

Char Dham Yatra, A Pilgrimage to Four Holy Shrines in the Himalayas, With Sumon and Jaya

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(Photographs by Subrata and Sanghamitra Das)



They traveled from two corners of the world, Sumon from New York and Jaya from Kolkata. They met at Rishikesh, a gem of a town on the Ganges River, nestled at the foothills of the Himalayas.

“Ready for [Char Dham](#), Sumon-da?”

Jaya asked excitedly.



Sumon countered, “South India last year was easy. But you can’t do Char Dham without divine help, they say.”



Away from their hectic work schedules, it was peaceful to meditate by the Ganges in the early morning. Later, they visited Ram Jhula and Laxman Jhula bridges and the Geeta Bhawan in Rishikesh on a blistering hot day.

In the evening, as the dusk settled in, they stood at Triveni Ghat on the Ganges and admired a carving of Krishna counseling Arjuna, a Mahabharata episode about the great Kurukshetra war.



Another one showed the mighty Ganga descending on earth, tamed by the massive hair of Shiva, while Parvati watched.



A surging crowd waited in the fading light for the *Ganga Arti* ceremony. Priests ignited scores of sacred flames by the river, chanting religious hymns. Bells rang out loudly. The whole atmosphere was charged and magical.





Jaya purchased her *Arti* package from a vendor, a mother-daughter pair on the Ghat. She lighted the incense and the candle in it, offered a silent prayer to Mother Ganga and let the package float away in the swirling currents. Sumon admired her devotion. “Did you include me in your prayers?” he asked. Jaya’s reply was an enigmatic smile and a look, without any words.

They started their Char Dham pilgrimage the next day, with a young charismatic driver, Sonu, at the wheels of their hired car. The first destination was Yamunotri, the source of the holy river, Yamuna. Sonu took them as far as Janki Chatti, where they spent the night. The next morning, they climbed the last six kilometers of steep winding mountain trails on horseback, in the middle of a chilling drizzle.



After a strenuous four-hour journey, they had a glimpse of the magnificent Yamunotri temple. It was all worth it, they thought. “Sumon-da, the scenery here is out of this world,” Jaya said. Sumon could not agree more, “I feel like we are intruders into this pristine landscape.”



Tying some raw rice inside a piece of cloth, they had it cooked by dipping it in the steaming water of a *kund*, a thermal spring, to make *Prashad*.

On the courtyard of the Yamunotri temple, Jaya prayed and paid homage to her ancestors through a *Puja*, guided by a local priest.



“Sumon-da, do you remember my grandmother who raised me, after my parents died in a car crash?” Jaya asked later.



Sumon replied after a long pause, “Yes, she was the one who turned me down some twenty years ago when I wanted to marry you. She felt I did not measure up to you in social standing.”

It was time to take the mountain trails back to Janki Chatti for their next destination. The horse ride down was also uncomfortable, but exhilarating.

“Look at the three local beauties in their colorful dresses and the child peeking from the back of his mother,” Jaya exclaimed.



Sumon nodded, “I envy them. They look so carefree and attuned to the rhythm of the nature here.”



After spending the night at Uttarkashi, they headed for Gangotri, the source of the Ganges. A rockslide precipitated by last night’s rain delayed them for hours. While they waited, Sonu told them about his young wife and year-old son he had left behind in Rishikesh. When the road cleared he jumped up and shouted, “*Koi*

baat nehi, tej chalo, (Never mind the problems, full speed ahead).”

At last, they reached Gangotri, glad that they did not need horses to get here. Jaya collected holy Ganga water in a bottle from the on-rushing river. After a devout Puja ceremony at the temple, they returned to Uttarkashi in the evening, tired but with a deep sense of inner peace.



The next day, they left for Kedernath, their third destination. The scenery was spectacular as usual.

They passed a group of children, all impeccably dressed, walking on the mountain path to their school.



Local village women had their work cut out for them.

They spent the night at Guptakashi, arriving at Gourikund the following morning. Kedernath was a five-



hour horse ride away. They donned their parkas to keep the rain out and bargained for a fair price to rent two horses, with their handlers.



They proceeded up the winding trail on horseback. It was physically challenging, but the sheer beauty and majesty of the place overwhelmed them. Mountain streams splashed down in front, crisscrossed their way and disappeared down the ravine below. Sumon and Jaya loved to watch people around them. Some walked the trail.



Others took it easy.

They wondered about the ascetic who walked alone renouncing the trappings of material life, or, about the three charming ladies who rested by the roadside.



At long last, they had a glimpse of the majestic Kedernath temple. Inside, Sumon and Jaya prayed side by side, touching their foreheads to the triangular



black stone that represents Shiva. "That's the back of Shiva's bull." the priest explained, "Its head rises from the earth in Nepal." Spending the night at Kedernath, they returned to Gourikund on horseback and drove on towards Badrinath, their final destination.



A tea stall on the way was a good place to stop for freshly prepared lunch.



They reached Badrinath in the evening. The temple was resplendent in the setting sun.



The next morning, they got up early to catch a glimpse of the Nilkanth peak. It basked in its glory against a deep blue sky. After getting the



necessary items from a local store, Jaya sat down in the courtyard with a priest for her Puja. Once when she was bowing her head for the rituals, Sumon wondered whether she gestured a *Pranam* towards him as well. Tear drops glistened in her eyes. “Jaya,” Sumon called, “what is it?” She did not reply.



Their Char Dham pilgrimage was complete. On their way back to Rishikesh, they

stopped at Mana village to visit the source of the Saraswati river.



They spent the night at Rudraprayag, where the rivers,



Mondakini and Alokanda, came together exuberantly. Standing by the confluence of the two rivers, they admired this view in the morning.

“How easily they embrace each other and become one forever,” Jaya wondered, “why is it so hard for two people to do the same?” She sighed and turned to face her companion, “Sumon-da, we will return to Rishikesh soon

and go our separate ways. I don’t know when I’ll see you again. I want to let you know that my grandmother changed her mind about you after reading [Sharat Chandra](#)’s ‘Datta’. I looked for you then, but you had already left for the States. To her final dying days, she never forgave herself for rejecting you.”

Sumon remembered discussing ‘Datta’ with Jaya years ago, during one of their coffee house chats, when they were enrolled in the Jadavpur University. It was one of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s classic love story set against the backdrop of conflicts in the contemporary Bengali society of the early twentieth century.

As the sun crept on overhead, temperature rose slowly. It was getting late. This was the last leg of their journey back to Rishikesh. Sonu was anxious to return to his wife and child after days on the road. He called out impatiently for them from the curbside. “*Koi baat nehi, tej chalo,*” he said, cranking up the car.

To know more about Char Dham, see sites such as <http://www.4dham.com/index.html>

To know more about the notable Bengali author, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, see sites such as http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarat_Chandra_Chattopadhyay