dena sath mera o ham nawa  
na koi hay na koi tha  
zindegime tumhari siwa  
tum dena sath mera o ham nawa*

“When things go wrong  
When troubles know no bound  
Please be around me, my love!  
Loveless am I now  
Loveless was I before  
So, please be around me, my love!”

Although these words are directed to someone’s beloved, but our direction was towards that entity who deserves to be the beloved of everyone – the Almighty God, our sustainer; and the land in which He decided that we should be born was our second tour anthem. It is a Bengali patriotic song written by Dwijendralal Ray. The song is:

*dhono dhanno pushpe bhora  
amader e boshundhora  
taha majhe ache desh ek  
shokol desher shera  
oshe shopno die toiri she desh  
sriti die ghera  
emon deshti kothao khuje pabe nako tumi  
shokol desher rani sheje amar jonmobhumi*

“Earth full of green fields and flowers  
Best among whom is the country of ours  
Created through dreams  
Surrounded by memories  
Nowhere will you find such a land  
Queen of all countries is my homeland”

We sang many more songs besides these two. Kennedy sang well, but where he couldn’t remember the lyrics I came to his rescue most of the time. We made the whole carriage alive through our songs. This transmitted to some other people in the carriage, who sang along with us. The gentleman opposite us had a very nice voice and sang some beautiful songs – from Hindi film songs to *bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs). This musical journey continued until quite late at night, and when we had had

our dinner and went to sleep, all our dreams collectively flew towards the Kanchenjunga Peak of the Himalayas where a spectacular sight was awaiting us!

The clock was about to turn 10 as the train reached New Jalpaiguri station the next morning. The ‘toy train’ to Darjeeling leaves from there, which is a nine hours’ journey through natural beauty. It is called ‘toy train’ because the rail tracks are very small – so are the carriages. Every hill station of India except Kashmir has this type of train, because the bigger trains would struggle to climb up high altitudes. You would slowly go up the hill through narrow winding tracks as if you were traveling towards the heavens onboard a special vehicle.

I was unofficially elected the leader of our small three-member team, because I knew much more about the language and culture of the country than my two travel partners (sometimes I had to endure the title ‘Indian’ by my friends). What else should be considered in electing me as the leader? However, my dear old friend Dipu somehow made us follow his instructions most of the time. As *Bharat* in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* ruled the country for 14 years wearing the shoes of his elder brother *Ram* while the latter was in exile, my brother-like friend Dipu gave one decision after another while keeping me at the helm. It is needless to say that I accepted majority of his suggestions as he was right on most occasions.

I was keen to travel by the ‘toy train’, but Dipu wasn’t interested. “There is no need to travel for nine hours when we can reach there in three hours by bus”, “I have come during my internship, so I have to go back as soon as possible”, “Time is money” etc. were constantly murmured to ensure that the slower option was not considered at all. This reminded me of another trip two years before when Dipu, Abid, Mushtaq and I had toured North India together. Abid and Mushtaq were slow in everything; I was neither slow nor too quick; and Dipu was always in a hurry. He hated wasting time, so he would repeatedly remind us by saying in English, “Hurry up – don’t waste time”. Knowing how that sentence had become his trademark in the previous tour, Dipu, the newly qualified doctor from Sir Salimullah Medical College, Dhaka consciously avoided it, and instead used a Bengali word *taratari* (quick). To be honest, it was Dipu’s time consciousness that enabled us to complete the trip in time.

Dipu’s hope of reaching Darjeeling in three hours didn’t exactly turn out the way he had expected. We had to stay in Darjeeling several hours more to sort out the bus tickets as too many people were traveling at the same time because of the *Durga Puja* holidays (the most prominent Hindu festival in West Bengal). Most of the tourists were Bengalis from West Bengal, India who really loved traveling. A few years earlier I had traveled to Kashmir with my cousin Najib. At the famous Shalimarbagh Gardens, someone suddenly asked us in Bengali, “Are you from Bangladesh?” At another time, I was touring Kerala (a South Indian state) with friends when a Bengali voice could be heard, “Aunt, could I have the water please?” During my tour of South India I also visited Ooty (a famous hill station) where a Bollywood film shooting was taking place. A lady’s scream in Bengali was quite unbearable, “O my God, this is Salman Khan!” (a famous Bollywood actor). I found Indian Bengalis a bit stingy, but they always loved traveling. They would seldom invite you to their house, and if they did so, they would give you a small biscuit and say, “You have to eat all of

them”. The money saved through such miserly attitude would be used for visiting more places.

After a lot of struggle and a ‘sun bath’, when we eventually got on the minibus for Darjeeling, it was half past two. Finally, our main part of the journey started – Road to Darjeeling! All the exhaustion of Shiliguri slowly disappeared. The bus was moving upwards, leaving behind our tiredness and fatigue. Those who haven’t seen this beauty cannot comprehend what it feels like to behold this nature. Looking at the amazing natural beauty of the mountains, I unknowingly started to sing a Bengali song:

*oi nishorger bake bake  
monje amar porei thake  
tomar karukajero melay  
bakhara hoi roije chup*

“In every corner of this nature  
My hearts are engulfed  
The beauty of your creation  
Makes me spellbound!”

It was evening and darkness embraced us. I was so stunned at the beauty of nature that I didn’t realize when the bus got stuck in congestion. Most of the roads of the Shiliguri-Darjeeling highway are one-way, so traffic congestion is quite normal. We were above the cloud, so gradually the temperature plummeted into single figures. We all put on our warm clothes when Kennedy put an end to his long silence and started singing. We joined him by first singing the ‘tour anthems’, and then Kennedy sang a beautiful romantic Hindi song:

*ye bahar kehrahi hay  
yehi pyar ka sama  
meri arzoo pukare  
mera dilruba kaha*

“This nature calls for romance  
I wish I could see my beloved once”

I am not sure if Kennedy found his *dilruba* (beloved), but I definitely found my beloved the next day. Readers, soon you will be introduced to her!



## Chapter 2

### Meeting my First Love

At half past six we could see a small town in a valley. As the lights of the city were coming nearer they seemed like a huge torch procession fast approaching us. We realized that we were about to reach Darjeeling. I felt so excited, from Aligarh – the headquarter of mosquitoes and flies to Darjeeling – the ‘epicentre’ of beautiful glaciers! “O God, all praise is to you!”

Darjeeling, a city in the state of West Bengal, is one of the most iconic tourist attractions in India. It is 2134 metres (7000 ft) high in altitude. The word ‘Darjeeling’ came from the Tibetan words *dorje*, ‘thunderbolt’ and *ling* ‘a place or land’, which makes it ‘the land of the thunderbolt’. There are also other opinions about its name. Some think that the Tibetan word *durjayling* ‘Observatory hill’ is the source word of this name. Some opinions say that Darjeeling is a name derived from the Lepcha word *darjulung*, meaning the home of god.

It was 1780. Darjeeling was then part of the Sikkim state when the Gurkhas from Nepal invaded this beautiful heavenly state. They ruled the land for half a century before the British East India Company became interested in the land. India was then under the British Empire. The Anglo-Nepal War in 1814 led to the defeat of the Gurkhas, and Nepal had to cede the land invaded by the Gurkhas to the East India Company. In 1817 the East India Company reinstated the land to the *Raja* (king) of Sikkim.

Darjeeling was gifted to the British in 1835. In 1841 the *Raja* was allocated an allowance of 3,000 Rupees per annum as compensation, which was later increased to Rs.6,000.

Darjeeling is famous for tea, and the British had its role in this too by bringing tea seeds from China and starting its plants. The British also developed the infrastructure of the valley and turned ‘the queen of hilly cities’ Darjeeling into a centre of tourist attraction.

We reached Darjeeling at 7 in the evening. The sun had set long time before, and it seemed that 7 was night rather than evening in Darjeeling as very few people could be found on the roads. We were shivering with cold, so getting inside the hotel was the first priority. We had brought some hotel addresses and decided to stay in ‘Hotel Nirvana’ – a reasonable hotel near the ‘toy train’ station. The hotel receptionist also arranged for our next day sightseeing tour including the sunrise at Tiger Hill, and advised us to go to sleep as soon as possible as we would be picked up very early in the morning. With Dipu’s constant bellowing of *taratari* ‘quick’, we had no other option but to eat, pray, brush and get to bed in no time at all. As soon as we were under our quilts, my two tired partners fell into a deep sleep.

My problem is I can’t sleep straight away in a new place. My body was numb with exhaustion, but my mind was as energetic as it could be. A marathon runner’s stamina

may come to an end after running 26 miles, but the stamina of our minds don't wear out at all. As I couldn't sleep, the mind got busy and reminded me of hundreds of memories that had been stored in my mind over the years. Pictures of some wonderful people would appear for a while and then disappear the next moment. I could feel the existence of my octogenarian father, a wonderful human being who faced many struggles in his life, but never forgot his heavenly smile. The love that was behind those smiles couldn't be described in words, but felt in my inner heart, which is beautifully expressed in this Bengali song:

*aghat joto nijer buke nie she  
amay shudhu bhalobasha dieche  
tari preronay tari momotay  
jibon shundor holo  
pita shorgo, pita dhormo, pita jogoter alo  
tar she chokh die dekhechi mondo bhalo*

“Enduring all the pain  
He gave me only love  
My life is so beautiful  
Because of his love  
Father is my heaven  
Father is my religion  
Father is my light  
Through his eyes I have seen wrong and right”

What about my loving mother? Could there be any comparison with her? Only one word ‘mother’, but it possesses enormous blessings of the Almighty! If you put mother's love on one side of a scale and everything else on the other side, yet mother's love will stand out. I always feel that my mother is the best of all mothers (probably all children feel the same for their mothers). She has run our huge family quietly and efficiently like a machine without any complaints or exhaustion. That is why whenever I go to her, I feel like the little Salman whom she played with during my childhood and sang lullabies to put me into sleep. Is it ever possible to repay her debt? Never ....

*mayer ek dhar dudher dam  
katia payer cham  
paposh banaileo riner shodh hobena  
emon dorodi bhobe  
keu hobena amar ma*

“One drop of my mother's milk  
Can never be repaid  
Even if I cut my skin  
To make her a mat  
So caring is my mother  
There can be none other”

I was racked with guilt lying down on my bed in Darjeeling that October night. I must have given my parents a lot of pain unknowingly! How far had I been successful in fulfilling their expectations? I prayed, “O my Lord, I don’t want to die until I make my parents completely contented with me as a son!”

Dipu woke me up at 3.35 am after the wake up call at 3.30. There was one bathroom, so we needed to take turns. I preferred to be the last person in the queue so that I could remain under the quilt a bit longer in spite of Dipu’s disapproval. This laziness was nothing new for me. My immediate elder brother and I used to share the same room in our house in Dhaka. We often fought over who would be the last person to go to the bathroom during Fajr (the morning prayer) time in order to stay under the quilt. After father woke us up, we would ask each other to go to the bathroom first, and each of us would come out with excuses like stomach upset or headache to justify staying in bed. The one who would lose this ‘laziness competition’ would say, “I don’t understand the benefit of lying down for extra five minutes only”. Sometimes both of us would go back to sleep when no one was ready to concede before our mother’s scolding waking us up again, and then we both would fight who would go to the bathroom first.

Dipu’s trademark *taratari* wasn’t very helpful to remain in bed, so I had to get up much earlier than I had wanted. By quarter past four we were in a jeep waiting for other passengers to arrive. We were pretty well wrapped up in winter clothes – a shirt over a vest, then a sweater, then a jacket, plus a neck scarf, a warm hat and gloves. Yet I thought I was in a bathtub full of ice. However, looking at Dipu made me feel much warmer, because he was in a dire state. He was extremely vulnerable to cold weather, so travelling to an altitude of 7000 ft at four in the morning was no fun at all. Our last tour together was in North India during the first week of January when northern India was in a terrible cold wave. Dipu had had some preparations done before that trip, like having honey everyday (though that didn’t seem to work much). However, he hadn’t been able to prepare at all for the cold weather in Darjeeling, so one can imagine what situation he found himself in.

We warmed ourselves with hot tea, and began our journey towards Tiger Hill. There was a mixture of adventure and apprehension in our minds. I was thrilled to imagine the sight of the sunrise and its reflection on Kanchenjunga. At the same time there were concerns about clouds spoiling our party, which meant that we would not be able to see either the sunrise or Kanchenjunga. I was told that less than 10% tourists are lucky enough to see the sunrise in their first attempt, so there was every chance of being amongst the 90% unlucky ones. I was in no mood to miss the opportunity to see the sunrise at Tiger Hill on that October morning. When there is an element of chance, then it is best to attain success in the first possible opportunity. We were quite hopeful, as October was the best time to see the sunrise, and kept on calling for God’s intervention during our ‘ascension’ towards Tiger Hill.

