

**Basic Mountaineering Course**

**(B.M.C.)**

**At**

**Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports**

**(D.M.A.S.)**

**Manali**

**(Formerly Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute)**

**July 2006**



## Travelogue

**28<sup>th</sup> June 2006 – Wednesday**

Paschim Express started from the Bandra Terminus at 11:35 and I as usual reached Just-in-Time for the train to start. I wondered as to why the luggage compartment was the sixth from the engine, when someone provided the answer – only the first six compartments would be going to Chandigarh and later Kalka from Ambala Cantonment. The rest of the train would go to Amritsar or Pathankot, I don't know where.

Ketan and I then made the mistake of having total faith on the sincerity of the pantry staff of the Indian Railways. We blindly ordered all our meals without even enquiring about the rates. The food in the simple vegetarian meal was fortunately edible though we ended up paying Rs.48 per meal! We were 12 of us from the Indian Institute of Technology in this same train and that was the real fun. Most of the guys were freshies and to be sophomores. The first lunch was served at Dahanu, while tea, coffee and cold drinks simply flowed on. Paresh, my former room-mate and colleague came to meet me at Baroda station at 17:30. I was seeing him after almost a year and a half, after his marriage actually. We had a good laugh on all the memories of all the amazing things we'd done when at Ahmedabad in 2003-04. Dinner was supposed to be served at Dahod in Gujarat state at about 21:00, but there seemed to be some problem. Dinner finally arrived when the train stopped at Meghnagar in Madhya Pradesh state at about 22:00. Saw Dev Anand's duplicate at Ratlam (and there seemed to be a small crowd following him, some fan following).

I spent most of my time sleeping it off in the train later as this was just the kind of break I very much required between my really hectic M.Tech thesis submission, its presentation and the killing grind of the BMC, that all its previous participants had told me all about. I'd heard that IITians were the outcasts at DMAS, Manali due to some crazy things done by some of the guys at BMC 2005. We therefore had to be a lot more cautious now.

**29<sup>th</sup> June 2006 – Thursday**

We had some really nice junta in our cubicle up to Delhi. Nice as in, they kept offering us some really good food stuff they were carrying ;). I called my hostel neighbour, Manmohan Gurjar as we approached Delhi. And Monu actually traveled quite some distance and came to the station. I felt so nice on seeing him and talking to him. It rekindled all those memories of hostel 4, when both of us would just talk and argue for hours in the corridors of 1<sup>st</sup> floor, new wing.

As the train started from Delhi, a few police constables joined us in our cubicle as the wonderful family (having great food stuff had got off). These guys, who were definitely off duty, were to escort us to Sonapat in Haryana state. To pass their time, they started off on “Seep” - a card game. Mind you, it is illegal to play cards on Indian Railways; in fact it’s a punishable offence. And here we had cops dishing out a hand or two, garnished with the choicest of expletives. Ketan seemed to have enough of it; he simply went to the upper berth and dozed off. I was on the other hand on the door of the compartment, enjoying the view of the expansive fields of the “grain bowl” of India – the main food grain producing states of India, Punjab and Haryana. Also, the names of the stations are so cute like Sandal Kalan, Chann Arorian, et al.

We finally did reach Chandigarh at 15:30. As soon as we alighted from the train, we were surrounded by hoards of rickshaw and taxi drivers, all trying their best to “bag” us in their respective vehicles. We managed to finally stop their in-fighting and finally reach our destination, the Chandigarh bus stand. We were joined by 2 more guys, Sachin Jadhav and Prateesh Sane from Mumbai and they too were heading for DMAS, Manali for BMC. The 14 of us now split ourselves into 4 groups and enquired about all the bus operators and services to Manali. I preferred the Government bus service as it offered the security that was required on the narrow and winding roads on the mountains of Himachal Pradesh. Ketan, Milind and Kanishka booked our tickets on the Chandigarh Transport Undertaking bus, which was to start from this same bus stand at 17:30. That gave us a full 3 hours to have a look at this beautiful city planned by the master French town planner, La Corbusier but first things first – food and that too fantastic Punjabi food. We gorged on the fantastic chole-bhature at the dhaba in the bus stand complex.

We then kept our luggage at the cloak room and proceeded to enjoy the wonderful sites in Chandigarh.

We visited the Rose Garden, which is hardly a kilometer from the bus stand. But unfortunately, it hasn't been maintained well. Many of the rose plants have withered away. But the best thing about this city is its members of the fairer sex. And the girls stare at you like you're ice candy and they look you in the eye! None of us missed this, ☺ it was glaring in fact. On our way back, we passed by the DSP's office, it's an amazingly beautiful building!

The bus to Manali started at 20:00. We passed right through Chandigarh and then took the road to the North. The route we were to take would take us through one of the most beautiful highways India has. Not to mention that the road is quite dangerous as well, what with it being a mountain highway.

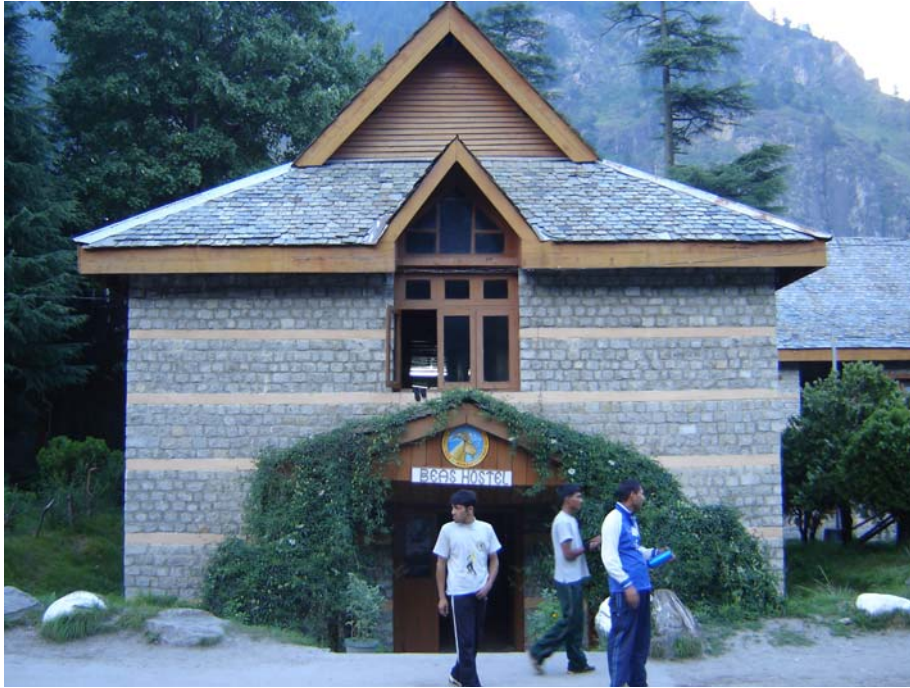
**30<sup>th</sup> June 2006 – Friday**

Our first stopover was at Ropar (Roopnagar) at 00:00. In fact we were on the Ropar bypass. I had tea and biscuits at the dhaba and the tea weren't good at all. The next halt was at Mandi at 02:30 and this place reminded me of Gulzar's movie Namkeen, which was based entirely in this town. I was humming the song from this movie "Hum toh safar karte hain" all the way. I didn't sleep a wink. The next stop was at Kullu at 04:15 and we finally reached Manali at 05:45. We took a rickshaw to DMAS, hardly a 15 minute ride from the bus stand in the centre of the Manali town. The institute is at a location called Aleo Manali on the left bank of the river Beas. Aleo in the Pahadi language means "Open and unused land".



