



## death

## A close encounter with

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In the year 1996, the Election Commission of India appointed me as an Election Observer, for the Eleventh Lok Sabha or General Elections of India, and I was posted to Chamoli Constituency in Uttar Pradesh (now in Uttarakhand State). The Chamoli district is the second largest district in Uttarakhand and is bounded by the Tibetan region to the north, the Uttarakhand districts of Pithoragarh and Bageshwar to the east, Almora to the south, Garhwal to the southwest, Rudraprayag to the west, and Uttarkashi to the northwest. The administrative headquarters of the district is Gopeshwar. Chamoli hosts a variety of pilgrim destinations like Badrinath, Hemkund Sahib, Valley of Flowers and Auli.

I proceeded for my assignment by flying to New Delhi and thereafter by train to Haridwar. Another 200 kms by road finally brought me to Gopeshwar, the District headquarters of Chamoli.

A small little cottage was the PWD guest house, where I was allotted a room. The guest house was managed by a simple, affable and very hospitable man, who introduced himself as having hosted several distinguished political leaders and Prime Ministers. My ego was elated by his disclosure. He also informed that my next room neighbor was BJP leader Shri. Lal Krishna Advani, who had incidentally come to Chamoli for the election campaigning.

Every day was hectic, starting at 7 AM and ending by around 10 PM. Monitoring election meetings, processions, banners, speech content, deployment of vehicles, and election expenditure, were all part of the assignment. My job involved a close association with the District Magistrate and the Senior Superintendent of Police. I got to know that the average tenure of these officers was just between 6 to 9 months in a district. Both these officers boasted that they were living out of just one suitcase, waiting for their summary transfer orders any moment! Indeed these officers were 'tourist bureaucrats', in every sense.

The greatest attraction in the Chamoli district is the famous Kedar-Badri holy shrines. Located at a distance of 98 km from Chamoli, the Badrinath temple is perched at an elevation of 3133 meters; the temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and was established in the 9th century by Adi Guru Shri Shankaracharya.

The Kedarnath Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is situated on the Garhwal Himalayan range near the Mandakini River. The temple is open only between the end of April (Akshaya Trithiya) to November (Kartik Purnima - the autumn full moon). The temple is not directly accessible by road and has to be reached by an 18 kilometres (11 miles) uphill trek from Gaurikund. This temple was built by the Pandavas and was revived by Adi Shankaracharya and is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas - the holiest Hindu shrines of Lord Shiva.

One day after lunch, we proceeded to Badri - Kedar. I was accompanied by my Escort Officer, and an armed police officer. The Ambassador car had all the official trappings - a uniformed chauffeur, official designation board and a red beacon light. The journey took us to Joshimath. Located at a height of 6150 feet (1875 m), it is the gateway to Badrinath. Joshimath or Jyotirmath is the uttarĀmnĀya Mutt or northern monastery, one of the four cardinal institutions established by Adi Shankara, the others being those at Shringeri, Puri and Dwarka. This Mutt is in charge of the Atharvaveda. This place is also a base station for pilgrims going to Guru Gobind Ghat or the Valley of Flowers National Park.

Enroute we crossed Vishnuprayag which is one of the Panch Prayag (five confluences) of the Alaknanda River, and lies at the confluence of the Alaknanda River and the Dhauliganga River.

The road from Vishnuprayag to Badrinath is prone to landslides, and one particular stretch is very steep. Traffic was being regulated and uphill and downhill were being alternately permitted. Though downhill traffic was in progress, my vehicle was accorded priority and permitted to go uphill. The other traffic proceeding uphill was neatly parked in a single line on the left hand side of the road, for a long distance.

My car began the steep climb, very fast. The road was totally deserted, and we quickly reached almost to the top. All of us were suddenly jolted by the hysterical cries of the chauffeur, "Sahib, brake fail ho gaya, brake fail ho gaya". It was a disastrous situation. On either side of the road, were deep ravines, one wrong move and we would be thrown hundreds of feet deep below and death was certain. The car started rolling backwards at great speed, and the hysterical driver was screaming at the top of his voice. However, the Escort Officer showed great presence of mind and equanimity. He yelled at the driver to be calm and to follow his instructions carefully. He then directed the Police Escort to assist the driver by holding the steering wheel. We were hurtling down rapidly, and the car was being kept on course blindly!

The fear of death crossed my mind for the first time. Somewhere on this stretch, many thousands of years back, the Pandavas, renouncing their hard won kingdom, were retreating into the Himalayan Mountains, when they were accosted by a Yaksha, who demanded answers for his strange queries. One of his spell binding questions to the eldest of the Pandavas was, "What is the most surprising thing in this world? Unfazed Yudishtara replied, "Every minute men see people dying everywhere yet they think that they will live forever". Strange, that I should be in this place encountering death. The great essayist Francis Bacon in his celebrated 'Essays', says "Men fear death as children fear to go into the dark". We were going to plunge into the depths below and death appeared an imminent possibility. Was everything over? How would our near and dear ones react at the news of our death? Is there any Soul waiting to flee the body and navigate into some unknown heaven or hell? Is there any scope of rebirth? What if there is nothing, this was simply the end of life? So many disturbing questions were racing through the mind.

The shouts of people from the side of the road yelling, "driver sharab piya hai" brought me to my senses. The car was almost downhill, we had reached the spot where the vehicles proceeding uphill were detained. People began running with our car downwards. Soon, my Escort Officer spotted a big rock on the side of the road, and he successfully guided the car to it. With a loud bang the car dashed into the rock and came to a grinding halt. We were overjoyed and hugged one another. Life was intact, life was sweet, there is nothing like life and we had survived. When we stepped out, total strangers hugged and welcomed us back to the world. Life on Earth was more precious, than some dream world of Heaven.

A group of pilgrims welcomed us into their bus and we resumed the journey uphill, once again. Shortly, I was in the presence of Badri Vishal.

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