

TREK GROUP REPORT

GROUP 1 :THE WANDERING WONDERS



TREK IN THE NILGIRIS- 25.09.2016 TO 30.09.1990

“It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”

- Edmund Hillary

1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TREK IN FOUNDATION COURSE

Trekking in a group, places the trek members in different situations all through the trek which are different from the usual day to day situations. The situations are unique and have different resource crunches at hand, that need to be managed to produce desired results. The resources at hand in a trek include human resources - people of different capabilities, different strengths, weaknesses and needs at different times; availability of food, water, medicines etc.

A trek group is only as strong as the weakest link; as fast as the slowest member. Trek therefore, helps people learn team building and synergizing energy of people of varying capabilities. It helps one learn how to live in difficult uncomfortable situations which helps the team members to stretch their limits and sustain difficult situations.

In our trek, there were situations where it was cold at night and the availability of blankets were a little less than the total number of members, bathing water was cold, it was difficult to carry excess water up the hill, food was scarce etc. Everyone wanted to trek light, but there was a bare minimum burden that everyone had to carry to sustain the remaining trek. This offered opportunity to the stronger and fitter members to share the burden of relatively less physically fit trek members and complement each other through the trek.

This is **analogical to the day to day decision making situations** that civil servants of all services deal with. With the given resources, constraints and limited choices, civil servants need to make various decisions every day. Some decisions are tough, some are day to day & routine ones while others need deliberation with members of public, civil society and other departments. Trekking helps us give the feeling of such difficulties in natural scenario. It helps us build the patience and perseverance needed to deal with such situations and others need deliberation with members of public, civil society and other departments. Trekking helps us give the feeling of such difficulties in natural scenario. It helps us build the patience and perseverance needed to deal with such situations and others need deliberation with members of public, civil society and other departments. Trekking helps us give the feeling of such difficulties in natural scenario. It helps us build the patience and perseverance needed to deal with such situations.

Team Building- In civil services, there is very less opportunity offered to choose your core group and a team for a particular project or task at hand. One needs to make the best use of the available human resource to produce desired results. This is team building activity that involves, utilizing the strength of all the members and covering up the weakness of all of them. This situation helps the administrators, see the possibility of capacity building and cohesive working of a team of peers.

Trekking is therefore an effective and fun activity that helps civil servants observe the depth of issues that face them in future in a very lucid manner. Facing effectively and sustaining contingent tough situations helps one feel accomplished and confident of effectively facing

such situations in life. Stretching the limits the trek members gain confidence in the possibility of the impossible.

2 INTRODUCTION TO THE GROUP

Our trek group consisting of 21 people –‘The Wandering Wonders’ had an absolutely wonderful time in the six days of the trek . The following are the members of our team.

1. Richy Rachel Mathew- Group Leader
2. Pema Khandu- Assistant Group Leader
3. Sahil Garg - Treasurer
4. Abhinandana Garg
5. Biplab Sarkar
6. Charu Nigam
7. Abhishek Meena
8. Ruby Rani
9. Ishita Das
10. Lipika Roy
11. Akshay Singh
12. Aishwarya Menon
13. Niret K. Kurian
14. Rahul Kumar
15. Pankaj Kumar
16. Kunal Angrish
17. Santosh Kumar
18. Dharmendra Sharma
19. Monica Bhutunguru
20. Bikash Kumar Malik
21. Shruti Pandey

With innumerable anxieties and fears coupled with excitement, the Wandering Wonders set out to discover the Nilgiris. The **Nilgiri** (*Blue Mountains*), form part of the Western Ghats in western Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and Kerala states in Southern India, the highest peak being Doddabetta, at 2,637 metres (8,652ft). All six days we joyously wandered around the Nilgiris witnessing its varied terrains , be it lush green meadows or picturesque mountains or silent valleys.

The various experiences, diverse flora and fauna and the myriad situations and details of the journey have found a place in this report.

3 PUTTING THE GROUP TOGETHER : Narrated by the Group Leader Richy Rachel Mathew

"A bit nervous and anxious, I reached Tamilakam. Our lot was the last to enter Ooty because of which I reached late for the briefing. After the briefing my anxiety was sky rocketing, as the time for trek was very near. I took a quick sip of the tea provided during high tea after which group members were made to sit in the bus and all our bags were kept in the jeep with the help of STF Anna's. We then proceeded for a journey we all were looking forward to. I was a little shy and hesitant to address the whole group for the first time as earlier we had only communicated through whatsapp. Now was the time when I had to take charge, forgetting about myself. The curiosity of the group members regarding the trek and the resultant interactions helped to build more confidence in me and thus made the hesitations fade away. Our AGL Pema Kandu is a very sincere guy, very helpful and supportive at every point. I and Pema also interacted with the STF people, and made them feel comfortable. They started giving advices regarding the trek routes, bags etc and also asked us to make buddy pairs for better management of the group.

At parson's valley we had our 1st dinner together, slowly building the rapport in the group. Pema and I interacted with one and all and tried our best to make the shy ones to open up. We also had some members in the group who came up wishing us all the success and lending their support for the team activities.

In the briefing at night we formed first and the last buddy pairs and the remaining ones were made after the first day's trek and thus getting a better idea of the speed and ability of the members. For example, fast person with the slow one, average with the average. Monica being a doctor was placed in the middle to cater with the medical need of the people as and when they came up.

The buddy system proved to be a successful one since everybody supported and cooperated with their buddy partners and there were no instance of misunderstanding.

Being the group leader I used to wake up at 5 o'clock and used to wake other girls in three time slots- half an hour for three girls as we were nine girls in the group. Pema followed the same with the boys. We ensured to start the trek by the said time (at 7:30 after having breakfast) and help the late comers in speeding up.

During the trek when people used to slow down or get tired, I and Pema used to encourage, motivate and pump up their energy levels saying "*destination is about to come*", "*you are doing very good*", "*we will soon get good food*", "*Halt is after 10 mins*", "*yes!! You can do it*" etc... There were times when I felt helpless and exhausted but still I kept on motivating my teammates and made everyone walk together and reach destination on time, of course with lot of fun in the course.



