

Total Recall

Sounds like the Schwarzenegger movie of 90s? A recall to a series of events before? Yes, the similarities of my latest hike to distant past forced me to recount and pen down a travelogue this time.

My latest fascination has been the close-by hilly terrain of Mangalore region, where the Western Ghats end. The latest hike, no wonder, was for one of them: the Kudremukh peak.

The vast region stretching between Dakshin Kannara and Shringeri Taluks is not just a dense forest, but also home to a peculiar hill-chain. This area is aptly known as the Silent Valley. The evergreen 'Shola' forests are part of a big national park known as the Kudremukh National Park. There are many hills in the area. But the whole area derives its name primarily from a majestic peak known as the 'Kudremukh' peak. Kudremukh means horse's head in local language, and indeed the peak, with its head held high at 1894 meters above the sea level, resembles the head of a horse. The height of this peak renders this as the highest point to be conquered by a trekker, in south India. It is claimed that the natural design of the hill-chain is to regulate the monsoon winds, and hence one needs to cross many of these regulating bodies, before reaching the peak. Also claimed by the localites is that lightning strikes the peak whenever it rains, and hence one should do night stay only at one's own risk. No wonder that the complexity of this hike seduced me return to return back to this peak, after 5 years.

The last time i went, i was still an amateur trekker, and i do remember frightening moments during the hike. In fact, i was happy that i could do it along with a gang of eleven, and never thought in my dreams that i will return to this hike. However, one of my close friends asked me to take him on this hike, before i perhaps leave Bangalore for good. One needs a guide to go on this hike, and i recall us getting lost on multiple occasions in year 2000. We were certainly not aware of the fact that starting yr. 2002, guides are made available mandatorily by the forest department. Apart much coaxing, I relented and agreed to take a group to this hike.

The main problem was to accumulate a big crowd, so that we are not only allowed to pass, but also strong enough to fight any potential attack of bison, who roam freely at the top. The bison are at times not visible because of the tall elephant grass, found throughout the terrain. Also, traveling with lesser crowd in a silent valley is not expected to go down well with first-timers. Also, at my age in India, you will rarely find city-slickers willing to walk 3-4 kms on straight path, forget a 16-km long dodgy climb. With few difficulties, and by providing filtered information, i managed to bring along three other friends of mine to this trek, thus making it a crowd of five.

The gang involved Praveen(a fellow trekker for last one-and-half-years), two of my previous colleagues, Jyotirmay and Nitin, and a friend of Nitin, Sajag. The last three people were first-timers, but i must say that they were all kicked at the prospect of their maiden hike. This made most of my job easier: all i needed to do is to lead an already-motivated team, during the actual course of the hike. We left for a town called Samse on Thursday, the thirteenth of January, 2005. We alighted from the bus at a tiny hamlet called Balegal, from where i restarted the trek after five years. Signs of the total recall indeed!

Just before we embarked the bus at Bangalore, i had realized that we will be handicapped from not having a kannada-speaking person in the gang. I had planned for one, but that person had to drop out unfortunately at the last moment. I realized that i might need to speak only few sentences more often in kannada. I called up one of my kannada-speaking friends and made him translate few sentences from kannada to English. This friend went a step ahead, and also helped me mug up few phrases, which might be commonly posed by passers-by. With a simple 5-6 sentence makeshift dictionary, i could help most of the language requirement during the course of our hike and the journey.

We were late to start our hike, because our bus got punctured in the way in midnight, and we lost two precious hours. Last time, in 2000, we started the trek at 6:30 in morning, and reached the peak at 7:00 in evening. Thankfully, that was May, and the day was long enough. This time, it was January, and to top of that, we faced really dense fog, while moving in the bus, close to the base point in early morning. It was around 9:00 AM when we could start the trek. Unless some miracle happens, i thought, we are not gonna make it to the peak in time. Not only we miss out on the real face-off with the nature stretching from a sunset, throughout the night and ending post sunrise the next day, but also that we will have to park at some unknown location in between the jungles. The responsibilities of leading through these risks made me quite shaky, but thankfully i kept my calm, and urged the team to simply carry on. I set the first target of 6:00 PM for reaching the peak, which itself meant that we take very few breaks. Right at the start, we had to cross a flowing stream. Rocks were placed along a curved line, so that people can hop over them, and cross the stream. Unfortunately, i slipped on one rock, which was not flat, and both my shoes and socks got soaked. Having no time to deal with that, even if it rubs into the softened skin, we just moved on. Yet another sign of things growing tougher!