We had our breakfast – fantastic aloo paranthas at the institute mess, a beautiful wooden structure which seemed to have been recently built. We just dozed off after breakfast as all of us knew that we'd have to face the grind within less than 24 hours. Lunch was at a dhaba close by – butter rotis, paneer sabzi and yellow dal (arharki). Food here wasn't up to the mark and I was already comparing the food here with that in Punjab during my last visit there. There seemed to be just no comparison at all. Spent the afternoon in the Manali market simply window shopping. I needed a good haircut and so started on my

way back and had one at the barber's shop outside the institute. I guess this was one of the best haircuts I've had in my life....the best is of course the one I'd had at Ahmedabad when I'd been there for Paresh's marriage. The only bad thing was that I had to have a cold water bath on getting back to the dormitory, that too at 19:00. The geyser just wasn't doing its job...I guess it was helping me in the acclimatization process ;)



The dinner alarm was sounded at 19:30 and it was simply too good with cabbage sabzi, rotis, rice and dal. We had a “fall-in” at 20:15...the first of many more to follow during the period of this course. Ashutosh Juwale (as usual) had some stupid queries, which the instructor answered sincerely (for the first and the last time I think☺). We were given our schedule for the Day 1 of BMC in the following manner: “05:00 bed tea – By bed tea it does not mean that someone comes and gives you tea in your bed. You have to go to the mess and have it yourself. Next fall-in at 05:30, good night.” This meant I'd have to sleep asap. I'm going to miss the soccer World Cup - Argentina v/s Germany...<subak subak>.

## 1<sup>st</sup> July 2006 – Saturday – Day 1

The day dawned at 04:45 for me with Vishal Anand (from Lahaul) waking me up. Oops I guess I forgot to mention the guys in my dorm room D2. Beas Hostel. We were 9 of us – Ketan Detroja (Vihar House), Suzuki Moondra (H13), Ankit Madhogadia (H4), Aman Malhotra (H8), Milind Gadre (H3, now H7), Kanishka Kamble (H4, now H8), Manish (H3, now H7), Vishal Anand (the only non-IITian and as I've mentioned from Lahaul in Himachal) and myself. Of all these guys, only Ankit and I had set our mobile alarms for everyone to wake up and were the only one's to sleep till almost 04:45. ☺ We toddled off to the mess for the morning doze of tea only to find it locked. We found a number of liquor bottles outside the mess, which were an indication of the DMAS staff enjoying a party the previous night.



The fall-in was perfectly on time though at 05:30. The instructor (Ramesh Thakur) said, “Today being Day 1, exercises will be light.” And were they light!! A heavy warm up followed by an almost 4km jog on the slopes of Aleo Manali. We did not return to the institute directly, we were instead taken to the pine forest behind the institute on the banks of the river Beas. Madan Dogra Sir then taught us some really tough stretching exercises there. We returned only at 07:30 after a 2 hour grind. Breakfast, which consisted of simply aloo sabzi and puri's, tasted really good after the tiring session.

We had the course registration at 10:00. I met the Advanced Mountaineering Course senior Mr. Seshadri and he had loads of advice for us. He himself was aged 38 years, was earlier in the merchant navy and now a financial consultant. The talk with him certainly lifted my spirits and I certainly now knew that I could complete this course. We were

issued all our equipment for the course including a 60litre rucksack except for the snow boots and ice crampons. Lunch was at 13:00 and the next fall-in was scheduled at 15:15. We were asked to assemble on the basketball court behind our Beas Hostel.

Mr. Gulia, the Chief Instructor of the BMC then asked us all to assemble according to our states of origin. I observed that we were almost 98 of us and a few more were to join us this evening. We were then divided into 2 groups and 16 ropes (sub-groups) such that every group had atleast one person from the host state HP (as these guys hail from the hills and are really tough) thus making the ropes well equally balanced in that respect. My rope consisted of Santhosh Devarajappa (Bangalore, rope leader), Chander Paul (Dharamshala, HP), Ravdeep Singh (Barnala, Punjab), Vibhas Kumar (Bihar, IIT) and Jagannath Sethi (Orissa, NCC). Our rope instructor was Ghanshyam Thakur, who'd been with the institute for over 25 years. There were almost 11 guys from NCC...and some of them were absolute samples, atleast from the first impression. At 17:00, we had a session on rope knots, which was really interesting. Narendar Thakur, our instructor had this really cute style of lecturing and he'd allow us to complete the last few words of all important sentences and then he'd repeat them.☺ The demonstration was also really good and it showcased almost all the knots that we'd have to use during this course. We were let off at 18:30 with the fatwa,"Go wherever you want but you have to be here for dinner." i.e. be back by 19:30.

Ketan, Kanishka, Milind and I rushed to the market as these guys had some purchases to make. I was just interested in having an egg omelet, which I did have near the main Beas bridge, near the Mall steps and that too amazing quality. I was alone on my way back and slightly late and this is where my hitchhiking skill came in good use. I was picked by this Sumo which dropped me at the institute gate at 19:25. I was at the dinner table right on the dot only to that the food was terrible.

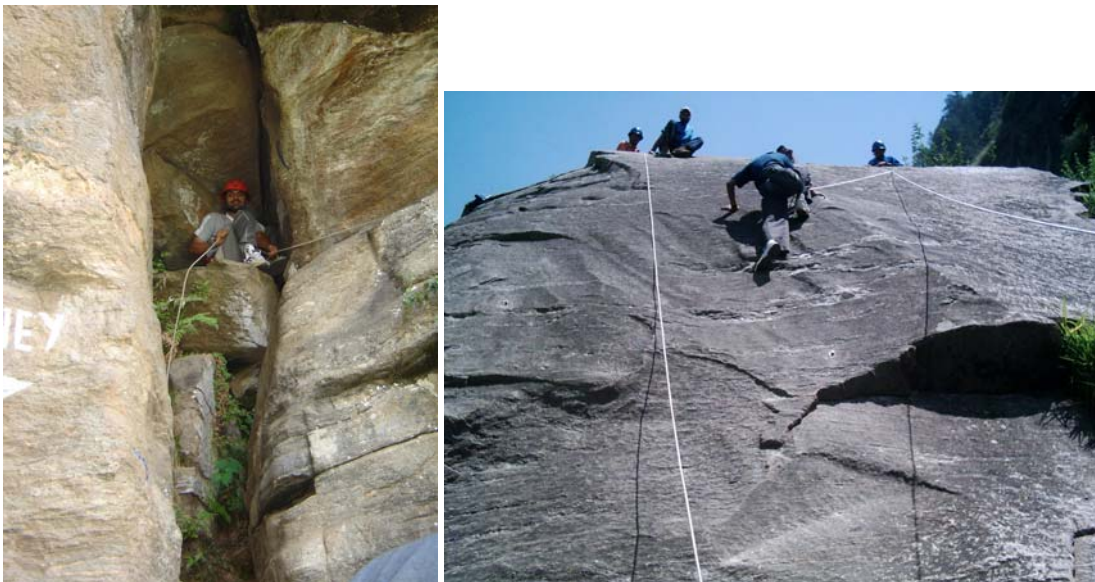
I was back in room D2 to check out the missed calls on my mobile as I hardly carried it during the daytime. There was this call from Nisha and when I called back she (as usual) had an awesome question on hearing that I'd come to Manali. She asked, "So how is the view from the top?" ☺

I was quite tired and I think I slept with the Agatha Christie novel in my hands...



## 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2006 – Sunday – Day 2

The day begins with Milind waking me up at 05:30. I guess the 05:00 rooster alarm just went cock-a-doodle with minimum results on my slumber. But I did get my first bed tea today. The fall-in was at 05:45 sharp and then there was the 6km jog and a tough exercise session. We had loads of activities during the daytime – rock climbing (lecture and practice) in the morning session followed by rucksack packing in the post-lunch session by Ramesh Thakur and finally a lecture on mountain hazards by Sandeep Kumar (lovingly called Sandy Sir). I think this was going to the standard time-table at Manali as part of the acclimatization and training process.



The day was cool actually....learnt a lot of things. The rock climbing session was really good as I was able to climb almost all rock patches with the correct techniques. Also picked up a few new points from the experienced instructors here who're really helpful when approached with good queries. These points will certainly be really helpful on the small treks we take up on the Sahyadris. The day was cool alright but it certainly was tiring. I could feel the strain in the muscles when sleeping but knew that these energy sapping exercises and practice routines would only help me build my stamina. I just hoped that I could withstand all this strain over the complete course duration.