I tried my best to maintain a balance between making the members enjoy and making them follow the rules, eg. halting, enjoying nature, clicking photographs were allowed until people started lagging behind or if we were not on time.

After reaching the camp, every day I and Pema ensured that the doctor is available and if food is on time, any special health or other issues are there and tried dealing with them at the best of our ability and resources. We also ensured for the recreation and the enjoyment of the members. The entire group used to get together in organising and enjoying bon fires, games, dinners etc.

We tried our best to make this trek a memorable one, to build some beautiful relations, to bring out the best in one and all. And this does not end here; this friendship and this bond of 21 people will last for a life time.

Our Trek route started from Parson's valley and the last day we came back to it from Sholur. A description of each day is added now."

4 Day 1: Parson's valley to Porthimund

On the first day of our trekking, we all woke up early around 5 am - 5:30 am . It was dark outside, and cold too. Some of the female officers went outside to bring bucket of warm water from the kitchen .We saw that all the kitchen staff were busy making our breakfast and packing our lunch. One by one we got ready with great enthusiasm . Next we were served with delicious south Indian breakfast. We were all ready to trek for the day by 7 am We took a group photo before leaving the base camp at Parson's valley so that it is kept as a memory of the onset of the journey of the very first day of a six day long journey with the fellow trek group members. We started following the Special Task force staffs (two at the front) and two at the back of the entire group and one officer from the forest department. Initially it was

cloudy ,so many of us were wearing raincoat as precaution and on the way here and there we encountered rain too at some places.

Trekking through the 22km stretch Parson's valley to Porthimund was really a wonderful experience as we passes through Parson's valley dam and encountered oak, pine trees and also eucalyptus tree whose oil is known for medical uses. We went along the Mukurthi National Park ,the flora and fauna of which resembles that of Himalayas .

Next was a slightly difficult job for all those who have no trekking experience before as on the trekking path it was full of dried leaves and trees fallen abruptly here and there. We have to walk through thick forest .After crossing a local bridge we had to climb up a little. We passed by the Emerald dam site where we meet some tourists.

After taking some rest and food in this open area and started again for the day's journey'. We crossed a bridge .The natural beauty was marvellous, all the photographers of our group started to capture it in their cameras. We saw lot of agricultural activities and tea gardens in the valley ,an old tea factory up the hill, worker's colony and a local stream.

Here we were asked to have our lunch and after a long walk as we were tired the food we were carrying appear to us the most delicious we ever had in life.

Immediately after lunch we had to climb steep slope full of wattlers having thorns .We have to hang on to branches to move forward. Everyone has to bend and this continued for a much longer time.STF staffs were careful enough to ensure that nobody is lagging behind.

After walking through earthen, metalled and tar road we were at the edge of a nice valley and the Porthimund dam.The picturesque view is still embedded in everybody's mind. After passing through a village we finally reached our base camp at Porthimund.

After reaching there we had our evening snacks and tea ,played cards .It was really becoming cold at night. After having dinner we had a briefing session for the next day's trek by STF staffs and we planned our strategy for the next day. We went to sleep earlier than usual as we were suppose to start early the next day.

5 Day2: Porthimund to Pandiar

The trek from Porthimund to Pandiar was the trickiest as we happened to transverse completely through the deep forest. It was also one of the lengthiest trek. We started from Porthimund around 7.30 am. Since the trek was lengthy, we were advised to start early and walk as fast as possible because it gets darker very early in the deep forest and becomes difficult and dangerous to cross the jungle after sunset. We had the best experience of wonderful views of pristine nature in the wearer escarpment of the Nilgiri plateau. Shola forests and deep woods kept us amazed.

The trek started with steep climb downhill for quite some time. After a while we crossed the

Mukurthi dam on our left side. We went to the top of the dam and had a very refreshing lunch there. A group of monkeys also came closer to us in the expectation of food. We talked to the staff of the dam and rested for some time on the bank of a small stream listening and singing beautiful songs.

After the lunch we again started our journey and passed the forest area belonging to the Mukurthi National Park. The terrain was a rolling one and suddenly we entered into an open saucer type area with all the sides surrounded by the hills. We saw a beautiful junction of water streams from all the sides into a small pond which we crossed with the help of a wooden bridge. We refreshed ourselves clicking beautiful pictures there.

We walked on the edge of a valley which was scary but at the same time thrilling also. The trek went through thick pine forests and the Shola forest. While going down the meadows we encountered with a herd of wild buffaloes who after hearing our noise thought that we were coming towards to attack them. It was a very challenging situation as the entire herd of buffaloes started coming towards us in an aggressive manner. But the quick wit of STF guards came handy and they diverted them from our route.

Innumerable locations were real picturesque. After continuous walking for some more time we entered the tea gardens. The pebbled road took us again closer towards our destination. Pandiar lies at 2253 meters high above mean sea level and is situated amidst deep forests and is famous for tigers, sambar and deer. Finally we reached Pandiar around 4.30 pm. We were all very tired but the scenic beauty of the place kept us rejuvenate. After a tedious and tiring day we were served with hot pakoras and tea. This refreshment was beyond any explanation. The pakoras and tea never tasted so good. After freshening up we arranged for the bonfire which served many purposes. It not only provided warmth and coziness but also helped in drying our wet shoes and clothes. We danced and enjoyed too much that night. Thereafter we had a good dinner in the candle night as there was no electricity at the Pandiar. No mobile network, no electricity and we were all alone in the silent deep jungles. We watched the stars twinkling in the night sky unexpected to be seen in the towns and cities. We laughed and enjoyed the memories of the day's trek. That night we could hardly sleep as the cold was at its peak but somehow we survived. We got up next morning and a new journey began for us with the heavy luggage. But we were equally prepared to enjoy the unseen beauty of the Nilgiris.