The initial trail was quite broad and clear, and we learnt that jeeps indeed travel now-a-days, on this trail, up to some point half the distance of the overall hike. Many people prefer to take that, after which the jungle guards/guides take over. Also, the law has been modified so that taking a guide past this mid-point has been made mandatory. I had learnt about most of these changes in Bangalore itself. But my idea was to make the hike really wild, i.e. to test our self-reliance in the face of uncertainties, and not a guided tour or picnic. Problems in such goal manifested later, when we crossed the newly set forest guards' camp.

Crossing the initial four-five kilometers was not much of a problem. We kept on meeting mountain-side farmers, and occasionally, a beautiful, charming mountain(or rustic) girl. Few falls, and picturesque landscape of contour agriculture made the passage even livelier. All this kept us amused for some time. We had a good breakfast of milk, buns, cheese spread and few more items. Though most of us had a night-out while traveling in the last seat of a jostling bus, we felt our batteries getting re-charged. With fresh energy, we moved on thinking that there is more beauty of the trail to unravel!

Unfortunately very soon, we were out of the initial arbor-like path, and entered the vast glade through which the trail passed. All we had was shrubs and elephant grass alongside the trail. The sun had started heating up. We were also picking up our speed, and the next target was revised for 5:00 PM. At times, we would stop, wash our faces in many of the accessible streams, which crossed our trail. Few of us also put sunscreen lotion on our faces, because we had miles to cross in burning sun. Any signs of civilization vanished in thin air, and for next few hours, we were all alone by ourselves. Along the path, we also came across milestones put by the proactive forest guards, to help any new traveler. Though the path was

partly known to me, it made the job little easier. This time, overall, i lost path only five times: thrice while ascending, and twice while descending. We were warned earlier that the forest range hut was about to come.

I had missed out on some of the worrying mails sent by team, a day ago. So, we already had a communication gap existing. All i thought is that we need to buy passes this time, and which to my knowledge was the only thing to do at the range office. I had not realized that staying at the top was banned now. According to me, there is no fun of taking so much pains to be at top, if one cannot sit down face-to-face especially from evening to morning, with nature. If one is sitting alone, it can tantamount to those spiritual moments, most of which one reads only in religious books, or hears in some discourses. Worse, i did not realize that hiring a guide has been made mandatory. It could have been for either reason: to make money, or to ensure safe return-to-roost-by-the-night of puerile hikers like me. So, while few of my colleagues grew apprehensive as we approached the office, i carelessly disowned their concerns. It actually worked.

At the range office, the attending guard continuously asked me to take a guide. And i continuously kept on telling him that i have been before, so I don't need a guide. After repeating for quite some time, he gave up. But he strictly said that we need to be back near the office, as the night falls. We falsely agreed that we will be back. But i am sure he could make out looking at me, how earnest my agreement was, when i was hell-bent to spend the night at the top, taking all kinds of risks.

With few more small breaks, and judging by the distance noted on the milestones, we had made around 10 kms of journey by 1:00 PM. Many of us (but not me) thought that we will make the rest 6 kms by 4:00 PM. I kept on pleading that we should take lunch, as tougher terrain awaited next. But the mates told that taking lunch at this point will make them sluggish, and we will get late in reaching at the top. Looking back, they were right; carrying on without getting covered by the problems lying ahead showed maturity on their behalf. We kept moving, having crossed a shaky wooden bridge made of few felled logs. There were few now-known huts in the way. One landmark hut is known as the "Lobo's house", named after the priest who was in charge of a hut-cum-chapel close by. Near the chapel, we had little more food, but not lunch. The remaining distance, four kilometers, and some of us even wondered if we will be at top by 3:00 PM. It was here that we first got a clear view of the majestic horse's mouth and neck. Going just 100 meters ahead, people found out that the rest of the hike is a climb, with gradient being a minimum of 30 degrees. And that there is no shade along the trail, as usual. Phew!

In that dead heat, we climbed another mountain. Some of the limbs of ours had started making creaking sounds, but we carried on. By the time we reached the top of this mountain, we were exhausted. We saw a solitary tree, and almost dashed towards it to lie down. One of us saw a snake under it, which crept in the grass around the tree root, as we lunged. I was so tired that i moved into this grass, even as people told me of a snake around. Fortunately for us, the snake had perhaps moved further away. We had our lunch there. We also crossed a team of sixteen localites, who perhaps started later than us, but were really dashing along the path. They sheepishly enquired with us whether we also wanted to stay up. Perhaps they did not want to take the risk of being caught red-handed. Even before we could start again, they just surged ahead on the path. Perhaps they must be classified along with the legendary Sherpa community of the northern Himalayas, in terms of their agility and strength.

