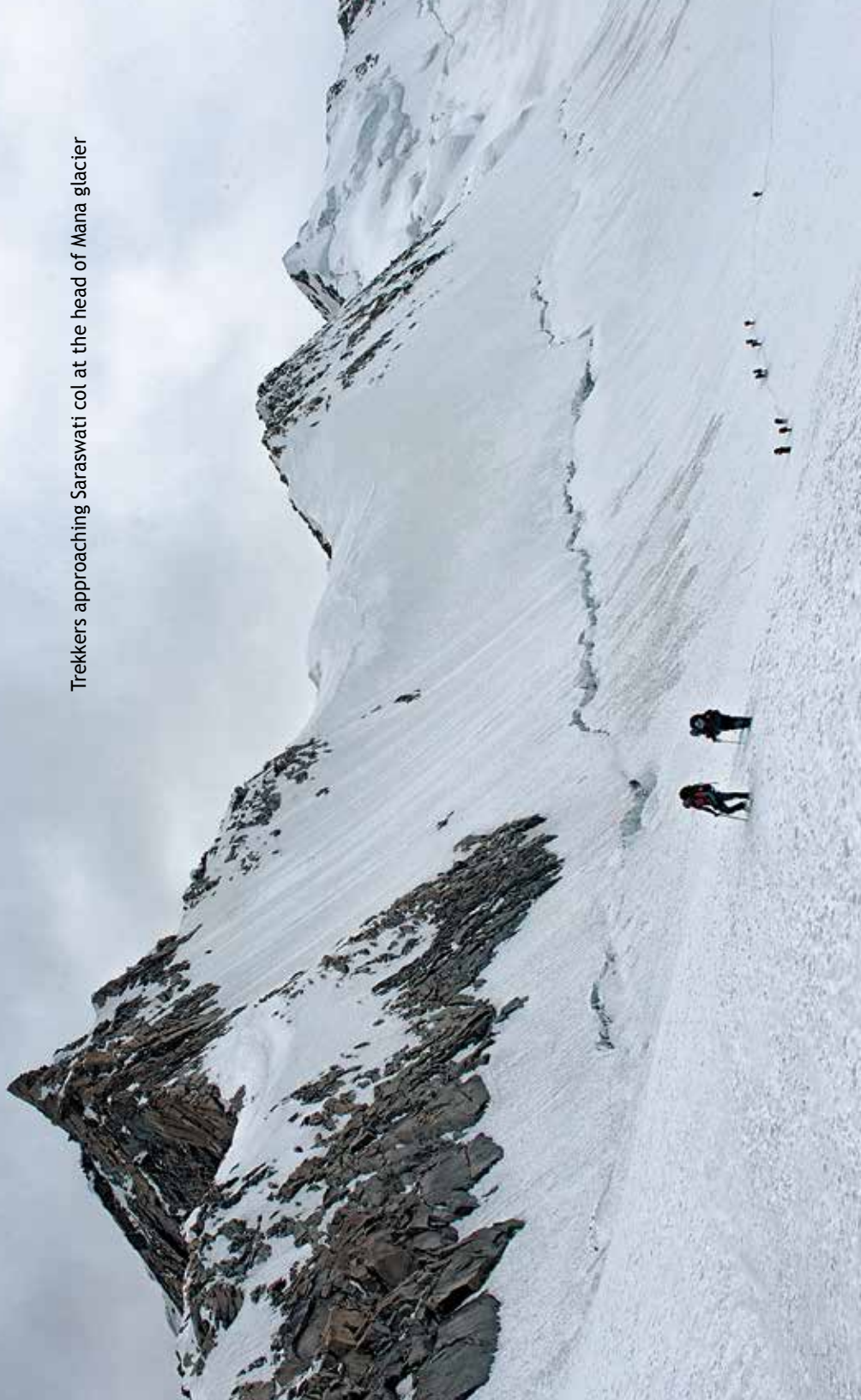


Trekkers approaching Saraswati col at the head of Mana glacier



13 In Search of the Elusive Arwa Col

Avilash Bisht

We were all exhilarated. We could see Kalindi pass right across and a host of peaks like Satopanth, Chandra parbat, Chaukhamba, Janahut, Parvati, Mana, Kamet, Mukut, Saraswati. Some snacks later, we all headed back down to base camp.

