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WEEKEND

FAR CORNER

The Bara Bangal trek takes one through the Pir Panjal and Dhauladhar ranges in Himachal, across a treacherous landscape. **Shyam Saran** makes a difficult journey and is rewarded by experiencing untouched nature at its most splendid



(Clockwise from top) The ascent to the Tamsar Pass in the company of migrating herds of sheep; the author (second from right) with his fellow travellers; a glacial lake on the descent from the Kalahani Pass; red banners over the Thamsar Pass; three generations of a Bara Bangal family



There are still hidden corners in our populous and congested country which have escaped the relentless trudge of human feet, where ancient forests still luxuriate in dense clusters and clear night skies sparkle with myriad points of starlight. The Bara Bangal trek in Himachal threads through the Pir Panjal and Dhauladhar ranges tracing the annual migration of shepherds and their flocks from the high alpine pastures to the grassy valleys below as winter approaches. Come summer the return journey begins towards the now snow-free grazing grounds among the high mountains.

The trek kicks off in the town of Manali and concludes in the village of Bir above Dharamsala. Our group of four — Ramya, Ashwin, Ranjit and I — and a superb support team of nine led by guides Nitesh and Kirti covered a distance of 140km between September 22 and October 4 this year. This is a forbidding and treacherous landscape which only shepherds negotiate with rugged confidence; we encountered few other human beings. There were no settlements once we had entered the mountain zone, except for the utterly remote village of Bara Bangal, which has given its name to the trek. It lies midway between the two snow-covered passes of Kalahani to its east and Thamsar to its west, each over 4,800m high. One follows the Kalahani river up to Bara Bangal, from where the next section of the trail runs along the Ravi river. We stayed in tented camps but our guides made certain we were comfortable, well-looking after and fed from an unusually varied menu.

From Manali, the route led to Lamadugh, a gentle climb away over pleasant forest trails. The lush green patch on which we camped in cool and agreeable weather conveyed no hint of the strenuous effort and challenging risks which lay ahead of us. The next day we camped at Riyal Thach, at over 3,200m, after a longish trek of over seven hours. What made this journey memorable were the dense forests of golden oak, cedar and fir and the occasional maple tree with gnarled and twisted trunks but still supporting canopies of luxuriant foliage.

As we approached the tree line, stretches of densely packed snow fields began to appear, their thick, frozen edges hanging over swift and thundering streams. The next day on our way to the Kalahani base camp, we would begin making the first of several forays across these “snow bridges”, having to exercise extreme caution to avoid slipping and sliding helplessly over congealed ice. There were river crossings, too, which posed the constant danger of losing one’s balance and subjecting one’s feet to an unwelcome soak in freezing water. Walking thereafter with cold wet socks and dripping shoes was not a pleasant experience. At one such crossing a young porter lost his balance and plunged into the swift current rushing over rocks and boulders. As he went downstream, flailing among the rocks, we thought we had lost him. But he had good reflexes and managed to emerge with only a few bruises. The climb over the Kalahani Pass and the

extended descent to our camp at Donku Thach were physically exhausting and mentally exacting. Though we began the day’s trek earlier than usual, it took us considerable time to negotiate a difficult trail strewn with jagged rocks and slippery boulders. And then we hit a vast snow field stretching all the way to the pass, which from below appeared as a massive wall of ice blocking our passage. It was a slow and painful trudge through thick snow — and a huge relief when we made it to the top of the Pass. But relief was short-lived as we still needed to descend over yet another vast stretch of ice on the other side, zigzagging to avoid slipping, before reaching a rocky flank over which lay our barely visible onward trail. This was forbidding country, with a series of small lakes and high mountains on the other side of the valley.

By the time we reached camp just before sunset we had covered about 14km, ascended 1,000m and then descended 1,200m. This was like a cruel endurance test and something one usually avoids. It is best to reach camp after a day’s walk latest by 2.30 or 3 in the afternoon. It enables one to relax and enjoy the countryside. On most days we were all so tired that our only thought was to have a quick meal and retire into the warmth of a snug sleeping bag. No one in our group had anticipated that this would be a most demanding trek. We were fortunate to complete it without mishap.

The next stretch to Bara Bangal village was a more gentle descent through a lush mountainscape interspersed with rolling meadows. We set up camp at Lampadh, at 3,550m and then at Dal ki Marhi, another 100m lower. There were no signs of human traffic except for the occasional “gaddi” or shepherd camping with his flock, taking shelter in covered shacks built with local stones. This was nature at its pristine best, unfolding serial vistas of rare beauty and gentle colours. But the final descent into Bara Bangal village was in pouring rain, our clothes wet and sticking to our skins, and our boots soaked through and caked with mud.

Bara Bangal is a quaint village of about 600 people. The houses were made of wood and stones; some were thatched while others had slate roofs glistening in the rain. Farmers grow rajma as the main crop. The village has no electricity and no communication with the outside world. The village headman has been provided with an Inmarsat satellite telephone for use in emergencies but we were unable to make calls despite repeated attempts. There is a helipad for evacuation of villagers in medical and other emergencies but that is useful only if the telephone works. The village gets its supplies from across the Thamsar Pass but there is also a narrow and more level track connecting it to Chamba. This latter route takes two full days to cover on foot. There is a village school but its teachers and students move to the village and wandered around meeting villagers, chatting with children and envying their simple and contented lives.

The final stretch to the Thamsar Pass proved as gruelling as the passage over the Kalihani. From Bara



Bangal we headed to Marhi, which is the base camp for the Thamsar Pass. This route, too, involved crossing stretches of packed ice and boulders. The bleak landscape was enlivened by a huge waterfall en route, whose thunderous roar was heard before it was sighted. At Marhi we encountered high winds and sub-zero temperatures but this was a beautiful spot girdled by high snow-capped mountains on all sides. Out came our down jackets and woollen gloves. Even inside our tents it was numbingly cold.

We started early the next morning for our passage across Thamsar. We soon had a herd of several hundred sheep and mountain goats accompanying us over the snow fields leading up to the Pass. Unlike Kalihani, Thamsar has to be approached tangentially from its right flank. Progress was slow in the thin air and on slippery ice. We were finally on top of the Pass marked by a small shrine to the local deity, topped with a bright red banner. It stood out against the pervasive white of snow all around us. Even more treacherous was the almost vertical descent beyond the highest point. It was made worse by a dangerous mix of melting snow, mud and droppings of sheep and mules which had crossed the Pass earlier in the day. It was only with the support of our accompanying guides and porters that we were able

to negotiate this stretch safely.

There were two more stops, at Panihartu and Rajgundha villages, before we concluded our journey at the village of Bir. Rajgundha brought us back to human settlement, electricity, mobile signals and, inevitably, plastic waste. The entire village was

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celebrating some festival that night with loud music, drinking sessions and some impromptu dancing. Later that night we had a violent thunderstorm with relentless rain but fortunately it was dry though overcast the next morning.

The walk from Rajgundha to Bir is easy and pleasant along a wide track through lush green forests. Bir has become a popular centre for paragliding and it was crowded with fun-seekers when we walked though it towards our cars, waiting to drive us into Dharamsala.

This had been a most demanding and difficult trek but compensated by the rare opportunity to journey through some of most pristine parts of the Himalayan ranges. There were dark and menacing stretches but they were interspersed with ethereal landscapes, steeped in primal beauty. They made the painstaking effort with all the risks involved eminently worth our while.

Shyam Saran is a former foreign secretary and an avid trekker