Tiger Hill is the highest place in Darjeeling with 2590 metre altitude. A narrow, steep and winding road of 11 kilometres separates Tiger Hill from Darjeeling – a frightening experience no doubt. However, Kennedy was not short of his songs even

in that terrifying journey. He felt warmer if he sang. The jeep stopped near the hilltop. We were told that we couldn't go further on the jeep due to traffic congestion, so we had to walk the remaining part of the road, which was only a ten-minute walk away. We reached the hilltop walking through a very steep road at 4.50 am, and were extremely exhausted. Even roller skater Kennedy's stamina was on the brink of extinction.

We found a tremendous rush at Tiger Hill. There was a 'view point' at the hilltop where one could go with a ticket. We had no scope of going there, as even the stairs leading to the 'view point' were crowded with people. Thousands of people gathered at Tiger Hill with 90% of them speaking Bengali, as if every middle class family of Kolkata had assembled on that early October morning. It felt like the culmination of a huge pilgrimage at the Tiger Hill.

The darkness began to disappear slowly. Not much could be seen around other than some patches of cloud, which looked like some white cats having a lazy nap. My probing eyes moved towards the east anticipating the sunrise, but I could only see the horizon. The light was getting brighter and brighter every second. The passage of time made me more and more nervous. Why wasn't the sun rising? Did that mean we would miss the sunrise? I was about to lose my patience when I suddenly turned to my left.

I could see a curved line. Before I could understand what it was, it seemed that a cover had just been withdrawn. Wow! A white glacier was standing high. I realised that Kanchenjunga had announced its existence. I could see Kanchenjunga, the 8586 metre (28156 feet) high peak of the Himalayas, which is the third highest in the world after Everest and K2. The name 'Kanchenjunga' derives from the Tibetan words, 'Kanchen' and 'Dzonga', meaning "The Five Treasures of the Snow", referring to its five summits all over 8000 meters. I had heard so much about it, and could instantly realise the emotion in the poems written about it, like the Bengali one below:

*oyi Kanchenjunge  
dekhechi tomar rup uttorbonge  
mugdho netre dekhi mora tomare probhate  
shajhete arek rup, bhul nei tate...  
tushar bhashkorjo tumi, moder gourob  
shobe mile tomarei kori mora stob*

“Oh Kanchenjunga  
We have seen your beauty in North Bengal  
We look at you admiringly in morning  
Your beauty is so different in evening!  
You are a sculpture of ice, and our pride  
Praiseworthy is your beauty worldwide!”

I could see that Kanchenjunga in front of my eyes! Was I dreaming? While looking at its beauty with deep admiration I felt immensely grateful to the Almighty for enabling

me to see this sight: *ei duti chokh diecho bolei dekhije kotoi oporup* ‘I can behold such beauty only because you have given me these eyes!’”

I am neither a poet, nor a litterateur, nor a novelist. I have neither the ability to express my emotion through poetry; nor have I the power to create a fantastic literary piece; nor am I capable of writing a beautiful story. How can I make you understand how I felt after seeing Kanchenjunga? There is nothing more beautiful in this world than my mother; but how can I ignore the beauty of Kanchenjunga? I kept staring at it without even a blink in my eye. “O my creator, you are so great! If you didn’t give me these eyes, then could I see this amazing sight?”

*tomar deya chokher shokor janabo tar bhasha koi  
jotoi dekhi totoi jeno polok hara cheye roi*

“No grateful expression is enough for these eyes  
The more I see the more I am surprised!”

I realised that I had fallen in love with Kanchenjunga. It was ‘love at first sight’. This was the love of a beauty-seeking young man towards a beautiful creation! This was the love of a God’s servant towards His beautiful nature! This was my love towards Kanchenjunga – a pure love!

‘Snow white’ Kanchenjunga probably felt a bit shy at my admiration. It turned red, like a beautiful woman becoming red when praised. She (Kanchenjunga) was probably looking at me saying,

“Why are you looking at me like this? Don’t I feel shy?”

5.25 am, Kanchenjunga changed its colour once again. This time it felt as if the gorgeous Kanchenjunga was in her bridal dress. Her golden colour seemed to suggest that she was covered in gold ornaments!

Suddenly, someone said, “The sun is rising”. Oh no! I was so engulfed in the love of Kanchenjunga that I forgot the sun – the architect of her beauty. I looked at the east. Where was the sun? The horizon through which the sun was supposed to rise remained the same. I looked below, and saw a large round rose slowly moving upwards. I felt so stupid! How could there be horizon in such altitude? They were actually clouds.

It was the first time I saw sunrise. I was enjoying every moment. I was in a dilemma where to look – the sun or Kanchenjunga? Meanwhile, the sun changed its colour to golden, and my ‘beloved’ Kanchenjunga, in her attractive golden attire, kept looking at me.

I became absolutely crazy, and started to take one picture after another. Kennedy lost his singing power; Dipu forgot his trademark *taratari* – all were stunned! The only sound that could be heard was the clicking sound of the camera. Everyone was after the binocular. Although it was Dipu’s binocular, he had very little scope to use it. I

allowed both of them to use it a bit before almost entirely keeping it with me. I needed the binocular to look at the beauty of my beloved Kanchenjunga with much more intensity. I was in a fantasy world seeking to become superman so that I could fly to my beloved, who was seemingly calling me towards her:

*esho esho amar ghore esho amar ghore  
bahir hoye esho tumi  
je acho ontore  
esho amar ghore*

“Come to me sweetheart  
Get away and come to me  
As you reside in my heart!”

“Come on Salman, it’s time to go”. This Dipu was so out of touch! How could someone interrupt in such a romantic situation? I was just getting my batting form, and was about to hit fours and sixes when his sudden call ran me out. He said,

“Let’s have coffee”

“How could you spoil such a romantic moment?”

“What romance are you talking about? You couldn’t even get a Bengali girl to love you, and now you have come to do romance with Kanchenjunga?”

How unromantic! How could he compare a Bengali girl with Kanchenjunga? Dipu was so disappointing; he probably had his own ‘open heart surgery’ going through those uninteresting medical books. That is why the only thing he could do is cut people’s hearts!

Kennedy also joined Dipu to mock my passion towards Kanchenjunga,  
“What if your beloved betrays you?”

I said in Hindi, “*mohabbat aur dokandarime bahot farak hai* (Their is huge difference between love and trade). My love is one-sided and can’t be judged by betrayal”

“Dipu, let’s get out of here. Salman has simply become insane. It’s no longer safe to keep him here.”

What could I do in that situation? I was in no mood to give up my leadership of the team, because I was ‘insanely’ in love with a mountain. I looked at Kanchenjunga once more and secretly told her that we would meet again before we hurriedly grabbed coffee and got back into the jeep. Kennedy immediately went back to his singing mode:

*tumi je amar ogo tumi je amar  
kane kane shudhu ekbar bolo  
tumi je amar*

“You are mine

O beloved you are mine  
Just whisper once in my ears  
That you are mine.”

This is adding insult to injury! I was sad leaving Kanchenjunga, and Kennedy had to sing this romantic song. I was about to request Kennedy not to sing that song when all three of us noticed an interesting thing – our driver was driving the car without even igniting the car’s engine, as the car was going down. This is probably to compensate the extra fuel that was used while going upwards. The clever driver surely knew how to save money!

Our first stop while going down was Ghum Buddha Monastery. The ‘Ghum’ area is 8 kilometres away from Darjeeling where that yellow-top Tibetan Buddhist Monastery was located built by Lama Sherab Gyatso in 1875. One has to go down the hill from the road to enter the monastery. Both sides of the road were full of shops where everything from warm clothes to Darjeeling tea could be found. Dipu and Kennedy went around the shops as shopaholics like them would, but to my surprise they didn’t buy anything.

Between Ghum and Darjeeling is another tourist spot called Batasia Loop, which is a scenic railway loop where the Darjeeling toy train makes a 360 degree turn. Built to help the train negotiate the steep landscape, Batasia Loop is a perfect place to have a panoramic view of the Himalayan mountain range, including Kanchenjunga. Many locals were there to show us the whole Darjeeling city through binoculars if we spent a few Rupees (Indian currency). I could see the Governor House, *Lalkothi* (Secretariat), local stadium, and the biggest tea garden of Darjeeling. My guide was very keen to show me where some famous Bollywood film shootings took place. My focus, however, was entirely on the vast mountain range that could be seen, particularly Kanchenjunga. I came to know that the Kanchenjunga peaks covered three territories: Sikkim in the south and east, Nepal in the west, and Tibet in the north. The mountain range was an excellent sight to behold. I took that opportunity to look at Kanchenjunga even more closely. The sun was quite high then, so Kanchenjunga also covered herself in bright colour. I could stay there all day and pay my guide as much as he wanted had Dipu not interfered once again. He literally pulled me towards the jeep. We reached our hotel at 8 am for breakfast and were told that the next sight seeing tour – the seven tourist attractions in Darjeeling (popularly known as ‘Seven Star’) would start in an hour’s time.

## Chapter 3

### A Strange Dream

We started at exactly 10. Our first destination was Himalayan Mountaineering Institute – the first mountaineering training centre founded in 1954. One of the first conquerors of Mount Everest Tenzing Norgay, whose grave lies beside the institute, was initially a trainer here. He later became its advisor and remained so until he died. Kushang Sherpa, the only climber to climb all 4 sides of Everest was then an instructor there. The month of May is very significant in Tenzing Norgay's life – he was born on 9 May 1914, he conquered the Everest as an assistant to Sir Edmond Hillary on 29 May 1953, and he died on 14 May 1986.

The most attractive parts of the institute were the two museums. We first entered the mountaineering museum where we learned a lot of things. Going through the museum we came to know that the Himalayas have 93 peaks with 14 of them over 8000 metres. The highest is Everest with 8848 metres (29028 ft) altitude; the second highest is K2 in Kashmir (8611 metres); and the third highest is Kanchenjunga (8586 metres).

We then entered the Everest Museum, which was founded on 2 November 1967. There were two lists of Everest conquerors – one of Indian conquerors and the other of women conquerors. The most noticeable thing was that majority of the successful expeditions were in May, which proves that it is the best month to conquer Everest. Apart from a lot of photos, we also found the equipment of Hillary and Tenzing during their first successful expedition. Dipu gets really excited about facts and figures, and kept telling me what I should note. It seemed that he had a basket where he would store all his experiences whenever and wherever possible, but would never open them. I was pretty sure that his only concern would be his big medical books once he returned to Bangladesh.

Beside the mountaineering institute there was 'Padmaza Naidu Himalayan Zoological Garden' where some rare animals could be seen like Himalayan black bear, barking deer, Siberian tiger, Tibetan wolf, snow leopard, red panda etc.

Our next destination was the 'ropeway', which was three kilometres away from the city. This five-kilometre long ropeway over the Rangin valley was the first ropeway in India, which connects Darjeeling with Singla Bazar giving the tourists a fascinating one-hour experience of journey through the mountains. We were very unlucky as there was no ticket for that day and the next three days were closed due to Durga Puja holidays. We were very frustrated, particularly Dipu and Kennedy. I had the experience of ropeway in Kashmir and South India, but my friends just missed their first such opportunity.

We carried on and visited Lloyd Botanical Garden, Natural History Museum, Ava Art Gallery, Tenzing and Gombo Rock (where people can take mountaineering training) before going to Tibetan Self-help Refugee Centre.



When China invaded Tibet, the spiritual leader of Tibet Dalai Lama fled the land after which, on 1 October 1959, this refugee centre opened with only four workers and two rooms. Thousands of refugees fled Tibet and came to Darjeeling at that time. A ten-member committee was formed to rehabilitate these people, which organized various charity programmes including donation events, charity shows, exhibition football matches etc. Initially, they found a small four-acre land where the thirteenth Dalai lama spent his exile life from 1910 – 1912.

The refugee centre we went to after many more years was a complete centre with almost a thousand workers including children, who were trained at the vocational centre. Many refugees began their own business after being trained in the vocational centre. We went around and saw people working in different rooms – carpet weaving, wool carding & skinning, tailoring & leather work, knitting & painting, wool making, wood carving, carpentry etc. We saw a poster in the first room, which said, “Stop the Chinese from using Tibet as a nuclear dump and base”.

In one room we found some very old people working. We tried to talk to the eldest looking person among them, but he didn't know English or Hindi. However, we didn't give up and at least could find out that his name was Siring Voce, aged 92. In another room we found from young boys & girls to old women all doing wool carding and skinning, while younger children were running around. It was really a wonderful sight. However, the room that we enjoyed most was the babies' room where 30 to 40 children could be seen on their beds. Some of the cute babies were sleeping, some were playing, and some were learning how to walk. We had brought some sweets for the children and gave them to the caretaker. The children were enjoying the sweets, and I was thinking what future lay for those little children.