The allure of a high altitude trek is that it challenges the mind and body. The allure of an exploratory high altitude expedition is altogether different, in that it challenges and satiates the mind, body and soul.

In 2008, a chance meeting with a group of trekkers on the Shastratal Mayali pass trek encouraged me to lead exploratory treks. Auden's col and the Panpatia col treks followed. More invaluable was the company of Sankar Sridhar, renowned photographer and adventure lover, which eventually paved the way to plan the climb up the Arwa col with him. During this phase, we realized that the Arwa col is as elusive now as it was in 1939, when JB Auden first attempted to locate the col.

The only recorded exploration in the Mana Gad valley after JB Auden was by a team led by Harish Kapadia in May 1990. This team went up to Saraswati col which lies about 2.2 kms NE of Arwa col and is at the east end of the southeast branch of the Mana glacier. They did not have the necessary permit to cross the Saraswati col and hence turned back to Nilapani. Their report turned out to be the most useful resource for us.

With help from Mr Kapadia's expedition report, Google Earth and numerous maps of the region, I started to plan the exploration. I found most of the trails and campsites quite accurate when we actually got on to the terrain.

But it wasn't until June 2016 that we embarked on this five-years-in-the-making plan. An unexpected access to Nelang valley meant less cumbersome permission to embark on this epic attempt. Raymond

Shaw and Ranu Kwatra, provided the much needed commercial viability to the project. A team of mountain guides - Tashi, Mohan and Harish Rana, meant we had a strong backbone. We were supported by an efficient crew of cooks and porters.

The Expedition

We not only got to Arwa col, but also went up the Mana ridge at three different points – Arwa col, Arwa col 2 (as marked on my GPS) and Saraswati col. The location and altitude of Arwa col was exactly where JB Auden had predicted. It is unbelievable that explorers from almost three quarters of a century ago knew the mountains so well, equipped with only a map and compass!

