



Munir (left) against the backdrop of the stunning Himalayas

# Finding Zen on the Himalayas after a nightmare ride to the top

By Munir Virani

In Hindu mythology, Kali is the Goddess of Death. In Sanskrit, the translation is "She who is black or she who is death". Kali's iconography, cult, and mythology commonly associate her with death, sexuality, violence, and, paradoxically in some later traditions, with motherly love.

That is what I felt when I rode up the Kali Gandaki Valley in Nepal's Annapurna Conservation Area in May of 2013. The Kali Gandaki River is one of the major rivers of Nepal and a left bank tributary of the sacred Ganges in India. In Nepal the river is notable for its deep gorge through the

Himalayas and its enormous hydroelectric potential. It has a total catchment area of 46,300 square kilometers (17,900sq.mi), most of it in Nepal. This blog is about my journey up the Kali Gandaki from where we began our survey of Himalayan Vultures and other raptors of the region.



Loading the bus at Beni

My last visit to Nepal was in February 2004 when The Peregrine Fund organized a Kathmandu Summit Meeting. The goal of that meeting was to disseminate results of our discovery of veterinary diclofenac as the primary cause of the catastrophic collapse of Gyps vultures in South Asia. Last month, I returned to Nepal after nine years and could not help but feel a tremendous surge of nostalgia when our plane touched down at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport. I was overwhelmed by emotion as I had very fond memories of this wonderful Himalayan country.

I was invited by Dikpal Karmacharya, a recipient of a Rufford Grant to help conduct a survey in the Annapurna



Conservation Area on Himalayan Vultures, the largest of the Gyps vultures. The Annapurnas rise in the heart of the Himalayas and whilst they may not be the tallest, they form the central core of the great Himalayan arc, towering in the very middle of the 2550 km chain that's the planet's highest mountain range. It is the most accessible and with its undulating mountains, valleys and gallery of forests, makes it one of the most diverse in terms of biodiversity, topography and culture.

Between 2002 and 2006, The Peregrine Fund had supported surveys on Himalayan Vultures in the Annapurna Conservation Area region of Nepal and we found no evidence that their populations had declined (see our paper published). After an overnight stay at Kathmandu, I left the following day for Pokhara, about 200 km west and the starting point for all trekking expeditions for the Annapurna Conservation Area. I met Dikpal and his colleague Seejan Gyanwali, both accomplished birders and we spent that evening over a traditional Nepali meal of daal-bhaat (rice and lentils) outlining a strategy for the next two weeks of our survey. The plan was to depart Pokhara at 3.00 am from the Rustika Guest House where we were staying and drive up to Beni to then take a bus to Muktinath from where we would commence our survey. Muktinath is nestled amongst a cluster of temples and lies at an elevation of 12,500 feet.

Early the following morning, our taxi driver arrived at 2.30 am and by 3.00 am, the three of us were huddled in a Maruti Suzuki and off on our way to Beni. The driving could best be described as a blend of Michael Schumacher and a Kenyan matatu driver (matatus are the rule-flouting minivan type public transport system in Kenya). My eyes were shut all the time as I simply could not bear to watch the undulating winds and hairpin bends that made my stomach churn. We got to Beni at 6.00 am. "Bad news sir," said Dikpal. I gazed at him wide-eyed expecting the worst when he replied "Buses to Jomsom are full, we have to take a bus to Ghasa and then another one to Jomsom" said Dikpal rather apologetically. I smiled and assured him that it was absolutely fine and that he needn't worry. So we bought our bus tickets for Ghasa (meant to be about five hours away) and settled



*Negotiating hairpin bends on the Mountain*

down for a cup of Nepalese tea and some biscuits. Half an hour later, we scrambled for our bus and I found a seat close to the entrance. My neck was really hurting from the ride to Beni but I persevered. Off we went on our adventure on the bus. The passengers comprised mainly of elderly Nepali people whom I could only assume were heading to Muktinath on pilgrimage. Muktinath is considered one of the holiest places on earth for both Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists. It is a great example of how two religions can share the same holy spot.