Our rope had a new member today - Paramjit Singh (SoM, IIT). That made us 7 of us in the Rope 1 of Group 1.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2006 – Monday – Day 3

Today's the first day that I got up thanks to my own alarm at 04:50, had my doze of the mixture of water, milk, sugar and I forgot a little bit tea....which was supposed to be called tea. The jogging was a bit more today, approximately 7 km up to Holiday Inn. The exercise session was also quite tough. But this now did not really make a difference a km here or there and a little more of exercise would only help us withstand the harsh climes and work we had to do in the tough terrain of Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal.



The morning session of rock climbing today was on the 50ft high wall behind the institute auditorium, which had artificial holds and pitons. This looked easy because the holds were clearly visible and we only needed to get to it. But hell....the amount of arm power it needed was amazing. It required us to lift out entire body weight using our arms....I remembered that I could hardly ever cross the number 4 when doing pull-ups and this was a full 50ft wall. I managed to get to almost the top somehow, taking a lot of breaks (which was not bad actually as many couldn't go beyond half the wall height).

The afternoon session was on mountain manners by Narendar Thakur, held in the pine forest in the campus. And I started dosing here too....and I'd thought I could doze only in classroom lectures ☺....This course was certainly revealing too. In the post tea session, we had the lecture on avalanches in the auditorium, which was really interesting as it

included avalanche formation as well as methods of protecting oneself from this hazardous phenomenon.

We had some free time after the lecture and as usual I felt like having an omelet. So as usual, I rushed to the Manali market and had a fantastic omelet-bread at the base of the mall road. I just hoped that the institute started providing us with eggs atleast for breakfasts. I found that I could gobble down a sumptuous dinner easily in spite of having that omelet, testimonial of the increase in my appetite already!

Overall, the day was great and not to mention strenuous.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Tuesday – Day 4**

We were asked to fall-in at 05:45 sharp with our rucksacks packed fully. Hidimba Mata Mandir is approximately a 3km trek from the institute, not much really after 3 days of heavy jogs and exercise sessions. But with the rucksacks and loads of about 25kg even these 3km felt like 5km, especially the steps from the base of the hill to the temple. The trek back to the campus was downhill and posed not much of a challenge.



The morning rock climbing session introduced us to the safety aspects, using the belay drills, and use of rock anchors. Today too I could scale all the rock patches quite easily. The afternoon session was on the Himalaya by Capt. Randheer Singh Saluria, Dy. Dir of DMAS. We then went to the institute museum and Sandy Sir made this session really interesting with his anecdotes and excellent information.

We then had a glimpse of the “dreaded” obstacle course. We luckily had to do just one round of it today. But even this one round seemed to get the pulp out of us, especially scaling the wall, which had 3 levels 1m, 2m and 3m. I could scale the 2m height albeit with a little difficulty.

The day passed coolly, slight pain in the shoulders and feet – rest all in peace.

## 5<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Wednesday – Day 5

Today was the coolest day of the course so far, although we trekked almost 7km in the morning. The rappelling session in the morning was absolute fun and no pains. It was almost a 200ft rock patch that we had to rappel down using the mechanical method i.e. using the descender and without the rucksack on our backs, it was peace. We also did the shoulder and arm rappelling styles on smaller rock patches. The afternoon session was a reading session in the library, which has one of the best books on mountaineering I've ever seen. We then had a lecture on weather and its forecasting by Mr. Gulia. The evening session was then entirely on knots.



The day therefore passed of coolly. Now, I felt that I'd got used to lifting the 20-25kg rucksack and trekking on all the sloping roads of Manali. The big question was whether I could repeat all this in the rugged terrain of Lahaul. With the kind of effort I was putting in, I felt confident about completing this course successfully. The only doubt was about my fitness, which I'd have to maintain in this same manner all through the remaining 21 days. Even a small sprain could put those brakes. So I had to be really careful not to over-strain myself.

It was France v/s Portugal tonight....and I do hope that Portugal get through. We couldn't even see a minute of the World Cup matches thanks to our schedule. We got the news results of the matches via sms though. I hoped that these sacrifices paid off. ☺

## **6<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Thursday – Day 6**

The fall-in today was a bit delayed at 06:00 and the morning walk too wasn't really strenuous. By this statement I mean that there was no exercise session after the walk, although the walk was certainly more than usual about 9km – we touched the outer limits of Manali literally, with our full rucksacks of course. I had an amazingly heavy breakfast today what with sandwiches, eggs and porridge.

The morning session comprised of rock climbing. The main difference today was that our instructor today was Jagat Sir and this actually brought out the best performance from all of us. Jagat Sir has such a wonderful way of demonstrating the techniques and explaining even the smallest of details that it made all of us get to the summit of every rock patch with absolute ease. He made us “eye-climb” every rock patch carefully before starting the ascent. He also made us climb every rock patch using 3-4 routes, each of which we had to search ourselves! I just hoped that our Ghanshyam Sir would stay absent for the rest of the course. ☺

In the afternoon, we had our first rope knot test and our Rope 1 stood 4<sup>th</sup>. I screwed up in the triple bowline knot...and that was stupid of me, I thought I knew this one really well though I hadn't practiced it with the long rope. After tea we had our 4 rounds of the obstacle course. Man! This was killing...especially crossing the dum dum wall. But thankfully today too, I could cross the middle section of the wall with ease in all the 4 rounds.

7<sup>th</sup> was declared as “Adam's Day” i.e. a complete rest day. This was mainly for everybody to make all the purchases for the next phase of the course which was to comprise of the really tough camp in the Lahoul and Spiti district. Peace man! A day off after 6 grueling days and I seriously didn't know what I'd do with so many hours on hand. I'd check my e-mail for sure....this is one thing that IIT Bombay has forced into our systems. ☺

## 7<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Friday – Day 7 – Adam's Day

Aaj Adam's Day hai ..... aaj din mein bhi aaram karne ka day hai! But hell...I've got used to getting up early man! As usual I woke up at 05:00 and I seriously made an effort to sleep again, was successful and finally woke up at 07:30, just in time for the breakfast. The chana masala, bhatura and dahi was great.....in fact, I've begun to enjoy the food being cooked in the mess here....don't know how ☺



At about 09:30 we left our hostel for the Manali market. We had quite a bit of purchases to make for the Spiti camp – band-aids, toilet paper, whistle (in case of benightment), woolen socks, Micoderm (to fight the fungus during the zero-bath days☺), et al. But first things first – e-mail and then bought all the stuff in the list. We had amazing sarson da saag and makki di roti for lunch at a Punjabi restaurant in the Manali market. I finally bought a camera, a simple KB10....I just couldn't resist the temptation of snapping those wonderful sights that nature had to offer and taking these memories to good ol' Bombay. I had a neat and clean shave at the barber's shope outside DMAS. The Tibetan kid who'd come for a haircut there was amazingly smart....wont forget the way he was taking the barber's head-on ☺

In the morning, before leaving the hostel, I'd seen the map of Manali which Aman had. I had noticed that there were 2 suspension bridges on the road to Naggar. So I made this plan of visiting atleast one of these sites. I left the institute at 16:45 and being a good hitchhiker that I am, I could afford to leave slightly late. ☺ And as usual I got a lift from

these 2 locals, who were transporting some fans to some place on way to Naggar. I started a chat with them and got to know that they were regularly employed by Kesari Tours, Mumbai for their package tours. I told them that I was a Civil Engineer and had to inspect these two bridges. They kept saying, “Aage toh sirf simple bridge hain koi special bridge nahi hai saab”. They had to stop mid-way, so guess what they do? They indicated to another vehicle to stop and told the driver, “Engineer saab bridge dekhna chahte hain, inko le chalo.” Amazing man....Engineer saab par kya bharosa! I thanked these guys and got into this other vehicle. This guy was driving like crazy! On the narrow, winding roads of Manali, this guy was speeding at approximately 100kmph. I was looking out for a suspension bridge, but couldn't spot even a single bridge, forget about a suspension bridge. Almost 20km from Manali, we arrived at this place called Jagatsukh. As we neared this place, there were 2-3 bridges across the Beas, but 2 of them were N-type truss bridges and one was a Pratt truss bridge. I gave up on going after the suspension bridge. Instead, I decided to go and see the blasting work on the Allain-Duhangan hydroelectric power project. A road was being constructed to reach the top of the hill, where I guess, a series of check dams were to come up. Beas was now in full flow and even s I was on the N-type bridge, I could feel the force of the wind which brought with it droplets from the river over the bridge....I in fact could have got blown away here if I hadn't held on to the railing.