6 DAY 3: PANDYAR TO NADUVATTAM

On day 3, our route was from Pandyar to Naduvattam. The distance from Pandyar to Naduvattam is about 11 km. This trek route is one of the easiest routes. We started around 8 AM. The route was mostly of roads and tea gardens. We were trekking at a height of 2000

meters above mean sea level. In the morning, when we started our journey we were surrounded by mist. This was giving us a mesmerising scenic beauty of tea garden. Once we entered the path between plantations, it was a bit slippery at some places and swampy at others. When we were about to reach Naduvattam, it started raining. It made our trek a bit difficult. We reached Naduvattam around 2 PM. It is located at an elevation of 1953 meters above mean sea level. The camp was located at a very beautiful place. In front of the camp, there was beautiful grassland and cattle were grazing and some children were playing basketball. Behind the camp there was a town and market. In the evening, some of us went to the market too. The place was chilly. In the night we had bonfire. Overall the route was very good and we enjoyed a lot.

7 Day 4 Naduvattam to Kargudi

The green meadows and football grounds of Naduvattom will always remain in our hearts. But we have to move on. We started from the Naduvattom Guest house at 7:30 AM. Since we were moving through some tea plantations, all of us were busy in putting salt and applying soap on our shoes. We all were pumped up and the fear of the leech bite made it better. The first 3-4 kilometres were covered swiftly. There was greenery everywhere and it gave us a great positive energy. The duty of finding and removing the leeches climbing through the sides of our shoes were given to the person followed. Since it was the early morning there were few people in the gardens but we saw a Trishul in a small Shiva temple set in between the gardens. It may be the place where the workers worship. Some of us plucked some tea leaves out of curiosity and some managed to take some photos of the greenery. At about 9:00 AM we reached the Tamil Nadu-Kerala Highway. We were told that we have to walk some kilometres through road also. Initially there were only tea and coffee plantations on both sides. We were lucky to eat some fresh guavas there. A flying squirrel and a mongoose also crossed our way. After a 10 km walked we reached an old house where we had lunch. There we met some local workers and talked to them about their work environment. We started again at 1:30 PM. We passed through a small tribal hamlet by the way. The houses were well constructed and there were plenty of paddy fields. The small children over there were happy after seeing us. A single 'hi' or a wave was making them so happy and excited. We reached Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. We have walked almost 20 kilometres till then and most of us were tired. Then the STF and forest officers told us that we have to walk 10 more kilometres through the tiger reserve to reach the respective guest houses. Here male and female OTs were supposed to stay in different places.

The real challenge in our trekking was going to begin here. We decided to start walking and know our limits. It was a small road with thick reserved forests on both sides. There were many monkeys, peacocks, elephants and deers. The wonderful scenes and the wild animals made us forget all the tiredness. Before we have decided to take some rest between the walk as we all were pretty exhausted but the energy we got by walking together cracking small jokes and sharing snacks made us fast. We took it as a matter of pride to walk 30 kilometres in a single day. At last we reached the destination. We were are so happy because we have achieved something earlier thought impossible. The accommodation facilities and food where so good. Some of us managed to have some chicken also. It was a very challenging and exciting day in our trek.

8 DAY 5 : KARGUDI TO SHOLUR

Kargudi (Forest Temple)

- Located within Mudumalai sanctuary, shares land with Kerala, Karnataka
- Meeting point of Eastern & Western Ghats; covers 330 km², started in 1940
- Hill Banana and cactus fruit – both edible

Sholur (Village in Forest)

- Sholur panchayat comprises six hamlets within 5,000 km² Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve
- Home to largest number of Asiatic elephants

Starting time-

End time-

Distance covered-14 kms

This is one of the toughest stretch of the Nilgiri trek. It is here where one needs to climb the steepest inclines of around 2500 fts. One had to draw on all the stocks of energy, food, motivation and zeal to complete the task at hand. This trek was done by only 20 people as Abhinandana was taken ill and the doctor had advised her rest. We came across agricultural land, grasslands and forests.

This trek is a true test of a person's physical and mental endurance. We also learn an important lesson in water management as its hard to find water source during this stretch. Group dynamics also came into play during this time. All the group members stood hand in hand to complete this trek.

On reaching Sholur we were welcomed by ever enthusiastic children of the nearby village. We played football with them, played music and danced to the thumping sound of the drums played by them. The accommodation was good and administrative staff catered to all our needs