Rest of the hike was a familiar story: more breaks, more water getting used, and steeper hike. During the last stage, the trail was barely visible, and we had to discover our way. The hike was steep, close to 50 degrees. This was unlike the path of 70-80 degrees which was close by, and which i had taken in year 2000. One of the team members developed knee problem. The tendons of my left knee were also tired: and my pace had dropped quite a lot. Slowly but steadily, we kept on moving. And at 4:10 PM sharp, all of us were at the plateau, where we would camp on the night. For next twenty minutes, most of us were just lying on the plateau, trying to catch a nap, while the sun baked our injured muscles.

Though in year 2000, i had parked on the same plateau, i wanted to explore a better parking place. This plateau was not exactly flat, and it was more like an uneven bed of rock-plates. If one lied down, one was certain to feel lying on uneven surface. Sleeping on such surface was never so easy. I scouted around for a better place, but could not find any better location. Tired, I came back and lie down among the resting crowd.

The sense of time running out dawned to Jyotirmay, and he literally dragged me into the forests for collection of firewood. The heights of Kudremukh is home to many a bisons, or the Nilgiri Gaurs, who are gigantic creatures. Though not aggressive, an animal cannot be predicted. One of the ways to keep them away was to have a fire going throughout the night. We also needed some firewood to cook our dinner. In the nearby forest at the top, we gathered a lot of firewood. We stacked it during the next one hour, and lie down again.

The sun was setting. The better view could have only come while perched atop the horse's neck/mouth, which was a kilometer away from the plateau. Yet again, a salute to the unflinching determination of Jyotirmay, who hounded us to make together, a sunset visit to the actual peak. We left our baggage behind, and managed to climb the actual peak. All along the path and even at the top, we could find bison's dry dung. On second thoughts, perhaps nature did a favor to humankind by making the dwelling of these creatures at hilltops. Had they been part of plains, life would have been tougher for either species. Anyway, we witnessed the sunset and the twilight for some time. A less strong breeze was blowing at the peak, which was unexpected. After taking some photos, we made our way back to the camping place.

From a set of flat rocks lying around, we made our makeshift hearth. Having finished that, we spent some of our time trying to decipher patterns of star in the sky. As time progressed, the sky grew brighter, and denser with stars. It is possible because of the clean air, and lack of any other form of light, which outshines their twinkles. After some time, we thought that the time was ripe to light the fire. But at the same time, we saw some lights moving down the valley. We first thought that the forest guards were going on a search-and-rescue, having read through our ploy. We were not sure how will we face them. We decided to postpone lighting of fire, and carefully observe the movement of light-balls. Only after a while, we realized that it could be just a minor movement of locals down the valley. We heaved a sigh of relief, and tried to burn the fire.

Having learnt from previous experiences, i typically carry good ration of petrol to kindle and maintain the night fire, in case the firewood is not dry. This time, while trying to rouse the initial small flame of fire, I accidentally poured it right from the bottle. In a flash, the bottle in my hand had caught fire. That is because petrol being highly volatile, the vapors of petrol caught fire all along the line-of-pouring, thus reaching the source. Luckily, in a blink of the eye, i gutted the fire on the surface by a very strong puff. My team was stunned; most people

thought that by few moments, a bottle-blast was averted. I still don't know whether bottle blasts in such a case; all i knew was that if fire is on surface, it can be blown out by a high dose of carbon dioxide. Something saved the day or me.

We then cooked Maggi and certain MTR rice, and had it with some other items. Three of us then shared a liter of milk, to top that. We had worked out four-hour sessions for patrolling; mine falling between the tough 12:00 AM to 4:00 AM period. So at 9:00 PM, i just dashed into my sleeping bag. Without bothering much about uneven surface, i was asleep in few minutes. Even with a broken sleep for next three hours, i could recharge some of my batteries.

At 12:00 sharp, I took over the patrol party. After a while, Jyotirmay joined it. Chilling wind, as expected, was blowing throughout the night, and only proximity to fire would have saved us from its fury. Though his leg still hurting, it was amazing to see him diligently keep the fire alive for next four hours. Personally, knowing that the whole world is asleep, i tried to keep Jyotirmay amused by singing first few lines of many-a-hindi songs in donkey's tune. Thankfully, he did not kick me into the valley. We kept on checking for possible bison attack, but at some point, became perhaps too careless. It was later that we realized that things were perhaps tighter than we took them. Early morning, when Praveen took over from us, i went into two hours of broken sleep again.