Jagatsukh had some beautiful, old temples – one Gayatri Devi mandir and one Shiva temple, both over a 3 centuries old wooden structures. The idol of Gayatri devi was



swayambhu and the priestess there was so old, she must've been over 80 years old. The priestess at the Shiva temple, who was equally old surprisingly, was carrying a mobile.



I got the 18:00 bus back to Aleo Manali. With wonderful apple orchards on both sides of the road, this journey was truly a visual treat. I only hoped that the apples ripened by the time we would get back from our Spiti camp. They looked so damn juicy on those trees now. I was back in the hostel by 18:45, JIT for the evening fall-in at 19:00 (which was just a formality). Sandy Sir only enquired about what we did all day and of course gave us the schedule for the 8<sup>th</sup>. We would be visiting the Shabari Mata mandir early tomorrow morning and then we would have the river crossing session. How exciting!

## 8<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Saturday – Day 8

It's a Saturday today and ironically the most important phase of the Basic Mountaineering Course – July 2006 starts today. ☺ After almost a 5km trek with our not-so-heavy-now rucksacks, we arrived at one of the most beautiful locations I've ever been to – Shabari Mata mandir. And it took us almost an hour to get to this place as it was uphill almost all the way. At 06:20 in the morning, the view from here was absolutely breathtaking! The doors of the sanctum sanctorum hadn't opened as yet. But this location was simply AWESOME! The trek was dead tiring, but I just kept going on and on using the best formula ever – kept a watch on the orange slacks of Ravdeep, who was right ahead of me and saw to it that I never lost sight of them. We returned back almost immediately as there was river crossing to do, which would take a lot of our time today. We reached the institute by 07:40.



The next fall-in was at 08:30 for which we were perfectly on-time. But we left for the banks of the Beas only at 09:30. The Beas was in full spate, and hence we decided to cross a branch of the same river, which also touches the institute campus. Jagat Sir chose just the right spot to cross the river by throwing heavy stones and hearing the sound of the splash. Our instructor, Madan Dogra first demonstrated the technique by using the double belay method. We then started crossing the chilled waters. We had a single belay, but we also had a rope which we could hold on to. On our way back from the other bank, we used the monkey crawl method, which was really exciting. We then also did the “float”, in which we went to the middle of the river, where the depth of the water was slightly higher. Here, we had a rope tied round our waist, but it was really loose. We then

had to let ourselves loose, and let the river take us along with its full force, till the belay tightened and pulled us back. This was an absolutely thrilling experience. We also did the chain crossing – 3 of us on the same belay rope, Ashok, Vedang and me. On our way back from the opposite bank, I lost my balance; fell into the water, almost lost my floaters and for a moment I'd thought that I was gone. 😊. Thankfully, the belay was tight and thanks to the bowline knot, I was back on the rocky bank. After staying in the icy waters for those 10 whole minutes, my entire body went numb. I had to literally sit on the warm rocks for sometime in order to get back to normalcy. 😊



We had the obstacle race in the afternoon...5 rounds this time. And this time, our Rope 1 stood 4<sup>th</sup> again. And I was dead slow today, God alone knows why? But one thing for sure now, my endurance limit had certainly increased to unbelievable levels...I did the entire course non-stop...and moreover, I was even encouraging Paramjit all along. The evening was free...and thankfully so after quite a hectic day.

In the night we had a movie show and I just couldn't believe it! Sylvester Stallone's "Cliffhanger" was shown in the auditorium...I was seeing this movie after almost 5 years and I really enjoyed it although it was the Hindi dubbed version.

This was certainly one of the best days I'd spent at DMAS, Manali. Tomorrow we were to visit the Sayali Mahadev mandir early in the morning and then it would be jummaring in the morning session. Waiting to have a go at it...

## 9<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Sunday – Day 9

It was a very cloudy day and it was about to rain. I guess that God's were happy with our work and wanted us to have a day off or atleast a break from the early morning walks with the heavy rucksacks. But no...our instructors were a determined lot and they insisted on going against God's wishes ☺...datke humaare peeche padey. We were up at 05:00 and the fall-in was held at 05:30 as usual. The trek to Sayali Mahadev Mandir was luckily just about 3km. And this temple was really beautiful. Most importantly, we were in the clouds when we reached there...and we could almost feel the water vapour condense on our bodies. ☺ We couldn't stay there for long as we knew that there would be a downpour anytime now. Before we started, Madan Sir said in his usual monotone, "Jaate waqt hum doosre raaste se jaane waale hain...hai na? Toh raste par aane waale seb ke bageeche mein se seb todne nahi hain...hai na? Institute ka naam kharaab nahi karma hai...hai na?" I don't understand why he has to add that "hai na?" at the end of almost every line that he says. ☺ And sure enough the apples on this route were red and juicy and we had to resist plucking them. The end of this short-cut route was at the Manali Gurudwara and we joined the main crossing. On this route, we came across some Punjabi dhaba's and almost everyone noticed that the prices of the paranthas here were quite low. I'm sure everyone mentally made a note of coming to this place to gobble those classy paranthas.



It was drizzling by the time we finished our breakfast and we again assumed that the jummaring session would get cancelled. I must say that we did underestimate our instructors here. Again they beat all our expectations and the session went off smoothly on the artificial wall in the campus as though the rains were absolutely a normal thing here. 😊 The afternoon and evening sessions were totally free. Tomorrow morning we would be leaving for Lahaul and Spiti. I had completed all my packing by night-time and was ready for the most exciting phase of the Basic Mountaineering Course.

## 10<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Monday – Day 10

I was up by 05:00 today too, although we were to leave at about 07:30. We had a hearty breakfast and picked up our sandwiches which were part of the packed lunch. But hell, 5 of us, Ravdeep, Malkiat, Harinder, Doc and me, could not find a place in any of the 11 Sumo's and Qualis's that had come to ferry us to our destination. We finally loaded our rucksacks in the truck and fit ourselves into different cars, making it almost 11 per car. I had luckily got a good car, a Sumo, with good music and a great driver and Ramesh Sir sitting next to me in the front. We passed by Palchaan, Solaang, Marhi (Madi) and by the time we reached the Rohtang pass, we were in the lead. "Rohtang", which means "valley of skeletons" in the Tibetan language, is at a height of 3977m (or 13050ft) is open for only 4 to 6 months in a year and can be really dangerous for the automobile traffic and we could see as to why.



The trees slowly disappeared as we crossed over to the Lahoul & Spiti side of Rohtang. The features started getting a lot more barren and quite like what is seen in the Ladakh, Tibetan plateaus. We were now at the doorsteps of the one of the largest dry deserts of the world. Before Grampho, we took a right turn and took the road to Kaza (the district headquarters of Spiti). If we'd have gone straight we'd have been on the road to Leh, which was maintained really well by the Border Roads Organization (BRO). Whereas, the road that we took was maintained by the Himachal Pradesh PWD as it was of lesser military importance. This road, if we could call it one, ran parallel to the river Chandra and consisted of only stones which were arranged such that there would be a somewhat plane surface on which vehicles could move along without overturning ☺

We arrived at Chhatru (pronounced as Chhatdu) at about 12:00. The guys had their lunches here....we unfortunately couldn't as our rucksacks were in the truck which was to arrive a few hours later. I tried out the Maggi at the dhaba here and it was simply amazing, with vegetables and cheese and all. We started off after the lunch and reached our destination for the day – Chhota Dadaa at about 15:00. The first things I noticed about this place were the howling wind and the stunningly beautiful grey hills (similar to the ones shown in the movie Lakshya). The camp site was classy, with a small glacial stream flowing past us and joining river Chandra at a distance.