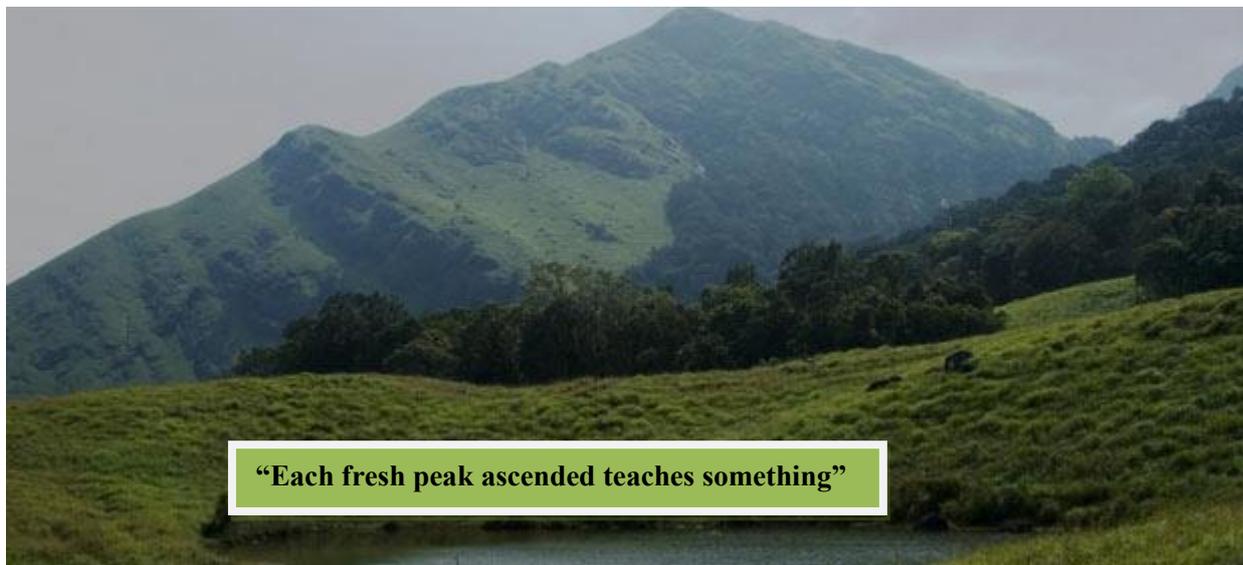
9 DAY 6 : SHOLUR TO PARSON'S VALLEY

The gentle slopes and temperate climate of the region mean that even those with little or no experience of trekking would not get fatigued in this beautiful stretch. The beauty of the Nilgiris, however, is such that even veteran hikers will enjoy themselves. Low, gentle slopes, where dense forests of Shola trees alternate with tea estates, orange groves and coffee plantations; a land where tribes like the Todas, the Kurumbhas and the Irulas still live in a way which has changed little over the past centuries.

Like others day, we got up early morning, washed our sleepy face and prepared for the next destination **Parson's Valley**. After getting up from the bed, the first thing that came to our mind was how much distance we have to walk for the next destination and we all asked that

to the group leader as well as the STF guards. On that day everybody was feeling relaxed because of the last day trek, however it was very sad for all of us too as the trek was ending. We started our journey from **Sholur** around 8 AM and we walked through the roads first and after walking some 5-6 kms; we entered into the medium density forest. Throughout our trek path that day, the beauty of the nature, nightingale of the birds accompanied us. We all were seeped in the sights and were moving slowly as no one wanted to finish the trek because of the last 5 days association with each other, time spent together in different activities had made our relation much stronger than it was initially. On the trek path we saw a herd of sheep and then we clicked lot of pictures of them. Other places were equally nice like the Shooting place and Parson's peak, which towers over Parson's Valley. Once we reached Parson's Valley, the area was so picturesque, it deserves every bit of time you can spend wandering through it.

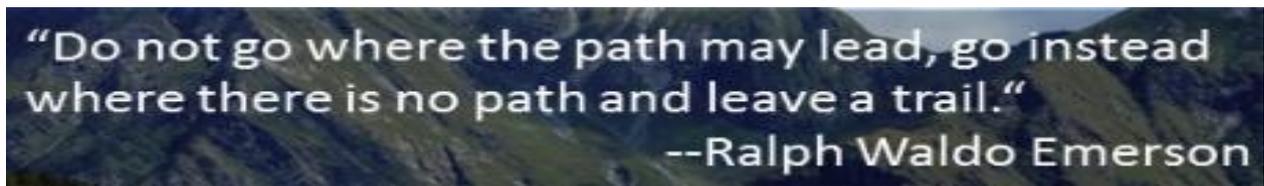
10 Terrain of Nilgiris- The Blue Mountains



Nilgiri means "Blue Mountains". The height of the hills in the Blue Mountain range varies between 2,280 and 2,290 metres. Nilgiri is one of the most ravishingly beautiful hilly terrains and supposedly one of the best. Nilgiri provides a fascinating view with the steep hills, hilly areas and enormously narrow valleys with plentiful rivers running in all directions with a few fine waterfalls and provide beautiful scenery.

The places are much cooler than the surrounding areas and Nilgiri has magnificent hills, far-fetched valleys and dazzling waterfalls. Also we can see dams built high up in the hills which provide an everlasting peace in the minds of trekkers. Low, gentle slopes, where dense forests of shola trees alternate with tea estates, orange groves and coffee plantations; a land where tribes like the Todas, the Kurumbhas and the Irulas still live and make their livelihood. The Nilgiris are interspersed with miniature villages, with serene blue lakes and elegant cottages. Tea estates add more to the beauty of the area. These major tea growing areas and

those tea gardens are beautiful to watch. The temperate and most levelheaded climate further heightens the attractiveness of the place. There is agreeable and chilled weather too.



This trekking route is indeed adventurous and offers panoramic views and is a paradise for trekkers. A trek through the Nilgiris is a great way to see the hills- to ramble through forests of rhododendron in full bloom; to trip the wildlife-rich sanctuaries of Mudumalai and Mukurthi; to walk through rising and falling green downs and along rippling stream. It is a pleasurable scene which really doesn't get better anywhere.

11 Flora And Fauna

Nilgiris form a part of Western Ghats and are one of the Biodiversity Hotspots in India. Thus the group could observe a lot of species as well as natural phenomenon during the trek.

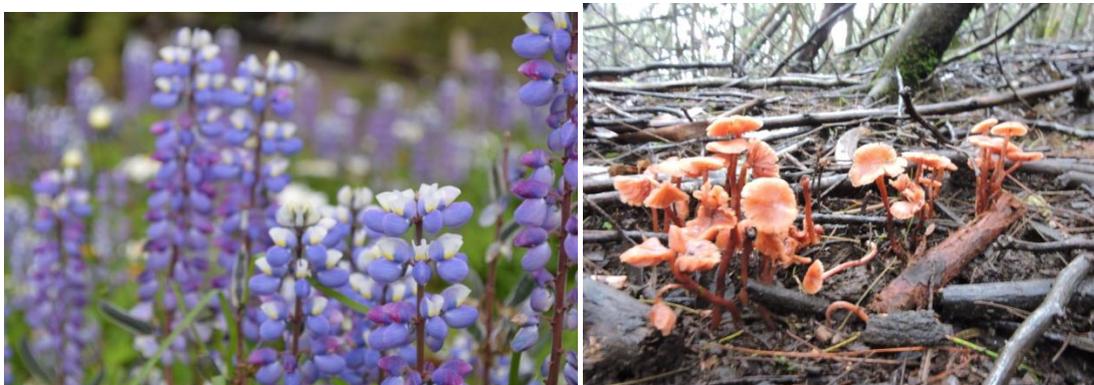
Flora

From lower plants to Angiosperms, the group saw a number of species.

Among the lower plants, we observed a number of brightly colored fungi. There were a number of rivulets and channels due to the monsoon season and that's why mosses and lichens were in full bloom. A number of Ferns were also observed in damp places.

