

A Trek to Kumar Parvata

Rightly termed as the mecca of ardent trekkers, the twin (scalable) peaks of Pushpagiri and Kumar Parvat are one of the toughest treks of south India. Lying at the bottom tip of the irregular Western Ghats, any trip to these peaks gets embedded into the folklore surrounding them. No wonder, it can be deemed as "The trek" for amateur trekker of South India. Himalayas, of course, are the benchmark for professional trekkers.

The idea of trekking these peaks, and the adjoining forests, came in my mind, right after in May 2001, when eleven of us successfully climbed the Kudremukh peak. Kudremukh peak is the highest peak of South India, the climb being around 6500 feet from the base of the mountain. It was pretty thrilling, but then, having trekked in the upper regions of Western Ghats in Maharashtra, I was not satisfied. There were tense moments, few really steep rock-climbs, but at the end, it was a tepid, long-winding trek. Then somebody told me that I can look out for "Kumar Parvat" for the thrill of trekking.

Life takes very interesting turns, and possibly for next three years, I could not manage three days of free time! Or may be if there was, I was too hell-bent to make them non-free. Over these years, I felt as many facets of my persona were dying out, and most of them needed a decent burial. So, one fine day last year, I decided to end my trekking career with a trek on Kumar Parvat. Or was it a psychological move to re-kindle the dying flame?

With most of my friends settling down after marriage, and others putting up flab enough to make them unsuitable for the trek, and still others sadly being left behind after moving out of the previous workplace, the endeavor required a new set of people. Fortunately, I found a few new people, who haven't done such things before, but were keen on doing it. With such a group, in the past six months, we did three practice hill-climbs in outskirts of Bangalore, which did help a lot in instilling more interest in these guys for "The trek".

So finally in March, I decided that it was getting late, and possibly I will run out of partners, if I could not ask these guys for it. Few dates consulted with the leave calendar of my company, and like an oracle, I declared that an assault will be made on the three-day weekend of Good Friday.

The response was good. One guy was straightaway ready. All we needed now to do was other partners, with at least one kannada-knowing fellow. Few of us, including myself, started doing tough exercise to bring ourselves back in shape. The joke was that I was doing "pehalwaan-style exercises done in akhaaras". But with dates so ahead, we hardly found dedicated partners. Luck as it was, in the last week before the climb, three people, two of them expected, pooled in for the climb. We knew that we might face problem having few rookies on the team, but it turned out that the problem was elsewhere!

Well, without any official word, thanks to under-estimation by remaining folks, I was to lead the small-scale expedition to the peaks. The only other experienced guy was Avinash, who has done trekking in Himalayas, but he came back from USA just three days before, and hence could not help me out, except on the day of leaving. And then there was this big mess.

I thought my role here was to lay out detailed plans for preparation before leaving, so that individuals can prepare. Further, it would also be to deal with contingencies while on trek. But it was not to be.

People took the detailing too casually, and one day before the journey, I went around the town to do purchasing of almost everything such as particular shoes, socks, shirt... for one of the fellow. It still did not suffice, for two of us still didn't get rubber shoes on the D-day, and one guy, the required haversack. Luckily, I had a spare pair of rubber shoes, as well as a bag, so part of the problem was solved. One chap had to rely on his PVC-sole shoe.

Nothing more interesting happened, till we reached Somwerpet before the crack of the dawn, and made ourselves fresh in the bogs of the bus-stand. We got a bus to the base, Bidahalli, which was 23 kms away. From here we were to travel 8 kms to the first peak, and 13 further kms to the other town to catch the next bus. We had a contour map this time, and it helped a decent bit during the trek. The tread became as tough as it started with. A slant of 30 degrees to be climbed for say, 100 meters, followed by 10-15 meters of plateau, and the path repeated. After around 1.5 kms of walk, we saw the peak of Pushpagiri. The thing which struck first was that it was too close, and too steep (one side looking at 45 degrees, while the other on 60 degrees), hence there didn't seem to be a chance for a winding trail like the mountain roads. But then, others had done it, so I had to do. I just told others, that it's not as tough as it looks, we need to walk on. So we carried on. We took a short break for breakfast near a Shiva temple at 10:30 AM, filled up our ration of water, and continued.

The climb was as tough as it has been pointed out. On an average, a 30 degree climb kept occurring all the while. Hardly any plateau we would find to walk on, and at the same time, giving relaxation to leg muscles and lungs. So we had to stop, but they were short. The mercury was climbing, and the jungle into which we entered, became more humid. But we had no option, so we pressed on. We had nature's call in between for one of us :-). While we were standing, few leaches managed to climb my foot. I was very lucky to sense movement, and even before they had punctured my leg skin, I had plucked them out. We made it a habit of weeding out leaches every half an hour till the next day. At one place, we took a dummy trail that we had doubted it anyway, so we came back and went on the other. A walk of around 5 kms from the jungle, and we arrived at the toughest 1 km stretch of climb. A flat rock surface stretching over 200 meters, standing at 50 degrees of slant, and here we were, two of us almost breathless after the arduous climb. Here the practice climbs came into help. We relaxed for a minute, and then with complete forward crouch, scaled the rock. Avinash thought that climbing down from here will be no-no, given the steepness, but I had second thoughts. Later it turned out that I was right!