While I was moving around the place, Dipu and Kennedy were busy shopping. Dipu loves shopping, and I was pretty sure he had come quite prepared for it. As I had thought, he came out a bit later with some goods including a beautiful Tibetan waistcoat. I didn't have much intention to buy anything, but still went to the show room. It was full of beautiful handicrafts all made in the centre. I could also see a huge photo of Dalai Lama with a congratulatory note for winning the Nobel peace prize in 1989. There was also a sticker protesting China's hosting of the Olympic Games saying, “Beijing Doesn't Deserve the Honour to Host the Olympic Games”. When we were leaving, the manager of the show room gave us a leaflet demanding the independence of Tibet. Many things were said there, but I was a bit surprised to read the slogan at the end of the leaflet: *Jai Bharat! Jai Tibet!* ‘Long live India! Long live Tibet!’ The second part of the slogan was fine, but what about the first one?

We returned to the hotel at lunchtime. We were so busy with the visit to Kanchenjunga and Darjeeling sight seeing that we hardly had any time to think of anything else. In the hotel room, there seemed to be a ‘vacancy’ in our minds. Generally, ‘An idle mind is the devil's workshop’ but whether it was the influence of Kanchenjunga or the cold weather of Darjeeling, the devil could not be seen anywhere. Instead, I remembered some names from Aligarh who made my life so enjoyable there. Most of my friends had left Aligarh, but these junior friends filled their gap so well that I never felt I was living abroad. Taimur, Tipu, Emran, Shibly,

Apel, Mahmud, Khawja, Tushar, Romel all respect me so much that I sometimes feel embarrassed. Kennedy broke my concentration. He was probably wondering whether I was still in that ‘unusual’ state of mind like in the morning at Tiger Hill. I tried to assure him by saying that it was not Kanchenjunga that I was thinking about. He didn’t seem to believe me, but didn’t say anything either. How strange! Did they really think I was mad? Can’t we love nature? Why did I go to visit those beautiful sites with people with such little romantic sense? Wouldn’t it be lovely if I had gone with a poet or a litterateur? Maybe a wonderful love story would have been written between Kanchenjunga and me.

We went to the Mall in the evening. ‘The Mall’ is the centre place in Darjeeling where everything was available from shops and restaurants to parks and hotels. Thousands of people assembled at the Mall making Darjeeling a city of festivals. At the top there was a Shiva temple where songs were being played because of the Puja celebrations. Some people were trying to get some customers for riding their horses. We really enjoyed the place, and started our way back to the hotel. It was ‘Navami’ (the concluding day of Durga Puja), so a *bhajan* (devotional Hindu song) could be heard from a temple near our hotel:

*dodin ka jagme lila sab  
chala chale ka khela*

‘All the enjoyments of this world are just for a few days and will end soon.’

This *bhajan* reminds us that death is inevitable. Our songs also give the same message when we sing:

*prithibi amar ashol thikana noy  
moron ekdin muche debe shokol rongin porichoy*

‘This world is not our real destination; death will one day wipe off all the colours of life’.

Then where is the difference between us? Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews – all believe in God. Every religion believes in life after death where we have to account for our deeds in this world. All religions talk about humanity, honesty and love. Then why do people fight for religion? Standing near the temple wall, we saw lights all around, as if Darjeeling was a city of lights. Darjeeling had made us so close in only two days that we felt terrible thinking about leaving the next day. However, we had to move on, as our next destination was Nepal – the land of the Himalayas. It is this thought of Nepal that made us get back to the hotel quickly.

After prayers and meal we sat down to chat for a while. We were so busy in the previous two days that we hardly had any time to talk amongst us. With the Darjeeling tour finished, we thought of reflecting how the tour had been so far. A lot of things were discussed including my friends mocking me about Kanchenjunga. Slowly, the topics moved from the present to the past. With the night becoming deeper and deeper, we shared a lot of secret things happening with each of us. This

happens quite often – people tend to share their secrets late at night. However, I apologise to the readers that I am unable to share them with you at the moment. There is no question of sharing my own ones, and if I even share a bit of the things Dipu and Kennedy said, I will be in deep trouble.

We all slept very late. Suddenly a sound of something woke me up. I looked around, but couldn't see Dipu or Kennedy around me. I looked at the door and found a white-clothed person standing. I got really scared! The scary look turned into astonishment when the person came near me. I was dumbfounded to find a beautiful young woman standing in front of me. Her whole body was covered in beautiful white dress. I had never seen such a beautiful face in my life. I just couldn't figure out what that young lady was doing in my room so late at night, so I asked her,

“What do you want?”

“You!” said the woman.

“Me?”

“Yes”

“Why? What are you to me?”

“I am your beloved.”

“Beloved? I don't have any beloved.”

“You called me beloved just yesterday, and now you have forgotten me?”

“Who are you?”

“Kanchenjunga”

Saying that, the young woman gave a sweet smile and started to withdraw. My whole existence was in a shock. I started chasing her as if I had been hypnotized – I have to get hold of my Kanchenjunga! She was running, and I was running after her, but was unable to catch up. Why couldn't I catch her? I became even more determined. I increased my speed, but all of a sudden the woman disappeared. I looked around and found myself in a strange place. I could only see snow around me everywhere, but was puzzled how I was wearing only pyjamas in that cold weather. What was standing in front of me? Wasn't that the one I had seen the previous day? Didn't I fall in love with it? Kanchenjunga, yes it was Kanchenjunga that came to see me in the shape of a young woman. It had brought me to her and then was looking at me in her original shape. What was happening? Why did Kanchenjunga bring me there? What would happen next? What would she do with me?

“Get up Salman!” – Dipu's call woke me up. Both of them were staring at me. I looked around and tried to come to terms with what I had been dreaming. I could see the morning sun coming through the windows. To enjoy the full sunshine I opened all the windows, and to my utter surprise, I saw Kanchenjunga right in front of me. We couldn't see it the previous day due to cloud, so we were not aware that Kanchenjunga was visible from our room. Even Kennedy and Dipu were looking at Kanchenjunga with deep admiration. I was about to tell them about my dream, but decided against it at the last moment. I didn't want them to make fun of me again. In fact I was baffled myself with what was happening with me. I realized that it was a bit too much. Kanchenjunga affected me so much that I even had a dream about it as my beloved! It probably happens if something has a permanent affect on a person's mind.

I realized that the beauty of Kanchenjunga had actually created a deep impact in my mind.

When the return bus to Shiliguri started, it was ten in the morning. We would start for our journey to Nepal that day, so I was a bit concerned thinking whether everything would go smoothly at the India-Nepal border. All my worries disappeared as soon as I looked out of the window. Kanchenjunga could be seen once again. Some small clouds around its peak made it even prettier. I felt desperately bad leaving her. I became philosophical for the last time, and bade Kanchenjunga farewell through a famous John Denver song:

“So kiss me and smile for me  
Tell me that you'll wait for me  
Hold me like you'll never let me go  
Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane  
Don't know when I'll be back again  
Oh babe, I hate to go”

Did Kanchenjunga hear my song? She also started singing, which I could only hear:

“Wherever you go, whatever you do  
I will be right here, waiting for you  
Whatever it takes, or how my heart breaks  
I will be right here waiting for you”

Then I could hear her singing:

*chalte chalte mere ye geet yad rakhna  
kabhi alvida na kehna  
kabhi alvida na kehna*

“Remember my songs while leaving  
Never say goodbye –  
Never say goodbye!”

The sight of Kanchenjunga disappeared. I became extremely emotional and told her:

“Please forgive me Kanchenjunga – I will never say goodbye to you! You are always with me. You will remain in my heart as my beloved throughout my life. I promise that I will come back to you at least once in my lifetime. If a woman enters in my life as my life-partner, then I will bring her along with me. I will introduce her to you as you, Kanchenjunga, are my first love!”

## Chapter 4

### A Dreadful Journey

We had some food as soon as we reached Shiliguri. It was prayer time, so we went to a mosque and prayed before starting for the Nepal border. It was 4 o'clock when we reached the Nepal immigration after one-hour bus journey to the border, then going through Indian customs and immigration as well as the Nepal's customs area. Nepal's immigration was completely empty, because Indians don't need visa to travel to Nepal. As a Bangladeshi, I had to get Nepali visa from the Nepali embassy in Kolkata paying a lot of money as visa fee. Interestingly, Indians don't even have to show their passport at the Nepali immigration, so many Bangladeshis travel to Nepal pretending to be Indians. However, I didn't think it was ethical to do so. I got extremely annoyed when the immigration officer implied that I was a fool paying such high amount in visa fees as giving them a small bribe would have been enough to get through the border. It was beyond my understanding how he could make that offer being a government officer. Corruption is an epidemic in most South Asian countries, and Nepal was no different. "That is not a great welcome to Nepal", I said to myself.

I was already upset, but Dipu added insult to injury by getting angry with me for my delay. I later realized why he was angry. They had bought tickets for the last bus to Kathmandu that day, and the bus driver was getting impatient with my friends for my delay.

I had thought after my Nepal border fiasco that my worst time was over, but that was not to be. I had traveled a lot by bus in my life, but this was a completely different experience. The bus was not too bad – a reasonably good luxury coach. However, there was no 'luxury' allocated for us. They took the full bus fare, but provided us with three stools between the seats, that too after standing for whole two hours. This time it was my turn to give an angry look at Dipu. How could he allow them to get away with this arrangement? Dipu explained that the seats were full and that was the only option left for us if we had to travel that day.

I was traveling on stool in a bus for the first time in my life. We were sitting between two sets of seats on both sides. How can I express what my feeling was at that time? The people on the seats looked at us in such a way as if we were beggars and it was their kindness that allowed us to sit on those stools. The people on our left side were from Kolkata, while those on the right were from Assam, so we could hear Bengali in our left ear and Assamese in the right. The 'hotchpotch' that was created by these two languages was beyond my knowledge of linguistics. In normal situation I get curious when I hear a new language, trying to know its history as well as its similarities or differences with the languages I know. Assamese and Bengali have a lot of similarities, and as that was the first time I was exposed to Assamese spoken in front of me, it was natural for me to speak to Assamese people and try to know a bit more about their language. However, our situation was so unpleasant that even Ferdinand de Saussure – the Father of Modern Linguistics would have preferred to listen to heavy metal music than talking about language had he been in our situation.

I was trying to feel normal thinking that destiny could not be changed. We had no idea how long the journey was, so we asked the bus driver how long it would take to reach Kathmandu. I felt I would lose my consciousness when the driver answered that the journey was eighteen hours long, which meant that we had to travel sitting on the stool for almost a whole day! How was it possible? I remembered a famous saying by Hindu god Ramakrishna, “The highs and lows in daily life is like the camel eating a cactus tree. His hunger may be reduced by that, but at the same time his mouth will be full of blood”. We were in a similar situation. There was always thrill of adventure, but to the fate of our poor bodies after reaching Kathmandu would be quite similar to that of the cactus-eating camel.

Well, we didn't have to wait long to turn a bad journey into worse. The experience we had is beyond any description. Those who have the experience of riding a large rollercoaster may have some idea about our ordeal. If I could ever imagine that highways in Nepal would be so terrible, then I would have thought ten times before embarking on this journey. It was much worse than a rollercoaster. Each time the high-speed bus fell on a dig, our stools jumped up almost touching the ceiling of the bus. There were so many butterflies in our stomachs that even doctor Dipu got worried whether his intestines were in their right places.

Our rollercoaster journey stopped for a while so that we could have dinner. That was another interesting (?) experience. The restaurant in which we had our meal was so bad that even the roadside restaurants in Dhaka could be considered five star hotels. I was extremely hungry, but at the same time I was aware that my stomach couldn't digest all types of food. What could I do? There was no option left, so I had to eat whatever was available. We chose to eat rice, vegetable and lentils. I had never eaten such vegetable in my life. While eating, I thought that I was a goat enjoying grass. The lentils had nothing to do with lentils, other than having yellow colour. What about the rice? Please don't ask me about that. Yet I had to eat this food to save myself from starvation. While eating, I was thinking of my mother, as she was more concerned about my stomach than me. She would certainly have fainted if she had seen me eating that food.

