

## The Fall Trek

The Mangalore region, sharing a unique boundary with the end of the western ghats, presents a lot of pristine, sublime beauty of nature to a beholder. Situated somewhere in this land of charm is a path, which weaves and winds itself through an area smeared with falls all over the place. In the folklore as well as the vocabulary of trekkers, this path is known as the 'Sakaleshpura Trek'.

Yours truly got acquainted to its presence way back in 2000. A casual Monday morning discussion with a colleague, Aloka, revealed that there exists a trek, most of which includes certain bridges over flowing streams. I also learnt that the trail of the trek consists of an abandoned railway line, which was laid during the colonial era! And that she managed to almost sneak herself (half of her torso, to be precise) between two wooden sleepers of the railroad exactly on one such bridges. What a wonderful premonition to Nirvana it must have been! For sure, these were sufficient convoluted triggers to turn me on.

A further inquiry with my trekking 'anna' of south, Bhavesh, revealed that this was trek with a difference. First of all, it was not a 'hike'. Secondly, seasoned campaigners like him regarded this one with reverence, which means that amateur junta like me would take it pretty seriously. Finally, in April this year, I happened to pass close to this area on my way to the hike to the twin peaks, Pushpagiri and Kumara Parvata. The terrain of the area looked like mysteriously inviting me for a visit into its folds. Though very keen to return back to the area, the city slicker in me found out many tight occupations in the many next months, thus ensuring that I do not honour the invite.

Nature and Destiny being mystic elements, and their collusion being even more mystic, the mortals in us cannot fathom how and why they tug you definitively. Recently, I have been moving towards the fag end of what I feel as a long-drawn lone struggle on the mundane front. The spirits had ridden sine-wave more often than required, thus sapping the energies and introducing a mental fatigue hitherto unknown to me. And precisely then came this 'honorary' offer of participating in the trip to Sakaleshpura, along with a gang of IISc. The motley crowd included a young professor (Manoj), a PhD student (Srivastan) and his wife (an ex-colleague of mine, Supriya), and a person (Praveen) who was the 'bridge' in this case. The other party sounded convinced that I am on with it, the moment offer is made; I was convinced knowing couple of other guys on the team, that they were on. I've found that when one is committed rather than being frivolous, the fun which follows can often be more enjoyable. Within half-a-minute of deliberations, no wonder that deal was struck!

Past one year has unfortunately snatched from me the supple body, and hence I invariably try to bring it back to shape, before embarking on a physically-challenging mission. This time, there was no time to do such preparations. The co-ordination homework became a joke. 3 hours before departure, two of us found ourselves with a huge and variegated list of to-be-purchased items. How we managed to board the bus minutes before its departure makes an independent action-thriller story. A glimpse of that can be seen from the fact that we had our dinner, holding rotis in hand like a mendicant, while our rickshaw-driver was speeding towards the bus-stop! A by-product of the melee was that when we measured our rucksacks, they turned out to be around 15 kgs. I first got the sinking sense of the 'lugging' task now.

The journey to Sakaleshpura was a short, 5 hour journey. At 3:00 AM in the morning, we found ourselves in the town. It was quite cold, and many of us were shivering even with our warm clothing on. There were five of us: Prof. Manoj(professional trekker), Srivatsan(professional trekker), his wife Supriya (completely novice), Praveen(partly novice) and myself(decade-old amateur). We first took a bus to Donigal(a hamlet), from where the starting station is 3 km farther. The hamlet was mostly sleeping, and all that were present to witness us there were a small hotel, a bidi-shop and the stars and moon of Saptami. The fog was dense. For half-an-hour, I bided my time by trying to identify bright stars. Alas! There weren't any star-like eyes to feed to the surging poetic romance against the pin-drop silence of the ambience. Heartbroken, I retired to the hotel. Rest of the pack, equally aimless, followed suit.

The owner of the hotel served us steaming idlis and some sambhar. Since my last visit to Kukke town, I have had a particular taste in certain dishes. I had conjectured and attributed it to overuse of coconut in preparation. The taste of sambhar reminded me of the conjecture. I was wrong; some beverage in the evening presented me with certain evidence, which made me change the conjecture.

It was 5 in the morning. The arrival of morning was first declared by the rise of the morning star, Mercury. It was followed by movement of just-woken people, who were moving towards bushes for the morning chores. We wanted to start early, so that we can avoid sun as much as possible. We stopped a truck, which dropped us to the Donigal Station.