A good trek, according to me, is one, which brings out the best of teamwork. I had experienced this on my trek to Kudremukh. I was expecting that for the miseries we face during the trek, it will bring people closer. But it was not to be. The "experienced campaigner", from few days before trek, felt that it was under-planned, and I had sensed it. I had sensed the feeling that he is feeling a bit let out, and it might create trouble. To placate him, on the last day, I shunned all the detailed plans of preparations on part of him, and myself and allowed him to re-draw and re-work them for both of us. But it didn't stop there. A rash comment in

the bus to Somwerpet triggered what I feared: Ego Clash. Till we came back, the clashes persisted. I thought of mediating, and then got reminded myself that my job was to deal with contingencies, and not command things like in the army regimen. It will spoil the fun and thrill of discovering Nature, and perhaps, Self; if one is asked to merely follow someone. I hoped that matters will settle, but they didn't, for every opportunity of leg-pulling was utilized by both to the full, and it was evident that it was not the healthy leg-pulling. Three of us isolated ourselves from it, and tried to enjoy the trek. But this was the most negative point of the trek. I still wonder how it could have been avoided, or nipped in the bud!

Coming back, we relaxed towards the end of the rock face, and met another team, who was quick enough to have climbed ahead of us. Each one of us was carrying around 10 kgs of ration on one's back, and hence the climb was not that easy. We could now see the peak from very close, but we differed on what peak it was. We had been polling about it from by-passers, ever since we saw the peak, and statistical results implied that we were about to reach Pushpagiri. This team claimed that there could not find any way to the other peak of the twins, Kumar Parvata. They did go to the peak of Pushpagiri, and were tracing back the route, so that somewhere they find the diversion required to Kumar Parvata, which they might have missed out. We were hell tired, so we sat and bade this team good-bye on their descent. We had our lunch under scorching sun over the rock-face. In between we found a Nilgiri gaur(Indian bison) just 200 meters away from us into the left-side jungles, majestically shaking a thick tree. Gaur is a huge animal(could be upto 400 kgs), and incites fear the moment one sees it. Somehow, we held our nerves, and finished the lunch. From the rock-face, we could also see the twin peak. We also saw few people there, who had possibly climbed up from the other side(the Kukke town). To discover the route, one of us went ahead of the rock-face(leaving his bag behind), and 20 minutes later, came down claiming that there was a route, but looked too long. So we decided that we will climb on Pushpagiri peak today, rest there for the night, and take the path to twin peak tomorrow. The remaining half kms was also tough, every 100 meters we had to stop and catch breath. A steep ascent of 45 degrees, that too in scorching sun, had seeped almost all of our energies. By 4:00 PM, I guess, we reached the top of Pushpagiri. There is a small man-made cave at the top, in which Shivalinga is put, and hence few people tell that there is a temple at the top. We had found our first destination!

Looks like some BJP workers had also climbed up there, for the lotus flag was put near the cave, and it kept on majestically fluttering throughout the day and the night.

We relaxed there, saw the other side of the Pushpagiri, which is around 70 degrees steep for a km, after which it opens in a valley. It is so tranquil there that it eats inside your head, and you feel, for a little time at least, out of the physical self. There are more such points, and perhaps better, discovered by me in the wilds of Kodai-kenal, so it was not all that new to me. Others simply got engulfed in this wonderfully strange feeling. You see, I was smiling for the first time.

Across the valley stood the Shesha Parvata. It is really steep, possible 80 degrees from one side, and 50 degrees from other, and is understood to be trekking-wise invincible in folklore. All one can do is to but admire the nature's creations.

It was time for sun-set, and also we had relaxed a bit by then. I had massaged my sore left knee. We had collected wood from the jungle for the night fire and patrol, too keep the animals away. The sun-set was picture-perfect(better was the sun-rise), and as it kept on going down within the clouds-on-the-horizon, it changed it's shapes and colors. The best point was when it was bright-red, coral-lipped shape, which I have never seen before. For a moment, I got reminded of Thomas Carew in "Disdain Returned", but I could not complete the rest of the face, which nature made in front of us :-). It duly got captured in the camera, anyway.

Also for the first time I saw, the "Evening Star", or Mercury, in its majesty. It appeared a minute before the sun set, and kept on growing in its shine. Till date, it is the most shining star I have seen in my life. Perhaps it borrows the shine from sun, to which it is the closest.

