

The Trek through Lahul and Spiti

In the month of October, a group of 17 probationers was sent for trekking in the Himalayas in the district of Lahul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh. Their trek was from Kunzum Pass, located at the altitude of 4550 meters (over 14,000 feet), to Batal, which was 25 kilometers away. The trek was to be completed in two phases. Phase I involved trekking up to Chandratal, located in the midst of the dry arid landscape of Spiti, 14 kms from Kunzum Pass. Phase II involved trekking for another 11 kms from Chandratal to Batal, which is at the base of Kunzum Pass. Both the phases of the trek were to be completed in one day, during daylight.

The trek was organized by a training academy. The trekkers were going to be led by Dilip (name has been changed), a probationer. The trail was located in a remote, high altitude area with sparse communication and medical facilities, and was set-up to be a team-building adventure. There were eleven men and six women probationers in the group. Four workers, including a cook from the academy, accompanied the trekkers, bringing the entourage to a total of 24 people.

In advance, and as part of their preparation, the academy organized a programme of two weeks of physical training and gave the trekkers instructions to improve their general conditioning. Then they were brought together for a night halt in Shatru, 25 kms from the starting point i.e. Kunzum Pass. The plan was that a bus would take them the next day to drop them off at their starting point at Kunzum Pass and then drive off to the end-point, Batal, to wait for them there.

The Morning of the Trek

That morning, although they were to start the day at 7:00 am, the group left Shatru by bus at about 9:00 am. Due to the late start, and several stops along the way to enjoy the scenic beauty, the trekkers arrived at the Kunzum Pass only at noon.

Not wanting to carry any provisions while trekking, the group decided to have lunch at Kunzum Pass. Unfortunately, because of the high altitude and low pressure, their cook discovered that even boiling water took longer than anticipated and food preparation became very time consuming. By the time everybody finished their lunch, it was 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

The Afternoon of the Trek

At 5:00 pm, the trekkers reached Chandratal. By then, some of them were quite exhausted and were finding it difficult to keep pace with the rest of the group. To recoup their energy, the trekkers took a longer than usual break of one hour before attempting Phase II.

The sky was beginning to turn dark. The trail started off as a pleasant walk along the pastures bordering Chandra River. But then it went through a rubble-strewn plateau of barren and cold desert land and across a shallow, narrow stream that the trekkers had to wade through. Finally, they began traversing the steep slopes up to Batal.

The Night of the Trek

They had been trekking in the dimming daylight for about an hour. By this time, some members of the group had forged ahead and gotten separated from those who were finding it tough to keep up the pace. Unsure of the terrain, and unclear about the remaining distance to be covered, the faster trekkers decided to push ahead.

Dilip, the probationer who was leading the group, chose to accompany the four lady probationers and a few others who were completely exhausted by then. As the shadows darkened, the slower trekkers began to realize that they were not in safe circumstances any more. The land was barren, and in the pitch dark, no tree or rock could be seen. There was no shelter where they could stop for even a short break. The temperature was dropping, extremely strong winds were picking up, and the wind-chill factor aggravated their fears. Within two hours of their leaving Chandratat, the terrain started to seem very harsh and hostile. They still had about 7 kilometers to go.

It had now become pitch dark and chilly. The warm clothing, headgear, first aid kit etc were in the backpacks which they had left in the bus that would be waiting for them at Batal. One of the probationers started sobbing and the general mood became grim and somber – expecting the worst.

Discussion

Imagine that you are Dilip, the probationer who was asked to lead the trekking expedition. What would you have done differently?

1. *How could you have planned the trek differently? What directions would you have given the entire group in advance?*
2. *Think about the different events that occurred and the decisions that were made during the trek. At every step, how could you have brought the activities of all of the members of the group into alignment?*
3. *Think about what you would want to achieve if you were assigned to lead a similar trek in the future. What would your commitment be to your group, to yourself, and to the training academy that initiated the venture?*