Among angiosperms we saw a number of flagship species of the Shola Forests. *Eucalyptus*, *Wattles* etc were also seen. We could see a number of brightly coloured wild flowers, classification of which was difficult.

Among Gymnosperms, Pines and Rhododendron were seen wherever the altitude was above 1600-1700m.





Fauna

All kinds of animals were seen. Among the Non-chordata, we saw animals ranging from millipedes, centipedes, insects like Cicada etc. the star of the show undoubtedly were the Leeches. Group observed their peculiar way of movement and how they use their suckers to attach themselves to the prey.

Among Higher animals, we saw a number of differently coloured toads and frogs. A good diversity of birds was observed. Among mammals, group was lucky to see Malabar Giant Squirrel, local rhesus macaque, domesticated elephants. Although the bigger animals like Tiger and Leopard were not seen, their presence was felt by observing their Scat and pugmarks. Porcupine quills were also seen by the group.

12 THE LIFE AND CULTURE OF NILGIRI TRIBES

THE life and culture of the various tribes in Nilgiris is interesting. Prized with the vast, rich forests and hills, Nilgiri has many aboriginal tribes inhabiting them, preserving their distinct identities.

The Tribes:

The tribes and the other backward classes constituted half of the Nilgiris' population. The Thodas, the Badagas, the Kurumbas, the Irulas and the Kotas are the original inhabitants of the Nilgiris. While the towns in the district presented a secular look, the people in the villages largely followed the tribal life styles.

The Thodas:

The Thodas are the ancient tribes in India. With their dress code and the busy beards, they are said to resemble the ancient Greeks in their culture. The Thodas lived in Mandoozes. The name 'Udakamandalam' is assumed to have its origin in the word, Othaikalmandi – meaning the 'single-stone dwelling'. Apparently, the early Thodas lived in the rooms or huts made of a single stone, and that is how the name must have emerged.

The Thodas reared the buffalo, which is the symbol of their clan, and they sold the milk. The number of buffaloes he possessed judges the wealth of a Thoda.

The Badagas:

The Badagas outnumbered the other tribes in Nilgiris. It would appear that they had migrated to the Nilgiris from Mysore during the reign of the Deccan Sultans several years ago. Vadayar means 'people from north'. Badagu is their language, which however did not have a script. The dialect resembles Kannada language. Efforts had been afoot to prepare the Badaga script.

Though the Badaga tribe is different from the other tribes, it is considered to be backward both economically and culturally. Over 75 per cent of this tribe lived in the villages, which are known as Hatti or Halli. While agriculture is their main calling, there are also professionals like doctors, lawyers, and engineers, besides government employees in this tribe. Some are even working abroad. Politics too entered the lives of the Badagas.

The Kotas and others:

The Kotas were the large inhabitants of Kotagiri – which had assumed its name after the tribe. They were experts in making the farm implements. Expert archers and hunters once, their bows and arrows have remained mere exhibits over the years.

Most of the other tribes, viz., the Paniyas, the Kurumbas and the Irulas lived in the forests even today. Some of them worked in the tea estates in the Nilgiris. Besides farming, these tribes also knew hunting. They hunted the animals for their living and also as a pastime.

The Tribal Associations:

The Tribal Association (or, the Adivasi Sangham) provided the much-needed medical relief to the tribes inhabiting the Nilgiris. And the Association is given assistance by the State government and the other Tribal Associations abroad. Besides, the State and the Central governments have their own schemes and projects for the benefit and uplift as also education of these aboriginals. Despite the sincere efforts made by these agencies at the economic and social development of these tribes, there desired much to be done yet. With the passage of time, rapid urbanization and the strides in education, some of the primitive customs of these tribes have been on the wane.

The wealth of Nilgiris:

The various tribes that maintained and preserved their own distinct cultures and traditions constitute the real wealth of the Nilgiris and add to the beauty of the hills. Its tribal songs, music and dances are well known.

The different tribes and their unique cultures greet and present a delectable picture to those who visit the panoramic and enticing Nilgiris. And these hills provide a good field for those who aspire to study – besides the abundant Nature – the life, the customs and the cultures of the various tribes inhabiting them for centuries.

13 Building Camaraderie

Building camaraderie is an essential part of a trekking activity. As a trek group is as strong as the weakest link. It is essential that all the members move together. The activities can not be completed effectively if one or more of the members is left behind. It is important to understand that 21 different individuals with different physical and mental strengths are made to do things some of whom find these in their comfort zones and some who are first timers to others who have mental as well as physical weaknesses in doing the trek activities.



A lot of activities during and after trek hours help build the much needed cohesiveness in the groups. Activities like :

1. Eating together, understanding the priorities of peer members.
2. Playing cards or other team games together
3. Sharing water and food munches while walking monotonously sometimes
4. Taking pictures and selfies together
5. Holding hands and supporting relatively less fit members by relatively fitter members through tougher terrains like uphill and slippery slopes etc
6. Singing and talking
7. Encouraging words , keeping them go on

During the trek , buddy pairs were made to walk through the tough terrains . Factors like strength and weaknesses were taken into consideration to bring out the objectives of timely completion of everyday trek while comrades help each other through the day activities.

A lot of games were played through the trek, so much so that as soon as there was a break, trek members would start continuing pending games and forget all the tough circumstances that they were braving through. On days of route marches, groups sang songs through the long stretches, forgetting their blisters and other pains they came through.

Starting from 21 independent souls, by the end of the trek the group was like one big family with most people knowing strengths and weaknesses of each other.

14 SWACHCH BHARAT ABHIYAN BY WANDERING WONDERS

A tendency to tolerate dirt and garbage is not accepted anywhere when we identify ourselves as literate and educated masses. This incredible tolerance to the ubiquitous dirt and garbage will create such a huge problem which may fuel to bigger problems in future than now. Further we do not have the right to destroy the assets of our future generations in our greedy pursuits. So, our duty must be to safeguard the environment without failing and polluting the nature by any means.