The truck finally arrived at 17:45, almost three hours after we reached this place. And the guys simply threw our rucksacks down from the truck. I spent the night in a 5 man tent with Ravdeep, Malkiat and Harinder. I knew that these were the guys with whom I'd be staying with for the next fortnight as they were absolutely fun-loving and loved ghazals and shayari. The night went off peacefully, my first night in a sleeping bag and it was really comfortable. Even with temperatures outside falling to almost 0 degrees Celsius, it was warm and cozy inside the sleeping bag. I just couldn't believe this!

## **11<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Tuesday – Day 11**

We were up by 05:15 as it was the turn of Rope 1 to serve food today. The bed tea was really good and the breakfast, aloo sabzi and bhatura, was even better. I felt that the quality was better than at the institute mess at Manali. I had the first time experience of answering nature's call in the open air theatre – right in front of the river Chandra ☺...and this would continue for the next fortnight. Jagat Sir had some great advice for us with reference to the early morning chores. He said, “Koi Chandra nadi ke kinare nahi jaayega...kisi bhi kaaran ke liye....anhi toh aap paaye jaayenge Karachi mein”.☺

Gulia Sir addressed us immediately after breakfast. It was now going to be a 15km acclimatization trek to Baatal, where we would be setting up our base camp and where we'd be staying till the 24<sup>th</sup> of July. The walk was a tough one, what with only 3 stopovers. The sight of the Baatal bridge brought a lot of relief and slumped on to the ground as soon as reached the destination. Baatal, which means “House of wind”, lived up to its name. The howling wind brought daytime temperatures to about 5°Celsius. But the place was definitely heavenly, with the Pir Panjal range and river Chandra on one side and the Chandra-Bhaga (C-B) range on the other.

The afternoon session was taken up by the lecture on tent manners by instructor Deepak Thakur. The evening was free, but none of us could step out of our tents as it started drizzling. Post dinner, when I went to fetch water from the dhaba close by, it was freezing. In the fall-in Jagat Sir emphasized on everybody getting acclimatized to the weather by not covering our entire bodies, especially our ears.

We were 5 of us in our tent now, the Punjabis and Santosh Kumar, the NCC cadet from Bihar, the sample of our entire batch. But it was certainly entertaining to have him in our tent. He would act as though he wasn't well, crack stupid jokes and do many more antics, which were too stupid to even remember. But it certainly was fun.



## 12<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Wednesday – Day 12

I was up by 06:15 for the tea...man! I couldn't miss this morning freshener, could I? Breakfast was heavy here – scrambled eggs and rotis served with extra helpings by the loving (and shouting) mess waale Chachaji. We got our packed lunch and we were ready for the acclimatization trek to Chandrataal. As per the information given by the past attendees of the BMC from IIT, Chandrataal was one of the most beautiful gifts that nature could have given to humanity. The sky was overcast and as luck would have it, it started drizzling as soon as we had our fall-in. Jagat Sir addressed us and in his usual enthusiastic speech said, “Jo aaj ka acclimatization walk complete karega, mere hisaab se use course complete karne mein koi dikkat nahi hogi.”

The wind was as usual howling and coupled with the rain, created conditions which forced atleast 2-3 people to return midway. The worst location on this trek was the stream which ran right in the middle of our path and went on to form a wonderful waterfall downstream. We tried our best to bridge this stream with big stones....reminded me of Lord Ram and the Vaanars bridging their way to Lanka ;) But we weren't even a fraction successful in this attempt. At the end of a 30min ordeal, we crossed the stream with our shoes fully wet and us feeling as cold as ever. But the good thing was this (hell, we found hope even in the worst of situations) our body temperature was more than the air and the shoes started drying as we walked on. We saw a Spiti Forest Division board describing Chandrataal and we hoped that we were close to our destination. But no, we had to walk for almost 2 hours more before we could set our sights on the heavenly blue waters of Chandrataal.





Our legs were aching after the 15km trek...but heaven! It was worth every minute and every inch of the trek. Chandrataal is a tarn (a geological formation caused by movement of glaciers); its waters have herbal and medicinal qualities. In fact, the water of Chandrataal is so clean that the stones at the bottom of it can be seen from the surface. Buddhists consider Chandrataal to be holy and the locals have an annual festival on the banks of this tarn. Chandrataal is surrounded by Chandra-Bhaga range on one side; Pir Panjal range ends at the start of it and Zaskar range starts at this very point. From the hillock close by, we could see CB-13, CB-14, Silver Glacier, peaks of the Mulkillia range, et al! The return journey was a lot easier, with our souls left behind at Chandrataal. I just couldn't get out of that heady feeling. I feel those 90 minutes spent at Chandrataal are probably the most heavenly 90 minutes I've spent in my life on planet Earth. The sun had luckily come out now and this automatically had a calming effect on the wind too. It was like a competition between the two forces of nature and luckily for us, sun was winning now. After 2 hours my legs had started giving way, but I had Vishal peppering me on. We finally reached Baatal at 16:30 and I guess everyone just went limp in their tents.

The good thing about this Baatal camp was that the meals were excellent. By excellent, what I mean is that I expected the food to be absolutely of inedible. But we were getting everything right from rice, dal, sabzi to mainly excellent rotis (that too in this cold weather), and Milo in the nights. This was absolutely commendable and I could see why DMAS was considered to be amongst the best adventure sports training institutions not just in India but all of Asia.

Tomorrow it would be the first session on snow-craft. And as I slept, I was already imagining walking in the snow...that too at a heady height.

### **13<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Thursday – Day 13**

The day dawned with the bad news of the bomb blasts at Mumbai on the 11th. Someone had been to the dhaba and read this news in the local newspaper. All Mumbaikars rushed to the Chief Instructor, Mr. Gulia, with a request to ferry us all to the nearest STD booth so as to make a call to our homes. Eleven of us (with innumerable numbers of those Mumbaikars who couldn't come due to paucity of space) were taken to Chhatru to make those vital calls. Believe me, it was such a relief to hear Amma-Papa's voice. The sad part here was that Chetan (NCC) had lost his uncle and his brother had suffered leg burns in the blasts.

We were back in the camp by 14:00 JIT for lunch with the Group B members, who were just back from the Baatal glacier after their first session of ice-craft. Our Group A mates returned only at 16:00 after a grueling snow-craft session at almost 4950m above MSL, about 400m above the top of Kunjam La (La in Tibetan means mountain pass). I just hoped that I could pick up the things taught in today's session tomorrow.

It was raining all evening and night. The locals were saying that this is the maximum rains that the Lahaul region ever got. We were plain unlucky that these rains had to come down just when we were there. It was also so damned cold...the temperatures today must've been 1-3 degrees Celsius all evening and must have dropped below zero in the night. I was sure the dropping mercury today, today's tiring trek to Kunjam La and back (in the rain), and yesterdays horribly long and tiring trek to Chandrataal would cause lots of trainees to quit the course.

Today's only good event was hearing Amma-Papa's voice, though it was just for a few seconds. Satellite phones are bloody expensive....the 30 second call cost me some 15 bucks, which left me with just about 90 bucks as I'd hardly brought any cash here. And that too we had to travel 32km to make that call.

## **14<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Friday – Day 14**

It was still an overcast sky and all the peaks that we could see from the base camp were snow capped. I guessed that when it rained here all night, it must've snowed heavily in the upper reaches. During the fall-in Jagat Sir broke the news that owing to bad weather, we wouldn't be going for snow-craft. Hell! What bad luck...was I going to miss snow-craft altogether? Thankfully Jagat Sir also assured us that we did have a couple of days which were buffers to account for such situations. And today, as a replacement to the training sessions, we were to have 2-3 lectures and if possible, a rock climbing session. But with the kind of weather we were having, with rains coming down off and on and no sight of the sun, even the lectures could get really boring. It was simply wait and watch now.

