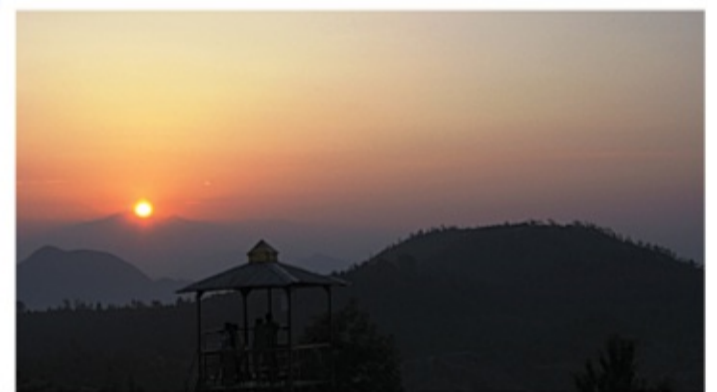


Chaukori:

Kumaon's beautiful daughter



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By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

After watching birds and Himalaya together at Binsar, we made a move to our next destination with a mild tension in heart. I knew that I was playing a gamble with my luck and my chance of winning was slim.

As we scaled up the height passing over the zigzag heavily wooded roads shadowed by pine, oak and decorated with blooming rhododendrons I got some time to close my eyes in peace inside of the speeding car.

The peace was short lived.

"I hope this time you are not throwing away money for another failed attempt" - my wife's barb jolted me awake when we were almost near KMVN tourist lodge of Chaukori a place we have been visiting for the second time in the last eight years.

While chalking out the tour plan of Kumaon we had the usual argument, a must before every vacation in the hills but surprisingly this time my wife did not find enough reason to disagree with me on one place that we had already visited before.

It is Chaukori a hamlet almost invisible in the hill map of Kumaon Himalayas.

Eight years ago when both of us were eight years younger (and so was our shared lives) we had two romantic nights at Chaukori counting galaxy of stars in the dark nights with music of cricket playing in our ears.

The serendipity of those two evenings walked with us for next many years and we still love to blend with that place. We had perfect accommodation in newly opened KMVN guest house where clouds slowly landed at our balcony leaving a patch of moisture on our chairs. We had seen the golden twilight sky at sun set and we bathed in the beaming ray of morning sun passing through large glass window of our room. My son had his day running after the butterfly on the green lawn of the lodge and playing with small puppies.

In a nutshell our memories of Chaukori visited eight years ago was colourful and almost satisfactory as it seems but it seemed something was lacking.

When you are gliding at the average height of 2100 mt and your location is shadowed by most beautiful snow peaks of the world it is your earned right to get yourself blended in the beauty of those snow mountains - Our last trip to Chaukori many years ago deprived us from this thanks to an overcast cloudy sky.

This time agenda was candid - We wanted to see peaks from Chaukori meaning bowl in local Pahari language.

For most of the young going to Chaukori is akin to bird watching, river rafting, mountain cycling, camp fire, tea garden walk and trekking but for one like me nearing mid age this small hamlet of Pithoragarh is the best seat in the theatre of nature to enjoy a train of peaks including the majestic Nanda Devi, Mrigathuni, Nandakot, Nandaghunti and obviously Panchachulli the mind blowing set of five peaks that as per local legend is nothing but five wooden ovens of Draupadi.

With Tibet in north, Tarai in south and a river named Mahakali that demarcates Indo-Nepal border, Chaukori obtains almost every single feature to be a place to watch best of Kumaon Himalaya.

Chaukori still stands distinctive for several reason.

Firstly it is so near to Nepal border that on a clear day Mt Annapurna is also visible from here. Secondly thanks to the proximity of Nanda Devi biosphere reserve the surroundings are rich with Himalayan flora and fauna. Lastly Chaukori is still largely unexplored and not yet commercialised like Kausani which is just 30 km from this place.

In this region of Himalayas Nanda Devi is the most respected deity among Hindus. She is considered as daughter of Drona and wife of Shiva. Apart from some of the highest peaks named after her there are many temples where she is worshiped daily by thousands. The region is also full of temples dedicated to Nagas like Berinag, Kalinag, etc.

Immediately after checking in Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (KMVN) tourist guest house we moved to see masked deer breeding centre set up in 1976 - a one of its kind in India.

A drive of 3 km and then a stiff yet manageable trek of 1.5 km finally took us to hill top where nearly 20 such deer are kept and nurtured.

"Look Baba - the same set of range that we saw yesterday from Binsar. Is it not Mt Panchachulli but much nearer from here?" - my son shouted as he got a jackpot on the hill top.

He was more than correct and indeed from here it looked much bigger than what we saw from Binsar.