Travelling from Mudumalai to Sholur on our fifth day of trekking, we actually had a difficult day through the steep and high terrains. We were the last group to pass through such distances with lots of courage and determination with cooperation among group members. However, the height of the hill and the greenery was actually attracting us to climb up and forget the pains by walking together, looking the face of our buddies with encouraged words till the sun sets to complete our task for the particular day. The moist breeze and the sounds of the jungle with hide and seek of animals were the attractions of the day. But we all were very thirsty by that time. What to do? We have already walked several difficult miles. Can we find a source of water in the middle of the jungle and hill? Our guide said, yes, there is a place where we all will have to halt for lunch, is place of small stream. We can drink the water. We were on our anxiety in waiting for the time to come. Finally we reached the place, a beautiful scenic divider as it has been painted in between two steep hills with deep forest and it sounds very joyful to attract us to drink her water. Wah! Such a nice place!



But what is this? It is full of garbage. Who did this such nuisance in such a beautiful place! Some of our group members were surprised and felt very disappointing. But, it was commendable that they did not want to tolerate these piles of garbage. Though the garbage was fresh and the plastic plate was the identification of our fellow mates travail. There were four previous groups who they had crossed this same trek path. Some of them must have done this, and many of them did not notice or retaliated. But, here our purpose is not to make any group responsible for this. We got a task there is somehow an opportunity to test to pursue our own diligence. And all our group members joined hand and worked together and cleaned the place. Alas! It is now a clean place to sit and set foot. The stream as if was thanking to us and singing with more joy. We were respecting the nature with folded hands and just asking her to excuse us for our nuisance. And then we moved for our destination with double courage and contentment.

15 FUN ACTIVITIES DURING THE TREK

It was the evening of 24th September we were about to start our journey from Ooty to Parsons Valley. We got on the bus, everyone was out of their comfort zone, trying to mingle with each other but some sort of hesitation was there. All of sudden idea of playing Antakhshari came and we started singing .We did not realise how the time passed and we reached Parsons Valley .It was just a game of Anatkshari which intertwined all of us.

After Reaching Parsons Valley we realised we have landed in the lap of nature where chilling winds are divine, chirrup of birds are like sweet romantic songs, everything surrounding us was extremely beautiful. Late evening we all had dinner under the wide and starry sky, it was fun having dinner like this at that place .We were talking to each other about what next we could do after dinner, someone suggested we will play cards. Some of us were interested playing cards but the rest had no idea about playing cards.Bluff and 29 were the two games which were taught and played with fervent throughout the trek. .We had no idea at that time that this would become the most memorable game of trek.



Thereafter the journey of this game also started with our trekking journey and it became the most played game during trek. Many times we blasted in to laughter during playing .There used to be 4-5 groups of people playing the same game, commenting on each other and laughing like anything at the camp site. We also played few other games of cards like UNO.

One evening we decided to play game Mafia, introduced by Monica. This game took all of us back to our childhood days and we literally behaved in that manner as well. We all participated enthusiastically but it turned out to be more fun for those who luckily became mafia. We all enjoyed enough this game as well.

Sitting under starry sky feeling chilling winds all around with the hope of getting some heat from somewhere just to pass the cold long night gave the idea of bonfire. Flames of fire turned out to be flames of togetherness, binding everyone .Together we danced, we sang playing round go round, shared our stories and ended up with a family of 21 people.

Thus entire trip was overloaded with fun activities; we started as a compulsion of being together but these activities knitted us altogether.

16 Survival in scarcity

The most common thing that one would encounter during a trek is the scarcity of different resources be it time, space, food , water etc. Even before we started for the trek we felt the grip of scarcity since our backpacks given by the institute was on purpose quite small so that we do not stuff too many things that it becomes unbearable to carry our own luggage during

the trek. Scarcity helps developing better management of resources. We jotted down the things that were extremely important for the trek and purchased those things only and that too miniatures of them. The basic aim was to keep the weight of the backpack as less as possible. This helped develop a skill of prioritizing for a given task. Still there it could be seen that many people carried too heavy bags without realising that all throughout the journey their shoulders have to bear the burden of their poor prioritisation. The survival technique under such condition then lies in sharing the burden among the group members so that no ones left behind.

Another form of scarcity that we faced was of time. We had to start from one halting place to the other and reach there before it gets dark. This required all the team members to be energised at all times so that an average speed of the group is maintained. Thus one had to plan for adequate halts in between that should be supplemented by intake of quick energisers such as chocolates, glucose and other stuff. In connection to this, the availability of water is limited since everyone was carrying one litre bottle for themselves. This limitation was a little eased by the cool climate of the Nilgiri but still it was an important scarce factor that we had to deal with. the survival techniques under such restriction is again sharing between the group and looking for water sources while traversing.

There was no network in most of the halting places, which also posed a kind of scarcity because we did not have the luxury to talk to our families and share our pain and pleasure with them. The best survival techniques is to come out of our shell or comfort zone and start to gel and bind with our team members. This would allow sharing and caring for each other which would relieve our whole days exhaustion. We indeed quite closely gel with our fellow team mates through different activities such as playing cards , dancing and singing around the bonfire.

Further, in case of trekking it is usually comes to mind that one has to reside in temporary tents through the night. But in our trek, thanks to the administration this scarcity was eased through permanents shelter that were mostly rest houses for trekkers. Thus we had to just adjust within the space provided. Along with that breakfast and dinner was served at the different rest house so the task of cooking was also solved. Lunch was packed for us and given to us to be taken in between the journey.

17 SECURITY AND GUIDANCE IN THE DEEP JUNGLES OF NILGIRIS

During the trek briefing on 24th Sept, 2016, we were apprised of the mechanism in place for guiding us through the hills and forests, and for our security over the one week of trek. Little did we realise the need and importance of this at that time but once we started the trek, not even a moment passed without that support.

Our group was assisted by a team of four: three from TN Police STF and one from the Nilgiri District Police. In short, it was a team highly proficient and trained in the hills and forests. They had good knowledge about the terrain and the animal movement, which immensely helped us in moving ahead with caution.