The first lecture was on fixing crampons to our climbing boots conducted by Narendra Thakur. We got our crampons adjusted perfectly as per our boot sizes. The next lecture was on first aid related to adventure sports taken by our co-trainee, Dr. Pravin Kammar from Belgaum. Both these lectures were over by 12:00 and we had atleast an hour and a half before lunch. We therefore got sometime to clean our tents and also have a small snacks session – “Chand-pan da tation” as Ravdeep would call the eatables Malkiat had brought. I never got to know as to why he called it so, but it did sound nice and I guess I never will forget it. Ravdeep, Harinder and I did have sometime to catch up on some of our common topics of interest like ghazals and Ghulam Ali.

The afternoon was spent lazily as it was still raining and it didn't look as though it would stop today. The sky didn't even look like it would clear for a long time to come. Post-tea there was a lecture on the ice axe and its use by our youngest instructor, Leelakaran Negi. It was still drizzling and we were anxious to get back to our tents. Thankfully Leelakaran Sir noticed our discomfort and completed the lecture in just about 30 minutes.

Dinner came and went but the rain continued to pour. We were just praying to God, that the skies would clear by tomorrow and we'd have our snow-craft session as planned.

## 15<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Saturday – Day 15

The sky was clear and bright! And there was better news in store for us....the institute truck would ferry us to Kunjam La. That cut down our trek by almost 8km...phew! But even the uphill trek from Kunjam La to the snow-field at an altitude of approximately 16500ft was quite some task. The slope was about 45-60 degrees. But more importantly, the 2 day break seemed to have eroded my stamina and also my “acclimatization”. I was feeling breathless all the way up and I was the last to reach the snow field which was about 300m above the Kunjam La top.

The feeling on reaching the snow-field was absolutely exhilarating. And most importantly, although we’d missed the first session on snow-craft, we (Keshav n I) started off confidently with all the snow walking styles. We also picked up the gla-sliding quite fast and also all the methods of self-arrest. In fact, we would deliberately slip from the top, do the semi-crouched gla-slide and finally arrest the fall at the very end of the snow patch.



The walk back to the truck was absolutely toe-crushing, but much easier than the trek up. The truck ride was really dusty and bouncy. On arriving at the base camp, we could venture to do the unthinkable, wash ourselves with water, thanks to the sun smiling high in the sky. ☺ In spite of the winds, the sun was the dominating force of nature today and it was certainly warm compared to the last 3-4 days.

By the way, the temperature in the night had fallen to a new low of almost -5 °Celsius, with frost forming on almost all the tents. The explanation was that the nights get colder when the skies are clear. I didn't get the logic behind this, but it was a fact, which was there to be seen.

## **16<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Sunday – Day 16**

I never realized that it was a Sunday, till I started writing this at 17:00! I must mention here that the number of trainees was already down from 103 to 91 now. It was the ice-craft day today at the Baatal Glacier, a 2 and a half hour trek over the ridge and moraines from the base camp, and supposed to be a really killing walk. This was as per the information provided by the Group B members. I was slow again today, but of course not as bad as I was yesterday. We reached the ice-field in precisely 2 hours and 10 minutes crossing a terrible uphill slope, a ridge, a horribly sandy and unstable 80° slope and of course that deadly moraine! The great part was that I did the ice craft really well...all the styles – single & double traction, low and high dagger and free hand. The main reason must've been that Jagat Sir was in charge.

We were back in our base camp by 15:00. The return trek took just about an hour and a half. There was good news in store...the evening lecture was cancelled! It was total free time now. Our tent had become the casino of the base camp I guess ☺ with Ravdeep, Malkiat, Vedang, Vivek, Adidas, Ravinder n many others coming over for a hand of some card game or the other. Ayn Rand's Fountainhead gave me very good company though and my free time was taken up by Howard Roarke and Dominique Francon. Dinner was simply awesome today, literally – there was simple khichdi...and I enjoyed it completely with the classy pickle. Although the mess workers insited on calling it "Pulav" .....what's in the name anyways. ☺

Overall the day was fantastic – great work, good food and lots of rest too! And the icing on the cake was the breathtakingly beautiful starry night sky. We had a few amateur astronomers amongst the trainees – Siddharth, Mandar, Sudhi – we could clearly spot the Scorpio and Leo constellations, the Milky Way and a lot many stars.

Only 7 more days to go in this heaven called Baatal....

## **17<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Monday – Day 17**

It was a cloudy and bleak day and as a result, our first session on ice-craft was cancelled.☹ We instead had 3 lectures, 2 by Gulia Sir and 1 by Jagat Sir. Gulia Sir's lectures were on map reading and glaciers, while Jagat Sir gave a fantastic lecture on rope management considered real life expedition situations. The rope management lecture was followed by an exercise on sequence rock climbing and this was real fun. But I was sad that this free day broke my string of good performance days at the field. Also a rest day brings in unwanted laziness, which is so very dampening on a mountaineering course like this one. I was reading Fountainhead all day long i.e. whenever we weren't in a lecture. Seriously, reading is the most boring thing one can do when in a place like Baatal...but that is just what I was doing thanks to the screwed up weather conditions.

This was certainly the most boring day we had at Baatal. I just hoped and prayed to God that no more days would be lost due to weather or any other reason. There was nothing more interesting to do in the night than listen to Bihari Babu, Santosh crack stupid jokes (in IITB lingo – farts) on his own farting skills.

## 18<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Tuesday – Day 18

Bright day at last...thank God! By 07:55, we were ready to leave the camp after having an early breakfast. And I was horribly slow, thanks to the lazily spent Monday. But the going was certainly better than what it was on Sunday. I didn't have many breathing problems and there were hardly any stopovers on way to the Baatal glacier. The chewing gum and half a bottle of water certainly kept me going. Unfortunately, on reaching the ice wall, I discovered that I'd lost the nut and bolt of my right crampon and there weren't any metallic wires to bind the 2 parts of the crampon. This is when Jagat Sir's 'Desi jugaad' came to my rescue...he used a simple piece of cloth to bind the crampon. I was able to do all the exercises perfectly. Although I don't know why, I found jummaring on ice quite strenuous.



We were back in the base camp by 15:00. Post-lunch, our group Senior, Navnit came with the news of fall-in after tea i.e. at 17:15. It was a lecture on 'Mountain terms' by Jagat Sir. Dinner was simply awesome especially the custard. We found that all the desserts here contained saunf – I guess it was so that it would keep all our digestive systems in order. ☺

The night sky was even more captivating tonight. Only 5 more days remain now for our return to Manali.



## 19<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Wednesday – Day 19

I woke up thinking about Amma-Papa and my M.Tech classmates. I was suddenly feeling quite homesick....dunno why this sudden change? Today too we had an early breakfast and immediately left for the glacier. We reached the ice-wall by 09:30. Jagat Sir taught us the rescue methods really well and then we practiced all the methods being both victims as well as rescuers. Ghanshyam Sir then taught us step making on ice. Well it looked quite easy till we actually tried it out on our own. My hand were aching after carving out only 5 steps on the ice, which seems not-so-very-hard till one starts breaking it with the ice axe. I guess the fact that we were using the trainee ice axe also made the difference because the professional ice axes are really light.



The best part was that the kitchen workers actually came with us to the glacier equipped with a gas cylinder and served us hot tea and bhajiyas. The return journey was really fast as I guess by now everybody was used to walking on the moraines. The lunch on our return was even better today, with fantastic koftas (made using cheese) and jaggery. The even better part was that there was no news of fall-in in the post-tea session. We therefore spent the entire evening playing. Even as I finished dinner, I just wasn't myself with half my thoughts taken away by that homesick feeling.