We were lucky to not have rains on the top. We learnt later, that it rains every four days. We knew before the start of trek, that it can rain anytime, and we left it literally to nature's mercy. Our bags were far too heavy to have water-proof stuff. When we saw thick black clouds squirming on the east, we feared the worst. But they harmlessly marched away to north(by mid-night), rather than moving west, and we were relieved!

Five of us decided to do two-hour, lone night patrol each, with the fire burning to scare the animals away. We had carried torches and a liter of petrol with us. We also managed to get a huge log from the woods, which we thought should last the whole night. Since my duty was at 2:00 AM, I tried to sleep. But it seems that the bigger log was damp, so by 12:00 AM, we ran out of fire. It was upto individuals to back up their sense of ranging, and I found it out myself when I woke up at 2:00 AM. The rest of the pack had gone to sleep near the cave, and all I could find around me was weird, unknown and shrill sounds of some wicked insects. An hour later, a hiss started from the bush close by, and I spent next one hour trying to understand whether it was a genuine hiss, or a jealous insect emulating a snake. It was chilling cold and breezy at the top, and I was trembling throughout the two hours, though I had a jacket on. No fire around, and a little light from two-third moon of the Baisakh Krishna Panchmi helping. But my eyes were shutting off and on, so I relied on my ears to do the "Sound Detection and Ranging(known in Radio Electronics as SODAR)". It helped a lot, and I did manage to finish my most help-less patrol of my life!

We woke up almost just before the sun rose, and the scene at that time is too pristine and stunning to be described in words. We did capture it in camera. Some of us took long time attending nature's call, because while sitting in bushes, we were admiring the sun-rise!

At 7:30 AM, we started our descent, so that the other ridge to the twin peak can be taken. Even when we carried 3.5 Liters of water as supply, we ran out of it by night. Luckily, we found a very thin, but heavenly stream half an hour later, and we filled up our bottles again. While climbing down, we came across another rock-face, which was around 70 degree steep. I had not under-assumed, and hence with great caution, I climbed down first. The rest followed.

Within an hour, we had found our way through leach-infested forest to the other peak, called Kumar Parvata. The view there was not as scintillating, as that on

Pushpagiri. Here we found, time after time, teams which were climbing from the sacred town of Kukke. Hardly anyone climbed to Pushpagiri. Later I found out why.

The descent down from Kumar Parvata was worse. It was, on an average, 45 degrees, and descending 2 kms was something which hurt the soles. But the lucky part was that the trail was very wide, and distinct. No wonder people were climbing more from this side, though it would have been tough for us to do it from here, given the load on the back.

By 12:00 o' clock, we reached the hut called "Bhattar-mane" ran by an ascetic called Girigaddhe Bhatt. Much about him can be found on internet, so I will not describe him here. But at his farmhouse, we got, for the first time, "Anna-sambar", or Pulses and rice. The Sambar had more vegetables than pulse, but possibly our hunger made it taste extremely delicious.

By 2:30 PM, we again started moving. Idea was to climb down to kukke town, a temple town, and take a late night bus back. Who knew that the trek will be so tough, to the last meter of walk?

The plan was that we will finish a trapezium. Starting from Somverpet, then to twin peaks of almost same height, and then down other side to Kukke town. But Kukke town, it seems, is much lower from Somverpet. So, hours after hours, all we found ourselves doing was to going down 45 degree steep trail. Ankles kept crying for mercy, shin muscles tired out into stiffness, but we had no option. We had to get out of jungle, before it was dark. We could not see the Kukke town, nor did we find companions here. All we could find was an old "Paan-parag" sachet, which meant that someday, somebody had travelled on the route. For once, we doubted that the path lead to Kukke town. For, there's another path in the area, which leads to Hassan district some 20-30 kms ahead. I had a couple of nasty shoe bites by then, but there was no time. We almost stopped talking to each other, and hardly stopped for a drink. I kept on wondering that we were lucky that we did not take this route to climb up. Out of panic, someone told that it was 6:00 PM, just an hour away from sunset. With the visibility within the jungle fading, we stopped for the last time. We had some glucose and water, and started descending again. Half an hour later, we came out of jungle to a road. All of us were relieved to find that it was the beginning of Kukke town. Also, it was 5:45 PM now, and not 6:30 PM. When we told people that we have scaled both, and slept in night under heavens, people silently shook their head in disbelief. Some sense of victory had started creeping in now. The body, which was crying full-throat now, seemed to relax a bit.

Kukke is a temple town, the town of Lord Subramania. We did the darshan. Luckily it was Shasthi now, the auspicious day. Late night, we took a bus, and were joined back into the mundane, mainstream life of the cities.

I had started on the trek, thinking that it will be the last. But it looks just like a new start. The body has recovered, and seems like a dream the way we let ourselves be on complete mercy of Nature and The Unknown, and emerged victors. Yours truly is hoping again, now, to make short escapes from the confines of a city into such worlds, where life means, for the least, a bit different.