I was woken up early morning, with some mates claiming that sunrise was close by. Grudgingly, i pulled myself out of the sleeping bag. The sun was not there. However, i could see the now-so-common sight of flood-of-cloud swirling between mountains. In few minutes, the sun showed a bit of its face from the eastern horizon. In a minute, the whole world around me got filled with dim red light. A minute further, its face came out more, and the color of the world around me changed to deep copper. Even a minute further, the sun was half out, and the color had changed into dusky orange. I witnessed such phenomenon first time in my trekking career. In a moment, Praveen and I decide to race towards the peak, a kilometer ahead. We wanted to capture the beauty of the moment from the top of the world! We literally raced to the top, all the while colors of the world changing around us. By the time we reached the peak, it was dark orange. Slowly we saw various mountains getting lit up by the sun, while the strong early morning breeze rang around our ears. There hasn't been any trek, on which I have not discovered some mesmerizing new phenomenon of nature, and this was one of them. Though captured some part in camera, only the human memory can store the entire process of charming.

It was 8:00 AM by the time we returned to our camping point, and the sun had already started becoming hotter. We doused the fire with all the water we had, so that any chances of jungle fire is removed. There was dry grass all over the plateau, and the chances of it catching fire were quite high. It was then that Praveen saw fresh dung of bison some 100 meters away from where we were sleeping. The color of the dung suggested that it is indeed less than a day old. I did not use the widespread method of sensing the heat by dipping the finger, to predict the time when the bison did that. But i still believe that it was done just before we made it to the top, a day before. If i were wrong, then the bison must have done it in the night. I tried to put it aside, hoping that we escaped it anyway, but that was again not to be.

We started our way back from the top, albeit a bit slow, owing to the knee injury to Jyotirmay. Having descended along the steep trail for a while, we stopped at a point. From

there we could see a lone Nilgiri Gaur grazing below us, at some 300 meters distance. For a while, we just looked at him, and then moved on along the serpentine trail hereafter. At the next turn, however, suddenly our feet froze. We realized that the point where the bison was grazing, falls very close to the trail we were taking. We could not see him from this point; there was high elephant grass around. After a while, we decided not to take much risk, and take a detour with around sixty degree gradient. This was tough, but we had no option. We shut ourselves up, so that we do not ruffle the bison. Slowly and very cautiously, we descended. The next descend was even more steep, and we hardly had an option. We took the risk, and very quietly moved along the trail again. When we reached near the point where we had located the bison, we could not see him. We collectively heaved a sigh of relief, and slowly moved on.

During further descend, we suddenly came across a migrating swarm of honeybees. Unfortunately I was caught in the middle. I instinctively lie down in a flash, allowing the swarm to pass over me. However, a wayward bee just dashed against my forehead, and stung me. I have messed up with bees before, so i immediately pulled out the bee, but its sting got inserted in the skin by that time. I pulled the sting out as well. Luckily, all this happened fast, so the venom did not spread much. Well, i thought, it cannot happen that any trek or hike ever goes insipid for me; something or the other always happens, and keeps it spicy.

We also came across the forest guards, who knew that we had broached the law. But perhaps they had given up. They asked us to write down a feedback about the trek. We gave them a rave review. Indeed, looking back, their toil and discipline has made the trek more amenable to normal hikers, and novices.

We reached the base point at 4:00 PM. We had finished all our food rations, and were hungry by that time. It was quite an odd time, and nobody especially in villages will put fire in their hearths at this time. After much begging, one gentleman asked his mother to cook for us. We ran into language issues here. Half of the time, her grown-up daughters would laugh at the situation: hungry people want food, but cannot exactly specify what and how much they want. I managed to arbitrate with her using my limited kannada vocabulary. The vegetable curry served to us was cooked according to typical Mangalore cuisine. We ate voraciously, as if it was an early dinner. We changed multiple buses before coming back to bangalore, 4:00 AM the next day. Interestingly, one of the buses got punctured yet again on our way back home.

In retrospective, this was indeed a total recall to nature, only the team accompanying was totally different. I also managed to plan and execute the hike really fast this time, thus adding to my confidence of leading expeditions. The next hike is planned for two weeks in July in Himalayas, and that will perhaps be the real test, if it materializes(getting leaves, ...). Till then, perhaps yours truly will be forced to dwell in the constraints of city life, carrying out his mundane chores.