We had completed training on all the crafts and had done all the things that we had to do and theoretically, we had completed the course. But the Group B trainees were a day behind and therefore we had this extra day on the ice-wall scheduled. And the best part was that Jagat Sir had scheduled a test on ice-craft on this day! Well, the test was nothing at all, but junta dreaded the walk to the glacier more than anything else, especially the moraine stretch. We just hoped that it would rain like never before. And the worst part about this night was that Malkiat and Santosh both were in real gassy form....it was going to be the worst night I guess. ☺

## 20<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Thursday – Day 20

As I'd (rather we'd all) hoped and prayed, it was cloudy and raining! Now we only hoped that our instructors would show mercy on us and cancel the horrible walk to the Baatal glacier on those horrid moraines and have the test somewhere close-by. But no...our luck was running absolutely haywire. We had to fall-in at 08:20, were given our usual 'Ditto' mango drink and sent packing to the glacier. ☹️ As usual I was lagging behind on the trek...I think I can be the best tail end of any trek. 😊 But certainly I was hardly tired when I reached up there. And the best part was that I performed all the tasks I was asked to do with absolute perfection.

I guess Jagat Sir was really happy with the performance of the Group A trainees, with our dear Santosh being the only odd man out. His statements have really caught on now..."I'm not a civilian like you people, I'm an NCC cadet", "Main 5000 mein se select hoke aaya hoon"...this was the statement which gave him the name '5001'. 😊



After the test, Jagat Sir explained lots of points about expeditions in general, applying to the IMF (Indian Mountaineering Foundation i.e.), liasoning officers during expeditions, et al. He explained to us the importance of liasoning officers during expeditions and as to why ascent of Nandadevi peak has been banned by the IMF. It was really informative.

We were back to the base in hardly anytime today and the lunch had our favourite Koftas and egg curry. The sun had come out now and the weather was nice and warm. As a result I not only had a good wash but also managed to wash my gloves and socks after a long time. 😊 It was cricket time in the evening with matches between instructor's v/s trainees. In the 2 hour cricket game I did quite a lot of running around and was hungry at the end of it. Reason enough to have a Maggi in the Chandra Dhaba nearby.



The Group B trainees had a grind at the snow-craft at Kunjam La. They came back only at 18:00 and then had their lunch! The worst part is that they had their ice-craft session the next day as they still hadn't been taught the rescue methods. We, I guess would have a free day, what with maybe the casualty evacuation session left to be done.

Just 3 more days we now left, with just height gaining and the survival night remaining. Yipee!

## 21<sup>st</sup> July 2006 – Friday – Day 21

The day started with the main task of the day, washing our climbing boots, crampons and oiling the crampons. Though the job was of washing the boots in the windy conditions, almost everyone was doing it enjoyably. After all, we wouldn't be using them again on this course! ☺ After this and the cleaning of our tents, we had a fantastic demonstration on casualty evacuation methods. All of us then made stretchers and even learnt the fireman's rescue and other techniques. Again the sample today was '5001'...literally, as he was the 'sample' casualty. ☺



There was the knot test in the afternoon and we Rope 1 fellas screwed it up royally. It was back to reading Fountainhead in the evening. And all of a sudden we were asked to fall-in with our tiffin. We only wondered as to why? That's when we got to know that we were to get the dry food for the next day's height gaining session. As part of the dry lunch there were lots of chocolates, dry fruits, chana, Ditto's, etc. Man...these guys are really experienced at conducting such courses...they had provided just the foodstuff which was really healthy and wouldn't cause indigestion.

In the night fall-in, Sandy Sir announced the schedule for the next day's height gaining exercise. It would be tea at 04:00, breakfast at 04:30 and departure for Kunjam La at 05:00 and ascent to atleast 18000ft. We just hoped everything went as per plan and well!

## 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2006 – Saturday – Day 22

As planned all in our tent except the hero of the camp '5001' were up by 03:30 and packing our rucksacks for the height gain. We started at precisely 05:00 and off we were on the road to Kunjam Mata mandir. I was at the 'pole position' as the slow walkers had to be upfront. ☺ Keshav and Paramjeet were just behind me and we were having a good time taking pictures of the amazing scenery at this early morning hour. We took lots of short cuts to reach Kunjam La at 07:00. We took darshan at the temple and started the ascent at 07:30.



The going was really slow with my breathing problems. Thankfully I had Keshav egging me on all the way. Our target was to get to the qualifying altitude of 15500ft, which is the height at which we had done the snow-craft. The next target was to get to the peak. Keshav, Param and I reached the height of almost 17000ft with quite some difficulty. This was when Ramesh Sir started dissuading us from going further as we were already lagging behind and he felt that the next 1000 odd ft were extremely difficult although it didn't look that tough. Since we had already crossed the required height, we listened to his advice and came back. There were 7 of us on our way back – Keshav, PArAm, Gondal, Vibhas, Siddharth, Anurag and myself. Luckily we got the state transport bus at Kunjam La and the journey to Baatal was over in 30 min flat.

On our return from Kunjam La, I sat at the Chandra Dhaba for over 2 hours doing literally nothing. I just couldn't believe that I'd completed this grueling course successfully. I got back in the tent at only 14:30 to find '5001' sleeping. This guy had given some crappy reason and had remained absent for the height gain...what cheapo!



Now for the details of the ascent – totally 41 trainees reached the summit, which was at 18280ft above M.S.L. Of these, 29 were from Group A. Ravdeep and Malkiat did it from our tent. The lunch on everybody’s return was fantastic khichdi and there were too good pakodas for tea! The evening session was devoted to Mr. 5001, who had the cheek of going to Gulia Sir and asking for his permission to “attempt a peak nearby” which was obviously refused.

Our instructors were really happy with our performance. The last day at Baatal was to be devoted to the equipment and systems test. This was to be our last session before the survival night and then it would be back to Manali....and believe me, most of us were waiting for this day to zoom past us.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006 – Sunday – Day 23**

We were up by 05:30 even though the breakfast was scheduled at 08:00 today...damn it...I guess we've lost the good old habits of sleeping and rising late, which we'd perfected at IIT. ☺ Today's breakfast was certainly the best amongst all the days – aloo paranthas and eggs....simply awesome! The fall-in was at 08:50. Gulia Sir congratulated the entire batch for the height gaining achievements. Jagat Sir then explained the importance of height gaining, which was that in normal circumstances, we should not climb more than 6000ft cumulatively i.e. 3000ft up and down. But on Day 22 we had done a cumulative climb of 10000ft, which was quite an achievement for a 'Basic' mountaineering course.

Our test started at 09:30 and our Rope 1 always being the first bakras also got done with it fast. There was equipment identification, tying of the double jummar, shoulder rappelling, knots and rock climbing with belay. I was in fact free by 11:00 and it was back to Fountainhead for me and the guys in the tent were back to their playing cards.

In the afternoon, the first of the Sumo's to ferry us back to Manali made its grand entry at the camp. The wind was literally howling today and as I was outside the tent for about 30mins, I bore the brunt of it. In fact the wind today tore the outer covering of one of the instructors' tents. The bamboo of the kitchen tent in fact gave way and the tent had to be closed down. Luckily today was the last day.

Finally the call for tea and we got excellent halwa today....that too real large helpings of it. Everyone I'm sure got a hint that dinner had to be skipped as it was the final session of 'survival'. ☺ We were then asked to pack all our rucksacks, clean the inside of the tents, roll the tents and load them in the truck. This exercise got over in 15 min flat. Gulia Sir then gave us a fantastic lecture on survival. He mentioned many cases on survival in extreme conditions like this book on a real life event called 'Alive', in which the airplane carrying the Peruvian Olympic football team crashed in the Andes and the survivors ate the flesh of even their own teammates in order to survive the cold. Then there was the WWII soldier who survived in the dense jungles of Assam for almost 18 years and found life in normal civilization much tougher than those 18 years. ☺ Gulia Sir gave us some very good points to remember when in difficult situations in the mountains viz.

- Do not panic – take stock of the situation first.
- Walk towards the valley and not the summit.
- Walk along a stream or river as most human civilizations are along river banks.
- Conserve energy and food - Eat to live and not live to eat.
- Do not eat anything from which milky fluid oozes out, it could be poisonous.
- Do not sleep – cold puts one to sleep – fight the sleep.
- If in a group, break up into teams and keep a common meeting location, where a single team goes to find a way out and comes back. Then the other team moves out.
- Keep telling each other jokes – Dirtier the better. 😊
- Find a good shelter before nightfall.