At every short intervals, the STF team continuously sent updates to the SP, Nilgiri regarding our progress. For every stop and for every move of ours, they were responsible and accountable. To a great extent, we saw and understood the working of the police force.

Every time we moved from our forest range to another, we were guided by two forest guards. They were locals of the region, mostly tribals who were used to the terrain and familiar with the regional topography. They were our guiding lights in those deep dark woods, of which we knew literally nothing.

As our trek in a range ended, the forest guards bid us goodbye and proceeded back to the starting point again on foot through a strenuous journey, so as to guide the next group, again. Their tireless journey inspired us whenever we felt tired and low.

When we started the journey, there was the problem of language. While the STF and forest team knew only Tamil and a bit of English, only one or two of us could understand Tamil. But soon we started communicating with them- we learnt some Tamil and they, some Hindi. That *broke the linguistic divide* and created a bond of unity and togetherness. They became our “Annas” which means elder brother in Tamil. We shared experiences with each other and we are *ONE BIG FAMILY* since then.



Another challenge was that of the perception of distance. The distance mentioned on paper was way less than the actual distance we trekked on the ground. So we used to keep asking the STF team about our progress. After 2-3 days, we realised that we never had the right knowledge about the distance we had to trek. On the 3rd day, upon interaction with STF regarding this, we came to know that the forest guards who were mostly tribals of the local villages, who had no idea about the distance. They just walked into the hills as long as they reach. This made us realise *the kind of simple yet a challenging life they live there*. It also gave us an important lesson that the thought of how much more to tread would disappoint and

demotivate us but if we enjoy and keep moving, the destination will come much earlier than we expect. Facing uncertainties with the least of expectations was the key takeaway.

The last day of the trek was that of mixed emotions- the happiness of completing the trek on one hand and the sadness of the end on the other. But life goes on. We clicked photos and exchanged numbers with them, hoping to meet sometime again. Nevertheless, the bonds created can never be destroyed.

In short, we met simple yet great men and learnt great lessons which couldn't have come from anyone better than those in the service of the nation.

18 A COUPLE OF ANECDOTES AND MUSINGS

by Monica

Wild buffaloes : An alternate angle

Today started as any other day. I woke up totally ignorant of what the day had instored for us & how it would change my perspective towards life for ever. It was noon time & I was lying around with my friends when suddenly I saw a group of animals coming towards us. I hadn't seen this creature ever before in my life. I could see surprise in their eyes too. I expected them to retreat & take another route but when they did not, I did what I have been taught a thousand times to do in such situations. That is I along with my friends ran & reported this to our elders. They all noticed this herd of intruders which had become bigger now. In an instinctive action we all moved in unison towards them to inquire. I also thought this might scare them away. But apart from a few in the back, they all stood steady on their ground. This got me worried. I had never encountered such tiny vulnerable looking animals with numbers no bigger than us stand so confident on the face of death. I knew there had to be a catch. I mean it failed all logic, they were sure to die in case of a fight with us. They were being "regally stupid" as my uncle who taught us combat would have put it. Then three of them made some noise which to my ears was plain silly. But, what happened next left me shocked & disappointed. We led by none other than my uncle started to retreat. I was heartbroken but had no choice but to follow them. I was dying inside to ask if this was a new battle strategy I had missed while sleeping in the class or was it to gain a dominant position as we now were on a higher ground or something else I had failed to decipher. But everyone around was silent so I didn't think it would be wise of me to open my foolish mouth. I have never been much of a conformist but the intensity with which everyone was staring at these intruders made me shut all ideas of revolt that were hatching my tiny brain. So I did what everyone was doing, i.e. nothing just observing them like some magic rays would emanate from our eyes, get magnified by our collective strength & burn them down to fumes. But it did nothing of this sort. They moved around our land like they owned it. My heart sank. These uncivilized lot who didn't even know how to move strategically in a herd were walking on my land, scrutinizing everything like we were subjects of some experiment. They first gathered around our bodily waste, I completely fail to understand what interested them in that & then they

went to our cremation ground. A few weeks back a horrible incident had occurred here. A dreaded tiger had attacked our home, with great effort we all managed to escape to safety but grandpa got caught. The rest is very difficult for me to describe. Now these disrespectful creatures had found his mortal remains & were playing with it, as we all just stood there & watched in utter disgust. This seemed to have some how satisfied them & they turned around to leave. A few of them still had their eyes on us. The situation demanded me to be afraid but all I could find inside of me was anger. Anger towards them for their grotesque actions & anger towards our elders for their inaction. The moment they were out of our sight I looked towards my uncle for answers. He would have guessed the burning turmoil in me because at that very instance he uttered something under his breath that forever woke me from my blissful ignorance. Every single one of us Wild Buffaloes knows that in our part of the wilderness these words silence all arguments, end all discussions, bypass the question-answer dichotomy & explain everything unexplainable to a common rational being. He had said, "Those were the humans."

"And "And I set fire to the rain"

"And "And I set fire to the rain", that's exactly what we did on the 3rd night of the trek at the wet, cold & electricity-deprived Pandyar. Two tiny dingy rooms for 21+3 of us with hardly any space to stretch would have demoralized anyone after a long day's trek, but us. We collectively defied our individual limits, we regardless of the pain or blisters sprinted to the finish line & some braver souls among us also took bath in ice cold chilling water that can actually bring shivers down one's spine. Though every fiber of every muscle the body possessed was tired to it's very core but our spirits didn't what to call it a day yet, they craved for more. So, there we were blowing our lungs out on the bon fire we had set, trying to keep the wet wooden logs burning. To our delight the fuel complied with ease. Rain the tormentor, fire the reliever, turned tables or just a game of perspectives. Anyways, we started doing what crazed out kids do at the end of a hard day's work, i.e. play. Play to the sound of music, to the bon fire, to the drizzle, surrounded by our newly found buddies, where does it all lead to. Yeah! We did shake a leg or two. But what came next wasn't expected.