The rise of dawn has always been accompanied by the welcome song of the birds. Rising from the confines of their cosy nests, they get out and collectively welcome the new day, with their harmonious chirp filling up the surroundings. It is a wonderful feeling to observe this phenomenon. Even more wonderful is to catch sight of some bird perched atop a glistening tree, which is chirping with gay abandon, with its plumage shining bright from the sunrays. Few of my colleagues, who are amateur ornithologists, had brought in their binoculars to capture the wonderful moments. As we started on our journey along the railway line, with the jungle trees dotting both sides of the route, we stopped every hundred meters to catch these wonderful moments. The next two hours were more of bird-watching, than trekking! I have never been a bird-watcher. But this time, out of curiosity, i took few peeks. Wonder! Wonder! The moments were breathtaking. You see a bird chirping alternately, with different melodies. What a jugalbandi to welcome the dawn! And there you see a green-feathered bird, with a red peck on its cute little cheek! Like a quintessential doting, possessive mother in Indian culture, which puts a black peck(teeka) on its baby to ward off evil looks, it looked as if mother Nature has done the same to its special cute little daughter. There dives a bulbul to catch hold of a beautiful blue monarch butterfly as its breakfast. A ruby-throated bulbul sings high and loud, to impress and court his fiancée! We hardly realized the passage of time. Only sometime later, the shoulders started creaking, and we stopped and had our breakfast. The breakfast was equally wonderful. We had multiple raisins in breakfast, followed by raw (cow's) milk! It gave enough energy to start the tread again.

And then we approached our first bridge. Perhaps 200-meter long, over a huge fall not covered with trees, it made most of us stop in the path. Headstrong people like Manoj and myself shook aside the fears, and moved straight on the bridge, only to find lack of rhythm and sure-footedness after few moves. One of our concerns also was that the girl accompanying us, though not timid or hysterical, was not Laxmibai either. We had to make up our mind fast. If we stopped too much to catch our breath, it would have sent wrong signals to the people following. With a

determination not to look down at the height, both of us started off. With 15 kgs on the back, a slip in footing would have surely doomed me. Thankfully, I held to my nerves, as did Manoj. Both of us crossed the bridge in the next one go. Slowly and steadily, with fear writ large on her still face, the girl and her escorts :- ) crossed the bridge. We stopped after crossing, more to still the ruffled nerves, than to have another bite of food.

The estimate was that the trek is 11.5 kms, and that we will reach Yedukumeri Station by 2:00 in afternoon. We were wrong. After stopping five-six times to give rest to the aching shoulders, we inquired few of the people crossing by. First, we were told that we have entered a reserved forest without permission. Next, we got varying figures about remaining distance, from 4 kms to 11 kms. Praveen and I were tiring out, because of the donkeyload on shoulders. The sun had also started beating mercilessly on our heads. The birds have fallen silent. At this time, we entered a pattern of passages: 2 bridges followed by a small tunnel. Even that could not lift our spirits. For the first time, the shoulders started drooping, and the journey started looking a tad routine. Some 12 bridges and 4 tunnels later, we stopped in the path, around 9 kms from where we started.

To make our feet breathe some amount of air, we opened our shoes. I found to my horror my right ankle had started swelling. This happens to me very rarely. It was then that I realized that all the while, I was walking on the uneven bed of rocks around the rail line. Given that my trekking shoes are improvisation of rubber-soled shoes, they do not lend support to the ankle. I had no option but to leave it as it was. Similarly, wrong packing of stuff in the rucksack ensured that the weight-distribution on the back was quite uneven. This led to minor inflammation in the shoulders, and it hurt if pressed. Many people had similar problems. But there could not have been any look back. We took a heavy lunch, followed by a small siesta along the length of the unused sleepers lying wayside. The sun was shining right on top, but we were so tired that we hardly noticed the falling sunlight on the face. The vivid memories of the typical traveller of yore, taking a journey break on the wayside, started dancing in front of my eyes. And yet again, taking such a break in the lap of mother Nature, rather than on a cushy bed, appeared to me as more fulfilling and satisfying. I can't remember when I passed into the arms of Morpheus, only to wake up when a pranky caterpillar crawled up my face, and tried to play around one of my eyelids. Time to move on!

Only the trekkers know what it means by drinking nectar, or washing a sweaty face with a natural lotion. All these functions are provided by a single source: a flowing stream. Till this point, we had seen falls, most of them too deep down to be appreciated fully. We fortunately located a big stream along the rock-face very close-by. We threw away the water in our bottles and refilled it with the stream water. Much like a camel, we also drank to our bellyful, and washed whatever part of exposed body :- ), with the cold water. The insipidity was gone in a minute, and there we were: ready to move on to the remaining unknown length of the trek.