Our instructors then led us to the locations where we would have to spend our nights in the open. We were 13 of us from Ropes 1 and 3. Our location was just behind the ridge bordering our camp. It seemed that the wind did not much affect this leeward face of the ridge, but we had no roof or any cover in case it would rain. We made a 2ft high wall in a 20ft by 10ft area, where all of us could fit in. We also placed our rucksacks around us and this protection was good enough for the little wind that blew here. I went to sleep almost immediately. Sagar (from Satara) and Chander Paul were narrating stupid and supposedly scary stories, which we were all forced to hear. Chander Paul luckily also had a cassette player and we got the opportunity to listen to some music after quite sometime. Unfortunately, the batteries drained off and the sound blew off. The time was I guess still 23:00.

I couldn't believe it but I was missing '5001's stupid jokes and Malkiat's farts! 😊 But this was compensated by stupid arguments between Chander Paul and Vibhas.



## 24<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Monday – Day 24

00:15 and there was suddenly a light flashing in my eyes. It was Sandy Sir and some other instructors who'd come to check out on everybody. He says, "Aaj luckily barsaat nahi hai." And sure enough as luck would have it at 02:00 it started raining. Fortunately it stopped in 15 min but in those 15 min, I had to get to my rucksack, remove my torch and rain sheet and cover myself fully. As the rain stopped, I was back to sleep. I was awakened again by the rain. The time now was 04:00 and this time it was quite heavy and continuous. I got into my sleeping bag fully, covered it with the rain sheet and slept soundly. I could hear the droplets for atleast 45min or so. I woke up at 05:30 to find that the rain had drenched my sleeping bag and mattress fully. In fact even my jeans were slightly wet. I was feeling quite cold actually but the excitement of going back to Manali got us all going. We all stuffed our things in the rucksack without even getting them dry...who was bothered anyways.



We were back at the base camp at 06:00 to find all the vehicles ready and waiting for us. We had our breakfast and took our packed lunch. This time we didn't make the mistake of forming a group and waiting for a vehicle to come to us. Harinder and I picked up the first vehicle which had some Punjabi music playing in it. According to Ravdeep, these were Z grade songs, but believe me even this music sounded really good after so many days. In fact, we enjoyed these songs right until we reached Rohtang. That's where the drive changed the cassette to Hindi film songs and of course the creepy songs of Himesh Reshammiya (Docs choice).

The halts were taken at Rohtang, Marhi, Kothi and we finally were back in DMAS at 14:30. We all took our mobiles from the locker rooms and I called home immediately.

Ketan, Vishal and I went to the Manali market in the evening had paranthas, pani-puris, chowmen and did lots of time pass. 😊 Back in the campus, we had a long chat with the Advanced course Senior – Sesh, who gave us a fantastic account of their course which was obviously much tougher than our course. The trainees got a bit carried away on coming back I guess because a few of them returned quite late. As a result, the entire group had to face some punishment till these guys returned. Hell! The DMAS instructors never spared anyone, anytime!

We went off to sleep only at 23:15...I was never this late in the last 16 days. And yes...we were all going to feel a bit odd sleeping on these cushions tonight. 😊

## **25<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Tuesday – Day 25**

Today was the day of the written test. The theoretical stuff that was fed into us had to come out in full flow. But the day started with submission of all the equipment that we'd been issued. The test started only at 12:15 and it was like 'nothing', duration was of 1 hour, but most of us got out in just about 30 min. It was more of a memory test. The entire afternoon was wasted in waiting for the interview with the Dy. Director, Capt. Saluria. It finally happened at 17:30 and went on till 19:10. We couldn't even visit the mall road and the laundry was also closed. ☹

The damned saloons were all closed today and I still had the horrible beard. But hey! I had that refreshing and fantastic bath after a fortnight. It was like a layer of my skin peeling off. ☺ And I guess I was clean at the end of it all. Of course I was still 3 shades darker than when I'd started the course, but it still was better than the moment, I'd just returned from Baatal. ☺

Dinner was luckily good...but you know what? Most of us preferred the meals served at Baatal much more than the meals served here at the HQ, Manali. Had a long chat with Amma-Papa as they were to leave on 27<sup>th</sup> for Jammu, where we would meet for the Part-II of this long North India tour that I had planned out. I also chatted with Yashu after a long time today...felt so very good. I was JIT for the fall-in at 21:00. The bad news was that the film show which was scheduled for tonight had been cancelled. So we were back in our dormitories, chatting away to glory. Vishal told us some stories of the God's in the Lahaul valley. He also sang some Jagjit Singh ghazals and did sing them really well. We all insisted that he had to sing on stage after the badging ceremony which was to be held the next day –Day 26.

I finally got up in the night and had a shave...I just couldn't have waited till the next for the saloon's to open.

## 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Wednesday – Day 26

The last day of BMC, July 2006 was meant mainly for the badging ceremony. Again there was a long wait for the Dy. Director, who was going to award us with the badges. This gave us all time to have some photo sessions and also to collect the contacts of all the trainees in the course. The ceremony finally started at 11:30. The anchor was Sesh and as soon as he'd welcomed everybody, the lights went out. I guess DMAS just didn't want us to leave its campus. ☺ Light were restored asap and the ceremony was conducted smoothly and quickly. The course Seniors read out the reports and then Capt. Saluria awarded us trainees with the badges. We then had photo sessions with our instructors and then off we went for the special passing out lunch.



DMAS had even arranged for their truck to ferry everyone to the Manali bus stand as most of the guys were to leave by the evening buses to either Chandigarh or Delhi. Ravdeep, Harinder, Malkiat, the entire IIT gang and I did a little bit of time pass and shopping before their buses took off at 16:30. I checked my mail after a really long time today and felt dizzy on seeing the number of mails I'd have to reply to on getting back

home. I was in fact feeling quite uncomfortable typing as I'd seemed to have forgotten the keyboard setting. 😊



It was raining heavily now and the river Beas was in full spate...in fact the rains brought down a lot of soil and the river which normally is white looked brown. I was back in the DMAS campus at 18:30. We were just 7 of us BMC trainees in the campus now along with a few advanced course trainees and of course the instructors. We had a quiet dinner and then had long chats with our instructors, who now insisted that we call them by their names as the course was over now. 😊 Santhosh, my Rope 1 leader from Bangalore and I were the only one's in D2, Beas hostel tonight. We planned to visit the hot water springs at Vasishth the next day, which was to be our last in Manali.

**27<sup>th</sup> July 2006 – Thursday**

We woke up early and started for Vasishth. The ashram was a 4km trek from DMAS and we didn't even think of taking a rickshaw to reach this place. This is the effect of BMC on any person I guess. ☺ Bathing in this hot water spring was truly an amazing experience. Thankfully the authorities had kept the place clean, thus we could enjoy our dip thoroughly. Even the temple complex was beautiful with temples of Lord Ram and Maharshi Vashishth close-by. From there, we left for the Manali mall and shopped for a while. I sent some postcards home, and hoped that they'd reach before I did. ☺ We also visited the Tibetan monastery, which is really quite beautiful.



We were back in the campus by 12:00. I had my bus to Jammu scheduled at 16:00 from the Manali bus stand. After packing my rucksack and having a long chat with Santhosh, I left the DMAS campus at 15:00. Unfortunately none of our instructors were on campus at this time. So I went to Gulia Sir's home and took his autograph. Mr. Gulia, our chief instructor is a great inspirer and mainly a fantastic person.

There's no need to mention that I walked to the bus stand with my entire luggage, which even when it was full seemed much lighter than the 25kg we used to haul and walk almost daily during the course. ☺

With a heavy heart I bid adieu to DMAS, the fast flowing river Beas, Manali and Himachal Pradesh. This mountaineering course has certainly been one of the best things I've done in my life and I would certainly look forward to returning to the Directorate of Mountaineering and Allied Sports, Manali to do the Advanced Mountaineering Course sometime in the near future.