There was another problem after we finished eating. The bus was just not moving. We were told that our dear old driver was having a 'happy' nap while we were in such a desperate situation. We noticed that the bus stopped many times during the journey – sometimes the driver would sleep, sometimes he would do some exercise, while at other times he would take a shower. Besides, if he stopped for tea, it would take half an hour. Probably the driver was following the Arabic proverb, which says, 'Only devils hurry'. I noticed that Dipu was getting increasingly impatient. He just couldn't tolerate delay, but the driver was not Salman or Kennedy that he would say *taratari* 'quick' and he would oblige. I felt I had a duty to console my dear friend. In our previous trip whenever we had been upset about something Mushtaq would give a lovely smile and cheer us up with an interesting story or say famous quotes from Arabic, Persian, Urdu or Sanskrit. We didn't have any alternative to Mushtaq during that trip, so who would play that role? Suddenly, I remembered a famous Persian quote, so expecting to be as successful as Mushtaq, I told Dipu:

“Don’t worry, there is a proverb in Persian – *der ayad durast ayad*, which means whatever comes steadily is good. If we follow that it is not that bad to reach Kathmandu a bit late, what do you think?”

Dipu said nothing, as if he had lost the power to speak. He just looked at me and I knew what happened. My quest to cheer him up failed miserably; rather it worked the opposite. I just couldn’t get it. If Mushtaq said something everyone would burst into laughter, but if I tried the same it would have the opposite effect. Did that mean I couldn’t follow the proper ‘grammar’ of giving quotes?

Our marathon bus journey finally came to an end at 1 pm the next day, which means it took us 21 hours to reach Kathmandu – ‘only’ three hours later than schedule. Our next destination was Lalitpur where Dipu’s great-uncle lived. We took an auto rickshaw. These auto rickshaw drivers are very good at exploiting newcomers in a tourist city like Kathmandu. He charged us more than double, which led us to the resolution that we would never take an auto rickshaw during our stay in Nepal. There is a saying in Bengali, which means that if you are cheated once then it is the fault of the cheat, but if you are cheated again, then it is your own fault. Hence, we decided to walk or take the bus, but not allow those cheats to trick us any more.

It wasn’t difficult to find the house. Dipu’s great-uncle had gone to Bangladesh for the Puja holidays, so his housekeeper Krishna was alone in the house. He had been informed that we would come; we also brought a letter for the landlord, so there was no problem.

It was a nice little house with two bedrooms, a large living room and a kitchen. We liked it very much. We also liked Krishna at our first meeting. Around 20/22 years old, he was a very active young man with an everlasting smile. After a nightmare of a journey of 21 hours, it was then we realized for the first time that we were in the Nepali capital Kathmandu.

Legendary Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali confessed that he was in a dilemma while writing his travelogue on Afghanistan whether to include the historical background of the country or not. I was also in a similar dilemma. After much consideration I decided that a travelogue on Nepal would be incomplete without at least a short historical account of the country.

The ancient history of Nepal is not very clear. Emperor Ashoka came to Nepal in 250 BC the evidence of which can be found in some temples in the city of Patan near Kathmandu. The next part of recorded history can be found from the 4<sup>th</sup> century when King Varsha Dev ruled Nepal after whom his son Mana Dev became the king. Nepal expanded during the reign of Mana Dev’s son Mahi Dev and his grandson Shiva Dev. Shiva Dev’s daughter married Anshu Varma (595 – 640) who later became the king. It is known from ancient writings on the wall of temples that Anshu Varma was a brave warrior.

The Dev family ruled Nepal until the thirteenth century after which the ‘Malla’ family took over the reign. The first Malla king was Ari Dev followed by Abhay Dev, Jay

Dev, Jay Sthiti Malla, Jyoti Malla and Yoksha Malla. Yoksha Malla had three sons and all of them desired to be the king, so Nepal was divided into three states – Patan, Votgaon and Kathmandu with three brothers in charge of the three states. The last of the Malla family Jay Prakash took over in 1732.

Until then the Gurkhas lived in Nepal as ordinary citizens. During the reign of Jay Prakash the Gurkha king Prithvi Narayan, who was from Rajput ancestry, led a revolt against the Malla king. In 1756 he attacked Patan and Votgaon. He first captured Patan; it was then followed by Votgaon; and finally Kathmandu came under the control of Gurkhas. Prithvi Narayan united the three Nepali states into one and declared himself the king of united Nepal. He added the 'Shah' title to his name. When Prithvi Narayan Shah died, his son Rana Bahadur Shah was a minor, so Rana's uncle Bahadur Shah ruled the country as the guardian of the minor king. Later Rana Bahadur Shah took over the full control of the country and imprisoned his uncle.

Rana Bahadur's first wife Tripura had no son, so the king married again. However, it was illegal under Nepali law for a king from a Kshatriyan family to marry a Brahmin girl. He had a son from his second wife who later became the king, but people's revolt resulted in the king fleeing into exile with his wife. As the king fled the country, his son Girvan Yudha became the king at a minor age, so the country was mainly run by Vim Bahadur Sher Thapa. This Thapa family ruled Nepal as its Prime Minister for a long time. After the death of Girvan Yudha, his son Rajendra Bri Bikram Shah became the king of Nepal who appointed Jung Bahadur Thapa as the Prime Minister and handed over the executive power of the country to him making himself inactive in the running of the country. In 1857 Prime Minister Jung Bahadur sent three thousand Nepali soldiers to India to help the British control the Sepoy Mutiny, who gave Nepal the Terai area in the India-Nepal border as a token of gratitude. Later, the Nepalese also helped the British during the Second World War.

When king Rajendra's son Troilakka Bikram Shah became the king, a conflict developed between the king and the Prime Minister Maharaja Chandra Shyam Sher because the latter made some revolutionary changes among which the famous were banning of the Satidah system and the abolition of the slavery system.

It was 1940. The king of Nepal was Tribhuban. During that time the people revolted against the Prime Minister and blamed the king for colluding with him. The king handled the crisis skillfully and for the first time in Nepal, the Prime Minister voluntarily resigned to create history. The king then realized that he had no power to run the country. He once said with regret, "I am only a name – nothing else – Nepal is run by the Rana family – I am just a prisoner who is closed behind five doors – there are guards outside these doors – no they are not there to save me, but to ensure that I don't run away."

The king's realization ultimately led to the change in the constitution. A significant incident happened on 6 November 1950. That day the royal family, led by King Tribhuban went out for hunting in the mountains. The king took the opportunity and entered into the nearest Indian embassy. The Nepali Prime Minister immediately surrounded the embassy, but could not stop the king to safely flee to India due to



threat from India and pressure from the international community. The king mobilized the rebels from India and defeated the Ranas and took over full control of Nepal through direct help from India.

King Tribhuban died on 13 March 1955 after which his son Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah and later Mahendra's son Birendra Bir Bikram Shah ruled the country. In June 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra assassinated 9 members of the royal family, including King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, before shooting himself. After this tragic incident King Birendra's brother Gyanendra became the King. In a few years popular support for the monarchy began to wane, but King Gyanendra tried to consolidate his power by dismissing the democratic government and assuming full executive powers in 2004, and declared a "state of emergency" to quash the revolution. However, in April 2006 the king was forced to reinstate the parliament. In December 2007 almost all the members of the parliament agreed to abolish the monarchy and changed Nepal into a Federal Republic. In the elections held on 10 April 2008, the Maoists secured a simple majority, with the prospect of forming a government to rule the proposed 'Republic of Nepal'. In June that year, Gyanendra, the last king of Nepal left the place.

By the time we finished our showers and freshened ourselves from the dreadful journey we became extremely hungry. To our pleasant surprise we found that Krishna had already got our food ready. Krishna had magic in his hand and we realized that though young in age, he was indeed a skilful chef.

Dipu's great-uncle would come two days later, so it was best to visit Pokhara in the meantime. Pokhara is the most beautiful place in Nepal, and it is said that one cannot claim that he/she has visited Nepal until one visits Pokhara. The dreadful journey in the previous two days demanded some rest, but that was a highly unlikely option with Dipu's *taratari* battering through the ears. He was right though, because we would struggle if we couldn't get bus tickets for the next day's travel to Pokhara. We started walking towards the central bus terminal in Kathmandu, which was four kilometres from the house. We stuck to our resolution the earlier day that we would not travel by auto rickshaw in Kathmandu. We lost the way on our way back, so we walked a couple of kilometres extra. My tired legs could take no more when we reached home. Thanks to Krishna, dinner was ready in 15 minutes after which we all went into deep sleep.

Again Kanchenjunga appeared in my dream – more clear, more beautiful.

“Every night in my dreams  
I see you. I feel you.  
That is how I know you go on.  
Far across the distance  
And spaces between us  
You have come to show you go on.  
Near, far, wherever you are  
I believe that the heart does go on  
Once more you open the door

And you're here in my heart  
And my heart will go on and on”

I realized why she asked me not to say goodbye. Our love story was not to end so soon! Despite the distance between us, she remained in my heart as my beloved.

## Chapter 5

### The Stunning Annapurna Range

Our bus to Pokhara was at 7 next morning, so at half past five Dipu went ballistic finding both me and Kennedy asleep. Kennedy woke up as soon as he heard the infamous *taratari*, but it was not easy for Dipu to get me out of bed. Kennedy too joined Dipu in their mission to pierce through my defense. I finally had to give in to their constant pressure and reluctantly woke up from the wonderful experience of romancing with my beloved in my dream. Dipu seemed quite annoyed at my stubbornness while Kennedy jokingly asked if I was dreaming Kanchenjunga. I just smiled mysteriously, which left both of them perplexed.

The 7 o'clock bus left at 7.30. We met five Bangladeshi students on the bus. Four of them were medical students from medical colleges outside Dhaka. They were thrilled to know that Dipu was a doctor. They seemed to be quite fun-loving and soon joined us in our 'tour anthems'. Kennedy found his singing form back after losing it for a brief period due to the bitter experience of the journey to Kathmandu. We then played a popular singing game in South Asia called 'Antakshari'. The game is played with one singer singing two complete lines of a song and then s/he may stop at the end of those or following lines. The last letter of the last word sung is then used by the next singer to sing another song, starting with that letter. The winner or winning team is decided by a process of elimination. The person or team that cannot come up with a song with the right consonant is eliminated if their opponents can produce such a song. The songs we sang were multilingual – Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, English, so it was difficult to win. The game ended in a stalemate – but we all had great fun and didn't even realize when we reached Pokhara.

Our new friends from Bangladesh decided to stay in the same hotel with us and we agreed to move around Pokhara together. We went together to Fewa Lake in the afternoon where we split into our own groups. We three took a boat to enjoy the beauty of the lake. Kennedy volunteered to row the boat as he had experience of rowing in Dhaka. He said that he had learnt this skill after a girl taunted her. It is important for the readers to know that Kennedy had a 'lady killer' image. Girls loved to come near him, but Kennedy avoided mixing with them much. However, according to Dipu, one girl appeared to have broken through. When asked, Kennedy only smiled and said that it was still at the stage of infatuation rather than anything serious.

We were in the middle of the lake with clear blue water beneath and mountains around. The sun was preparing to set amidst the mountains in the west. A wonderful feeling of tranquility engulfed us with only the sound of Kennedy's rowing audible. I felt I was sailing to the 'never never land' with Christopher Cross:

"Sailing

Takes me away

To where I've always heard it could be

Just a dream and the wind to carry me  
And soon I will be free”

Kennedy almost snatched the song from me. Then he continued singing songs in Bengali, English and Hindi one after another. Like several other occasions on the trip, I became emotional and went back to my childhood when we used to go to our village home in Bangladesh in a boat. I haven’t been to our village home many times, but the sweet memories of the journey through the river Meghna are still vivid. Childhood memories are such that they keep reminding us how wonderful those days were – free from all complexities in this cruel world. I remembered those days when we used to make paper boats and play with them after our yards used to be waterlogged due to heavy rain. That is why this song of Jagjit Singh is so favourite to me:

*ye daulat bhi lelo, ye shohrat bhi lelo  
bhale chinlo mujhse meri jawani  
magar mujhko lotado bacpan ki sawan  
wo kagazki kashti wo barishka pani*

“Take away my wealth, youth and fame  
I want back my childhood  
The paper boats in rain”

I also remembered another favourite song of mine from my all time favourite band Carpenters:

“When I was young I’d listened to the radio  
Waitin’ for my favorite songs  
When they played I’d sing along  
It made me smile  
Those were such happy times and not so long ago  
How I wondered where they’d gone  
But they’re back again  
Just like a long lost friend  
All the songs I loved so well  
Every sha-la-la-la Every wo-wo-wo, still shines  
Every shing-a-ling-a-ling That they’re starting to sing’s, so fine  
When they get to the part where he’s breakin’ her heart  
It can really make me cry  
Just like before  
It’s yesterday once more”

How wonderful our childhood was! Why have I grown up? Why don’t I feel like playing in the rain? Why don’t I play with paper boats any more? Why can’t I sleep on my mother’s lap listening to lullabies? Why have I left my parents and come so far away? Why?