So not deer but the first appearance of Mt Panchachulli from hill top gave me confidence that this time I may win the gamble.

The stunning memory of watching Mt Panchachulli was soon fueled up with new motivation when after returning to tourist lodge I noticed a mountain bike at the reception meant for hire.

Though it thrilled me for a moment but soon I discarded the idea of biking and opted for a tea garden walk near the lodge.

Kumaon tea is perhaps the only type of tea business in which British failed in India. Though they started tea plantation in Kumaon region more than 100 years ago but they were never able to make it a global brand as they made it in case of Darjeeling and Assam. We had a small walk in tea garden which was in decay and at the verge of closure. However I was told that Dharmagargh tea estate situated inside of deep oak forest can be reached by bicycle.

Some of our co-travellers opted for it and some even went 40 km from the lodge to watch exotic Himalayan birds and do river rafting in river Kali.

"We are doing nothing here," - my son complained to me.

"Wait son - if luck permits tomorrow morning may be the best morning of this tour," I told him before checking next day's weather forecast in my smart phone. It showed partly cloudy.

Partly cloudy! Last time it devastated my Himalayan dream. Surprisingly the room that was allocated to us was exactly the same room where we spent two nights many years ago.

Though the interior was almost same but the only painful change noticed was a ceiling fan.

"Global warming - This is an evil signal that we are sleeping under an electrical fan at 2000 mt plus altitude and with Himalaya before us," - my wife sounded logical yet pensive.

A good and simple vegetarian dinner was served at 8 pm followed by another round of chats in which speculation on our luck next morning dominated the most.

"Let us go to bed early - else we will miss tomorrow's sunrise," - warned my son to both of us.

I quickly slipped myself under the warm blanket and closed my eyes for a silent prayer for a clear early morning sky - I recalled how this place of Kumaon once broke my heart even though it was full of content in many things else.

After few hours I was the only one standing on the highest platform of watchtower standing on the KMVN ground. Facing towards the tea garden I was fighting with my palpitation of heart as sky was still not clear. In poor visibility I could see two huge pillows of cloud over the tea garden.

In next 15 minutes a young man with camera joined me there on the watch tower.

"Will it be visible today?" I asked softly.



"It is there already - Look carefully. Two giants are smiling at us," he replied.

Visible already? I rubbed my eyes violently and realised in a second that two big chunks of clouds over the horizon are not actually cloud mass - These are peaks.

Peaks!!!! So near! So majestic! So gargantuan!

"Yes - these are twin peaks of Kumaon range of Himalayas - One is Nanda Devi East of 7434 mt and other is Nandakot of 6861 mt."

My hands were shivering in sheer excitement.

I had seen Nanda Devi before from a place called Auli in Garwal Himalaya but the same peak looks so different from Kumaon that it is hard to believe that both are same.

The beam of sun rays kissed the surface of snow soon after - It is morning at Chaukori now blazing under the shadow of the most sacred peak of Kumaon.

Soon on the left of twin peak a train of magnificent range started appearing just like beautiful models hitting the ramp of a fashion show. One by one with their distinctive shape and size peaks like Dronagiri, Nandaghunti, Mrigathuni, Maiktoli started to emerge from behind the veil.

Within a span of 20 odd minutes the green lawn and tea garden of Chaukori blended with the white snow peaks turning the moment beyond expression, leaving us speechless.

"Who can do justice with this moment? An artist? A poet or a painter?" - my wife whispered. She had joined me in the process of getting engrossed with the magical moment.

"A cameraman like me," - I got her out with my bouncer.

Such a huge exhibition of snow peaks in one long frame was enough to make me believe that I have seen everything of Chaukori and there itself I again was rectified by my wife as she pointed out towards the central point of the train of peaks.

"Look and tell me what is that?" she quizzed me.

"It is Panchachulli - The grand amalgamation of five peaks of Kumaon."

I started clicking the panorama like crazy and soon realised I could also see Mt Annapurna and Rajarambha from here. I soon realised that my idea of Himalayas is yet to be improved to that level.

A quick breakfast was followed with another photo session in tea garden with Nanda Devi on background.

As soon as the sun started moving up in sky, the brightness of the milieu enhanced manifold. The sky turned blue and snow turned brighter white. By afternoon Chaukori emerged as the most beautiful daughter of Kumaon.

"The zenith is here," my son concluded the session with a memorable statement. I silently added that now I have no worries if the world were to end. I had seen everything! ■

Travel Logistics:

Chaukori comes under Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand - It is 86 km from Pithoragarh and 30 km from Kausani. It can be reached from Nainital via Almora and Binsar.

KMVN is the best located accommodation - Some private hotels are also there. Nearest rail head - Kathgodam is directly connected from Delhi and Kolkata.