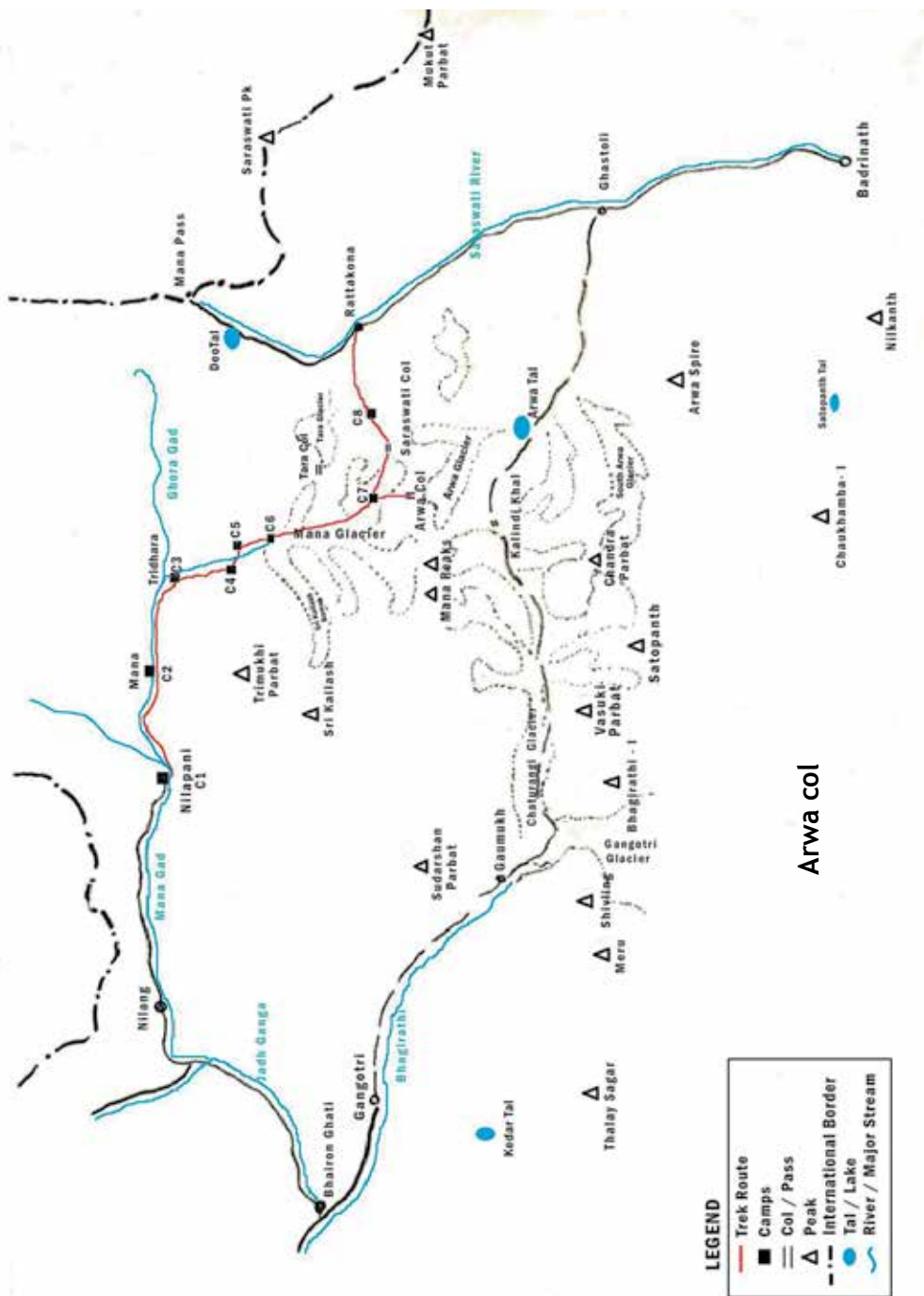
Had it not been for our porter loads, I think we would have given descending down the Arwa col a shot. I would like to get back someday to cross the Arwa col into the Arwa glacier.

We scanned the whole area on the Mana ridge seeking the elusive crossing from Mana glacier to Arwa glacier. Point 30/ 57.715'; 79 / 18.600', exactly at 6100 m, is where Arwa col was marked by JB Auden. It is possible to cross over from this point but one would need to fix at least 200-250 m of rope to get down.

Getting to Arwa col was just one leg; we still had to cross over to the Alaknanda watershed. Our backup plan, to use Saraswati col in case we were unable to descend from Arwa col, helped us as we had to adopt that route. We split into two teams. While one team went up to Arwa col, the other (Mohan and Harish) went up and across the Saraswati col to locate a safe route. We managed to go up to Arwa col, come down to Arwa col base camp and then go up the Saraswati col and across it in a single day. Not being able to find a safe descent across the Mana ridge would have meant that we would have had to retrace our steps and head back towards Nilapani, which was a long walk. Venturing into unknown territory made us feel like real explorers. Besides, we had excellent weather throughout the expedition.

Flashback

After clearing the Forest Dept check-post at Bhaironghati, we took the road towards the Jadh Ganga valley. The stunning scenery



reminded me of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh. After about an hour we reached Nelang, the biggest army base in this valley. In about an hour we reached another army base called Naga, at the confluence of Jadh Ganga and Mana gad. The two valleys meet each other roughly at a right angle – Jadh Ganga flowing in from the north and Mana gad coming in from the east. After clearing the customary checks, we reached Nilapani at 12 : 30. We crossed Nilapani gad by an aluminum ladder left behind by the army personnel, and pitched camp. Close to camp we spotted pug marks on the sand and were told by the soldiers that two leopards had been sighted there a couple of weeks earlier. Curious about what lay ahead, Sridhar and I headed walked up the Mana gad. After a couple of hours of walking along the right bank, we could see a trail going up on the other side which meant that the river needed to be crossed somewhere upstream.