There was a small temple in a small island in the middle of the lake. When we returned to our boat after visiting the temple it was night. It was a nice moonlit night,

which created a blissful atmosphere as we slowly went back to the land. We had no intention to return to our hotel leaving this place, so we found a nice place to sit. With the moon above us and the lake in front, we talked about a lot of things, shared a lot of our sweet memories, discussed our future plans and reflected on the wonderful trip we had had until then. We all hoped that we would continue to enjoy in the following days. We stayed there till late before returning to hotel.

We had heard that a number of Himalayan peaks could be seen in Pokhara, which is a rare sight anywhere in the world. It is called the 'Annapurna Mountain Range'. Kennedy was very keen to be the first one amongst us to see the range, so he went to the roof of the hotel after the morning prayer while Dipu and I went back to sleep. At around 7 am, Kennedy came to the room literally shouting. He informed us about the sight beyond our dreams on the roof. This was too tempting to resist, so we rushed to the roof even without washing our faces. What could be seen was much more than anyone could bargain for. A huge range of Himalayan peaks were right in front of us. They appeared so near that it seemed we could touch them if we stretched our hands. Kennedy had brought a pamphlet with information about the peaks:

*Annapurna Range* includes 8,091 metres (26,545 ft) Annapurna I and thirteen additional peaks over 7,000 m (22,970 ft) and 16 more over 6,000 m (19,690 ft). This section is a 55 km (34 miles)-long massif. *Annapurna* is a Sanskrit name meaning 'Goddess of the Harvests'. The Annapurna Range was in the northern side of Pokhara city with four major peaks. The one on the right was called *Dhabalgiri*, then *Annapurna I*; the one on the left was *Nilgiri*; and the one between *Nilgiri* and *Annapurna I* was called *Machapuchare* or 'Fish Tail'. *Macha* in Nepali means 'fish' and *puchare* means 'tail'. It is named so because it looks like a fish tail.

The famous Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chatterjee once described the beauty of cyclone in the sea saying, "O Lord, you have given me these eyes and you have made them worth today!" My feelings echoed with Saratchandra as I looked at the beauty completely dumbfounded. Astonishing! Amazing! Astounding! Fantastic! No adjective was good enough to describe the splendour our eyes could behold. Kanchenjunga made me overwhelmed with emotion, but can Annapurna range be further behind? The massifs were shining so brightly in sunshine! The small clouds around them seemed like smoke coming out of them. We looked at them with open eyes, then with binoculars. We took photos one after another, yet our eyes or our hearts didn't feel contented. Now that I am writing this – do I feel I could describe it properly for my readers? I don't think so. Will I feel complete when you will read this? Not at all! I don't think I can do justice describing that beauty, nor will my heart ever feel fulfilled, no matter how many times I see it. It is like a short story – it never ends even after the ending.

The Pokhara city sightseeing bus started late, at 10 am. The first destination was *Bindubashini Temple*. Our guide said that the deity in the temple was brought here from Mirzapur (in India) by King Mahendra. He later wanted to move it, but failed to do so; hence a temple was built here. He also said that there was a 300 year-old tortoise living there. However, most of what he said about the temple and other places

are best taken as legends rather than anything historical. No literature verified these claims.

We next went to *Mahendra Cave*, which was a very old cave claimed to be 300 years old. Again, this could not be independently verified. It was the first time I entered into a cave. It was mostly dark, though there were lights in some places. We could feel drops of water falling on us while walking through the cave. The guide said that statues of deities and snakes randomly appear through the walls of the cave. Of course we didn't believe him, yet the whole environment was quite scary. It seemed like a snake would suddenly come out and ask in Nepali *tapai lai kasto cha?* 'How are you sir?' Or a red-tongue creepy statue of the goddess *Kali* would greet us with her typically angry look. Normally I am not quite brave, but still I didn't feel comfortable at all in that cave. I realised that my two friends were not having fun either, so we came out of the cave as soon as we could.

We then went to see *Seti Garj*. The word *garj* means loud noise, which is *gorjon* in Bengali referring to the noise of a turbulent sea. The legend goes that two rivers flow from the '*machapuchara*' peak – one white and the other red. What is true though is that there was a river below, which had been raised to a much higher level by the British to facilitate farming. We could see both the original river and the one that had been raised. The original river was full of current and was very noisy. That is why it had been named as *garj*.

The last destination before the lunch break was 'Davis Fall', which is called *Patale Sang* in Nepali. Our guide was never short of stories and legends about each place, so he had one for this waterfall as well: long time ago three western tourists came here. One of them was a lady called 'Davis', who slipped and fell into the waterfall and died. Since then the fall is called 'Davis fall'. We were not sure how far this story was true, but one of our new Bangladeshi friends made everyone laugh by asking in Hindi 'Was Davis married?'

It was a very big waterfall. The source of the clear water goes winding up into the mountains. The interesting aspect of this is no one knows what the real source of waterfalls is. We also don't know where the flow ends. I remembered a beautiful Bengali song that talks about this:

*paharer pash die cole geche jojodhara  
ami tar janina kono thikana  
mone hoy hoytoba mishe geche obosheshe  
jekhane nil nilimar shimana*

“Waterfalls beside the mountains  
I don't know their destination  
Probably they have finally disappeared  
Into the blue skies far unseen”

I was contemplating the source and destination of the waterfall when a small incident happened. One of our new friend's camera cover fell into the water. It slipped out of

his hand and fell into the lower level of the water near us while he was taking photos with his friends. The cover was stuck with something and seemed almost within reach. It was an expensive cover of an expensive camera, so he wasn't ready to give up so easily. He tried his best to get it, even risking his life. Yet he couldn't catch hold of it. At one stage he was about to fall when one of his friends saved him from facing the same fate as that of Davis.

After lunch back in our hotel, we started for the second part of our Pokhara sightseeing. The biggest Buddhist monastery in Pokhara was the first destination. These monasteries are generally built at very high places. There were 303 stairs to climb. We counted while going up the steep stairs. When we eventually reached the top, we almost lost our breath. The whole Pokhara city could be seen from the monastery. We could have an aerial view of the city through our binoculars. There were many Buddhist monks in the monastery, from 5-year-old children to 80-year-old veteran all wearing maroon dress. They lead a very difficult life. They are never sexually active; they never eat any meat; their only way of life is to call people towards Buddhism. I know that many people survive without meat, but sexuality is a natural human desire. Resisting this is like revolting against one's own body. I wonder how they survive living like this. Hindu and Christian priests also have similar lifestyles. With due respect to all these religions, I find Islamic tradition more natural, which does not create any hierarchy between religious and normal people, neither does it prevent anyone from doing anything that is a legitimate normal human act.

The final place to visit in Pokhara was Begnas Lake – two kilometres away from the city. The lake was two kilometres long and one and a half kilometres wide. Once again we found ourselves in a boat with Kennedy at the helm. This time we had an elderly Indian couple joining us in the boat. They were from Rachi, a city in the northern state of Bihar. The gentleman was in his sixties and his wife in her fifties. They were a very nice couple who also seemed to be enjoying our company, particularly our songs. Kennedy was in full form that day. After our 'tour anthems', he sang a beautiful romantic Hindi song by Jagjit Singh:

*na umre ki sima ho  
na janmo ka ho bandhan  
jab pyar kare koi  
to dekhe keval man  
nai rit cala kar tum  
ye rit amar kar do  
hoto pe chulo tum  
mere git amar kar do*

“No age limit, no bond of birth  
Love only knows heart  
Let's start a new tradition  
And make it immortal  
Please touch my lips  
And make my songs immortal”

Kennedy was really in great touch. Some divine blessing had probably made his love for songs immortal. He sang non-stop one song after another. There was no fatigue at all. As a roller skater, merely singing some songs were not enough to exhaust him. The open atmosphere was just the icing on the cake for him. People from other boats looked at us with surprise. One Indian gentleman from another boat couldn't resist himself from saying in Hindi, *bhaisab, apko to Mumbai jana caiyetha, ap Nepal kayse aa gaya?* "Brother, you should have been in Mumbai (referring to the Bollywood film industry). How come you are in Nepal?"



## Chapter 6

### Quest for Everest

We returned to the hotel in the evening. Our return bus to Kathmandu was at 8.30 pm. We had already vacated the hotel room in the morning, so we had to wait in the hotel lobby until the bus arrived. There we met two Bengali gentlemen from Kolkata. I remember the name of one of them – Mr S Bhar, an assistant registrar at the Kolkata High Court. They came to Nepal for trekking. Trekking in Nepal is very popular. We saw many people from around the world coming to Nepal for trekking with Pokhara one of the most attractive destinations. Trekking in Annapurna region provides an introductory trek for regular hillwalkers, which is purposefully designed to cater for trekking holidaymakers. The beautiful landscape of terraced fields along the glaciers of the Himalayas is truly a picturesque as well as a challenging experience. Mr Bhar and his friend were heading for a seven-day thrilling experience to the base camp of *Machapuchare*. Not only that, they were also making it a pilgrimage to Muktinath, a sacred place for both Hindus and Buddhists.

We had been to the place where lots of multinational tourists were camping in tents the previous evening. There were lots of shops beside the Fewa Lake selling trekking equipment. We saw many tourists enjoying campfire while some of them could be seen keenly going through the trekking map. Our visit the previous evening was out of sheer curiosity, but talking to these two gentlemen almost double our age made us much more interested in it. As soon as we parted with Mr Bhar and his friend, Dipu announced that he would go for trekking the next year with Kennedy. No one knows Dipu better than I, and I was in no doubt that he would forget this temporary fascination in a couple of days. It is needless to say that I was right.

The bus for Kathmandu left at 9 pm. My two friends didn't take long to go to sleep, but I realised that I would have to stay up all night. I just can't sleep in buses. Whenever I stay up all night I remember my best friend Abid. He was contemporary to Dipu in the same medical college. He used to stay in the medical hostel as his family lived outside Dhaka. Whenever I went to Bangladesh on holidays, Abid would make my house his temporary residence. In fact I spent so much time with my friends in Bangladesh that my mother would complain that I went home only for my friends, not for her. Abid and I would often spend the whole night chatting and sleep after the morning prayer. Abid had some unique habits of surprising people. I can never forget the surprise he gave me once. One day, I came back to my room in Aligarh from lecture, and found a large envelope in front of my door. When I opened it, I found a huge roll of paper beautifully decorated with a small note saying, "A little surprise for you – Abid". I started opening the roll, but struggled to handle it alone. I asked a friend next to my room for help. After opening it in full, I measured it – it was a staggering 27 feet long! It took me more than five hours to read the whole letter – a 'little' surprise indeed. However, Abid proved his worth as a true friend during the publication of my first book, a Bengali book on cricket named *Bishwer Shera Cricket O Cricketer* "World's best Cricket and Cricketers". Immediately after finishing the manuscript I left it with him and went back to Aligarh. As my publisher (this was one of many other talents he had), Abid worked day and night to complete the book

including the horrendous task of proofreading, which was my responsibility as an author. It is difficult to find such selfless friend in this selfish world.

We reached Kathmandu at 5 next morning. Dipu's great-uncle Dr Shamsul Islam had returned to Kathmandu by then, so we had the opportunity to meet him for the first time. He was working at the WHO office in Kathmandu as its Public Relations Officer. We came to know more about him while having breakfast. In his sixties, Dr Islam seemed a very humble man with a wise head on his shoulders. He had travelled to many countries due to his job and gained experiences of varied cultures and civilizations. Speaking eloquently he kept us spellbound through his description of interesting anecdotes including a fascinating story of his first travel by the Concord aircraft.

We wanted to continue listening to Dr Islam's stories, but Dipu's *taratari* reminded us that we were scheduled to go to Nagarkot that day. The main purpose of visiting Nagarkot was to view Mount Everest. It would be pointless to leave Nepal without at least viewing the highest peak in the world. Hence, in spite of tired bodies, we had to rush to the bus stand for Bhaktapur. It is a city in the Bhaktapur district, which also includes Nagarkot. Bhaktapur was once the capital of Nepal during the Malla Kingdom until the second half of the 15th century. It is now listed as a World Heritage by UNESCO for its rich culture, temples, and wood, metal and stone artwork. Lots of public buses were heading towards Bhaktapur, but all were full. As it was a short journey, we decided to travel standing on the first available bus rather than waiting for seats in later buses. It took us half an hour to reach Bhaktapur.

Reaching Bhaktapur, we immediately inquired for transport to Nagarkot. To our utter surprise, we were told that only two public buses went there in a day from Bhaktapur. It was 10 am and the next bus was due at 1.30. As we had planned to return to Kathmandu the same day, we were not ready to wait that long. On the other hand our pockets informed that taking a taxi would be difficult to afford. While we were contemplating what to do at the Taxi stand, an English gentleman named Daniel came to our rescue and offered to pay one third of the taxi fare. We gladly accepted the offer. Daniel was from Sheffield. Aged 30/32, he was working in an oil company in Egypt. He was a very amiable person and was a keen follower of sports. As a sports lover myself, I talked to him a lot about world and club football as well as international cricket. While speaking to Daniel, we also enjoyed the scenic drive through tiny villages along meandering mountain roads.