Let me apologize for my over exaggeration. It was totally expected of us to dry our belongings, but the flame had plans of it's own. Oblivious of it, we chirped around. Believing we were playing with it, while all along we were the one's being played. There's a lesson in everything that happens & there's a story in every moment lived. A story for everyone, a story in everyone. Stories differ, lessons differ, interpretation differ as do people. Let's dissect. There were those among us who didn't bother to dry their socks, some who were too lazy to do it & some probably scared to. This risk averting lot will have to bear with their wet socks tomorrow. Few will learn the lesson for the times to come & few would adapt into someone who doesn't mind wearing wet socks.

Adaptation that's our greatest asset, this ability has placed us at the top of the evolution chain. In simpler words, we humans can get along with literally anything & everything. Then comes the smart lot which has always known how much to venture, in this case have meticulously calibrated how far from the fire should the socks be placed. These people

generally get what they want, but then they are always careful what to want. A good number of us got our socks burnt in the pursuit of drying them. This is pure science, hit & trial, one learns from their experience & gets wiser with each passing day. But deviants are hard to miss. What do we call someone who is adamant not to learn. One who doesn't think before dousing fresh socks into fire on a new day. All we can do is pray for such foolish eternally optimistic souls. They are incapable of floating. They either drown or cross the English channel. Lastly, its hard to forget those who raised the stakes. These real life gamblers mostly get their shoes burnt along with the socks, something like Mahabharata's Yudhishter. But as is in any game of probability, those very few who survive, never have to look back. By now the flames were no more than a few drops of glistening glitters in the backdrop of rain. That night we were burnt more than just socks..

The ice cream vendor

29th Sept was ironically the only day we didn't play the famed game of "29". Instead we catered to our blisters which had not spared a single one of us, thanks to the never ending Route March we had to endure to the much revered Mudumalai. The delight of the day was the discovery of a smiling, nameless ice cream vendor who sold his goodies on his two wheeler. There cannot be a better example of, being at the right place at the right time. I can't remember the last time I was so happy to see an ice cream vendor. It took us no time to metamorphose to our much younger forgotten selves. We took more than we could eat & relisheded it to the last lick. But in all this the happiest was the ice cream vendor who was so busy fulfilling to our demands that he forgot to keep an account of the numbers he had served. It's interesting to observe that there, some twenty of us paid less than what wouldn't have sufficed for even two of us in any fancy ice cream parlor here. Anyways, his ice cream was no less than "mana" for us thirsty souls on the way to our promised land led by our equally misleading annas. But indeed it turned out to be more than expected luxury with warm water to bathe in & cozy individual beds to sleep in. That night our ritualistic game of cards was conspicuous by its absence, so I slept early with a thought that brought a smile on my lips. I believe the ice cream vendor too would have slept with a smile on his face & a hope in his heart to find more grownups the next day. All of whose hidden childhood he would magically conjure with his ice cream.

19 THE THINGS THAT WENT WELL

- The complete success of Espirit de corps. There was a complete bonhomie between people from various services, backgrounds and mindsets.
- Group Unity- our group saw no sub grouping based on service or personal friendships formed in the course of Foundation Course prior to this. Each and everyone was open and welcoming to every other member and new permanent friendships were forged.
- No quitters- Winners never quit and quitters never win. Despite not being used to the terrain, surpassing steep climbs, ignoring the various blisters, scratches and bodyache; our group finished each and every trek successfully.

- Best efforts by STF and Forest Staff- They became like an extended family, guiding us, protecting us and navigating our way through the Nilgiris. Words fall short to exemplify their significance.
- Camaraderie- the anecdotes and the other sections exemplify too well the camaraderie fostered in this trek.
- Hospitality and innocence of the various people we met on our way. It was a touching and humbling experience to see these people always willing to offer food and water to travellers like us with no expectations in return. They even refused to take money for the carrots and other vegetables they offered us.
- Hunger is the best sauce. After a long, tiring day to be served with hot tea and snacks is the best thing ever. The food at each camp was delicious despite the remoteness of the areas.
- There were no major exigencies nor many leech bites despite we being so scared about it.
- The trek has taught us to adjust to anything and everything that may befall us in our lives now.

20 SUGGESTIONS

- The quality of backpack, mats and sleeping bags need to be improved or newer ones may be procured. many of us had to re-stitch our bags despite not stuffing them.
- It would be better if the flights and other logistics can be booked after the trek group has been decided, that way the entire group can travel together and there can be better synchronisation for the institute as well if they send the OTs out as per their trek groups.
- A few people who travelled on 23rd and came back late night on 1st got two entire day to sightsee in Ooty while others reached a few hours before briefing and had to leave in the wee morning hours on 1st. It would be nice if its noted that the group leaving early can come early and the group leaving late can come late too so that everyone gets an opportunity to enjoy.
- It would be appreciated if a safari can be organised in the Mudumalai reserve in the core areas instead of a route march through it.
- The trek manual if needs to be updated regarding the actual distances of the trek routes.
- Also it would be better if there can be a climate and terrain briefing before the trek so that no one is left ill-equipped.
- The last day stay at La Flora Ooty needs to be improved.

21 CONCLUSION

The trek in the Nilgiris was a highly exhilarating experience in all of our lives. It brought 21 strangers together. It taught us to test and enhance our limits. It taught us to live within limited means. It helped us scale not only steep slopes but garner the spirit in us that will

enable us to scale any height in life dodging the difficulties in the way. We will forever remain beholden to Dr. MCR HRDI for giving us this life-changing opportunity to avail which has helped us to bond and find a new family, new school of thought and a new way of life.

We would end it with a poem penned by Lipika

*The Wandering wonders set out one day
To conquer the Nilgiri mountains
Hills, valleys, meadows, canopies
Streams, rivulets and fountains*

*21 unknown souls we were
Bound by a common spirit
Forged together, marching ahead
Trying to test their limits*

*Heights, slopes, leeches and rain
Nothing deterred our daily tread
One with nature, one common soul
The wonders found nothing to dread*

*Hand in hand they mustered on
Giving each other support and care
Blindfold trust in each other they put
Forming lifetime bonds so rare*

*How far our wings will spread
Lies unknown within us all
Till one day we set out to fly
Overcoming the fear to fall*