After 15 minutes of walking the next morning, we had to climb down a big rock to get on to the river bed. At 11 : 30 a.m. we saw a loose wire across the river set up by the army, probably used to ferry loads with the pulleys. We set up camp on the flat ground above the river-bed on the other side. After lunch, Mohan and I went up ahead to scout, all the way to the point from where we could see the wide river-bed of Tridhara and the Mana gad valley joining in from the south.

Thirty minutes into the climb on the slope above camp, the walk on the next morning became quite flat. After negotiating tricky scree with a steep drop to the river on the left, it was a gradual climb up to a meadow. There was a helipad and a trickle of water nearby. I marked this point on the GPS as Mana helipad. This place can be used to camp on day 1 even if it means a 550 m height gain from Nilapani. A further walk and descent later the wide bed of Tridhara was visible. The Tridhara campsite is an hour's walk from the Tridhara river bed. Since Tridhara was a wide open valley it was windy, Mana Gad seemed better protected from the winds. This was probably the Leopard Camp described in Mr Kapadia's report.

While the team took a rest day, Mohan and I went up looking for possible campsites for the following day. We crossed many side streams and negotiated huge boulders on this climb. We decided to camp on the river left next to the glacier (coming from Sri Kailash).



Porters crossing a snowfield after descending from the Saraswati col.
The mountains covered by clouds are Saraswati I, Saraswati II &
Chamrao parbat

The snout of the Mana glacier seemed close by so we went up a little further. We could not make good progress on the moraine and decided to return the following day.

The last trace of humans in this valley was next to our campsite - signs of a shepherd's camp. I decided to go down to the river-bed to avoid the boulder terrain. The river bank offered a better route to walk on places where it was frozen. We reached camp at lunchtime. Mohan and I went up the left bank of Mana gad beyond the snout of the glacier, which was huge and filled with crevasses. Crossing the glacier high up above the snout would have meant an extremely long day and we were still not sure if we would find a place to camp. The glacier itself was quite wide. We turned back and reached the campsite by 6:30 p. m. We decided that we would cross the river near the camp and follow the right bank of the glacier.

We walked down a frozen bank of the river and then hopped over some boulders to cross the Mana gad. The climb was steep but we were quite sure that this would be easier than the left bank which seemed longer as the glacier was turning right. There was a side glacier coming in from the right bank and we hoped to get some water on that side. We got to the top of the side glacier and could only see endless moraine. The side glacier coming in from the right did not carry any water; the melt only made our feet sink in. We saw a couple of small glacier lakes nearby. I decided to camp as there was no sign of water anywhere further. Mohan and I tried to find a route up the Mana glacier. We could not reach the Mana glacier but were high up on the lateral moraine on the right bank and could see the ice surface on the glacier below us. The imagery for this section was not very clear on Google Earth hence I had little idea about the terrain here. What seemed like an easy gradient from the contours of the map had changed completely due to the presence of moraine. The route from the glacial lake camp to the Mana glacier ice surface turned out to be one of the toughest days of this expedition.

We left camp early, crossed the side glacier and walked on the lateral moraine the whole day. 3.5 hours later we came across a stagnant, muddy water pool being fed by a small trickle. This could possibly be a place to camp.

We reached the side of the Mana glacier at 3 : 00 p. m., exhausted. This was one of the most beautiful camps as we had the huge Mana glacier right ahead of us and we could see it as far as Saraswati col. On our right the massive Mana ridge stood like an ice fortress. The next day would be a rest day but Mohan and I planned to go all the way up to Arwa col the next morning.

We set off at 5:00 a.m. The crisp glacier was nice to walk on. It was lovely watching the sun come up on the Mana ridge. On reaching the foot of the Mana ridge around 8:00 a.m., it seemed we would have to negotiate a crevasse to get to the top. Mohan pointed out to another point on the ridge a little on the west - it seemed like an easier slope to climb. It took us about an hour to get to the top - towards the end the slope was quite steep and icy and had an icy cornice. It required me to use all my crampons and ice-axe skills to get to the top of the ridge. It turned out that this point at 6137 m was higher than the Arwa col. I marked it as Arwa col 2 on my GPS. The other side was a steep descent down to the Arwa glacier. It did not seem like a good slope to go down on. We turned back at 11:00 a.m. - many streams had started flowing on the surface of the glacier by then making it slushy. We reached camp by 2:30 p.m., completely exhausted.