We reached Nagarkot at 11.30. Nagarkot is located 32 km north east of Kathmandu. Also known as 'Candle City' as most people depended on candles after dark, it is famous for its panoramic Himalayan views. We heard that the Himalayan peaks at sunrise are a magnificent sight to behold. However, we had no plans to stay there overnight – a decision I regret till this day. It remains as one of my many unfulfilled travel wishes. Surrounded by thickly forested hills of pine trees, Nagarkot seemed to be a rustic resort with the main attraction being the hilltop that offered great views of the Himalayas. A breathtaking mountain scenery could be seen from there in a huge range of Himalayan peaks. The range was not as near as that in Pokhara, but was much bigger. The other Himalayan peaks that can be seen from there include

Manaslu, Ganesh, Langtang, dorje Lakpa, sisa pagma, Choyu, Gauri Shankar, etc. We heard that Mt Everest was quite far and it had to be a crystal clear day to view it from there. We felt optimistic because it was a crystal clear day, so we opened a map of the Himalayan peaks that could be seen from the hilltop. Our ‘operation Everest search’ took a few moments before we could ultimately locate the Everest. We were overwhelmed by a thrilling sense of success. Mount Everest was in front of our eyes!

Archaeologists say that Mount Everest was formed about 60 million years ago. Its height is now measured as 29,035 ft (8850m) as it was found to be 6 ft higher in 1999. It is called *Sagarmatha* in Nepali, which means ‘goddess of the sky’. It is named ‘Everest’ after Sir George Everest, the British surveyor-general of India, who was the first person to record the height and location of this peak in 1865.

It took all three of us a few moments to realise where we were and what we were beholding. We were sitting on one corner of the 1,970 metre high hilltop facing the Himalayan range with clear blue sky above us. Clusters of clouds were going past. We could feel the soft romantic touch of clouds in our bodies. Dipu asked Kennedy to sing a song. He sang a couple of songs, but couldn’t satisfy Dipu. I also realised that something was missing in Kennedy’s songs that day. Probably he wasn’t able to find an appropriate song in that situation. I thought of trying my luck. Most of my efforts to impress in that tour had been miserable failures. However, this time I was hundred percent successful as I remembered the perfect song for the moment – a beautiful romantic song by the legendary Bengali singer Manna Dey:

*jodi himaloy alpser shomosto jomat borof  
ekdin goleo jay, tobuo tumi amar  
jodi naegra jolopropat ekdin  
shaharar moto hoyeo jay, tobuo tumi amar*

“The Himalayan ice can melt, so can the Alps  
But you will remain mine  
Dry as Sahara can be the Niagara Falls  
Yet, you will remain mine”

The last stanza of the song is amazing:

*jodi prithibike dhongsho korte ekdin  
tritio mohajuddho badhe  
jodi nibheo jay konodin  
jototuku alo ache, oi shurjo ar chade  
jodi siberiar tushare kokhono  
shobuj foshol foleo jay, tobuo tumi amar*

“If the Third World War begins  
And the whole world ends  
If the sun and the moon  
Bring no light but gloom  
If green grass appears

At the Siberian Ice  
Yet you will remain mine”

I could never claim that I sing well. I have always been culturally active, but was never a successful singer. All I could do is sing among the chorus. It seemed that Manna Dey himself possessed me on that day in Nagarkot and enabled me to sing. Otherwise how could I sing so well? I couldn't believe my own ears! Dipu and Kennedy were staring at me completely perplexed. They were probably wondering if it was really me or a ghost in disguise. When they finally recovered from the initial shock, they were full of praise. I accepted the first ever admiration of my singing skills as humbly as I could. Who doesn't like to be praised?

We were looking at Everest almost uninterrupted, particularly through the binoculars. There were clouds around the peak suggesting that *Sagarmatha* was about to be veiled in white cover. My unsettled mind once again left the present and went backwards a few decades.

29 May 1953 was a bright sunny day. Two valiant young men were climbing their last few metres to the unconquered summit of the world. A white man from New Zealand named Edmund Hillary and his Nepalese *Sherpa* (a term used to refer to local people, typically men, who are employed as guides for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas) Tenzing Norgay. Both of them were ecstatic. They were about to create history. They had gone through lots of struggle and hardship to come so far. A lot of sleepless nights had to be endured to achieve this. They were about to achieve that success that had eluded many expeditors before them. Heavy snowfall, slippery ice, sky-high altitude – nothing could deter them from their resolve.

11.30 am. Mount Everest conceded defeat for the first time as Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit and hoisted their flag. Many people had lost their lives trying to defeat this peak. Finally, two young men were able to bring glory to human being's indomitable desire to conquer the unconquered.

Mount Everest got lost in the clouds as we headed back to Kathmandu. How weird and wonderful this world is! It has deep-blue oceans as well as rock-solid mountains. But above all, human beings have the ability to conquer them both. Is there any limit to the beauty of nature? If the beauty of this world has no limit, then how can there be any limit to the power of the One who created it? He is Omnipotent, and his mercy is unlimited:

*jodi sagorer jolke kali kori  
ar gacher patake kori khata  
ar eke eke likhe jai mohima tomar  
tobu roibena ektio pata*

“Use all the trees as paper  
And ocean water as ink  
Then write His mercy one by one  
Yet no pages will remain blank”

We were lucky to have seen the Everest despite our timing not being perfect. We chose this time as we had no other option. The best time to view Everest is to come to Nagarkot in late afternoon. You can witness the sunset amidst the beauty of the Himalayas, then spend a tranquil night in the 'Candle City' before waking up for sunrise to behold the ultimate wonder of sunrise at Everest. With fewer clouds in the morning, the Himalayan view is much clearer. I had to sacrifice enjoying that beauty on that tour, but I still cherish the desire to go back to Nagarkot to witness this splendour. When that will happen only God knows.

## Chapter 7

### Kathmandu & the Rajbhandari Family

After another hectic journey we returned to Kathmandu in the Evening. We were so tired that there was no question of even thinking about going anywhere. Besides, we had enough to look forward to in Dipu's great-uncle's house in terms of Dr Islam's interesting stories and Krishna's delicious cooking. Krishna had cooked chicken and vegetable that day. The way we ate, anyone would doubt whether we had eaten anything for a few days.

The next day was 29<sup>th</sup> October. We had decided to spend the last two days of our Nepal trip in Kathmandu before our return journey to Shiliguri on the 31<sup>st</sup>. We were yet to see the capital of Nepal in spite of being there for four days. There was another attraction. Dipu had a couple of former classmates from Nepal who lived in Kathmandu. One of them Matrika was in Chennai (in India) that time for his father's treatment. The second person was Bandana who was doing her internship at Bir Hospital in Kathmandu. We decided (or better said Dipu made us decide) that we would meet her first before going anywhere else.

Bir Hospital was established in 1889 and is the oldest and one of the busiest hospitals in Nepal. It is located at Parade Square, near the Sundara bus stand in Central Kathmandu. We went there to meet Bandana. Dipu dressed very smartly that day. It could be easily understood why when we met Dr Bandana Rajbhandari at the Gastroenterology department of Bir Hospital. She looked very impressive in her red *salwar kameez* with a white medical apron over it. Her complexion was fair like most Nepalese women with an 'un-Nepali' sharp nose that increased her beauty considerably. Overall, she was pretty enough to make any young man interested. I had heard a lot about Bandana from Dipu. She was famous in Sir Salimullah Medical College in Dhaka for three reasons – firstly, for her prettiness, secondly for her amiable behaviour, and thirdly for being the top student in her class. According to Dipu, she was the most famous student of the 14<sup>th</sup> batch of his medical college.

Bandana first took us around the hospital. It was a very modern hospital, which impressed Dipu a lot. Dipu was walking along side Bandana with Kennedy and me behind them. Naturally we were not as excited as Dipu. Bandana probably realized that and asked Dipu several times, "I hope your friends are not getting bored".

Bandana had told Dipu when we first met her that she had a surprise for him. We came to know about it a bit later. She introduced us to her fiancé Dr Sabin Joshi. The wedding was to take place in a couple of months. Dr Joshi completed his Bachelor of Medicine from Bahawalpur in Pakistan. We found him a very pleasant man. With equally good looks Sabin was a perfect match for Bandana and they looked a 'made for each other' couple.

Dipu was in a very good mood after meeting Bandana. He was quite animated cracking jokes and reminiscing their wonderful time together as classmates in Dhaka.

He was clever enough not to disclose his feelings what happened inside him after meeting Dr Joshi. We had some tea in the hospital cafeteria when Bandana invited us all for lunch at her house the next day. She opened a map and showed us the way to her house. She repeatedly reminded us to reach there at 1 pm sharp, as her father was very particular about time. Dipu replied with a smile, “If the house is standing, we’ll definitely be there on time”.

Dipu and Bandana were close friends during their student life, which was proved by Bandana when she immediately recognized Dipu’s voice when Dipu phoned her in Kathmandu. They had not had any communication for a while, nor was there much telephone conversation in Dhaka. The way Dipu was talking to her vindicated this to a large extent. However, it is not wise for anyone to suggest anything else about their relationship. They were classmates for more than five years, so it is natural to develop close friendship. There was nothing beyond friendship between them – at least that is what Dipu wanted us to believe, which we did (did he leave us any other option?). I hope the readers will believe the same. However, my mind was wondering whether there was anything to stop Dipu from developing any other relationship if Bandana was not from a different religion and a different country.

It was Friday, so we had to rush for the Friday prayers. Before leaving we took some photos with Bandana and her fiancé. We hadn’t seen any mosque after reaching Nepal. Sabin told us where we could find one. We actually found two mosques in Darbar Marg in Kathmandu. We went to the bigger one where the congregation was quite large. We didn’t know there were so many Muslims in Nepal. We were even more surprised when the Imam was giving the sermon in Urdu. I had witnessed similar situation in South India. People there can hardly speak the national language Hindi, but Muslims are well conversant in Urdu. I realized that Urdu had really developed as the lingua franca of the Muslims in the region except in Bangladesh. Interestingly and probably due to historical reasons, it is a language rarely spoken by Bangladeshi Muslims. However, thanks to the emergence of satellite television and the influence of Bollywood cinema, many urban Bangladeshis understand Hindi quite well.

We went out for some shopping in the evening. We had heard that jeans and trainers were quite cheap in Nepal. I also wanted to buy a Nepali cap. Eventually, I ended up buying only the cap, as jeans in that market were very expensive and trainers even more so. Dipu bought a Pashmina shawl for his mother. These shawls are made from cashmere fibre. The wool is of Pashmina goat – a special breed of goat in the Himalayas in Nepal, Pakistan and India. Going back home, we enjoyed another delicious meal from Krishna before going to bed.

It was not new that I found it difficult to sleep. The fact that I was missing some classes had been bothering me for a while. I was wondering how annoyed my teachers would be for missing my postgraduate classes for a week. After good results at undergraduate level, the expectations of my teachers increased so much that I was struggling to cope with it. They loved me dearly and it seemed that their concern about my career was more than my own.

Aligarh Muslim University is my alma mater. It was established by the prominent Muslim philanthropist and educationist Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to facilitate much needed educational development for Muslims in British India. It began as Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College in 1875 and later became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920. It is one of the premier universities in India with more than 30000, students, about 1400 teachers and some 6000 non-teaching staff. There are 12 faculties comprising a wide spectrum of academic disciplines and 18 halls of residence. The University offers 325 courses. It also has an engineering college, a medical college, a dental college, an institute of ophthalmology and a food craft institute as well as two higher secondary colleges and four schools. The University has a campus spread over 467.6 hectares of land. Students from all over the world come here to study. Aligarh alumni are well established around the world.

I had a brilliant time there as a student. There is wonderful academic environment with high quality teaching and a huge library, which remains open 24 hours a day. Besides, each department has its own seminar library. Some departments are well-renowned centres for academic excellence, particularly the History department. My own department, Linguistics, has a high reputation with some academics being visiting professors at leading world universities like Cornell University, USA. Beside academic excellence, the university is well equipped with extra-curricular and sports activities including its own football and cricket stadiums.

There is nice Muslim environment maintained in the university, though some funny traditions also exist. One of them stands out as unique. There is an unwritten tradition that male students will not use an umbrella. The tradition goes back over a century when only children of *Nawabs* used to study there. ‘Nawab’ is an honorific title for male Muslim rulers of princely states in South Asia – a Muslim equivalent of Hindu rulers *Maharaja*. Sons of *Nawabs*, who used to study in Aligarh, were also accompanied by their servants who would hold the umbrellas for them when they moved about. The *Nawab* influence has long diminished, but the strange tradition still exists. While female students have no problem using umbrellas, you will not find males using them. Although there is no official university policy about it, but students maintain it religiously. How many times I had been soaked in rain while studying there I can’t remember.