As I gazed outside my window, the rural mountainous countryside became more apparent. Neatly tended agricultural fields growing corn, mustard and barley, quaint Tibetan type architecture, mules, children running around playing football and people going around their business, looking really busy. We ascended our way along badly eroded steep sided hills along corrugated roads whilst negotiating sharp hairpin bends almost running over a myriad of domestic livestock. We



*The Mighty Kali Gandaki River in the Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal*

crisscrossed the mighty and raging Kali Gandaki River, which is the lifeline of the people living in this area. I suddenly had a mental image of the Goddess Kali and was reminded of a quote by Martin Cruz Smith that said "Kali is the goddess of destruction, the Clawed Hands, the Blood Drinker... And that's one side of her, as it is for any god. If you knew her for thousands of years you'd know she could be all colors. The sky is black at night, but if your eyes were good enough, they could see the different lights of a million stars. Death is part of her because death is part of life." At the time of writing this blog, at least 1000 people had lost their lives from landslides and floods further south in the Indian mountainous state of Uttarakhand. This was just a week after I had returned to Kenya.

We gave a ride to three primary school children who carried with them a basket of the sweetest plums you ever tasted. The kids were very resourceful and sold handfuls of plums to passengers for Ten rupees each (about 15 US cents). We



*Cramped like sardines inside the Jomsom to Muktinath Jeep*



*At the livestock office in Jomsom against a Himalayan Backdrop*

finally got to Ghasa at 10.30 am and I was relieved to be able to stretch my legs. As I got out of the bus, my instinct was to look up where I was rewarded with an astonishing sight of six magnificent Himalayan Vultures soaring above us. I mentally gave myself a “high five” and wondered whether it was unprofessional to do so.

Dikpal and Seejan were busy trying to get tickets for another bus to take us to Jomsom, which is the headquarters of the Mustang district. After a cold drink and a snack, we were herded towards another bus that looked like all the bolts on it were on the verge of coming off. This became more apparent when the bus’s

foot rail snapped as I placed my foot on it to get on. It was now hot and dusty and I found a seat towards the back of the bus where my knees pressed hard against the seat in front of me. It was going to be a hard and cramped ride. The only consolation was a stunning view of one of the Himalayan peaks that glistened in resplendent white across the Kali Gandaki Valley. I kept my eyes open for any soaring raptors but the dust was excessive and I had to cover my face to protect my eyes. An hour and a half later, we stopped at a tiny village called Tukuche where they had the loveliest apple orchards and I seemed to have been drawn into a small shop that sold dried apples. I bought a couple of packets and they were simply delicious. We



*The impressive Himalayan Range as seen from Muktinath*

finally got to Jomsom (the district capital) at about 2.30 pm. There, Mahendra, who would be our porter for the duration of our survey, met us. He worked for the livestock department and had a passion for walking and the wilderness. As we all walked towards the center of the town, Dikpal pointed into the valley where the remains of a 15-seater aircraft laid. It was a stark reminder of the harshness of the Annapurna Conservation Area. “It crashed a couple of months ago as it took off because of heavy winds,” said Dikpal pensively. “All the passengers survived”, he continued. We crossed the Kali Gandaki River via a rope and chain-linked bridge that swung in the wind. It was at least a 150 feet below to the river and whilst I was barely holding on to dear life, Seejan was pointing out to a Plumbeous Red Waterstart on a rock. We finally got to the other end and headed to the office of the Chief Livestock Officer. He was a delightful man full of positive energy and welcomed us in his office. “We have now declared Mustang as a diclofenac free zone,” he said proudly. “At least 33 districts are now diclofenac free.” he added. This was a huge achievement and I was happy to be associated with Dikpal and Seejan both of whom have played a major part in ensuring the diclofenac is not available for veterinary use. “This is very good news for vultures,” I told him.