I asked Tashi to go with Harish to the other point which we had marked as Arwa col on our Google Earth images. They would leave early in the morning to check if we could cross over the Arwa col or exit via the Saraswati col. The rest of us would move camp to the base of Arwa col.

Our plan for 5 June worked out perfectly. Tashi and Harish reached camp soon after us with pictures taken from the Arwa col and we discussed possibilities. It seemed doable but we were not sure so we decided against descending into the Arwa glacier. We would certainly have had to fix the ropes on the descent and we did not have crampons for the porters.

So the plan for the next day was that Ranu, Ray, Sridhar, Tashi and I would go up to Arwa col and the porters would stay back at camp. Mohan and Harish would go up to Saraswati col to find a safe route across. If they could not find a route across, the plan was to retrace the steps back to Nilapani.

Within 20 minutes of leaving camp, Sridhar's ankle problem from a recent fracture resurfaced so he turned back. Negotiating a crevasse, we got up to the top - it was nice and sunny. We were all exhilarated. We could see Kalindi pass right across and a host of peaks like Satopanth, Chandra parbat, Chaukhamba, Janahut, Parvati, Mana, Kamet, Mukut, Saraswati. Some snacks later, we all headed back down to base camp. Mohan descended down the obvious gully on the other side which ended up as an overhanging slope.

Realizing he was stuck, he started traversing the mountain on the left and climbed some daunting rocks to get down to the parallel snow gully looking for a route. Mohan found some old yellow rope stuck in the ice; he had obviously found the route. With this go-ahead all of us headed to Saraswati col reaching in an hour. We could see the Saraswati valley below and the road too. We would soon be in the Alaknanda watershed. This is the road which goes up towards Mana pass. We could see the brown mountains of the Tibetan plateau and knew that we were not far from the Chinese border. We camped close to a water body at the edge of the snow ground.

Finally on reaching Joshimath, we celebrated to culminate the completion of an epic trip.

Summary

Avilash Bisht and his team trekked to Arwa col and then successfully crossed Saraswati col (5941 m) on 6 June 2016.

About the Author

AVILASH BISHT has been guiding trekking/ mountaineering trips to the Himalaya since 1997. He enjoys exploratory trips and climbing expeditions the most. He has guided mountaineers to the summits of Kun, Satopanth, Kedar dome, Sudarshan parbat, Bandarpunch, CCKN, Kangyatse, Dzo Jongo, Stok Kangri, Mentok Kangri, Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua, Elbrus and many lesser mountains. He is a co-founder of White Magic Adventure Travel, a company specializing in high altitude treks and climbs.

References

1. *HJ*, Vol XII, p.21 *A season's work in the Central Himalaya* by J. B. Auden.
 2. *High Himalayas Unknown Valleys* By Harish Kapadia
- Garhwal Treks Article 1 *Two is a Company - Explorations & Climbs in Mana Gad 1990*

Maps

- 1) Garhwal Himalaya West Swiss Map 1:150,000
- 2) Leoman Map Indian Himalaya Maps Sheet-8; Garhwal & Kumaon (Uttaranchal) 1:200,000
- 3) Series U502 Sheet NH 44-1 & Sheet NH44-5
- 4) Google Earth - I tried to plot the route on Google Earth and marked the camp sites along the route. I took screenshots of these maps with me on the trip.

Additional References

Saraswati col was first reached by a team of Harish Kapadia and Monesh Devjani in 1990. See their details, photos and panorama in *HJ* Vol. 47, p. 48

For location Arwa col, see *HJ* Vol. 47 p. 49.

HJ references to all expeditions to the Arwa valley and col are as under: Arwa Valley - exploration of, 4 35; glaciers of, 6 157; journey down, 15 90; climbs in, 25 87; ascents in, 53 72, 96; trek to, 54 73