One of the most useful experiences I had in Aligarh was learning to endure hardship. The summer in northern India is unbearably hot with temperature rising near 50 degrees centigrade. The average temperature in May and June is 45 degrees. People don’t have much difficulty in the Middle East with similar heat, because they have access to air-conditioning everywhere. However, in Aligarh we were not privileged enough to have that luxury. All we could afford was an evaporative cooler, but constant load shedding meant that it would be of little use. Load shedding refers to the rationing of the available electricity to the customers when the demand for electrical power is more than its generating capacity. It is a very common thing in South Asia where non-stop electricity supply is almost unheard of, particularly in the summer when the demand is high. In Aligarh there used to be four to five hours’ load shedding every day. I remember the extreme difficulty I faced in Aligarh the very first year when I suffered from cholera and typhoid in the space of three weeks. We used to



have our exams during this extreme weather. However, looking back at those days I feel that those testing times have made me strong enough to tackle hardship.

I didn't know how long I was thinking about my university and when I went to sleep. When Dipu literally pulled the quilt from my body to wake me up, I realised that it was time for the morning prayer. Kennedy and I were completely different about one thing. It didn't matter for how long, but I had to have some sleep after the morning prayer while Kennedy just couldn't sleep after waking in the morning. That is why he volunteered to go to the bus stand to purchase tickets for our return journey from Kathmandu. He had had his roller skating kit ready beforehand and went out towards the bus stand after the prayer while Dipu and I went back to sleep. Kennedy returned at 7.30 am with tickets as well as with a beautiful jacket popularly known as 'butterfly jacket'. It looked so beautiful that both Dipu and I decided to buy one each.

The history of the Kathmandu city dates back to centuries. Its ancient name was 'Kantipur'. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the famous 'wooden temple' was built during the reign of the Malla family. The Sanskrit name of the temple was *Kashthamandap*. It was named so because it was built by one giant *kashthakhanda* 'piece of wood' for which it became a tourist attraction since many years. According to some historians the name 'Kathmandu' derived from *Kashthamandap*. Situated 1,350 metres above the sea level the main city area are just over 50 kilometres long. The urban core of the Kathmandu Valley also includes two sister cities: Lalitpur (Patan), which is 5 kilometres to its south and Bhaktapur, which is 12 kilometres to its east. The city is surrounded by glaciers as if a huge army dressed in white had been assigned to protect it.

Our first destination was Pashupatinath Temple. It is one of the most important Hindu temples of Lord Shiva in the world. It is located on the banks of the Bagmati River, which connects Kathmandu with Lalitpur. The temple is listed in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list. We could see a large statue of a cow in front of the temple. Legend says that Lord Shiva once took the form of an antelope and sported unknown in the forest on Bagmati River's east bank.

We next went to see *Singha Darbar* – the Parliament building of Nepal. The huge building consists of 1800 rooms. We had to be contented seeing the building from outside, as there was no possibility to get inside. Thus we walked towards the King's Palace, which was not too far away. We needed official permission to enter the premises, but who would give us the permit? Hence, we had to be satisfied only by viewing it from outside. The palace has now been converted into a museum after the monarchy had been dissolved.

We walked through city, so it was taking long to move around different places. Dipu became quite restless when it was 12.30. He was finding it difficult to concentrate on anything and reminded us that Bandana was probably waiting for us. His heart couldn't bear to give her any pain. We were often irritated by his *taratari*, but this time we were quite happy with the reminder. Kennedy started walking fast while I was looking forward to have lunch with a Nepali Hindu family.

It wasn't difficult to find the house – Bandana's description was as perfect as her appearance. We could see the house from a distance and saw Bandana waiting at the window. Dipu was right; she had been waiting for us. She waved towards us as we approached the house and Dipu waved back. Their relationship was really special. Dipu tried to explain several times why it was so to remove any doubts from our minds. As a foreign student Bandana had to face some difficulties at the beginning. Our dear old Dipu, who was always there for others, helped Bandana overcome her problems. That is how they developed close friendship. I never had any doubts, but I enjoyed bantering with him about it. He was so simple that he thought his reputation might be at stake if I wrote much about their relationship. He even requested me to censor some of the things I wrote in this travelogue. That's not fair, is it? Should he interfere with a writer's independence? I'll leave the readers to judge what is right.

Bandana's family lived in a three-storey house. We were first taken to the living room. A sophisticated taste was evident everywhere. Bandana looked even prettier in her olive-coloured *salwar kameez* with matching scarf. Her modest clothing was really admirable. Soon we were introduced to Bandana's parents, sister and brother-in-law. Everyone seemed very nice. I had heard from Dipu that Bandana's family was very religious and humble. He was absolutely right. Bandana's father Shankar Bahadur Rajbhandari was also a physician. He did his medical degree from Kolkata Medical College in 1955. He was quite happy to know that my uncle also graduated from the same medical college, which is one of the premier medical colleges in the region. With experience of working in Zambia for 10 years, Dr Rajbhandari was working in a radiology clinic near Bir Hospital. He was a man of immense knowledge, which was not only confined to medical science. He spoke very eloquently about different tribal traditions of Nepal.

After a while, Dr and Mrs Rajbhandari went upstairs. Dipu was waiting for that opportunity, as he was not enjoying the discussion about the tribal societies as much as I was. He got back to his form as soon as they left– chatting and joking with Bandana. Bandana asked Dipu if he liked Nepal. Dipu said that Nepal was good, but there was a complaint. He wouldn't tell her what that complaint was in spite of her repeated requests. This was his deliberate attempt to annoy her. Disappointed at Dipu, she asked our opinion. Both Kennedy and I said together, "Nepal is fantastic". She seemed very happy and then asked, "What about the people?"

What should we have told her? We had mixed feelings about Nepalese people. There had been bitter experience of Nepalese immigration staff asking for bribe. At the same time, we had been overwhelmed by the simple and peaceful lifestyle of the people. Their behaviour was much more amicable than that of Indians. The aspect that impressed me most was the non-communal attitude of the Nepalese. They had been a 'Hindu' state for a long time, but there had been hardly any instance of communal disharmony or oppression against the minorities. On the other hand, the neighbouring India claims to be a secular state where sectarian riots are common. This proves that no religion teaches to attack people from other religions. This notorious task is committed by opportunists using the name of religion or some rogue politicians instigating religious hatred in the region. If one follows a religion in the true spirit then one would never have any ill feelings against followers of other religions.

One thing I disliked about the Nepalese is alcoholism. Alcohol was sold in every grocery shop. During our journey to Kathmandu a drunk got on the bus and created havoc. He had drunk so much that the whole bus was full of its smell. We had to endure the smell of alcohol on roads and streets throughout Nepal.

Nepalese didn't seem to like Indians. The country was very dependent on India. The people didn't like that, but had no other option but to accept the reality. We received indifferent behaviour most of the time we came into contact with Nepalese people, but they became friendly when they came to know that we were from Bangladesh.

Bandana had entertained us with Coke and cashew nuts when we reached their house. Those digested quite quickly and we were about to feel hungry when the news came that food was ready. We were taken to the dining room on the second floor. Dipu had explained earlier that as we only ate halal meat, we would prefer to eat fish and vegetables. Bandana's family was very understanding and prepared several types of fish and vegetable dishes for us. Dipu had also requested Bandana to prepare one dish herself. Bandana kept his request, but took the easier option - she prepared the salad dish. The food was so tasty that all of us ate more than we should have. Vegetables cooked by Hindus are generally very tasty. In Aligarh we often used to go to Hindu restaurants for eating vegetable dishes. Anyway, we really enjoyed the food. Needless to say that Dipu ate the most. He had been on a 'hunger strike' since the previous day for this occasion. His mouth was busy simultaneously eating and talking. He was mostly speaking in Bengali to ensure that Bandana's parents wouldn't understand his jokes. Bandana knew Bengali very well. He felt extremely embarrassed when Bandana quietly informed that her father knew a bit of Bengali as well due to his studies in Kolkata. However, Dipu was smart enough to overcome that embarrassment.

Ice cream was served as dessert. We continued our chatting enjoying ice cream before Bandana showed us her photo album. She also showed us a large laminated photo at the request of Dipu. It was a group photo of their 14<sup>th</sup> batch. Dipu had presented it to Bandana before she left Bangladesh. A very nice quote was written at the bottom of the photo:

“Make new friends,  
but keep the old.  
One is silver,  
the other is gold.”

Kennedy and I had no doubt that the relationship between Dipu and Bandana was genuinely gold. We two also developed good friendship with her, so if we two were silver, then Dipu was definitely gold.

It was prayer time. We requested Bandana to make arrangements for our prayers, which she happily obliged. Three Muslim youths prayed in congregation at the house of a Hindu family in a Hindu country. It was a wonderful example of communal harmony.

It was time to go. Parting is always a sad thing. We really felt bad to leave the Rajbhandari family. They had made us feel so close in such a short time that we felt like members of their family. We knew very well that it would be difficult to forget their behaviour and their hospitality. We were so different in terms of nationality, religion and culture – yet no differences could take away the fantastic bond that was created between us that afternoon. The harmony between us reminded of a beautiful couplet of Kazi Nazrul Islam:

*mora ek brinter duti kushum Hindu-Musalman  
Muslim tar noyonmoni Hindu tahar pran*

“Two flowers from one bud  
Hindu-Muslim alike  
Muslims are its heart  
Hindus are its life”

When we were about to leave, Bandana gave us each a beautiful photo frame as gift. We lost words how to thank her after her hospitality, and now the gift. My knowledge of linguistics could be of no use in that situation. We just said ‘thank you’ that came from the bottom of our hearts and left the house feeling very sad. All three of us agreed that it was one of the best days of our tour.

The last destination of the Kathmandu city tour was Sambhunath Temple. Our three pairs of legs and three watches told us that we had no other option but to break our resolution. We took an autorickshaw towards the temple, which was 500 ft higher than the city. There were 400 stairs up towards the temple. It was too tiring and we felt that all the food at Bandana’s house disappeared. However, it was worth the effort, as the view near the temple was absolutely magnificent. We could have the full view of the Kathmandu city from there. There was a tall statue of Buddha outside the temple with two big eyes, as if Gautam Buddha himself was guarding the Kathmandu valley.

We were in no mood to spend more money on an autorickshaw, so we took a shortcut route to the Darbar Square where there were prominent remnants of old kingdoms in Nepal before its unification. As it was getting dark, we couldn’t spend time there for long. Before returning to the house, we printed all our photos of the trip so far. Dr Islam had wanted to treat us in a restaurant, but it wasn’t to be, because it was too late. We noticed throughout the trip that Kathmandu became a ghost city after dark. No one would go out in the evening. I was wondering why as crime rate was not that high. Dr Islam informed us that Nepalese people were very lazy and didn’t bother going out late.

We went to sleep early as we planned to visit Bhaktapur the next day. We had been through Bhaktapur en route Nagarkot, but had no time to see the place. Quite a few people suggested that we must visit this most ancient city of Nepal. Bandana also strongly suggested that saying, “Don’t leave Nepal before seeing Bhaktapur”. Dipu’s

heart was not rude enough to disregard such strong recommendation from Bandana; and it had been proved more than once that if Dipu wanted something, he would make sure that we agreed as well. In fact, the idea was not bad to spend the morning time effectively, as our return bus was in the evening.

We went to the bus stand on foot as usual where we took the minibus for Bhaktapur. The sky was very clear that day, which made the glaciers much brighter. The ancient name of Bhaktapur was 'Votgaon'. Situated seven miles east of Kathmandu, the city was the capital of Nepal until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The architecture of the city and the art and civilization of the ancient *Newars* gives an astonishing account of co-existence between Hinduism and Buddhism. The two religions are so intermingled in Nepalese history that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between them.

When we were going towards the Bhaktapur Darbar Square, we bumped into a group of medical students from Dipu's college who were two batches junior to him. Five of them were Bangladeshis and three Nepalese. They were quite excited to see Dipu and targeted him to give them a treat, but Dipu tactfully managed to get away from spending any money. They were not aware that Dipu was not an easy nut to crack.

The Darbar Square in Bhaktapur was quite different to that of Kathmandu. There was a museum, which was full of statues of deities. The most famous temple in Bhaktapur was *Nyatapola*, i.e., the 'five-storey temple'. Built in 1703, the 30 metres high temple is a good example of the Newari architecture. It is also the highest temple in Nepal.