It was the fast-changing moods that made rest of the trek exhilarating! For example, I went through a circular pattern of feeling fatigue, fear and jaw-dropping sense of beauty. As it turned out, the overall trek was 19 kms long. We had started coming across longer bridges and tunnels more regularly. Some of the bridges had deteriorated wooden sleepers, making the crossing job tougher. To top that, the tunnels started growing longer, and we started encountering bats flying around and laughing at us hysterically. It was as if they were telling, "Look at these damn fools! They are walking upside-down". I took a strong exception of their laughing. At every shriek, I would chide them aloud. There would be silence for some moments, and

then those cursed creatures would laugh again. The worst was in a 572-meter long tunnel, where it is a miracle that we escaped without colliding with these laughing, flying, pestering creatures. Indian bats are timid, and not like their vampire brethren, so i did not panic. However, once again, the girl needed escorts to guide her slowly through the tunnel! What saved us from being demoralized due to fatigue is the kind of falls we regularly encountered. Over the 29 bridges that we crossed eventually(along with 19 tunnels), all of them were over falls. They were all of different type, different swirls, and were also not too deep down. Their breadth also kept on widening, making the falls more enjoyable. In fact, few of us, including me, would now deliberately stop on the bridge. Though both of our legs would be on two different sleepers, this precarious balancing act would give us nice view to capture and savour. Some of us had cameras to store these, while i used my memory to store. After covering 16 odd kms, with the final destination nowhere in sight, we stopped for the last time. We finished another bout of raisins, milk, bun and daalmoth, as a special preparation for the final assault. We knew that we were close, but there were no signs. With a final face-wash from a running stream, we set out for the last mile. There were few more tunnels and bridges, but with sun moving towards its rest-house, we had to hurry. After walking for around an hour, we finally saw the railway track splitting itself into two lines. We could smell that we were near. We came across some person, who confirmed our hunch. Our steps became faster in anticipation. And there we were, at Yedukumeri station, an open ramshackle station, with a single small platform. Few goats were peeking down from the platform collectively, as if anticipating an arriving train, which they could ride on! We climbed the ramp of the platform, and tumbled down. And finally, we could hear the girl titter and talk to the whole bunch. I checked my shoulders, and as anticipated, they were swollen. I could not rotate my hands; the shoulders would cry in pain. I hoped that using its soft hands via the blowing sweet breeze of evening, Nature would make me rid of all these pains by the morning. If it did not happen, then?

Few people had made those ruins as their home. On inquiry, we figured out that most of their rations would come from the jungles. Rest they would purchase from distant town, from whatever pennies travellers like us gave to them. These guys gave us black tea brine with sugar, to drink. To make it a bit enjoyable, I squeezed a lemon in it. While sipping the tea, yet again I faced the same taste, about which I mentioned before. It was then that it dawned to me that this unique flavour is due to a unique blend of firewood smoke. Some of us went for late-evening excretions in the open-air, closed-bush loos, after drinking the lubricant :-). We had a heavy dinner of dates, milk, rotis, jam and daalmoth. We cleaned a portion of the platform, rolled out our sleeping bags and crept in. The locals told that animal attacks in night were not heard of. Even if there was, we were too tired to do any kind of patrolling job. A rustic's delight of sleeping under a brightly-lit sky, with an eastern breeze resonating in the woods, engulfed me for a while. It was this brief moment, where I realized that like a tippler, it is worth enduring all the pains, to get those few moments of boundless joy. Living in city especially cuts us off from such intimate moments, and once in a while, escaping to undertake such journeys invigorates one enough to carry on with the 'bigger' journey! After such vague musings for a while, I passed into a long sleep at around 8:00 PM, only to wake up at around 5:00 AM to the now-known welcome song of the birds.

The actual journey was finished yesterday itself, but to catch the bus from the highway, we were suppose to travel further 3-4 kms down a valley through the woods. We had opted against it the night before, for it was too late in the day. Few of us managed to finish the early morning chores in the bushes. The whole gang had a short breakfast, and by 6:30 AM, we were off into the valley along a man-made

trail. This time around, we passed through two of these falls, and in fact, we had to wade through one of them. I fell into one while trying to imitate the confused movements of a stranded person, and had to change my socks and roll up the pants. The limits of modesty made me not to take the bath in the stream, for which I was itching to! Nor did I come across the much-hyped village beauty, which undertakes such baths in the morning time(Oops! The 'Sagar' movie girl :-)). Alas! We had to move on. Some two-and-half hours later, we emerged on the highway. We stopped a laal-dabba, went till Hasan, from where we took another bus back to Bangalore.

Looking back, the last-minute escape to the wilds was a refreshing experience. I had to labour through to periodically come across and taste those honey-drop moments! Though my old, limited list of to-be-trekged-in-karnataka is now over, I wish to be available for it many more times, as and 'when Nature calls'!!