I was feeling rather jaded by now because we had been on the road for nearly 12 hours. Both Dikpal and Seejan read my mind and we all needed some food. We stopped into a very quaint little guesthouse (called the Mountain View Palace) that served us a bowl of delicious noodles. I gulped it down with ferocious voracity and felt energized. “So how do you feel about getting up to Muktinath today?” asked Dikpal. Muktinath was supposed to be the starting point of our survey and if we got there this evening, then we could begin our survey tomorrow. “It’s another three hours away by jeep,” lamented Seejan with a frown on his face. “I think we should go there today.” I told them. I could feel their genuine concern about my wellbeing and to be able to acclimatize to being at nearly 13,000 feet in a single day from Pokhara, which was about 2000 feet. “I live in Nairobi which is nearly 6000 feet” I told them. “I will be fine”. Of course I realized that I might have been prematurely macho in making that





*Colourful potted plants adorn an aging building in the Annapurna Conservation area*

decision. I just wanted to get all the crazy-whacky travel by road out of the way so that we could peacefully enjoy the survey on foot. The Nepali crew exchanged confused glances, and was soon engaged in emphatic conversation. Finally Dikpal looked at me square in the eyes and said, "We go to Muktinath".

So off we went to the jeep park and bought tickets to Muktinath. Nothing prepared me for what was about to unfold. I was herded into the trunk of the jeep where eight people were squashed in (there were only four seats). I squeezed in between an elderly Nepali man and a young person who looked (and smelt) like a shepherd. There was also a very strong odor of diesel and to my horror; a 25-liter diesel tank was squished between the two passengers seated next to me. I honestly thought I was going to die as the driver had already raced out of Jomsom on the roughest road imaginable. As I turned my neck to try and force the window open, I felt a huge lump rise up my throat. All I could see was a deep gorge and a vertical precipice that was probably a 1000 feet drop. I was on the

road to death and yet I managed to smile because I looked down at the Kali and felt her strength as well as her warmth. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, almost choking on the diesel fumes whilst at the same time feeling a wave of panic and nausea.

Much to my relief, one by one, passengers began alighting from the jeep as we approached Muktinath. When I got the opportunity, I requested the driver if I could ride up front with him. I alighted from the jeep and took my position on the front seat whether he had agreed or not. I had to get out from the back seat. I felt light in the head and every bone in my body ached. In the distance, I caught a glimpse of a cluster of temples and figured that we were getting close to Muktinath. We finally drove into the jeep park at Muktinath where I leaped out of my seat to stretch my legs. I let out a loud yelping yawn with my arms outstretched. We had been on the road for nearly 15 hours and all I needed right now was a firm comfortable bed to lie on. But as I stared at the scenery in front of me, I felt my fatigue dissipating from my body. I

experienced a new surge in energy and felt that I was at that very moment capable of running a marathon. An outline of jagged white glistening mountain peaks stared at me. I was in the heart of the tallest and most spectacular mountain range in the world. From the corner of my eye, I saw a black dot against a backdrop of white glacial fields. It was the unmistakable silhouette of a majestic Himalayan Vulture with upturned white wings, soaring against the mountain peaks. The quintessential image that I had dreamed of just a week or so ago and now I was here immersing myself in the moment. I was reminded of a quote I had read sometime ago which said, "The only Zen found at the top of the mountains is the Zen you bring up there" With that thought, I was ready to give myself fully to science, the Himalayas and the Goddess Kali.

*About the author: Kenyan born Dr Munir Virani is the Africa Program Director for The Peregrine Fund, a US-based conservation organisation that is dedicated to conserving endangered birds of prey worldwide. Munir conducts extensive research on birds of prey in Africa and also in India, Nepal and Pakistan. His major interests lie in seeking solutions to link biodiversity conservation with poverty reduction.*