## Chapter 8

### Goodbye Nepal

We stayed in Bhaktapur only for two hours, as that was all we could manage in our tight schedule that day. On our way back we had to visit Bir hospital to drop off some photos we had taken with her to Bandana, though we knew she wouldn't be there. Dipu finally solved the mystery about one complaint about Nepal he had mentioned to her before. He wrote at the back of a photo that he actually had no complaint, and it was just to make her annoyed.

We had already completed our packing, so upon reaching home, we took shower, prayed and had our lunch with Dipu's *taratari* constantly reminding us that we were not quick enough. It was time to say goodbye to Dr Islam and Krishna. His empty house was full of life with our presence, and he repeatedly reminded us how lonely he would feel after our departure. We really felt sad to leave this wonderful man, but life's rude reality kept no other option left. Dr Islam just managed to control his emotion while we hugged him goodbye. We could also see young Krishna feeling emotional. He too enjoyed our company, particularly our praise of his delicious cooking. We gave him some tips for his wonderful service and with heavy heart, we left the house for the bus stand to say final goodbye to Nepal.

The bus started just after 4 pm. There wasn't a cloud in the Kathmandu sky on the afternoon of 31<sup>st</sup> October. The white glaciers around the Kathmandu Valley that were guarding the beautiful city seemed to be giving us their farewell 'Guard of Honour'. A week was spent in Nepal as if it was a dream! What India couldn't do in three years, Nepal did in seven days – it made me feel at home. We loved the land – its people! The Annapurna Range, Fewa Lake, Begnus Lake and Davis Fall in Pokhara; viewing the Everest from the Candle City Nagarkot; the temples, the palace and the Darbar Square in Kathmandu; the temples and the Darbar Square in Bhaktapur – all were in our thoughts. It was not possible to forget Dr Islam's hospitality or Krishna's cooking. What about the Rajbhandari family? Could we undermine their contribution towards liking Nepal?

The glaciers could be seen as long as the daylight was bright. As the night appeared and the reddish element of the sky also disappeared, another beauty engulfed the surroundings. The hills and jungles on both sides emerged as a dreamland in the stunning full moon light. My wonder and deep admiration soon turned into a strange feeling once I looked at the moon. There was a deep sense of emptiness in my mind. Yes, something was missing! I realized for the first time that I was lonely. I consciously avoided being too close to women in my life. I never felt the need until that moment. But on that moonlit night on my journey back from Nepal, I strongly felt that every man should have a woman in his life. I realized why the Prophet of Islam (Peace be on him) emphasized the importance of marriage. I didn't know what Kennedy and Dipu were thinking at that time. Kennedy was probably assessing some recent events in Dhaka about his personal life. Dipu may have been wondering like me why he hadn't found someone to love. But I was daydreaming about a future moment when a beautiful lady, whose exquisiteness could only be compared to

Kanchenjunga, would be sitting beside me in a similar environment. My life partner would be sitting in front of me and I would sing:

*cadni ratme cadki samne  
rukhsē parda hatana gazab ho gaya  
cadni chup gayi  
cad sharma gaya  
aapka muckurana gazab ho gaya*

“You removed your veil  
In a moonlit night  
A great thing happened  
In the moon’s delight  
The moon felt shy  
Its light disappeared  
A great thing happened  
When you finally smiled”

How wonderful those days would be when I would have my beloved beside me! A friend of mine always joked, “Life without wife is like a kitchen without knife”. I wouldn’t use that analogy about my feelings at that time, but I did remember some wonderful few lines of a John Denver song I like so much:

“Come let me love you  
Let me give my life to you  
Let me drown in your laughter  
Let me die in your arms  
Let me lay down beside you  
Let me always be with you”

The journey from Kathmandu was much better than the journey towards it a week before. The main reason was that we were on real seats – not stools; there were no disturbances by Bengalis and Assamese; and finally, we had food prepared by Krishna. I even slept for a while, which was quite unusual. However, the terrible roads did not let me sleep for long. The rollercoaster experience continued for almost six hours. I just somehow managed to keep my body intact until the next morning when the roads became a bit better.

We were not too far away from leaving Nepal. In its final effort to remind us how amazing the country was, white glaciers were still within our sights. Nepal probably realized how much I was obsessed with glaciers, so it kept reminding me what I would miss once I left the country. We were about two hours’ journey away from leaving the country of *sagarmatha*. I became very quiet with emotion staring at the glaciers! Nepal probably felt my emotion, so it asked me through a Bengali song if I had anything to say before I left:

*jabar age kichu bole galena  
nirobe shudhu roile ceye*

*kichuki bolar chilona*

“You are so quiet  
When you are leaving  
Will you say anything?  
Or just keep staring?”

“No, I don’t have anything to say. Nepal – I can’t express how much I love you. Your Everest, your Pokhara, your Kathmandu, your Bhaktapur, and the amazing Rajbhandari family in your land – I love everything and everyone! I can’t express this love, nor can I hide it”:

*chupana bhi nehi ata  
jatana bhi nehi ata  
hame tumse mohabbat hai  
batana bhi nehi ata*

“I can’t hide  
I can’t suppress  
How much I love you  
I can’t express”

When we reached Shiliguri after the hassles of border immigration and customs, it was 12 noon. Krishna’s food had been digested long before and our empty stomachs suggested that filling them should be the first priority. After having our lunch in a restaurant, we went to a nearby mosque for some rest before our return bus to Kolkata at 7 pm. The bus left on time. I felt sad even leaving Shiliguri. Darjeeling was just three hours’ journey from there. If I could go to Darjeeling again! If I could get a glimpse of my beloved Kanchenjunga again!

We went back to the same hotel in Kolkata. Our pockets were almost empty after the trip, except Dipu’s who still had some cash left for shopping. After a shower and breakfast, we all went out. Kennedy’s Indian visa had expired, so he was quite worried. I had a neighbour and friend called Osman whose mother’s family were Indians. We went to see one of his uncles for help. He was very kind and helpful, and took the full responsibility of getting Kennedy’s visa problem sorted. Keeping Kennedy at his disposal, I went with Dipu to help him with his shopping. Thus the day passed very quickly.

When we returned to the hotel in the evening, we sat down to reflect on the whole tour. How fulfilling was it? All of us agreed that it was extremely fulfilling, though to me, not quite hundred percent. I still had the regret of not seeing the sunrise at Nagarkot. However, I had no regrets. I fully agreed with my two partners that we had never thought our tour would turn out to be so great.

I believe that all expectations should not be fulfilled when travelling to a beautiful place, otherwise there would be no attraction left to return there. Nagarkot was one such unfulfilled wish. I have two other such wishes that still keep me wanting to go



back to India. The first one is visiting the Taj Mahal once again. Aligarh was literally two hours' bus journey away from Agra where Taj Mahal is located. I visited the Taj no less than a dozen times. When I visited before my marriage, I always missed a loving partner as Taj Mahal was all about love. When I finally visited the place with my wife during our honeymoon, it was extremely fulfilling. Yet I am not fully satisfied, as I have not yet seen the beauty of Taj Mahal in a full moon night. There is a hotel just opposite Taj Mahal from where the Taj can be seen from the hotel room. I was not able to get a room in that hotel during my honeymoon. I am still waiting for one more opportunity to visit Taj Mahal when I can stay in the hotel on a full moon night with my wife and enjoy the night beauty of this historic monument.

The other unfulfilled wish is visiting Kashmir (one time known as the paradise on earth) with my wife. I have been to Kashmir twice, once before the troubles started and once during my studies at Aligarh. My second visit was with my best friend in Aligarh, a Kashmiri boy from Sri Nagar, the summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir. I stayed in his house for two weeks during which my friend's mother asked me if I wanted to marry a Kashmiri girl. Kashmiri girls are supposed to be among the prettiest in the world. However, I told her that ever since my first visit to Kashmir, I had been planning to have my honeymoon in Kashmir; so how could I marry a Kashmiri girl? Then I jokingly told her, "*agar apki koi beti hoti to mey zaroor shadi kar leta*" 'If you had a daughter, then I would definitely marry her'. During our honeymoon, I told my wife that that was our 'warm up' honeymoon as the real one would be in Kashmir. I am still waiting for the day when I can take my wife there and stay in the beautiful houseboats on the Dal Lake in Sri Nagar and visit places of immense natural wonders like Sonmarg, Gulmarg and Pahalgam (the most beautiful place in Kashmir, which I am yet to visit).

It was 3<sup>rd</sup> November the next day, the day we would leave each other's company. Kennedy had planned to leave in the morning to go by road; Dipu's flight was in the afternoon; and my return train journey to Aligarh was in the evening. Everyone was gloomy since waking up. Kennedy rarely showed bad mood, but even his trademark smile was missing; Dipu forgot his favourite *taratari*; and I became completely silent. It is rare to have such a wonderful team for traveling. It was really disheartening to feel that our time together was over.

Kennedy left at 10 am. It was difficult to part with this ever-smiling friend. Kennedy had a lot of resemblance in character with my immediate elder brother – very enthusiastic about everything, very fond of singing, and above all, possessing a big heart. When I was saying goodbye to Kennedy, I remembered the day when my brother had left for England a few years before. I felt similar emptiness when Kennedy left the hotel.

Dipu and I had lunch together. We could hardly speak to one another. He left soon after. He was my childhood friend, and our bond was very deep. Dipu was feeling bad for me, as I was unable to go to Bangladesh after being so near. He was going back home, but I had to return to Aligarh. I really felt heartbroken when his taxi disappeared.

Kalka Mail left Howrah station at 7 pm that evening. After spending some of the best days in my life, I was heading back to Aligarh – all alone! Kennedy’s songs could not be heard, nor was there the sound of Dipu’s *taratari*. I, and only I, was traveling with my loneliness as my company. I remembered some lines of *Ghazal* king Mehdi Hassan:

*tanha thi aur hamesha se  
tanha hai zindegi  
ye zindegi ka naam magar  
kya hai zindegi*

“I have been alone  
With loneliness my life  
This is life  
But what is life?”

Everyone around me on the train was Bangladeshi. They had also got their tickets from the tourist counter. Two of them were going to Ajmer; a disabled man was going to Jaipur to fix his artificial leg; and the fourth Bangladeshi mysteriously kept quiet as to why he was going to New Delhi. I didn’t talk much with anyone, as I was too depressed to have any conversation. I tried to sleep after having dinner with the food I had bought from the famous *Aminia* restaurant of Kolkata. Needless to say, I was struggling to sleep. I haven’t had good sleep for days, yet ‘sleep’ could be found nowhere. I was literally feeling restless. I had never felt that bad on my way to Aligarh. It was as if I was on board a journey to hell after failing to get a ticket for heaven.

It was 1 pm on 4<sup>th</sup> November. Kalka mail had just left Kanpur station. I was resting on the upper berth. My journey had five more hours left. I had recovered considerably from the misery of the previous night. While reflecting on various aspects of the journey, I didn’t realize when I went back to sleep.

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I was standing in a strange place with Kenedy and Dipu. The red rounded plate called ‘the sun’ was rising from the east. I could see my beloved Kanchenjunga in the north calling me towards her. The sight of *Sagarmatha* ‘the Everest’ standing sky-high in the west reminded me of the existence of my Lord. In the South I could see the beautiful Annarpurna Range very near me. On our right Dr Islam was calling me to eat at the dining table with Krishna putting hot vegetable and rice on the table. On the left I could see Dr and Mrs Rajbhandari sitting on their sofa, and standing beside them was the beautiful Nepalese girl named Bandana.

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*caye piyo bhai, caye* “Want some tea?”, *ei momfali* “Here are some peanuts!”, “vegetable cutlet” – the shouting of vendors woke me up. I looked at my watch; it was 5 pm. I found out from a gentleman below that the train was at ‘Hathras’ station,

which meant that Aligarh was only 20 minutes away. I quickly got up, freshened myself, got ready, bade farewell to the fellow Bangladeshi travelers and went towards the door when I could hear the announcement coming from the platform of the Aligarh station: *howrah se a kar Delhi janewali 2311 up kalka mail abhi platform number tin par pouch chuki hai* “The 2311 up Kalka Mail from Howrah to Delhi has just reached platform number three.” Once again I was back to Aligarh. Once again the same lifestyle – traveling between Zohrabagh, Dodhpur, Amirnishan, Sir Syed Nagar; wandering between the Arts Faculty, Linguistics department, library, canteen; having food at Hot Bite, Fun Munch, Kwality, Mezban; or chatting with Emran, Tipu, Taimur, Shibly, Apel, Mahmud, Khawja, Tushar, Romel and many more friends. And of course, the *tarana e Aligarh* ‘Aligarh song’:

*ye mera caman ye mera caman  
mai apni caman ka bulbul hu*

“This is my garden  
This is my garden  
And I am the bird  
Of my own garden”